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**BETWEEN THEORY AND POST-THEORY;
OR, SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK IN FILM STUDIES AND OUT**

Résumé: Par une lecture minutieuse de son livre, *The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieslowski Between Theory and Post-Theory* (2001), cet article défend la pertinence des travaux de Slavoj Žižek pour les études cinématographiques. Dans ce livre, Žižek, répond aux critiques adressées à la théorie du cinéma, particulièrement celles qu'on retrouve dans l'ouvrage dirigé par David Bordwell et Noël Carroll, *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies* (1996). En procédant de cette façon, Žižek contribue de façon significative à la théorie du cinéma en identifiant les erreurs des premières théories psychanalytiques du cinéma et en les corrigeant de façon à insister davantage sur les questions d'idéologie ou d'identité. La première partie de cet article montre comment une interprétation psychanalytique du cinéma peut ajouter à la théorie de l'idéologie et de la subjectivité alors que la seconde partie se concentre sur l'interprétation que Žižek fait des films de Kieslowski qui sert de moyens pour défendre la Théorie (avec un T) contre la post-théorie. Pour Žižek, la scission des études cinématographiques est le symptôme d'une lutte des classes au sein même du discours intellectuel à propos de la question de l'idéologie.

On a first approach, the relevance of Slavoj Žižek to film studies appears rather slim. His most important contribution would seem to be his rethinking of the later work of the French psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan. Lacanian theory was quite relevant to screen theorists in the 1970s and 1980s who drew upon his work in order to develop new conceptions of film ideology and spectatorship. Žižek has argued, however, that the version of Lacanian theory developed by screen theorists misconstrues many of his central ideas, and focuses on the earlier Lacan—a Lacan advanced by the work of Louis Althusser; the Lacan of the “mirror stage,” or the Imaginary and Symbolic—leaving out some of the important elements of Lacan’s later work: a focus on the Real, the Thing (*das Ding*), the *objet petit a* (what Žižek refers to as the “sublime object”), the *sinthome* (as opposed to symptom), *jouissance* and the drive.¹

Žižek has been one of the most important advocates of the later Lacan in social, cultural and political theory, and in film studies. Many contemporary film scholars, therefore, credit him for bringing back to prominence the relevance of

Lacanian theory for film studies.² However, few would argue that Žižek has a film theory of his own, and it is difficult to argue with this point. Žižek's relation to film theory remains rather ambiguous.

As Todd McGowan points out, there are many who object to the kind of engagement with cinema that Žižek practices in his work.³ Žižek is well known for referring to films primarily as an exegetic tool in his explanations of Lacanian theory. Many of his earlier books, such as *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture* (1991), *Enjoy Your Symptom!: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out* (1992), and the anthology, *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Lacan... (But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock)* (1992), certainly attest to this fact. As Žižek himself points out, his use of popular culture and films is purely strategic: "I resort to these examples above all in order to avoid pseudo-Lacanian jargon, and to achieve the greatest possible clarity not only for my readers but also for myself—the idiot for whom I endeavour to formulate a theoretical point as clearly as possible is ultimately myself."⁴

It is more appropriate to say that Žižek's objects of inquiry are first and foremost ideology and subjectivity. But the study of film is still central to Žižek's investigations into the latter. His constant references to the work of Hitchcock and Lynch (amongst others) certainly attests to this fact, as does his film collaboration with director Sophie Fiennes on *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema* (2006). In *Pervert's Guide*, Žižek serves as host to a psychoanalytic interpretation of cinema, which on closer inspection is, rather, a psychoanalytic interpretation of ideology, as evinced through cinema.

The way in which Žižek approaches films with regards to ideology and subjectivity actually gives us cause to rethink the entire project of film theory, or "screen theory." What, in fact, were screen theorists working towards? Were they, as David Bordwell has suggested, trying to understand something about the social and psychic functions of *cinema*?⁵ Or, closer to Žižek's project, were they trying to understand something about the social and psychic functions of *ideology and subjectivity*, focusing on film and spectatorship as objects of inquiry for the purpose of this investigation?

Theory, as both Žižek, Bordwell, and others, have indicated has come to signify a certain configuration of Structuralism, post-Structuralism, deconstruction, Althusserian Structuralism, post-Marxism, etc., all of which developed in the wake of the post-1968 Leftist Turn in Cultural Theory, and the emergence of new social movements in politics. In other places (but also according to Bordwell), "Theory" has come to mean Grand Theory, or "Grand Narrative;" the latter has, in the work of postmodernists, such as Jean-François Lyotard, become a code word for arguments against Marxism (the term "Grand Theory" seems to accomplish the same effect, for Bordwell, towards psychoanalysis).⁶ For Žižek, then, Theory seems to be more specifically associated with the Marxian method:

dialectical materialism, something of which he associates with his own Hegelian-Lacanian method.⁷

The problem with film theory, particularly psychoanalytic/Lacanian film theory, is that it misconstrued its object of analysis. Film theory, like Theory in general, must be aimed towards an analysis of ideology, and not necessarily at some kind of Truth-Knowledge about film and spectatorship—that is, as some kind of objective knowledge about the latter. Within this context, it is worth thinking about Žižek's book, *The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieslowski Between Theory and Post-Theory* (2001), a book which was received with disdain from many in film studies. The book takes aim at David Bordwell and Noël Carroll's anthology, *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies* (1996), a manifesto which seeks primarily to debunk the supposed reign of Theory (capital T) in film studies; but *Fright* also seeks to rethink the project of Theory in general, and the place of cinema within this project.

Through a careful analysis of *Fright*, the following argues for the importance of Žižek in film studies and for the role of *film in Theory*. Here it is argued that Žižek's relevance for film studies is not based on his rethinking of Lacan, as some have suggested, or his enhancement of a strictly Lacanian film theory (this, however, is one of his accomplishments, although perhaps unintentional); rather, Žižek's relevance to film studies comes by way of his rethinking of the project of Theory, and the role of film studies within *this* project. As a particular field of inquiry (as opposed to a discipline), film Theory shares a specific object of analysis with other branches of film studies, including post-Theory; however, it differs with regards to the nature of the questions posed, and the methodologies practiced, in examining films. Questions posed with regards to film can be either object-based, seeking to know something specific about the film-object, or they can be subject-based, seeking to understand something about the particular subject-position from which films are approached and interpreted (including political interpretations). The difference between Theory and post-Theory, then, according to Žižek, is that the former admits its own particular subjective-position, the position from which it examines the cinema—a position which is subjective and knows itself to be so (for Žižek, this is the political position of the proletariat); the latter, however, does not and post-Theorists work under the guise of some kind of objective, neutral knowledge towards their object.

Two central points direct Žižek's project in *Fright*: 1) to reclaim Theory from the distorted version of it found in screen theory and contemporary cultural studies; and 2) to argue for Theory against post-Theory, which for Žižek is an example of the ideological displacement of class struggle in intellectual discourse.⁸ Žižek's project is one of ideological critique, but film is still central, and not merely as a tool of exegesis. The following seeks to demonstrate to what extent this is so.

TWO CODES IN ŽIŽEK'S *FRIGHT OF REAL TEARS*

Two codes of sorts indicate the way in which *The Fright of Real Tears* needs to be read.⁹ The first concerns the book's subtitle, "Krzysztof Kieslowski Between Theory and Post-Theory." In the introduction to the book, Žižek begins by stating that had it been written twenty-five years earlier, at a point when structuralist Marxism was at its peak, then its subtitle might have been something along the lines of "On Class Struggle in Cinema." How should we interpret this shift from "class struggle" to "between Theory and post-Theory"? Furthermore, what is Kieslowski's place, in this context, between Theory and post-Theory? Contrary to what one reviewer has suggested,¹⁰ it is not Žižek who is between Theory and post-Theory. It is, in fact, Kieslowski, in this book, who is presented between Theory and post-Theory—but in what sense?

In *Fright*, Žižek addresses two related problems in the Theory versus post-Theory debate. On the one hand, he criticizes the post-Theory position of Bordwell and Carroll. On the other hand, Žižek seeks to reclaim Lacanian theory from its initial misuses by early psychoanalytic film theorists and others in cultural studies. In a sense, Žižek attempts to criticize the two versions of Theory at which Bordwell takes aim—"subject-position theory" and culturalism—but from a position, which is fully immersed in Theory. I will consider the latter (below) before moving onto the former.

A second code gives us further insight into what it is that Žižek accomplishes in *Fright* with regards to Theory. Also in the introduction, Žižek recounts a story of being invited to participate at an art round table and to comment on a particular painting. He claims to have not had anything original to add and therefore "engaged in a total bluff": the frame of the painting, he suggests, is not its true frame:

there is another, invisible, frame, implied by the structure of the painting, which frames our perception of the painting, and these two frames do not overlap—there is an invisible gap separating the two. The pivotal content of the painting is not rendered in its visible part, but is located in this dislocation of the two frames, in the gap that separates them.¹¹

Žižek repeats this story in the last section of the book,¹² but this time without the ironic distance through which it is presented at the beginning. These two versions, in fact, speak to the necessity of this framework for Žižek's ideological critique of cinema.

The story of the two frames indicates the three Lacanian levels of the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real. The visible frame exists at the level of the Symbolic, while the invisible frame is at the level of the Imaginary. It is the gap between them that announces the Real. So, on the one hand, Žižek attests to a spontaneous bluff in devising his methodology, while on the other hand, we see

that even in his own “distanciation” between himself and his methodology, he does seem to be taking himself seriously in his analysis. This is the lesson of Žižek’s critique of ideology: ideology is not simply a visible set of ideas within discourse. It is not simply the visible, transparent dogma of authority, enforcing order upon its subjects. Ideology operates at another level, beneath the surface, through fantasy. Fantasy is what structures our effective, everyday, practical relationship to the authority of the Symbolic order. In Žižek’s (Lacanian) terms, ideology thus exists between the level of fantasy and the level of the Symbolic. This is how we have to approach Žižek’s interpretation of cinema.

For Žižek, the form of the cinema speaks to the general form of ideology, both as an ideological text and in terms of spectatorship. There are, according to Žižek, two important levels at which ideology functions: it functions at a Symbolic level, the level of the text itself, but it also functions at the “sublime” level of fantasy. Thus, it is not enough to simply criticize the ideological content of films themselves, at the Symbolic level (this, I claim, is the aim of discourse analysis). Rather, we must consider that level which Žižek refers to as the “objectively subjective:”¹³ the level of the object in the subject, the noumenal object, which subjectivizes the objective world *for* the subject. Contrary to Bordwell’s caricature of “subject-positioning,”¹⁴ when speaking of actual “subject positions” it is important to keep in mind that not every subject (or spectator) approaches the Symbolic in the same way: there is an element within the subject (the fantasy object) which subjectivizes the external Symbolic order for the subject herself. It is the invisible frame which structures the way in which the subject perceives the visible, Symbolic frame. The invisible frame, of course, is the Lacanian *objet petit a*, the fantasy object, or what Žižek refers to as the “sublime object of ideology.”

Žižek approaches ideology in two ways: with regard to the (Symbolic) text, he practices a dialectical critique which speaks to the Symbolic form of ideology (he uncovers the Universality of the form by locating its exception), while at the level of spectatorship (or subjectivization), Žižek examines that which in films, in the Symbolic text, subjectivizes the spectator through fetishism disavowal. This, to be sure, is a conception of spectatorship that differs significantly from screen theory notions of “suture” or “gaze.” Žižek in fact revises these theories by referring to what he calls “interface.”

INTERFACE

Žižek’s notion of interface differs from the standard suture theory by way of his inclusion of the *objet petit a* in its connection to the Master-Signifier (what early Theory referred to as “suture”).¹⁵ In a way, theorists such as Laura Mulvey and Christian Metz were on the right track with their own conceptions of spectatorship;¹⁶ however, they were overly deterministic, and too simplistic, in assigning too much power to the cinema towards the interpellation of the subject/spectator.

Mulvey, on the one hand, gave too much significance to the formation of Ego ideals in the cinema through the power of the star and the male protagonist. For her, spectatorship resembles the mirror stage, and the spectator identifies with the image of the male protagonist who produces a male gaze in his objectification of the female characters on the screen.¹⁷ Metz, on the other hand, is more thorough in noting that the subject enters the cinema having already developed the ego in the Imaginary through the process of the mirror stage, and therefore, the cinema does not reproduce the mirror stage effect. However, he accords too much knowledge to the spectator, who, according to him, identifies with the cinema by identifying with herself, through the self-knowledge of the fantasy invested in the cinema.¹⁸ “Interface” corrects these misconceptions about subjectivity and spectatorship.

We can conceive interface as a relation between the *objet petit a* and the Master-Signifier, or the relation between the invisible and visible frames, passing through the subject. Here, we find the three levels of Imaginary (fantasy), Symbolic (Master-Signifier) and Real (subject), coming together to form the necessary link of subjectivization. Film theorists focused on either the relationship between the Imaginary and the Real (following Althusser), or between the Imaginary and the Symbolic, never taking into account the relation between all three. The point about interface is that it conceives the subjectivization of the subject/spectator by way of the link between the obscene supplemental underside of the fantasy object, and the Symbolic appearance of the cinema as signifier (not an “imaginary signifier” as Metz claims).

The standard suture effect functions, according to Žižek, in the following manner:

First, the spectator is confronted with a shot, finds pleasure in it in an immediate, imaginary way, and is absorbed by it... Then, this full immersion is undermined by the awareness of the frame as such: what I see is only a part, and I do not master what I see. I am in a passive position, the show is run by the Absent One (or, rather, Other) who manipulates images behind my back... What then follows is a complementary shot which renders the place from which the Absent One is looking, allocating this place to its fictional owner, one of the protagonists. In short, one passes thereby from imaginary to symbolic, to a sign: the second shot does not simply follow the first one, it is *signified* by it.¹⁹

In order to avoid the gap opened up in the second phase of the suture effect, the previous shot must, according to Žižek, be reinscribed into the texture of the film as a point-of-view shot of one of the characters within diegetic space. That is, all subjective shots must be assigned to one of the characters through an objective shot conveying the point of view to that particular character.

Interface, according to Žižek, is what accounts for the functioning of cinema when we are absent the standard reversal of subjective and objective shots. As

in Metz's problematic, whereby the cinema makes possible an entirely objective representation, without the representation of the subjectivizing shot of the protagonist,²⁰ interface accounts for the way the cinema still functions in the absence of some subjectivized perspective. Interface takes place when the standard suturing effect no longer functions.²¹ As Žižek puts it, when the gap of the Real can no longer be filled by an additional (Master-)Signifier, it is filled in by the spectral element of the fantasy object. Here, we find the relevance of Žižek's notion of the "sublime object of ideology."

The "sublime object of ideology" accounts for the subject's "passionate attachment"²² to the Symbolic level of ideological appearances at a point that may be said to be "post-ideological." That is, the question that Žižek asks is, how can we account for the functioning of ideology when ideology no longer relies upon the operation of mystification, or false/naïve consciousness? His thesis is that there is an objective element within the subject—an element that is "objectively subjective"—which attaches the subject to the Symbolic order. It is the subject's attachment to the Symbolic which displaces, or allows her to disavow, some supplemental fantasy object which remains unknown to her. This underside, the "sublime object," is that which is formed in the Imaginary as the subject's fundamental fantasy, which is itself constitutive of the subject: it is the original symptom of subjectivity, what Lacan called a *sinthome* (as opposed to symptom).

Objet petit a, the "sublime object," the fantasy object, is the object in the subject which is directly the subject herself. It is that part of the subject with which she cannot identify, which remains primordially repressed. This is where Metz errs with his conception of spectatorship. In order for subjectivization to occur the subject definitely cannot identify with the fantasy which sustains her own existence. As well, this is where Althusser is mistaken since ideology does not represent the subject's imaginary relationship to her real conditions of existence (a link between the Imaginary and the Real); rather ideology constitutes a Symbolic relation of the subject to the Real, which is sustained by the supplemental underside of fantasy. This is the relation that the notion of interface describes: the subject's attachment to the Symbolic supported by some disavowed supplemental underside. Subjectivization only works if this relation is concealed. The cinema does not induce this effect in the subject, and therefore we must be careful not to suggest that films somehow subjectivize the spectator. However, the cinema does function in accordance with this notion of subjectivity, and in doing so develops a degree of enjoyment (or, *jouissance*) for the spectator.

ENJOYMENT IN THE CINEMA

The cinema, in fact, works upon the spectator in the production of *surplus-enjoyment* as opposed to enjoyment. We can refer to the Wachowski Brothers' *The Matrix* (1999)—a film which functions as a kind of meta-discourse on film itself—in order to better understand this function in the cinema. The virtual

world of the Matrix in the film is, in fact, designed to extract surplus-enjoyment, desire, the energy of humans in the form of libido, from the subjects trapped within it. This energy serves as fuel for the reproduction of the machines themselves.²³ Here we have a perfect model of the relationship between spectators and cinema, for what the cinema produces in the spectator is a degree of surplus-enjoyment: desire. Cinema truly is the medium of our desires, or the “dream factory” *par excellence*. It functions, as Žižek points out at the beginning of the film, *The Pervert’s Guide to Cinema* (2006), not by giving us that which we desire, but by teaching us how to desire. Cinema functions by constantly postponing the satisfaction of desire in enjoyment (in the psychoanalytic sense).²⁴

The cinema activates desire and produces a degree of surplus-enjoyment, by denying actual enjoyment. In this, it is no different than the Symbolic order itself; the difference between the two, however, develops only to the extent that one is taken seriously—as reality—while the other is not. Spectatorship differs from subjectivity in the degree to which we create a distance between ourselves and the cinematic text.

In psychoanalysis, there is a strict distinction between enjoyment and pleasure. Pleasure is what we get in Symbolic reality. Enjoyment, however, is closer to the Real. If the Thing (*das Ding*)—the Kantian “thing-in-itself”—is the hard, material substance of the Real—the Thing which is inaccessible in Symbolic reality, but which protrudes the Symbolic as that around which discourse is constantly articulated, then enjoyment is the other side of this Real. It is the psychical correlative of full access to the Thing—to knowledge about the Self. The Symbolic is just so many failed attempts to gain full access to knowledge in the Real. Scientific knowledge endeavours to do so; however, it is always barred by the subject’s own particular position of enunciation with regards to the Real. There is, in other words, always a gap between the Symbolic and the Real, a gap which is marked by the subject. It is this gap that indicates the impossibility of the subject ever gaining full access to knowledge about herself. This is what constitutes enjoyment/*jouissance* in the psychoanalytic sense: it is impossible-Real. Desire therefore emerges as the constant attempt to actually get full enjoyment. This is what produces the surplus of enjoyment, and cinema interpellates the subject in this way: by activating desire, *not* by producing subject positions.

FROM THE SYMBOLIC TO THE SUBLIME

The relationship between the Symbolic and the sublime is best rendered through an example Žižek pulls from the *Post-Theory* anthology regarding a three-and-a-half second shot in *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942). In his chapter, “A Brief Romantic Interlude’: Dick and Jane Go to 3 ½ Seconds of the Classical Hollywood Cinema,” Richard Maltby highlights the relevance of a particular shot of the airport tower at night, in between a shot of Rick and Ilsa sharing an embrace and then a shot from outside the window of Rick’s room, “where he is standing, looking



Fig. 1. *Casablanca* (Curtiz, 1942). Rick and Ilsa sharing in an embrace.

Fig. 2. *Casablanca*. Three-and-a-half second shot of the airport tower at night.



Fig. 3. *Casablanca*. Ilsa resumes her story.

out, and smoking a cigarette. He turns into the room, and says, 'And then?' [Ilsa] resumes her story..."²⁵ Maltby suggests that viewers may interpret this scene in at least two mutually conflicting ways: it either suggests that Rick and Ilsa had slept together during the interlude where the scene dissolves into the shot of the airport, or it indicates that they have not, and is simply added to denote the passage of a short amount of time, during which Ilsa continued to recount her story to Rick. Maltby focuses on this scene "as an example of the way in which Hollywood movies presuppose multiple viewpoints, at multiple textual levels, for their consuming audience,"²⁶ and indicates something of Hollywood's "contradictory refusal to enforce interpretive closure at the same time that it provides plot resolution. According to Maltby, the movie neither confirms nor denies either interpretation."²⁷ However, for Žižek, the question is not simply "did they 'do it' or didn't they?" It is not simply a question of interpretive closure and plot resolution. Instead, for him, the more important question is: *which content must be added* in order to disavow the potential, obscene supplemental interpretation: that they *did*, in fact, sleep together?

As Žižek puts it, in Lacanian terms, the question to ask is: which content is *allowed* to enter the "public domain of the symbolic Law, or the big Other"? Or, put differently, *which content is added in order to disavow the (supposedly) prohibited content?* According to Žižek, this shot indicates the essential character of appearances—that is, the need for appearances that are added in order to activate and disavow obscene surplus-enjoyment. This added content speaks to *the form* of the appearance itself.²⁸

In the three-and-a-half second shot in *Casablanca*, Rick and Ilsa did *not* "do it," they did not sleep together for the Symbolic big Other—for the "order of appearance," as Žižek would put it; but they *did* "do it" "for our dirty fantasmatic imagination."²⁹ This fantasmatic, obscene supplement, has the structure of what Žižek calls the "inherent transgression,"³⁰ and, according to him, Hollywood needs both levels—the explicit order of appearance, *and* the obscene supplemental fantasy—in order to function. There are, of course, other examples of this kind of supplement in cinema, such as the close-up shots of the match in David Lynch's *Wild at Heart* (1990), but one example, which is often discussed in film studies, is the added shot of the unicorn in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner: The Director's Cut* (1992).

The latter is often discussed as adding to the dimension of Deckard's own status as a human being. The film, as is well known, challenges Deckard's own humanity: is he truly human or is he a replicant? Since Rachel's memories were implanted, we come to question whether this image is truly Deckard's own, or whether it was, in fact, implanted in his mind. This added shot of the unicorn also speaks to the psychoanalytic thesis that fantasy structures reality. Here, Deckard's own sense of Self is produced in tandem with this fantasy image. However, what does it add for the spectator? Is it, like the three-and-a-half second

shot from *Casablanca* added as a kind of censorship, as a signifier of prohibition, activating desire? Like the question “did they do it or didn’t they?” apropos of *Casablanca*, the unicorn shot subjectivizes the spectator through the question: is Deckard a human or a replicant? It is this added element that produces a degree of (surplus-)enjoyment for the spectator in the film.

This, for Žižek, is how we have to understand the function of ideology. It is neither a naïve false-consciousness, nor simply the ideas which seem to dominate; it has to do, rather, with *the fetishistic attachment to a particular kind of avowed supplement (the Master-Signifier) and its disavowal, sustained by one’s attachment to some supplemental underside (the fantasy object, objet petit a)*. The critique of ideology has to ask: what is it that is added to the order of appearances in order to generate a subjectivized element of desire, one which supplements the subject’s actual, practical attachment to the order of appearances?

This underside, the fantasy object, conceals the fact that the Symbolic order is structured around some traumatic impossibility, which cannot be symbolized: the Real of enjoyment. Fantasy is what domesticates this impossibility, transforms it into desire (or what Lacan refers to as “surplus-*jouissance*,” or “surplus-enjoyment” in Žižek’s texts).³¹ Fantasy is, thus, that which closes the gap of the pre-ontological Real, the Void of nothingness.³² This, finally, points to the psychoanalytic fact that “what should remain inaccessible to us is not the noumenal Real, but our *fundamental fantasy* itself—the moment the subject comes too close to this phantasmatic core, he loses the consistency of his existence.”³³ In cinema, fantasy is definitely *not* that which appears on the screen, the Symbolic texture of the film. It is, rather, that which allows the subject to take pleasure from the screen as surplus-enjoyment. Fantasy is the Imaginary, “invisible frame” which co-ordinates our *perception* of the visible, Symbolic, frame. This conception of ideology, made readable through an analysis of film and spectatorship, is what allows us to understand the ideological position of post-Theory with regards to Theory. This distinction is further articulated through Žižek’s reading of the major motifs in Kieslowski’s films.

OF REAL TEARS AND ETHICAL CHOICES: THE DIALECTICAL CRITICISM OF IDEOLOGY

For Žižek, films in general are worth analysing because of their proximity to Symbolic reality. Film, as such, is a fake: a fiction. However, in its very form as fiction, in appearance, it becomes more real than reality itself. While it is generally the case that films are approached as fictions, as mere appearances, they manage to approach the Real in their honesty, *as* fictions, while Symbolic reality—the fiction which structures our everyday, effective reality—is misrecognized as the real thing. In this way, there is more Truth in the appearance, in the form of cinematic fiction; we admit it as such, as a fiction, whereas we tend to avoid recognizing Symbolic reality itself as mere fiction. This is what we can learn from

cinema: how to understand the appearances which structure our everyday (fake) Symbolic reality. For Žižek, it is Kieslowski's transition from documentary to fiction in cinema which signals his shift towards the Real.

The ontological thesis of psychoanalysis is that, it is impossible to show the whole of reality. In order to represent reality, something must be foreclosed from it, a certain gap, or Void, in reality which accounts for the subject's own position *within* reality. According to Žižek, this foreclosure is what accounts for Kieslowski's transition to fiction. Documentary was too Real, thus making it difficult for Kieslowski to develop some kind of emotional response in the viewer. He seemed to feel it necessary to express something in the subjects of his documentaries that remained impossible in the form of documentary reality. Documentary for Kieslowski was too intrusive of the Real. As he puts it himself: "I'm frightened of real tears."³⁴

For Žižek, then, this is "the ultimate lesson of the dialectical tension between documentary reality and fiction: if our social reality itself is sustained by a symbolic fiction or fantasy, then the ultimate achievement of film art is not to recreate reality within the narrative fiction, to seduce us into (mis)taking a fiction for reality, but on the contrary, to make us discern the fictional aspect of reality itself, to experience reality itself as a fiction."³⁵ All of the variations of Symbolic reality are just so many failed attempts to grasp the kernel of the Real.

The key to Kieslowski's films, according to Žižek, is the theme of open-ended repetitions of the same basic narrative (of alternative histories) which repeat without any determinate closure. All of his films are therefore various different Symbolic articulations of the same basic Real. Every deadlock in the preceding version results in its re-articulation in the next. All of Kieslowski's films, in other words, are remakes of the same basic story, but from a new vantage point.

For Žižek, the common theme in Kieslowski's films is that of "alternative histories," or alternative narrative lines. According to him, this theme is another case of an artistic content pushing the boundaries of form, as if the content, the narrative itself, has to be invented in order to practice the form. Kieslowski's films, according to Žižek, present a "new life experience," one that "explodes the form of linear, centred narrative and renders life as a multiform flow."³⁶ His films present various parallel, overlapping, alternative narrative lines, disrupting the linear flow of narrative cinema. Žižek argues that the way to understand this procedure in Kieslowski's films is by interpreting them through the theme of "ethical choice," particularly the choice between "calm life" and "mission." This choice is presented in the relation between each new version and its previous incarnation: each new version is prompted by a deadlock in the previous one, regarding the failure to make a proper ethical choice.

Žižek distinguishes three versions of alternative histories in Kieslowski's films: "direct presentation of three possible outcomes in *Blind Chance* [(1987)],



Fig. 4. Witek's cry at the beginning of *Blind Chance* (Kieslowski, 1987).

the presentation of two outcomes through the theme of the double in [*The Double Life of*] *Veronique* [(1991)], and the presentation of two outcomes through the “flash-back in the present” in *Red* [(1994)].³⁷ But these variations take on different forms in Kieslowski's many films. *Veronique* is the key (or “master code”); it is *the* film which stages the choice between vocation (leading to death) and quiet satisfied life (the result of compromising one's vocation).³⁸ The key distinction is played out by the two “Veroniques”: Veronique, herself, is melancholic and reflective, while Weronika is directly enthusiastic for the cause. This theme of “ethical choice” is also played out in *Decalogue* (1989). Each segment of *Decalogue* stages one of the ten commandments, but in a disjointed way, so that, according to Žižek, each film in the series stages a commandment in the order that proceeds it (i.e., *Decalogue 1* stages the second commandment, etc., whereas *Decalogue 10* stages the first commandment). Each instalment, however, is about the transgression of a commandment, leading to a deadlock which thrusts the narrative into the next film and the next commandment, each failing to make an ethical choice.

Rather than giving some indication of liberation, alternative histories, Žižek argues, are in fact quite enveloping: “the fact that there is only one reality leaves the space open for other possibilities, i.e. for a choice. If, however, these different possibilities are all realised, we get a claustrophobic universe in which there is no freedom of choice precisely because *all* choices have already been realised.”³⁹ Having all possibilities realised eliminates the openness of choice; everything is given determinate closure. This closure is, perhaps, what is expressed by Witek's cry—his desperate shout—at the beginning of *Blind Chance*.

This cry signals at the beginning the determinate suture, closing upon the deadlocks experienced in the two other alternatives presented in the film. Žižek argues that the entire film presents flashbacks of alternative histories of a person who, aware of his imminent death, reflects upon alternatives that could have been. He reflects upon his three possible lives. Žižek interprets these three different versions as intertwined to the extent that each passes into the next as the result of a deadlock in the previous scenario: “the deadlock of the socialist apparatchik’s career pushes him into dissidence, and non-satisfaction with dissidence into a private profession.”⁴⁰ It is only the final version, which is “real:” the one which ultimately ends back at the beginning, with Witek’s cry as he realizes that he is about to die in the plane explosion. The deadlock of the other two realities, the two realities where he does not die in the end, still throw him into the “real” reality: the one where he *must* die. The final version, the “real” one, gives finitude to the deadlock of “choice,” and in this way, transforms the various contingent possible realities into a single necessary reality (the final version retroactively authorizes the *necessity* of the Master-Signifier as the only possible solution).

The psychoanalytic point that Žižek makes apropos this relationship between the possible, contingent alternatives and the necessary determinate *one* reality, concerns the relationship between the sublime, spectral, fantasy object and the Master-Signifier. The possible alternatives resonate below the surface—the fantasy of that which could have been, haunting us in the present—and it is the necessity of the choice made which gives closure to the “real” effective, Symbolic reality. It is the elevation of *one* of the possibilities (one element of content) into the only—necessary—existing choice, retroactively suturing the entire field of Symbolic “reality.” However, these possible alternatives still haunt us below the surface and are disavowed by the effective “real” reality. These overlapping fantasies of possible alternatives are, in other words, the *fantasmatic* support for the effective Symbolic reality. The truth of this effective reality, the truth of the appearance of reality, is found in the exception of these possible alternatives.

Žižek, finally, contrasts *Blind Chance* with *Blue* (1993). *Blue* is, according to Žižek, “the obverse of the psychoanalytic treatment: not as the traversing of fantasy, but as the gradual reconstitution of the fantasy that allows us access to reality.” After the accident, Julie is deprived of fantasy, she is deprived of the “protective shield” of fantasy and is, thus, confronted with the Real in all its traumatic disgusting pulsating nothingness; its non-purpose; its non-meaning. The film concludes once Julie is able to reconstitute the fantasy that protects her from the Void of the Real. *Blue* is, thus, “not a film about the slow process of regaining reality, to immerse oneself in social life, but rather a film about building a protective screen between the subject and the raw Real.”⁴¹ The difference between *Blind Chance* and *Blue* is, thus, one of ethical choice between “calm life” in *Blue*

and “mission” in *Blind Chance*.... And, as Žižek puts it, is this ethical choice between calm life and mission not also the choice between the calm life of post-Theory and the (political) mission of Theory—in Alain Badiou’s terms, between Being and Event; or in Freudian terms, between the “pleasure principle” and the drive, “beyond the pleasure principle”: either fidelity to the Symbolic fiction, or fidelity to the Real?⁴²

CLASS STRUGGLE AND IDEOLOGY IN FILM STUDIES

The post-Theory stance against, not just psychoanalysis, but Theory in general, is indicative of the postmodern cynicism, described by Fredric Jameson as “the end of this or that.”⁴³ Post-Theory spells out the end of Theory. As Bordwell and Carroll put it in their introduction to *Post-Theory*, “Is this book about the end of film theory? No. It’s about the end of [capital T] Theory, and what can and should come after”;⁴⁴ “What is coming after Theory is not another Theory but theories and the activity of theorizing.”⁴⁵

Žižek claims that, for post-Theorists, the end of Theory is perceived as an end to the burden of Grand Theory, or TOEs (Theories of Everything). Post-Theorists, according to Žižek, reproach Theory with two “mutually exclusive” deficiencies: Theory as a new version of TOE; and Theory as “a cognitive suspension characteristic of historicist relativism: Theorists no longer ask the basic questions like ‘What is the nature of cinematic perception?’ they simply tend to reduce such questions to the historicist reflection upon the conditions in which certain notions emerged as the result of historically specific power relations.”⁴⁶ In other words, post-Theorists reproach film Theory, on the one hand, with claiming too much (TOE), and claiming too little (historicist relativism). Is the way out of this impasse (between post-Theorist middle-level empirical research and Theory/cultural studies historical relativism), Žižek asks, a simple return to old-fashioned TOEs? His answer is that Hegelian dialectics offers a solution. This approach concerns the paradoxical relationship between the Universal and its exception. But it is important, Žižek adds, to distinguish what he refers to as “dialectics” from the post-Theory version of dialectics.

According to Žižek, the post-Theory approach to dialectics refers to “the notion of cognition as the gradual process of our always limited knowledge through the testing of specific hypotheses.”⁴⁷ The post-Theory notion of dialectics is elaborated by Noël Carroll who claims that dialectics involves a process of dialogue with opposing theories, what he calls “dialectical comparison.”⁴⁸ For Žižek, the difference between “dialectics proper” and the cognitivist version of dialectics, has to do with the inclusion of the subject’s “position of enunciation.” As he puts it, “the cognitivist speaks from the safe position of the excluded observer.”⁴⁹ He adds that,

while the problem-solution model of historical research can undoubtedly lead to a lot of precise and enlightening insights, one should nonetheless insist that the procedures of posing problems and finding solutions to them always and by definition occur within a certain ideological context that determines which problems are crucial and which solutions acceptable.⁵⁰

Žižek's point, here, concerns the way in which the problem-solution model of post-Theory dialectics necessarily avoids reflecting upon the researcher's own position of enunciation within the particular relations of ideological contemplation. The post-Theory problem-solution model simply displaces the existing ideological relations of domination and exploitation, something of which Theory seeks to extrapolate. Here, we are not necessarily referring to ideology as "false consciousness." Instead, ideology, here, must be understood as a *misrecognition* of form—that is, the form of the discourse on film.

Dialectics, according to Žižek, is simply a process of examining the way in which a particular content is elevated to the status of universality. In other words, ideology has to do with the way in which a particular subjective position is raised to the status of Truth, or what Foucault calls power-knowledge. The way to understand this universalizing process is by locating a singular (traumatic, irrational, pathological) element that sticks out (a symptom) which indicates something about this false universality, what Žižek refers to as "a direct jump from the singular to the universal, by-passing the mid-level of particularity so dear to Post-Theorists."⁵¹ Here, power-knowledge can be contrasted with the truth of the (excluded) subjective position, which represents the false universality of the existing dominant discourse in the field. It is a matter of distinguishing between the highest and the lowest.

The difference, here, between Theory and post-Theory concerns the way in which each approaches its object. Post-Theory, on the one hand, approaches the film-object as a neutral thing—that is, as something about which objective knowledge is possible. It, therefore, presents itself as a neutral, objective science. Theory, on the other hand, accounts for its own subject-position, and thus speaks to the film-object as a Thing (*das Ding*). Film Theory and post-Theory, therefore, speak to the knowledge about the same object, but they do so from two particular positions in the class struggle: one that imagines itself to be neutral, object-based, outside of relations of domination and exploitation—as a discourse that adds knowledge to our understanding of the film-object (post-Theory); and the other which is subject-based, one which takes sides in the class struggle which adds to our knowledge, not of the film-object but to the way in which the film-object can add to our knowledge of the form of ideology in general. For Žižek, the difference is also that between commitment to the pleasure principle (Symbolic fiction) and its obverse, commitment to the drive (Real), or to the difference between the choice of calm life and mission.

Post-Theory can, therefore, respond by asking how Theory can be so sure that it has grasped the correct, singular, position from which to investigate the film-object. Post-Theorists might ask whether it is not necessary to compare different examples, different approaches, different conclusions in order to speak more generally to the truth-knowledge of film. Should we not, in other words, make more empirical observations before we come to general conclusions about *film*? The dialectical counter-argument, however, according to Žižek, is that,

all particular examples of a certain universality do not entertain the same relationship towards their universality: each of them struggles with this universality, displaces it in a specific way, and the great art of dialectical analysis consists in being able to pick out the exceptional singular case which allows us to formulate the universality ‘as such.’⁵²

His point is that all of the empirical examples will simply speak to the form of the universality of the reigning discourse on the object. The point of dialectical analysis is to locate the exception (which varies in different cases), which speaks to the false universality of the form itself. One needs to locate the point of *negativity*, to tarry with the negative, that is, to locate a point of irrationality, such as in the films of Hitchcock, Lynch and, in this case, Kieslowski, all of which speak to the form of cinema in order to understand the way in which each positive, empirical example adds to the universality of the form. This is the procedure found both in Marxism and in psychoanalysis. Both recreate a totality by observing the rational from the perspective of the irrational, which the reigning form seeks to extricate.

Here it is the exception which coincides with the universal. In order to understand Žižek’s analyses of film examples, one needs to understand the dialectical method of analysis with which he is engaged. The examples to which he refers stand out as exceptions which speak to the universal form, *not of film, but of ideology*. Žižek, as I have argued throughout, is concerned, first and foremost, with the form of ideology and subjectivity, and therefore his analyses of films are not object-based. They are not based upon understanding something directly about the film-Thing; they are, rather, subject-based, and refer to the form of films, to the form of cinema, in order to understand something about the form of ideology and subjectivity.

Both Theorists and post-Theorists refer to the same object: the film-Thing. One can, however, assert that—along the lines of the Lacanian “there is no sexual relationship,” or the Marxian “there is no class relationship”—in film studies, there is no Theoretical relationship. Both sides refer to the same object, one which knows itself to be partial, to be engaged in a partial project (the political project of the proletariat), choosing an ethics of mission, and the other which takes itself as the “neutral” observer that has Knowledge about the object

itself, choosing a calm life in developing the knowledge of this object. *This* is where the class struggle is to be located in film studies: between Theory and post-Theory.⁵³

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NOTES

1. See Slavoj Žižek, "Undergrowth of Enjoyment: How Popular Culture Can Serve as an Introduction to Lacan," *New Formations* 9 (1989): 7-29.
2. See Todd McGowan, *The Real Gaze: Film Theory After Lacan* (Albany, NY: SUNY, 2007). See also, McGowan and Sheila Kunkle, eds., *Lacan and Contemporary Film* (New York: Other Press, 2004). McGowan has also edited a special issue on Žižek and Cinema for the *International Journal of Žižek Studies* 1.3 (2007).
3. Todd McGowan, "Introduction: Enjoying the Cinema," *International Journal of Žižek Studies* 1.3 (2007), <http://zizekstudies.org/index.php/ijzs/article/view/57/119> (accessed 1 November 2007).
4. Slavoj Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: On Woman and Causality* (London and New York: Verso, 1994), 175.
5. David Bordwell, "Contemporary Film Studies and the Vicissitudes of Grand Theory," in *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, ed. David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1996), 6.
6. Bordwell argues that psychoanalytic film Theory, what he refers to as "subject-position theory," is a Grand Theory in the sense that it frames cinema within grand schemes, "which seek to describe or explain very broad features of society, history, language, and psyche." *Ibid.*, 3.
7. Althusser argues in *For Marx* that the term "Theory" (capital T) should be reserved to designate Marxian philosophy, i.e., dialectical materialism. See Louis Althusser, "On the Materialist Dialectic," in *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (London and New York: Verso, 2005 [1969]). In *The Parallax View*, Žižek also aligns himself fully with dialectical materialism. See *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT, 2006), 3-13.
8. Žižek contends that, at the level of ideology, class struggle is "ultimately the struggle for the meaning of society as such, the struggle for which of the two classes will impose itself as the stand-in for society 'as such,' thereby degrading its other into the stand-in for the non-Social (the destruction of, the threat to, society)." Žižek, "Lenin's Choice," in *Revolution at the Gates: Selected Writings of Lenin from 1917*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (London and New York: Verso, 2002), 210. The same can be said regarding the struggle over the intellectual hegemony in the field of film studies. Here we have the ideological struggle over the meaning of the field "as such." Post-Theory, from this perspective, appears to hold to a position of "counter-revolution."
9. Slavoj Žižek, *The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieslowski Between Theory and Post-Theory* (London: BFI, 2001). Subsequent references to this book will be marked *Fright*.
10. Greg Oguss, Review of *The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieslowski Between Theory and Post-Theory*, *Film Quarterly* 56.4 (2003): 52-53.
11. Žižek, *Fright*, 5.
12. *Ibid.*, 130.
13. Žižek, *The Parallax View*, 170.

14. According to Bordwell, early psychoanalytic film theories focused on the construction of "subject-positions" in the cinema, claiming that subjectivity is "constructed through representational systems." Bordwell, 6.
15. See, for example, Jacques-Alain Miller, "Suture (elements of the logic of the signifier)," Jean-Pierre Oudart, "Suture and Cinema," and Stephen Heath, "Notes on Suture," *Screen* 18.4 (1977/1978): 23-76.
16. See Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Film and Theory: An Anthology*, ed. Robert Stam and Toby Miller (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000); and, Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, trans. Celia Britton, et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982).
17. Mulvey, 486-487.
18. Metz, 42-44.
19. Žižek, *Fright*, 32. This follows very closely to the way in which suture is outlined by Oudart (see note 14, above).
20. As Metz puts it, the cinema "often presents us with long sequences that can (literally) be called 'inhuman'... sequences in which only inanimate objects, landscapes, etc. appear and which for minutes at a time offer no human form for spectator identification" (Metz, 47).
21. Žižek, *Fright*, 52.
22. This is a term borrowed from Judith Butler to which Žižek also refers. See Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 6-10; and Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London and New York: Verso, 1999), 247-312.
23. Žižek asks, "Why does the matrix need human energy?" While the machines, he argues, could have easily found another, more reliable form of energy, it is the energy of humans that is still needed. So what is this energy? The only consistent answer, according to Žižek, is that "the matrix feeds on the human's *jouissance*," the surplus-enjoyment of human desire. Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out* (New York and London: Routledge, 2008), 262. For Žižek's political interpretation of *The Matrix*, see *The Parallax View*, 312-317.
24. Desire, for Žižek, is best rendered through a joke about a conscript who pleads insanity in order to avoid his military service: "his 'symptom' was compulsively to examine every document within his reach, and exclaim: 'That's not it!'; when he was examined by the military psychiatrists, he did the same, so the psychiatrists finally gave him a document confirming that he was released from military service. The conscript reached for it, examined it, and exclaimed: 'That's it!'" (*The Parallax View*, 213). The point, of course, is that the search itself generated its own object. This is precisely how desire functions, and the cinema adds to this production of desire by staging another Symbolic fiction within which the subject/spectator produces her own surplus-enjoyment in the process of searching for enjoyment itself.
25. Richard Maltby, "A Brief Romantic Interlude: Dick and Jane go to 3½ Seconds of the Classical Hollywood Cinema," in *Post-Theory*, 434.
26. *Ibid.*, 436.
27. *Ibid.*, 438.
28. Žižek, *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000), 6.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
30. See Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London and New York: Verso, 1997), 18-27.
31. See Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London and New York: Verso, 1989), 123.
32. See Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, 57.
33. *Ibid.*, 60.
34. Quoted in Žižek, *Fright*, 72.
35. *Ibid.*, 77.

36. Ibid., 78.
37. Ibid., 79.
38. Ibid., 137.
39. Ibid., 79.
40. Ibid., 80.
41. Ibid., 176.
42. Ibid., 148-149.
43. See Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* 1/146 (1984): 53-92.
44. Bordwell and Carroll, "Introduction," in *Post-Theory*, xiii.
45. Ibid., xiv.
46. Žižek, *Fright*, 14.
47. Ibid.
48. Carroll, "Prospects for Film Theory: A Personal Assessment," in *Post-Theory*, 57.
49. Žižek, *Fright*, 15.
50. Ibid., 17.
51. Ibid., 25.
52. Ibid., 26.
53. In the interest of space, Bordwell's response to Žižek has not been addressed here; however, the reader is directed to Bordwell's article, "Slavoj Žižek: Say Anything," *David Bordwell's Website on Cinema*, <http://www.davidbordwell.com/essays/zizek.php> (accessed 10 February 2008). See also, Bordwell, *Figures Traced in Light: On Cinematic Staging* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2005), 260-264.

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