In “On the Rhetoric of Theory in the Discipline of Writing: A Comment and a Proposal,” Lynn Worsham asks us to examine the role of postmodern theory in the field of composition. Two of her main concerns are the part played by theory in the construction of writing as a discipline, and the use of theory in constructing a professional identity for composition scholars and practitioners. Worsham posits that the field of composition’s recent interest in postmodern theory, as it relates to social and political change, may represent an effort to transform the field of writing into an important intellectual component of the contemporary university and thus enable composition to escape from its debased status as a purely service-oriented discipline (389, 390). I want to respond to Worsham’s call to examine the multiple roles of theory in the discipline of composition by analyzing the rhetoric of Slavoj Žižek’s recent work. More importantly, I will argue in this essay that Žižek’s writings show us why the turn to theory could actually hurt the field of composition by increasing our discipline’s level of ideological misrecognition concerning the economics and politics of higher education. On the one hand, I will posit that the future of composition studies depends on our ability to confront the concrete economic realities that place composition in a low position on the university totem pole. On the other hand, I will affirm that theory has often been used to hide these economic realities, and, yet, theory can also help if it is directed toward fundamental economic and political transformations in higher education.

In the case of Žižek’s work, we find an academic theorist who has actively engaged in the economics and politics of postmodern culture; however, he has rarely if ever directly discussed the fundamental antagonisms shaping higher education. I believe that his lack of analysis
concerning the politics and economics shaping the vast majority of his readership is symptomatic of contemporary academic discourse, for it is my contention that Žižek and many other academic critics employ abstract and universalizing political theories in order to escape the horrible working and thinking conditions shaping academic labor. Thus, instead of discussing the exploitation of part-time instructors, the inflation of class size, the de facto loss of tenure, the de-funding of higher education, the rise of a new administrative class, and the use of graduate students as surplus labor, political academics often use theory to examine social issues such as multiculturalism, globalism, mass culture, and cyber communities.

What is strange is that Žižek himself often points to this problematic use of theory when he discusses postmodern criticism and liberal multiculturalism. For example, in "Repeating Lenin" he denounces "contemporary academic politics" for its failure to confront the fundamental economic antagonisms shaping our world:

Let us take two predominant topics of today's American radical academia: postcolonial and queer (gay) studies. The problem of postcolonialism is undoubtedly crucial; however, "postcolonial studies" tend to translate it into the multiculturalist problematic of the colonized minorities' "right to narrate" their victimizing experience, of the power mechanisms which repress "otherness," so that, at the end of the day, we learn that the root of the postcolonial exploitation is our intolerance towards the Other, and, furthermore, that this intolerance itself is rooted in our intolerance towards the "Stranger in Ourselves," in our inability to confront what we repressed in and of ourselves—the politico-economic struggle is thus imperceptibly transformed into a pseudo-psychoanalytic drama of the subject unable to confront its inner traumas. . . . The true corruption of the American academia is not primarily financial, it is not only that they are able to buy many European critical intellectuals (myself included—up to a point), but conceptual: notions of the "European" critical theory are imperceptibly translated into the benign universe of the Cultural Studies chic. (2)

In this wonderfully revealing passage, Žižek presents his argument that cultural studies and other postmodern discourses work by translating political and economic struggles into "pseudo-psychoanalytic" dramas. This transformation then allows for critical European theories to be translated into the "benign" realm of fashionable cultural studies. In other terms, culture trumps economics in the academic realm of high theory. In
fact, Žižek hints that he himself has become nothing but a cultural commodity bought and sold in the American academic market. Yet, even with this not-so-repressed self-revelation, Žižek insists that the American academy is not corrupted primarily by financial concerns; rather, he claims that the corruption comes from the cultural translation of economic and political factors into cultural theories.

Žižek’s failure to understand the economic determination of American academic politics is presented out in the open in this same essay, where he shows his ignorance of the economic constraints facing many radical American academics:

My personal experience is that practically all of the “radical” academics silently count on the long-term stability of the American capitalist model, with the secure tenured position as their ultimate professional goal (a surprising number of them even play on the stock market). If there is a thing they are genuinely horrified of, it is a radical shattering of the (relatively) safe life environment of the “symbolic classes” in the developed Western societies. Their excessive Politically Correct zeal when dealing with sexism, racism, Third World sweatshops, etc., is thus ultimately a defense against their own innermost identification, a kind of compulsive ritual whose hidden logic is: “Let’s talk as much as possible about the necessity of a radical change to make it sure that nothing will really change!”

What Žižek does not know, or refuses to accept, is the material conditions facing a large number of his academic readership. The stereotype of academics with secure tenured-positions playing the stock market is becoming more of an ideological fantasy than a social reality in our contemporary world of academic downsizing. In reality, the problem with radical academics is not that they are content with their great financial positions; rather, the problem is that they have been unable or unwilling to confront the concrete economic and political factors shaping the working conditions in their own home institutions. Žižek’s pronouncements on the politics of American academics therefore play into the very ideological fantasies he claims to critique. To counter Žižek’s fantasmatic representation of American higher education and cultural politics, I want to offer my view of the role played by theory in the economics of higher education, and then I will offer a rhetorical reading of Žižek’s work in order to clarify some of the destructive aspects of contemporary academic discourse.
Theory and Downward Mobility in Composition Studies
After twenty years of participating in the higher education job market as a graduate student, faculty member, graduate advisor, and administrator, I have come to the conclusion that there is indeed a secret plot shaping the role of theory in the humanities. This politico-economic plot is determined by the desire of universities to cut costs by producing a constant surplus of overqualified but unemployable graduate students and faculty. One of the potential problems in this system is that it depends on graduate students’ participating in their own future unemployment. In order to solve this conflict, universities help to provide the ideological fantasy of the tenured research position. Yet, this system has itself threatened to fail, and so a new mechanism is needed to keep the steady production of surplus graduate labor flowing. This new strategy involves training graduate students in fields that do not hire any permanent faculty. Starting in the 1980s, this trend manifested itself in the production of dissertations in cultural studies, literary theory, and other critical interdisciplinary domains. The only problem with these new areas of research is that virtually no one is hiring anyone into tenurable positions to specialize in cultural studies, literary theory, and interdisciplinary studies. If you do not believe me, just look at the MLA Job Information List for the last twenty years. The vast majority of jobs in the humanities are still defined by traditional areas of historical periodization. In fact, the same departments, which are often the hot beds of high theory, tend to hire within very narrow standard specializations.

One of the results of this process is that graduate students, since they did not specialize in the right area, accept their unemployment or underemployment as their own problem. Likewise, individual departments can always say that it is not their fault since there is a lack of qualified candidates. Of course, the real problem is that there should be more than enough jobs for everyone: universities have simply decided to replace tenured faculty with part-time instructors and graduate students. One of the effects this overreliance on graduate students has had on the field of composition is to circulate the ideology that anyone can—or will—teach writing. This in turn has undermined any attempt the field of composition has made at gaining respectability and influence in the university.

Now, if we enter the role of theory into this process, we see that a lot of radical graduate students have transformed their social and political energies into abstract theoretical research interests only to be told that the system itself has no need for their area of expertise. In fact, many of the
graduate students doing theory in the last twenty years have wound up repackaging themselves as compositionists in a desperate attempt to gain employment. This economic process has helped to introduce theory into many writing programs from the bottom up. However, this infiltration of theory has often encountered the strong force of the service ethic, which works to undermine critical thinking in favor of the "practical" need to teach students how to write for their other classes and their future employment. Every aspect of the system thus seems to work against the role of theory in the humanities.

This same conflict between postmodern cultural theory and the political and economic realities facing higher education is reflected throughout Žižek's work in his discussions of liberal multiculturalism, false individualism, economic globalism, and political fundamentalism. In fact, I believe that these four central aspects of contemporary society shape the totality of his theory, and they can be effectively employed to discuss the current dynamics of higher education in the United States. On the most basic level, Žižek posits that liberal multiculturalism is a false form of cultural politics hiding the true power of global capitalism, which is itself generated out of a matrix of fundamental political antagonisms and hidden by the false ideology of psychological individualism. While I do not think that he is wrong in this analysis, I do think that he misses the essential point by refusing to examine the role played by local political and economic factors in shaping the cultural systems he critiques. One of the main reasons for his theoretical blindness is that he is locked into a modernist Hegelian conception of universality that threatens to transform his entire corpus into a self-consuming rhetorical machine.²

Modern Writing and Postmodern Theory
This mechanical nature of Žižek's rhetorical productions is discussed in his JAC interview with Gary Olson and Lynn Worsham, when he declares that he does not have "an aesthetic attitude toward writing" and that his "obsession" is to "transmit ideas" like a pure "thinking machine" (253). This very modernist move of defining writing as a pure act of mechanical reproduction may seem odd to those of us who know Žižek to be a very postmodern writer whose style is often anything but straightforward and mechanical.³ Indeed, it appears absurd that a critic like Žižek, who is constantly concerned with the problematic nature of language and communication, would state that his own composition process is based on "self-instrumentalization" and an attempt to efface his own subjectivity from his textual productions (254). Of course, we could read his declara-
tions as ironic postmodern posturing; however, I want to argue that Žižek’s stress on the mechanical nature of his writing represents a repressed awareness of a central tension haunting contemporary academic writing. This tension concerns the conflict between the global technological homogenization of our world and the amazing diversification of our cultures. In Žižek’s own work, this dialectic is played out between the globalizing realm of free market high-tech capitalism and the expression of liberal multicultural lifestyles.4

On a fundamental level, Žižek argues that our shared technologies and economic systems produce a global structure catering to diverse identities and cultural representations.5 However, as Žižek points out in his *JAC* interview, he believes that the multicultural realm of identity politics “serves to obliterate, to render invisible . . . the more fundamental capitalist economic struggles” (278). Underlying Žižek’s argument here is the idea that global capitalism produces multiculturalism in order to hide the true functioning of capitalist determinism. Thus, while it appears we have an incredible mixing of cultures and belief systems in contemporary global society, there is still a shared economic system (capitalism) determining all relationships.

Žižek’s critique of postmodern liberal multiculturalism is centered on his argument that underlying the multicultural tolerance of the Other is a secret Cartesian subjectivity proclaiming a universal, empty, and neutral status for the democratic subject (280). What then makes global capitalism global for Žižek is that it is based on the definition of a subject as void of all content. In *Looking Awry*, Žižek makes this point in the following way: “The subject of democracy is not a human person, ‘man’ in all the richness of his needs, interests, and beliefs. The subject of democracy, like the subject of psychoanalysis, is none other than the Cartesian subject in all its abstraction, the empty punctuality we reach after subtracting all its particular contents” (163).

Here we see one of Žižek’s great rhetorical feats: he is able to equate very different concepts and discourses so that they all seem to be making the same argument. In this context, the subject of democracy becomes equivalent to the subject of psychoanalysis and the Cartesian subject. In all these separate domains, he locates the same definition of the subject as one void of all content. For example, he argues that in democracy every subject is considered to be equal in front of the law without regard to race, sex, religion, or class (*Looking* 163). By removing these cultural and biological attributes from the status of the subject, one effectively erases the subject’s content in favor of a universal notion of equality. This same
“equal but empty subject” is necessary for “value-free” science, where every finding is supposed to be repeatable for any other person regardless of his or her particular beliefs and values. Finally, in capitalism, it is necessary to establish a universal exchange value that does not change according to who is doing the buying and selling.

Of course, all of these universal realms are impossible fictions, but they still have worked to shape our culture since the Enlightenment. Moreover, these universal realms of democracy, science, and capitalism define what we now call modern culture and the modern subject. For example, in the following passage from the *Communist Manifesto*, we see how Marx identifies the modern capitalist subject by the subject’s ability to efface all previous belief systems and prejudices:

Uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.

Marx’s description of the revolutionizing power of capitalism thus defines the subject as one who is constantly uncertain and changing, and, therefore, this subject is void of any fixed internal or external attributes. Furthermore, since these subjects overcome all prejudices and beliefs, which traditionally block people from encountering the naked reality of economic exploitation, they (the ever-changing bourgeoisie) are supposed to enter into direct confrontation with the realities of capitalism.

Of course, we know now that Marx was wrong about his prediction concerning capitalism’s ability to overcome itself by negating deceptive belief systems and thus providing a clear understanding of its own exploitative nature. According to Žižek, the two central things that Marx got wrong were that he did not see the power of psychological deception, and he did not understand the role played by Hegelian negativity. On the level of psychological deception, Žižek highlights the way that capitalism constantly produces new modes of self-deception by playing on the subject’s desire to be a free individual:

This is how ideology functions today, how the very new unfreedoms are sold to you as freedoms. This is what I call “false psychology,” where something is really imposed on you by the external symbolic social
Thus, instead of seeing how we are controlled by capitalism, we buy into the way that capitalist culture sells us images of our freedom and tries to translate our lack of freedom into the ideology of free choice. To prove this point, Žižek offers in his *JAC* interview the example of people being told that their loss of job security should be affirmed as their new freedom to change jobs whenever they like.

Žižek often refers to this false level of psychological freedom under the banner of reflexivity. For example, he claims that what really defines our new global economy is the way that all previous traditions and natural endowments are now considered to be a part of personal choice (267). Thus, through the process of personal reflection, I decide what gender I want to be or what ethnic tradition I want to affirm. Here, we can see how Marx’s theory of the constantly changing nature of the capitalist subject is turned on its head; instead of the subject undermining all beliefs and traditions and thus being confronted with the pure materiality of capitalist relations, the subject uses these constant transformations to take on new identities and belief structures. Everything that is solid does melt into the air, but it is also quickly absorbed by the subject’s desire to produce and consume more traditions and beliefs.

In Žižek’s theory, the rhetoric of social construction becomes a source for a false sense of personal empowerment and an increased circulation of deceptive beliefs and ideologies. According to Žižek’s logic, psychology is a realm of pure deception and must be replaced by a more Cartesian theory of subjectivity. However, we soon find out that Žižek’s theory of Cartesian subjectivity is itself based on a Hegelian rereading of psychoanalysis and that this subject of “true radical freedom” is defined by the empty and universal quality of the subject of the unconscious (267). Here, the subject takes on a totally negative quality as one who can only reject diverse political and social solutions. In fact, in his interview with Olson and Worsham, Žižek exclaims that he has no practical political answers. Of course, this answer should not surprise us since he also states in this interview that “It’s not so much to find the ready solutions, but to reject the way problems are formulated” (276, 282). Here we see the logical results of Žižek’s desire to base the ethical subject on a purely negative definition: like many academics, Žižek is adept at describing problems and shooting down responses, but the question of specific concrete solutions rarely surfaces in his writings.
I believe that one reason why Žižek and other political academics tend to offer only negative arguments is that they are unwilling or unable to confront the hard economic and political realities shaping the production of knowledge in our culture. More specifically, I will argue that the failure of academic theorists to deal with concrete academic economic issues forces these writers to make overly general and abstract negative pronouncements regarding culture and society. Furthermore, it is my argument that this tendency to address theoretical social issues, and not concrete academic problems, motivates many teachers to present knowledge to their students in a way that separates symbolic cultural productions from concrete economic and political factors. In other terms, the failure of academic theorists to connect social and political issues to the structural problems of their own institutions may infect the way these teachers present cultural knowledge to their students.

The central paradox of Žižek’s work is that he obsessively talks about economic and political issues in an academic way at the same time that his work avoids discussing the economics of the profession shaping his readership. This paradox should come as no surprise to anyone who has witnessed the simultaneous politicization of academic culture and the depoliticization of academic administration. To be more precise, in the last twenty years we have seen universities and colleges taken over by bottom-line business practices, while we have also watched the dissemination of political and economic criticism into most areas of academic culture. Is this contradiction simply the result of people spending their energies critiquing culture and not their own workplaces, or does the realm of cultural criticism act as a safety valve effectively releasing the critical energies of our intellectuals? To respond to this question concerning the relation between academic criticism and the economics of higher education, I want to concentrate first on Žižek’s writing style and rhetoric as indicative of certain dominant tendencies in academic culture and discourse. I then will posit several ways that we can use his theory to change the structure of higher education in America today.

Reading Žižek’s Rhetoric

If Žižek is indeed a writing machine, we can locate a strong tendency for his mechanical program to repeat itself. This tendency for repetition concerns not only the content of his texts but also the structure of his arguments. In fact, I will posit that the vast majority of his arguments follow the same four-part logical structure: he begins by paraphrasing the “common” or “standard” academic understanding of a certain problem;
he then shows that our understanding of the original problem is wrong and that Lacanian theory or Hegelian dialectics can provide the true interpretation; he next turns to the realm of popular culture and/or everyday experience to provide proof for his interpretation; and he then returns to a combination of Hegelian philosophy and Lacanian theory to make a universalizing claim about the original problem. In fact, this final stage of his rhetorical strategy often presents a notion of universal negativity and meaninglessness, which acts to absorb all of the previous stages into a globalizing and self-negating argument.

Each of these rhetorical stages works to persuade and seduce the reader in different ways and forms. The first step of this process is to set up a “straw man” by producing Žižek’s own version of a “common” or “standard” academic interpretation. He thus starts out his rhetorical process by subjecting the reader to a shared symbolic knowledge that he has constructed himself. He then uses this symbolic and social mode of academic bonding to set up the reader for a radical reversal, where the reader’s theoretical feet will be pulled from under him or her. This second rhetorical stage is often signaled by a phrase like “the opposite is actually the truth.” More often than not, he employs this rhetorical reversal to deny the common sense of the reader and to turn the reader’s attention to a “paradoxical” Lacanian and/or Hegelian concept. Furthermore, these concepts shaping the second logical time of his argument often involve paradoxical notions like “vanishing mediator,” “fundamental antagonism,” “internal Other,” and “forced-choice.” It is important to note that all of these notions are counterintuitive in that they combine together seemingly opposing concepts and ideas. However, to quote one of Žižek’s favorite statements: “This is precisely the point.” In order to win over the reader, Žižek must argue that our common sense notions and cultural understandings are misleading because they do not take into account the contradictory nature of social reality itself.

According to Žižek’s reading of Lacan and Hegel, the fundamental driving force of social reality is the arbitrary imposition of rational representations. From this perspective, culture is itself mad and counterintuitive because it is based on the irrational foundations of reason. In other terms, what allows us to move from a state of irrational nature to a state of rational culture is the arbitrary imposition of some master signifier and discourse (the pure will to power of the master). Here, the irrational mediator has to vanish in order to install a rational symbolic order. For example, Freud must posit the presence and then murder of the irrational and perverse primal father in order to account for
the formation of a rational society of brothers dedicated to the memory of the symbolic father. Likewise, Žižek points to Christianity’s need to posit the presence of Christ as the lost mediation between the unknowable god of Jewish culture and the symbolic spirit of Christian culture.6 In both these structures, the mediating master (the primal father and Christ) needs to vanish in order to function.

To prove the importance of this second stage of vanishing mediation, Žižek usually turns, in a third rhetorical moment, to the recognizable realms of everyday experience and popular culture. The power of this third move is that it draws in the reader’s desire by offering objects of identification and common experience. What we then enjoy about his interpretations is that they give us a chuckle of recognition, as if we are also in on a very private joke. However, we must be careful to distinguish our recognition of the example from the conclusions that he draws from these examples, for I would argue that he most often uses the reader’s sense of identification to posit self-negating and universalizing conclusions. Moreover, the particularity of the example always resists its inclusion into the symbolic discourse that Žižek’s attempts to subject it to.

As Worsham argues in “On the Discipline and Pleasure of Perilous Acts,” the use of examples in academic writing can serve many diverse purposes: “We . . . use example rather freely and effortlessly in our everyday speech and in the same way we use it in scholarly argument: to ground our thinking, to illustrate or dramatize an idea or viewpoint, to supply concrete detail, to educate and aid understanding, to make the given argument more compelling” (708). In Žižek’s case, he claims that his examples are only the frosting on the cake or a cheap way to seduce his readers (Olson and Worsham 255), but we must question the ways his uses of examples fit the ideological role of fantasy as he defines it in The Plague of Fantasies: it structures our desires (7), mediates between formal symbolic structures and objects we encounter in reality (7), structures intersubjectivity (8), hides social antagonisms (10), represents the installation of the law (14), and takes a distance to its own content (18). This burdensome and diverse workload associated with fantasy for Žižek echoes many of the criteria that Worsham connects to the role of examples. In both cases, the object of representation serves to structure a situation or experience by “forgrounding some aspects and minimizing or ignoring others, and thereby telling us in what direction to think” (Consigny qtd. in Worsham, “On” 709). Moreover, like fantasies, examples tend to naturalize social constructions by taking on the feel of pure manifestations of reality.
In academic writing, examples are often taken at face value although they do important ideological work. As John Lyons posits, examples are “the most ideological of figures, in the sense of being the figure that is most intimately bound to a representation of the world and that most serves as a veil for the mechanics of that representation” (qtd. in Worsham, “On” 709). Žižek himself presents his theory of fantasy under the heading of “The Seven Veils of Fantasy” in order to stress the relation between fantasy and ideology: for fantasies and examples both reveal and conceal a disconnection between symbolic representations and concrete reality.

In his own work, Žižek’s use of examples from popular culture may act to establish a fantasmatic relationship between his reader and his text; his examples tend to naturalize his symbolic arguments by giving his abstract universal arguments a concrete feel, which in turn hides the constructed nature of his arguments. Furthermore, as Worsham posits, there is a certain micropolitics in academic discourse that tends to place examples in a subordinate relation to the general theory or principle that is being presented (710). In the case of Žižek’s work, one often gets the idea that he is only turning to his pop culture references to help support a larger theoretical claim or universalizing gesture.7 The effect of this process is that culture and the (pop) art object are actually devalued at the same time they are being used to do important ideological work. Moreover, his use of recognizable “real life” examples may function to hide the fact that his work is repressing the economics and politics of its own production and consumption. In other words, we get real-world examples in his work, but we do not see how economic and political factors shape the academic world in which these examples will circulate. For example, how does one read Žižek’s discussions of multiculturalism differently if one is an African-American female in a part-time composition position versus a white male tenured literary theorist? Since, as Worsham argues, examples tend to be decontextualized and placed in new and different contexts (711), how do we effectively recontextualize the use of academic examples?

Inside Žižek’s Matrix

In order to contextualize Žižek’s rhetoric and his use of examples, I want to turn to his various readings of the popular film The Matrix. I will concentrate on “The Matrix, or, the Two Sides of Perversion” because I believe that this Web-based article offers one of the clearest examples of his postmodern arguments. Furthermore, this text outlines several of his
important claims about the postmodern realm of computer technology and virtual cyberspace.

In typical fashion, Žižek begins his analysis of *The Matrix* by presenting his constructed versions of the standard and common academic interpretations of the film:

My Lacanian friends are telling me that the authors must have read Lacan; the Frankfurt School partisans see in the Matrix the extrapolated embodiment of Kulturindustrie, the alienated-reified social Substance (of the Capital) directly taking over, colonizing our inner life itself, using us as the source of energy; New Agers see in the source of speculations on how our world is just a mirage generated by a global Mind embodied in the World Wide Web. This series goes back to Plato's Republic: does *The Matrix* not repeat exactly Plato's dispositif of the cave (ordinary humans as prisoners, tied firmly to their seats and compelled to watch the shadowy performance of [what they falsely consider to be] reality?).

The rhetorical strategy of this first stage of Žižek's argument here is to paraphrase the various common (mis)readings that academics make concerning this particular issue, which in this case concerns the question of the ultimate meaning of this film.

This opening move allows Žižek the chance to gather together many of his different readers and to show them how they are all wrong, for the essential problem that he reduces all of these different interpretations to is the conflict between Marxism and psychoanalysis as the main ways of understanding virtual reality:

The key opposition is here the one between Frankfurt School and Lacan: should we historicize the Matrix into the metaphor of the Capital that colonized culture and subjectivity, or is it the reification of the symbolic order as such? However, what if this very alternative is false? What if the virtual character of the symbolic order "as such" is the very condition of historicity?

The ending of this passage introduces the second rhetorical stage, where Žižek will show how the opposition between economic colonization and the symbolic determination of reality is false, since the very foundation of symbolic culture and history is itself posited to be virtual. This rhetorical move thus undermines our common sense understanding of culture because it breaks down our usual conceptual opposition between fiction and reality. In other words, he bases the possibility of history on
the non-difference between real economic capital and virtual symbolic culture. He thus collapses the Marxist distinction between the material economic base and the cultural superstructure at the same moment he collapses the Lacanian distinction between the symbolic and the real.

Žižek’s argument therefore relies on setting up a conceptual opposition only to knock it down and replace it with a counterintuitive theory of virtual reality (VR), which combines opposing ideas together:

The point here is the radical ambiguity of the VR with regard to the problematic of iconoclasm. On the one hand, VR marks the radical reduction of the wealth of our sensory experience to—not even letters, but—the minimal digital series of 0 and 1, of passing and non-passing of the electrical signal. On the other hand, this very digital machine generates the “simulated” experience of reality which tends to become indiscernible from the “real” reality, with the consequence of undermining the very notion of “real” reality—VR is thus at the same time the most radical assertion of the seductive power of images.

Žižek begins this argument by centering the reader’s attention on a single “point,” and then he deploys the opposition between digital reduction and simulated experiences in order to posit the “indiscernible” difference between real reality and virtual reality. Moreover, his argument introduces a counterintuitive logic by stating that the reduction of experience to the digital alternation of symbols acts to produce seductive realistic images. Yet, this assault on our intuition is signaled by his use of the term “radical ambiguity,” which sets up the presentation of a contradictory logic. To be more precise: the fake virtual world seems more real because we are fundamentally living in an ambiguous reality that does not distinguish between the virtual and the real.

To further prove this contradictory and ambiguous point, Žižek then jumps to the realm of popular culture. In this third rhetorical stage, we slide between common experiences and examples drawn from science fiction films as if there is already no difference between the virtual realm of film and the real realm of lived experience:

Is not the ultimate American paranoiac fantasy that of an individual living in a small idyllic Californian city, a consumerist paradise, who suddenly starts to suspect that the world he lives in is a fake, a spectacle staged to convince him that he lives in a real world, while all people around him are effectively actors and extras in a gigantic show? The most recent example of this is Peter Weir’s The Truman Show (1998), with Jim Carrey playing
the small town clerk who gradually discovers the truth that he is the hero of a 24-hours permanent TV show: his hometown is constructed on a gigantic studio set, with cameras following him permanently.

The rhetorical strategy in this passage begins with defining the "ultimate" example of the previous argument by introducing proof based on the personal and cultural experience of fantasy. In many ways, the psychological realm of fantasy represents our everyday virtual reality where personal experience is interwoven with cultural representations. Fantasy is thus the embodiment of the ambiguous virtual reality that Žižek establishes in the second stage of his argument. Furthermore, in his cultural example of *The Truman Show*, he attempts to prove something about the virtual reality of one film by turning to another film, and therefore he participates in a postmodern hall of mirrors where one media simulation is judged for its verisimilitude by comparing it to another media simulation.

Žižek uses this cultural example to introduce the fourth stage of his argument by shifting from the "concrete" realm of particular examples to the abstract realm of generalized global statements:

The underlying experience of *Time Out of Joint* and of *The Truman Show* is that the late capitalist consumerist Californian paradise is, in its very hyper-reality, in a way irreal, substanceless, deprived of the material inertia. So it is not only that Hollywood stages a semblance of real life deprived of the weight and inertia of materiality—in the late capitalist consumerist society, "real social life" itself somehow acquires the features of a staged fake, with our neighbors behaving in "real" life as stage actors and extras. . . . The ultimate truth of the capitalist utitarian despiritualized universe is the de-materialization of the "real life" itself, its reversal into a spectral show.

Here, the "ultimate" truth is declared to be that our late capitalist consumerist culture is a dematerialized and de-spiritualized staged spectral show. In other words, nothing is real—not even the real.

Žižek’s final interpretation therefore results in an affirmation of total Hegelian negativity. Everything is considered fake because the real and the symbolic have been equated in a universal claim of absolute self-negation. Doesn’t this mean that all of the previous findings concerning virtual reality, radical ambiguity, and capitalist culture are transcended and rendered insignificant in the face of an all-consuming rhetoric of denial? I believe that this dual attempt to produce cultural and theoretical
distinctions only to collapse them into a self-consuming rhetoric is one of the fundamental gestures in postmodern academic discourse. In other words, Žižek's reading of *The Matrix* only uses culture and theory as a pretext to perform an academic act of self-denial. Since everything is fake and nothing is grounded in reality, his own arguments must be considered to be fake and unrealistic.

The Social Other is Lacking

Yet, Žižek continues to write, and in this very essay he follows his establishment of absolute self-negation by restarting his nihilistic machine to take on another series of common understandings. In the following section, entitled "The 'Really Existing' Big Other," his rhetorical strategy is re-centered on the question of social control:

What, then, is the Matrix? Simply the Lacanian "big Other," the virtual symbolic order, the network that structures reality for us. This dimension of the "big Other" is that of the constitutive alienation of the subject in the symbolic order: the big Other pulls the strings, the subject doesn't speak, he "is spoken" by the symbolic structure. In short, this "big Other" is the name for the social Substance, for all that on account of which the subject never fully dominates the effects of his acts, i.e. on account of which the final outcome of his activity is always something else with regard to what he aimed at or anticipated.

In this first rhetorical stage, he establishes the common academic understanding of social determinism: we are controlled by social forces beyond our understanding and power. Here, the matrix is not considered to be based on the new invention of virtual reality machines; rather, this type of virtual control is equated with the very fact of our being social subjects who are born into a world of predetermined symbolic codes.

Žižek follows this restatement of Lacan's theory of symbolic alienation by offering a "however," which sets into a motion another dialectical reversal:

However, it is here crucial to note that, in the key chapters of Seminar XI, Lacan struggles to delineate the operation that follows alienation and is in a sense its counterpoint, that of separation: alienation IN the big Other is followed by the separation FROM the big Other. Separation takes place when the subject takes note of how the big Other is in itself inconsistent, purely virtual, "barred," deprived of the Thing.
Once again, the counterintuitive argument is developed in this second rhetorical moment where the symbolic order is itself determined to be inconsistent, virtual, barred, and deprived. That is, the thing that controls us is itself lacking in control, and thus the symbolic Other or order is itself rendered virtual.

Žižek follows this theory of the lacking Other with his return to fantasy and the exemplary logic of popular culture:

Fantasy is an attempt to fill out this lack of the Other, not of the subject, i.e. to (re)constitute the consistency of the big Other. For that reason, fantasy and paranoia are inherently linked: paranoia is at its most elementary a belief into an “Other of the Other,” into another Other who, hidden behind the Other of the explicit social texture, programs (what appears to us as) the unforeseen effects of social life and thus guarantees its consistency; beneath the chaos of market, the degradation of morals, etc., there is the purposeful strategy of the Jewish plot. . . . This paranoiac stance acquired a further boost with today’s digitalization of our daily lives: when our entire (social) existence is progressively externalized-materialized in the big Other of the computer network, it is easy to imagine an evil programmer erasing our digital identity and thus depriving us of our social existence, turning us into non-persons.

Here he makes an important insight by arguing that fantasy does not fulfill the subject’s own sense of lack, but rather it helps to plug the hole in the symbolic Other. In many ways, we can say that Žižek’s own turn to popular culture for particular examples serves this fantasmatic function of trying to fill the gaps in the lacking symbolic order. Moreover, his habitual example of the “Jewish plot” appears to come out of nowhere, and it forces us to question what role his repetitive discussion of anti-Semitism plays in his work. Does this turn to examples of anti-Semitism and other states of cultural victimization represent his own academic fantasy? And if this is true, does he use these examples to make the symbolic Other seem more complete and full? Žižek does effectively juxtapose these fantasies of victimization with discussions of “our own” alienated status in a digital symbolic universe that reduces us to being “non-persons.” I would like to posit that the flipside of his self-negating rhetoric is a fantasmatic academic objectification of victimized others. In this structure, the objectification of the other’s victimization points to the displaced aggression that often circulates in postmodern culture and is very evident in academic criticism.
The reason why academics may need to return constantly to scenes of cultural victimization is that these scenes of torture give a real presence to the theoretical claims concerning symbolic alienation and subjective destitution. In fact, in a fourth logical moment, Žižek returns to the ultimate point of *The Matrix* in order to claim that the film fails to go far enough and show how behind our virtual reality, there is nothing but a hole of nothingness:

The film is not wrong in insisting that there IS a Real beneath the Virtual Reality simulation—as Morpheus puts to Neo when he shows him the ruined Chicago landscape: “Welcome to the desert of the real.” However, the Real is not the “true reality” behind the virtual simulation, but the void which makes reality incomplete/inconsistent, and the function of every symbolic Matrix is to conceal this inconsistency—one of the ways to effectuate this concealment is precisely to claim that, behind the incomplete/inconsistent reality we know, there is another reality with no deadlock of impossibility structuring it.

By defining the Real to be a void, Žižek creates a theoretical black hole where all of his and Lacan’s theoretical concepts and distinctions are sucked into a state of total negativity. Like many other postmodern academic writers, he thus presents some very important and critical notions and examples only to ultimately deprive them of any grounding other than their own self-denial. Isn’t this type of self-consuming rhetoric proof of the way postmodern society has helped to place intellectuals in a structure where they deny the reality and the import of their own criticisms? No wonder so many academic arguments remain fixated on the level of pure theory.

**The Academic Fantasy**

I believe that one of the reasons why Žižek is able to be so rhetorically seductive in his writings is that he appeals to the fantasy of so many academics who would also like to be global intellectual free agents circulating around the educational world without having to be tied down by the material exigencies of teaching and committee work. From a certain perspective, we can say that he mimics the flight of global capital as it circulates through diverse symbolic systems and overcomes all national boundaries and traditional value systems. As is the case with the World Wide Web, he is able to spread out and proliferate by freeing himself from any hard real material reality. Yet, like the Web, he is read and received in various institutional and cultural
domains that are still tied to the material reality he tends to deny.

The problem with Žižek's discourse is thus also the problem with cyberspace and academic culture: all of these rhetorical domains tend to deny the very material conditions they are dependent on. For example, while Žižek's main audience is surely western academics, he never seems to mention the politics and economics of higher education. Matters like the downsizing of tenure, the exploitation of part-time labor, the rise of the administrative class, and the unemployment of people with Ph.Ds rarely enter into his intense debate with academic culture. Perhaps, this denial of the economic and political realities shaping the production and consumption of symbolic academic culture helps to free him and other postmodern intellectuals from dealing with the real material factors weighing down our symbolic discourses. And without these material anchors in the real, Žižek is able to circulate his symbolic knowledge in a boundaryless symbolic virtual hyper-real that ultimately points to its own meaninglessness and vacuity.

I Write, but I do not Exist

This proliferation of self-consuming rhetoric is continued in the next section of the text, which is entitled "The big Other doesn't Exist." In this argument, we find Žižek jumping between his theoretical denial of both the subject and the Other. He starts this movement by first returning to the social realm of common sense:

"Big Other" also stands for the field of common sense at which one can arrive after free deliberation; philosophically, its last great version is Habermas's communicative community with its regulative ideal of agreement. And it is this "big Other" that progressively disintegrates today. What we have today is a certain radical split: on the one hand, the objectivized language of experts and scientists which can no longer be translated into the common language accessible to everyone, but is present in it in the mode of fetishized formulas that no one really understands, but which shape our artistic and popular imaginary (Black Hole, Big Bang, Superstrings, Quantum Oscillation ...). Not only in natural sciences, but also in economy and other social sciences, the expert jargon is presented as an objective insight with which one cannot really argue, and which is simultaneously untranslatable into our common experience. In short, the gap between scientific insight and common sense is unbridgeable, and it is this very gap which elevates scientists into the popular cult-figures of the "subjects supposed to know" (the Stephen Hawking phenomenon). The strict obverse of this objectivity is the way
in which, in the cultural matters, we are confronted with the multitude of life-styles which one cannot translate into each other: all we can do is secure the conditions for their tolerant coexistence in a multicultural society.

Žižek’s main point here appears to be structured by the cultural opposition between untranslatable expert scientific knowledge and the multicultural combination of diverse lifestyles. From a certain perspective, one could argue that both of these current social tendencies contribute to a feeling of losing any notion of “common sense” or shared cultural values.

Moreover, Žižek seems to be right when he posits that computer technology constantly reminds us of this level of cultural fragmentation by bombarding us with diverse and contradictory social messages derived from diverse and contradictory cultures and local identities. However, he veers off course when he tries to collapse this opposition between science and cultural identity by affirming that the real problem is the general ignorance of the masses:

And the point is not simply that the real issues are blurred because science is corrupted through financial dependence on large corporations and state agencies—even in themselves, sciences cannot provide the answer. Ecologists predicted 15 years ago the death of our forests—the problem is now a too large increase of wood . . . . Where this theory of risk society is too short is in emphasizing the irrational predicament into which this puts us, common subjects: we are again and again compelled to decide, although we are well aware that we are in no position to decide, that our decision will be arbitrary. Ulrich Beck and his followers refer here to the democratic discussion of all options and consensus-building; however, this does not resolve the immobilizing dilemma: why should the democratic discussion in which the majority participates lead to better result, when, cognitively, the ignorance of the majority remains.

It is telling that in this passage he mentions and then denies the economic control of science only to concentrate on the ignorance of the masses. But isn’t the stupefaction of the general public derived in part by the cultural desire to hide the true economic determination of our symbolic systems? Moreover, he fails to mention that the political order is itself often controlled by money and pure capitalistic calculations. He thus turns to the social and the political only to void these symbolic orders of their real material weight.
In response, to this voiding of the symbolic order of its materiality and consistency, Žižek returns to the realm of fantasy and paranoid conspiracy theories to clog the hole left by the emptying out of meaning and value from the symbolic order: “The political frustration of the majority is thus understandable: they are called to decide, while, at the same time, receiving the message that they are in no position effectively to decide, i.e. to objectively weigh the pros and cons. The recourse to ‘conspiracy theories’ is a desperate way out of this deadlock, an attempt to regain a minimum of what Fred Jameson calls ‘cognitive mapping.’” In this third rhetorical movement, his description of conspiracy theories can be itself read as a conspiracy theory, allowing him to substitute the lack of materiality with an imaginary fantasy object, for he fails to mention that the reason why people cannot objectively weigh the pros and cons of the social and scientific messages they are receiving is that these messages are not objective, since they are all tainted by the subjective political and economic forces that are constantly being repressed.

After he then establishes this popular example of conspiracy theories, he enters his fourth rhetorical stage by making a more general and universalizing claim: “The problem is not that ufologists and conspiracy theorists regress to a paranoiac attitude unable to accept (social) reality; the problem is that this reality itself is becoming paranoiac.” In response to this statement, we should ask how it is possible that reality itself can take on the psychological and subjective attributes of being paranoid. Isn’t paranoia precisely based on the subject’s radical rejection of social reality? How can he then invert this concept and call the social order itself paranoid?

In this inversion, we find a key to understanding Žižek’s central rhetorical and theoretical mistake: since he denies the materiality and realness of social reality, he is able to equate reality itself with a psychotic state of self-negation. Here, the subjective and the objective are identified in a Hegelian moment where both are equivalent because neither has any meaning or content. Furthermore, he himself tries to anticipate this problem by projecting it back onto the field of contemporary culture: “One is tempted to claim, in the Kantian mode, that the mistake of the conspiracy theory is somehow homologous to the ‘paralogism of the pure reason,’ to the confusion between the two levels: the suspicion (of the received scientific, social, etc. common sense) as the formal methodological stance, and the positivation of this suspicion in another all-explaining global para-theory.” Doesn’t Žižek’s own argument constantly return to this level of an “all-explaining global para-theory”? 
It is thus highly paradoxical that Žižek’s obsessive return to the realm of the real only serves to transform the real into a symbolic form empty of all content. His universalizing and globalizing discourse thus feeds off of his ability to make us think that he is talking about social reality and the existential real at the same time that he absorbs both of these orders into a state of unconscious non-meaning. This assault on the real continues in the next section of his text, which begins with another possible interpretation of what the matrix is really about: “From another standpoint, the Matrix also functions as the ‘screen’ that separates us from the Real, that makes the ‘desert of the real’ bearable.” Here, the real appears to be equivalent to the Lacanian notion of the imaginary as the ideal and idealizing mental space, which allows the subject the ability to escape from symbolic contradictions and real trauma. In this turn of the interpretive screw, we see that the matrix is not just a social fiction or the controlling symbolic order; rather, this virtual reality is shown to have an important psychological and ideological function.

After he establishes this imaginary nature of the virtual matrix, Žižek introduces his second rhetorical stage by insisting on the “radical ambiguity” of this real imaginary screen: “However, it is here that we should not forget the radical ambiguity of the Lacanian Real: it is not the ultimate referent to be covered/gentrified/domesticated by the screen of fantasy—the Real is also and primarily the screen itself as the obstacle that already distorts our perception of the referent, of the reality out there.” In a very paradoxical statement, he here affirms that the real is both the ultimate referent shielded by the screen and the very fact of the screen itself. In fact, on closer inspection, he does state that the real is not the ultimate referent, but he continues by writing as if it is still the center of reference. The ambiguity in his theory is thus matched by the ambiguity of his language, and this represents one of the symptomatic aspects of his writing style, for we can read this passage as indicating that his attempt to repress the real as the ultimate referent fails, and so the real returns in a repressed form. His writing symptom is therefore a paradoxical signifier, which conceals and reveals a repressed real referent.

I have been arguing that this repressed real referent in Žižek’s text is the economic and political factors determining the production and circulation of symbolic academic knowledge. Since he continues to miss his encounter with this real materiality, his text tends to return symptomatically to the same paradoxical contradictions. Like Neo, the main character of The Matrix, Žižek knows that something is wrong—he has a splinter in his mind—but the only way he can address the problem is by going
Robert Samuels

further away from it deep into his own virtual void. Academic theory thus serves him the ideological space to escape the real material conditions that shape the discourse of the university.¹⁰

**From Universal Theory to the Contingent Worker**

In order to redeem important aspects of Žižek’s theoretical work, it may be necessary to reverse his rhetorical structure and begin with a critique of his final affirmation of universal negativity. To clarify this strategy, I will translate the four stages of his rhetorical machine into four main aspects of contemporary university economics and politics: administration, curriculum, student consumers, and standardized education. According to my reading of the postmodern university, debates over curriculum and culture (the first stage of Žižek’s rhetorical structure) have often hidden the real source of power and conflict in our institutions of higher education: the new administrative class. This foundational source of power and economic control functions like Žižek’s vanishing mediator (his second logical stage): a traumatic social antagonism covered by imaginary fantasies and ideological constructions (his third stage). The main way that fantasy and ideology function to hide the basic conflict between education and capitalism is by producing happy or content students who do not complain about the universalizing standardization (the fourth stage) of their higher education. This ideological satisfaction of the psychological subject is also evident in the academic fantasy of the pure theorist who is not involved in the concrete economic and political forces shaping higher education.

In many ways, the globalizing success of universities has allowed them to grow beyond their own educational capacities so that they have become increasingly like large factories of knowledge consumption and bureaucratic regulation. Moreover, this standardizing movement in higher education is a prime example of the universal negativity that Žižek often describes in the last stage of his rhetorical machine. Universities have indeed become universalizing by emptying the essential content from their educational missions. For example, in most of the large universities in our country, students are often packed into lecture halls containing more than five hundred students. While this is an effective way for universities to save money, by using one professor or graduate student to teach many students, one has to wonder about the quality of education that can be presented in an environment effectively ruling out the students’ participation. Moreover, the size of these classes often forces the instructor to give only multiple-choice exams testing the students’ ability to
internalize and spit out information and factoids. Is this really education, or is this a way to allow people to feel that business is going on as usual although the system has outgrown its own function?

In many ways, we can read the field of composition as the central symptom of this postmodern university system, for the symptomatic nature of writing instruction is manifested by the notion that anyone can teach writing because it has no inherent subject matter. Moreover, as a general requirement, writing courses are supposed to be universal and empty (void of content), and therefore they embody Žižek's negative definition of the postmodern global subject. In other words, Žižek’s depiction of the universalizing nothingness of the virtual global economy is manifested by the creation of a field (composition) that staffs required courses that are supposed to have no inherent content and that are supposed to be taught by people with no particular skills or intellectual training. Here, we see how writing instruction has become a symptom of the general de-skilling and de-professionalization of the casualized workforce in the global economy. Thus, theories like Žižek’s help us to understand these universal forces shaping our globalized virtual worlds; however, these theories must be forced to account for the labor practices shaping their own production and consumption.

In order to combat this universal emptying out of difference in the field of writing, we need a national movement that would defend the particular cultural knowledge, experience, expertise, and degrees defining the professional status of compositionists. This effort has to be national, or even international, since it is the national academic labor pool that helps university administrators to replace tenure-track faculty positions with non-tenurable positions. However, we must not let this globalizing nature of our capitalist system blind us from seeing the possible ways that local coalitions can work together to respond to local-global concerns. Perhaps what is missing in Žižek’s and other cultural critics’ work is an articulation of a social movement that understands both the local and global aspects of economic determinism, for Žižek’s abstract and universalizing rhetoric tends to blind us from seeing the contingent nature of political coalitions. Moreover, his fixation on generalizing about the traumatic nature of political and economic power structures prevents him from defining the micropolitics of local and national social movements.

A national movement defending the professional status of compositionists would have to counteract the fact that the growing interest in political and economic theory in the university has most often
been coupled with the growing exploitation of educational workers. I am not arguing here that we should get rid of theory and theorists; rather, we should stop using theory as a virtual way of escaping our own real practices. The best way to limit this self-negating postmodern rhetoric, a rhetoric that is so evident in Žižek’s work, is to insist on grounding our symbolic knowledge systems on an understanding of the concrete material factors shaping current employment practices. To transform the field of composition into one of the intellectual centers of the new university, we need to tie theory to our own material practices and contingent social movements.

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Notes

1. While many other academic theorists also discuss economic and political issues while avoiding the concrete material conditions shaping higher education, I believe Žižek is an extreme example, since so much of his work concerns a radical critique of contemporary capitalism and postmodern culture.

2. To clarify what I mean by his self-consuming rhetoric, I want to turn quickly to Žižek’s Hegelian use of Lacanian theory. He often turns to Lacan’s theoretical distinctions only to erase their differences by making abstract and negative universalizing claims. An early example of this rhetorical process can be found in *Looking Awry*: “Lacan’s point is that the real purpose of the drive is not its goal (full satisfaction) but its aim: the drive’s ultimate aim is simply to reproduce itself as drive, to return to its circular path, to continue its path to and from the goal. The real source of enjoyment is the repetitive movement of the closed circuit” (5). At first glance, this argument seems to follow Lacan’s theories of the drive and repetition, and yet doesn’t Lacan make a major distinction between the drive, as a structure of difference, and repetition, as the return of the same? Moreover, Lacan posits that the drive moves around the object (a), and thus it is structured by the loss and not the production of enjoyment. I posit that this collapse between the drive, the object a, and repetition points to Žižek’s own symptomatic repetition of signifiers that have been voided of signification. Throughout his work, one of Žižek’s strategies is to show how every one of Lacan’s concepts should be read from the perspective of the real and at the same time, he transforms the real into the symbolic. He presents a chain of equivalencies, which we can read as: repetition = superego = idiotic enjoyment = fantasy = the signifier = the letter = enjoyment-in-meaning = the object (a) = a fragment of the real. In other terms, he reduces Lacan’s entire conceptual edifice into the mechanical reproduction of the same idea: the superego represents the pure repetition of an idiotic mode of enjoyment.
What this theory does not allow for is the distinctions that Lacan makes between real enjoyment, imaginary fantasy, the repetition of the signifier, the symbolic structure of the superego, and the presence of lost enjoyment in the form of the object (a). Žižek thus participates in the postmodern process that Jean Baudrillard attaches to the emptying out of all essences from every system. Of course, Žižek would have a hard time himself arguing with this analysis since he claims in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* that his own method serves to get rid of the “fascination” with the “kernel of signification” and replace the search for hidden meaning with a purely formal definition of the subject (14). In this sense, it is not surprising that he empties Lacan’s concepts of all meaning; yet, what we must pay attention to is what he excludes and how he produces this series of conceptual displacements. Moreover, it is important to question the role played by this type of universalizing mechanical rhetoric in the contemporary academic writing.

3. I am using the term “modernist” here to designate the culture of scientific and technological rationality first developed during the Enlightenment. For various ways of defining the relation between modernist culture and the writing process, see Worsham, “Rhetoric,” 398–99.

4. This conflict between economic globalization and cultural diversification is complicated in Žižek’s work by his concern with ethnic fundamentalism and psychological individualism. In fact, I would argue that the vast majority of Žižek’s work deals with the interaction among these four central forces of contemporary society: economic globalism, liberal multiculturalism, ethnic fundamentalism, and psychological individualism. I would also argue that the field of composition theory is currently structured by the interaction among fundamentalism (current-traditional rhetoric), individualism (expressivism), multiculturalism (socio-epistemic rhetoric), and globalism (cognitivism).

5. For a detailed discussion of the concept of global capitalism in Žižek’s work, see McLaren 615–17.

6. Žižek develops this reading of Jesus as a vanishing mediator in *Fragile*, 157–58.

7. Miklitsch argues that Žižek often employs an overly general and negative rhetoric when he discussing art and other modes of culture (611).

8. Gigante points to the universal negativity of Žižek’s philosophical statements:

In the case of Žižek, the critical subject never quite does emerge, but remains trapped in an endless cycle of birth contractions (and expansions) which expose the Real of the struggle involved in any act of self-assertion. Like others, such as his mentor Jacques Lacan, he assumes a theoretical stance which sets out to transgress boundaries between philosophy, psychology, literature, politics, film, and popular culture. But where Žižek is unique, and where he makes his radical break with other literary theorists who take up a position, any position at all that
pretends to some notional content or critical truth, is in the fact that he fundamentally has no position. (153)

In this insightful analysis of Žižek's work, Gigante continues by connecting Žižek's lack of a fundamental position to the emptiness of his critical self: "In order to understand how the 'void' functions at the heart of Žižek's critical self, giving rise to and at the same time undermining each theoretical structure he erects (always with borrowed tools) it will be useful to examine how he adapts this model from Schelling" (154).

9. Hurley argues that Žižek's abstract and privatizing discourse often works to transform the real materiality of capitalist relations into an immaterial realm of virtual subjectivity (8).

10. In his seminar L'envers de la psychanalyse (The Inverse of Psychoanalysis), Lacan posits that we now live in a period dominated by the discourse of the university. For Lacan, this discourse is not only dominated by the circulation of symbolic knowledge, universalizing bureaucratic structures, and subjective objectification, but it is also a structure supported by the hidden master of the signifier. On one level, this means that the key to our postmodern universe is the way we subject all experiences to the symbolic reign of language. However, Lacan also posits that it is the ego in the form of the master signifier "I," which is the hidden truth of the universal university discourse.

**Works Cited**


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