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# On Reading Žižek: Notes for Lacanian Clinicians (or what to do when a little bit of Žižek gets stuck in the throat)

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*“Lacan’s seminars, addressed to psychoanalysts, are focused on clinical questions and clinical training, and the reading off from his writings into other spheres requires something a little less hasty and less dramatic than what we find in Žižek.”*

(Parker, 2004: 80)

*“[...] Lacan’s work is a notoriously tortuous read, full of mind-bending puns, obscure allusion and slippery conceptual interplay.”* (Myers, 2003: 20)

*“I would like to begin with an almost narcissistic reflection. Why do I resort so often to examples from popular culture? The simple answer is in order to avoid a kind of jargon, and to achieve the greatest possible clarity, not only for my readers but also for myself. That is to say, the idiot for whom I endeavour to formulate a theoretical point as clearly as possible is ultimately myself...”* (Žižek, 2005: 56)

At a recent gathering comprised exclusively of Lacanian psychoanalysts we found ourselves considering the idea of inviting Žižek to be a keynote speaker at an upcoming event. There was a mixed response: silence, some mutterings of excited enthusiasm, some heads bowed barely concealing faces contorted with disapproval.

He would certainly draw in the crowds! His talk alone would finance the entire conference! But Žižek! But... Žižek. Well, why not Žižek? This 'mixed' response to Žižek amongst Lacanian psychoanalysts is so commonplace as to be clichéd. Hated by some, loved by others, (but probably read by all!). A grudging admiration tempered with the suggestion that he is dangerous, his writings perceived on the one hand as a dilution of the Lacanian *doxa*, and on the other as a potential pollutant. 'Students', they say, are only reading Žižek now and taking his word on Lacan. Even secondary texts on Žižek openly acknowledge that they are taking his word on Lacan! Soon enough nobody will read Lacan, not even training analysts!

In a curious moment of retroactive irony I remember from my days as a doctoral student - in the heady climate of a partially tolerated post-structuralist turn in the social sciences in British Academia during the early 1990's – being engrossed in Lacan, Baudrillard, Derrida, Foucault, and Lyotard almost interchangeably and the concern at that time was that students would forget to read Freud, Marx, Weber, and Hegel. In short, let us admit that the current fear of Žižek is at least in small part symptomatic of the fear that the new kid in town is always more fascinating than the crusty old (or dead) sage. But of course there is much more to it than that! Is it not the case that in Žižek's own (oft cited) words above where he restates his desire to give examples from popular culture, to 'avoid jargon', to 'achieve clarity', to provide indeed an 'idiot's' guide to Lacan, that he actually sets up the very obstacles for Lacanian psychoanalysts to read him with a 'clear conscience'. At least one part of a Lacanian formation requires *may* demands a tenure in blood, sweat and tears, poring over poorly translated seminars and revelling in the better ones (if your French isn't up to Lacan's standard), painstakingly attempting to follow Lacan's trains of thought, endless unpunctuated paragraphs, switching and oscillating between a free-floating attention to his free associations in the hope of actually 'hearing something' and the studious determination to make cuts in his discourse, pen in hand, Saint Christopher medal nearby in the hope of navigating some trajectory that would bring you closer to a kind of *understanding*. In short, Žižek's 'short cuts' appear to offer to some Lacanians an opportunity to compromise their desire!<sup>1</sup> In this article I want to look at little bits of Žižek where he says something about *the practice of psychoanalysis* that might be both interesting (and *digestible*) to Lacanian psychoanalysts, where, in keeping with the remit of this special issue, we can read Žižek with Lacan, and *maybe* put to rest some of the evident panic-mongering that mobilizes – in some Lacanian circles - an anti-Žižekian stance. I will take as my compass, the first section in Lacan's own work on *The Direction of the Treatment and the Principles of its Power* (Lacan, 1958) in order to stage Žižek's engagement with Lacanian theory

as both clinically derived and clinically interesting. Perhaps, my effort will in the words of T.S. Eliot, *lead us to an overwhelming question: why not Žižek?* In any case, we will discover what happens when a little bit of Žižek gets stuck in the throat.

### **Who Analyses Today?**

In his paper *The Direction of the Treatment and the Principles of Its Power*<sup>2</sup>, delivered at the Royaumont Colloquium July 10-13, 1958, Lacan outlines key aspects of the psychoanalytic treatment, what we might call the crucial characteristics of the treatment. Organised in five sections, this is where Lacan concisely spells out the components of a specifically 'Lacanian' psychoanalysis<sup>3</sup>. The question posed at the very beginning of this paper - *Who Analyses Today?* – and the ensuing formulations can be read as a statement which takes in Lacan's broader concerns with the training of analysts under the IPA regime, the bastardization of the Freudian project (especially as it glorifies the intersubjectivity of 'two-person' or 'ego' psychology), and, the ethics of psychoanalysis. I will not be presenting an in-depth summarizing of Lacan's paper here - many good summaries, exegeses, critiques, and ruminations of and upon the paper are published (see in particular Fink, 2004) - rather, I am interested to pick up on certain motifs and indicate where we can read Žižek alongside Lacan.

For Lacan, whoever positions themselves as the analyst *is not* in the business of the emotional reeducation of analysands, the analyst directs the treatment, but does not direct the patient. In getting the patient to apply the fundamental rule of psychoanalysis, the analyst conveys the doctrine that they themselves have arrived at in their formation. This is so because the directives laid down at the outset of an analysis in the form of instructions are nonetheless received by the patient (always already caught up in a certain transference with the analyst and with psychoanalysis) according to '*the mass of prejudices*' in the patient based on the ideas the patient has formed about the '*procedures and aims of the psychoanalytic enterprise by the spreading of notions about analysis in his culture*' (Lacan, 1958: 490, my emphasis). For those of us who work as analysts we encounter this 'mass of prejudices' on a frequent if not daily basis (and not only in the clinic of course!). Questions and statements indicating the cultural embeddedness of analysis range from well-worn self-conscious reflections on Freud's pansexualism and Woody Allenesque analysis jokes, to Lacan's phallocentrism ("of course woman exists!") and quirky manner ("have you seen that mad documentary called *Television?*") and now thanks to *YouTube* this 'spreading of notions about analysis in culture' include Žižek's

obsessional capers in his own kitchen (“I was looking at the Žižek movie last night and I couldn’t help but feel that like him, I too must be an obsessional, since I also keep my socks in the kitchen drawers”), and obsessional tricks in order to get some writing done (re: Žižek not calling his writing ‘writing’ as such, but ‘getting some points down’ and ‘editing them’). As the commentator *par excellence* on popular culture from a Lacanian perspective, is it not the highest point of delicious irony that Žižek’s own neurotic symptoms are played back in the consulting room, indeed where Žižek the ‘TV psy-personality’ can be identified with and embraced *qua* ego-ideal? Lacan’s critique of the one who analyses today in this first section of his paper is aimed at those who would claim to dispel these cultural notions of analyses as irrelevant, or to ignore them as inconsequential for the work since after all, for them, analysis *does* involve a re-education of the patient. Interestingly though, I think that in Žižek’s work we do find an attempt to re-educate the reader into having a ‘better notion’ of *Lacanian* psychoanalysis. In other words, whereas Lacan accepts the manifold of notions about psychoanalysis in (1950’s, French) culture as part and parcel of the patient’s (transference) prejudices that the analyst must *not* forget (Lacan, 1958: 490), Žižek, in his own words, a ‘card-carrying Lacanian’, attempts to correct misguided notions about Lacanian psychoanalysis by invoking and sustaining a constant and consistent engagement with Lacanian theory via thousands of analogies and examples of the theory applied in his various exegeses. We need to begin to see something of Žižek’s own desire at work (which *pace* Lacan, is not that of a Lacanian analyst insofar as he seeks to *re-educate*), as that of the obsessional making good the lack in the Other (of psychoanalytic knowledge etc). Indeed, if we *were* interested in making some kind of structural diagnosis of Žižek’s psyche there is no shortage of examples from his own writings and ‘movies’ that would steer us in the direction of a diagnosis of obsessional neurosis!<sup>4</sup> However, Žižek is neither the first or the only one who reveals his desire in this respect, since by definition, any and all of those (us?) who seek to write something *about* Lacanian psychoanalysis, in part, do so in order to fill in some gap (lack) in (the knowledge of) the Other. Finally, we cannot forget that Freud himself long felt it his duty and ‘guiding purpose’ to explain, detail, and otherwise reiterate ‘the nature and discoveries’ of psychoanalysis (Freud, 1933: x, for e.g.). Indeed, we might ask, is not Lacan’s ‘return to Freud’ at least in part, identifiable as the staging of the obsessional’s grand gesture of oblation ceremonial practice in the pursuit of deference to the Other on the one hand, and on the other, an index of the obsessional’s anxiety *vis à vis* ‘the lack of lack’. To paraphrase Lacan, when ‘the Freud is always on your back’ there is no possibility of lack and that is to be face to face with the object of anxiety!<sup>5</sup>

## The Analyst Must Pay!

Back to Lacan's paper in which he declares that the patient is not the only one who finds it difficult to pay his share in analysis. The analyst too must pay: with his words raised to the level of effects as interpretations, with his person lent as a prop in the transference, and with the very core of his being insofar as his being is not something that can be parked on the sidelines.<sup>6</sup>

The analyst must pay with his words. In *Taking Sides: A Self-Interview* (Žižek, 1994: 169), Žižek emphasises the 'unique figure of the analyst'. The analyst, he comments, is absolutely responsible for the effects of his words. Whereas, in ordinary discourse, when ordinary people witness the outcome of their actions as contrary to what they had in mind, they can throw their hands up in the air and disclaim the intention of their words, the analyst is 'never allowed to take refuge in saying 'This is not what I had in mind!' For Žižek, this indicates the analytic discourse as Other, indeed as he says, as exceptional and surprising.

The analyst pays with his person as a prop in the transference. In the transference, at some point in the treatment - often at the beginning although not necessarily (Lacan, 1973: 233) - the analyst is the 'subject supposed to know' (something about the patient's symptom, fantasies, truth etc). In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (Lacan, 1973), Lacan develops the notion of the subject supposed to know in relation to the transference. He emphasizes that once the subject supposed to know 'exists somewhere' there is transference. The subject/analyst and insofar as he/she addresses some individual/analyst in this function effectively establishes the transference. Moreover, the transference is 'unthinkable' unless there is a 'subject supposed to know' (Lacan, 1973; 253). To know what? For Lacan, this 'knowledge' always involves desire, insofar as the dimension of desire is implicated in signification. Žižek makes numerous comments on the function of the subject supposed to know in the transference throughout his work in various ways both implicitly and explicitly. In *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (Žižek, 1989), in his chapter on the symptom (by definition particularly clinical in its focus) we have Žižek largely commenting on Lacan's seminars and papers of the 1950s and 1960s whilst nodding to later work on sexualisation and the *sinthome*. Here he remarks that the symptom is formed with an eye to its interpretations: it is addressed to the big Other presumed to contain its meaning. There is no symptom without its addressee: in the psychoanalytic cure the symptom is always addressed to the analyst, it is an appeal to him to deliver its hidden meaning. We find a keen isomorphism with Lacan's statements on the subject supposed to know in the

transference when Žižek states: 'We can also say that there is no symptom without transference, without the position of some subject presumed to know its meaning' (Žižek, 1989: 73). Again, in *The Plague of Fantasies*, Žižek mobilizes an exegesis of the subject supposed to know, this time enlisting the TV series *Colombo* and character of the title. Colombo always knows 'whodunit': 'from the moment he visits the scene of the crime and encounters the culprit, he is absolutely certain, he simply knows, that the culprit did it' (Žižek, 1997: 106-107). In the same way that we know that Colombo always knows who committed the crime, Žižek argues that this is what the analyst qua 'subject supposed to know' is about. When 'the analysand enters into a transference relationship with the analyst, he has the same absolute certainty that the analyst knows his secret' (Žižek, 1997: 107).

Now this whole theme of the detective as 'subject supposed to know' is treated in some detail by Žižek in *Looking Awry* (1991) where he argues that the detective's domain, as well as the psychoanalyst's, is the domain of meaning: the scene of the crime analysed by the detective is by definition 'structured like a language' (Žižek, 1992: 57). The detective's 'omniscience' is homologous to that of the analyst who is taken by the patient as the subject supposed to know. It is here also that Žižek invokes Dupin, the detective in the Edgar Allan Poe short story "*The Purloined Letter*" in order to advance some comments aimed at unpacking Lacan's *apropos* of the same character and story (Žižek, 1991: 60-61). For, indeed, it is Lacan who sets the precedent in using the character of the detective in order to illuminate aspects of the trajectory of the signifier in the psychoanalytic treatment but also to indicate parallels between the detective and the analyst *vis à vis* the transference (see Lacan, 1966: 6-48; 1978: 179-190, 191-205)! In the story, Dupin is the detective called in by the Prefect of the Parisian Police to advise them in their search for the Queen's letter taken from her boudoir in front of her very eyes by the Minister. She has not been able to object openly to its theft for to do so would have revealed (what we can only suppose is) its impropriety, to the King. The King's Minister, as the story goes, replaces the Queen's letter with one of his own and hides the Queen's letter in his apartment. The police have conducted a thorough search of the Minister's apartment to no avail. Thereupon, Dupin is consulted with and he advises them to search again. Again they come back to him saying that it cannot be found. At this point, Dupin demands that they hand over the reward money to him and he will procure the purloined letter. Payment is made and Dupin immediately produces the letter. Dupin's knack for detecting the true location of that which is secreted away is revealed as the story unfolds, retroactively. Dupin explains that he went to the Minister's apartment wearing green-tinted spectacles (all the better to

conceal the true focus of his gaze from the Minister) and found the letter without much difficulty lying in clear view. For the letter has been turned inside out and readdressed and sealed as if it were in fact addressed to the Minister and there it lies amongst other correspondence upon the mantelpiece.<sup>7</sup> Deliberately leaving his snuff box behind, Dupin returns next morning with the pretext of recovering it, and having paid someone to conduct a disturbance outside the apartment manages to have the Minister distracted for long enough such that Dupin retrieves the purloined letter and in its place leaves a facsimile version. Now, Lacan's reading of Dupin and his function in this short story is not to credit Dupin with some extraordinary genius, some kind of knowledge of the ways in which the thief's mind works, but rather to comment that Dupin, like the analyst, has thought a little about the symbol and about truth, and that is why he will see what there is to be seen (Lacan, 1978: 202). Of course, Dupin is situated there by the Prefect of Police as the 'subject supposed to know', but his 'knowledge' is nothing other than his having meditated upon what a 'letter' is, whereas the Police have not. Dupin will make the Police pay for the letter he has managed to recover. It is in this way that Lacan will say that Dupin pulls out of the game but it is precisely because he is paid that he is able to move out of the transference, the drama, as it is played out in the symbolic circuit of the letter. It is the same for the analyst Lacan says, who accepts to be paid to be the bearer of the purloined letters of the patient. "Are we not, in fact, justified" he says "in feeling implicated when Dupin is perhaps about to withdraw from the letter's symbolic circuit – *we who make ourselves the emissaries of all the purloined letters which, at least for a while, remain en souffrance with us in the transference?* And is it not the responsibility their transference entails that we neutralize by equating it with the signifier that most thoroughly annihilates every signification – namely, money?" (Lacan, 1966: 26-27, emphasis mine)<sup>8</sup>. Žižek articulates the same moment in the story as follows:

*what is at stake here is not the classical detective's simple greed or his callousness toward human suffering and injustice – the point is much finer: the payment enables him to avoid getting mixed up in the libidinal circuit of (symbolic) debt and its restitution. The symbolic value of payment is the same in psychoanalysis; the fees of the analyst allow him to stay out of the "sacred" domain of exchange and sacrifice, i.e., to avoid getting involved in the analyst's libidinal circuit (Žižek, 1991: 60-61).*

Here again we find this close reading of Lacan, *à la lettre* in fact. And we are still within the parameters of the question of who analyses, since the one who analyses is

the one who must pay with his/her person as a prop in the transference, but who moreover, must be aware of his/her position in the transference insofar as the domain of 'exchange and sacrifice' is involved.<sup>9</sup> Žižek picks up on this domain of 'exchange and sacrifice' in his commentary on Hannibal Lecter (the cannibal serial killer in the Thomas Harris novels) in his essay *A Hair of the Dog That Bit You* (Žižek, 2005, 147-148). Lecter offers to help the young FBI agent, Clarice Sterling, to track down and ultimately capture 'Buffalo Bill' (since he knows the mind of the cannibalistic criminal) in exchange for her confiding in him – what? *“Precisely what the analysand confides to the analyst, the kernel of her being, her fundamental fantasy (the crying of the lambs). The quid pro quo proposed by Lecter to Clarice is therefore, ‘I’ll help you if you let me eat your Dasein!’”* (Žižek, 2005: 148). This act for Žižek marks the inversion of the properly analytic relation insofar as Lecter compensates Clarice (ie. for swallowing her *dasein*) by helping her track down Buffalo Bill. As such, Žižek ironically remarks, Lecter is not cruel enough to be a Lacanian analyst since 'in psychoanalysis, we must pay the analyst so that they will allow us to offer them our Dasein on a plate!' Again, in *The Parallax View*, Žižek notes that the link between the analyst and the patient is not only speech, words, but also money: one has to pay a price which hurts. As such, he remarks that this link is not only symbolic (i.e. at the level of the signifier) but rather, also of the real (at the level of the *object*). He goes on to consider the figure of the Jewish money-lender qua miser as closer to the analyst insofar as he (sic) is the exemplary figure of desire (Žižek, 2006: 305).

### **To Be or Not to Be?**

And what of the analyst's being? In *The Direction of the Treatment*, Lacan attacks the notion that "the analyst cures not so much by what he says and does as by what he is". That is, the analyst's 'own goodness' has no place as a benchmark for any kind of certainty in the direction of the treatment, actually, it is the very last thing that should serve as a compass (since the more of the analyst's being is involved the less the analyst is sure of his/her action, (Lacan, 1958: 491)). In his seminar on the *Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (i.e. the seminar delivered during 1959 and 1960, the years directly following his delivery of *The Direction of the Treatment*, Lacan, 1986), Lacan argues that the notion of the good is inherently problematic for psychoanalysts. He asks: which good are you pursuing precisely as far as your passion is concerned? The question concerning our behaviour as analysts is always on the agenda. At every moment we need to know what our effective relation is to the desire to do

good, to the desire to cure (Lacan, 1986: 218). Moreover he argues that we have to deal with this notion of doing good as if it were something that is likely to lead us astray and in many cases to do so instantly. He condemns therapeutic practices that have as their aim a wanting-to-do-one's-best for the subject as benevolent fraudulence. To make oneself the guarantor of the possibility that a subject will in some way find happiness in analysis is itself a form of fraud (Lacan, 1986: 303). The ethics of psychoanalysis has nothing whatsoever to do with specifications about prescriptions for, or the regulation of, the service of goods (Lacan, 1986: 313). Which is not to say, by the way, and as Lacan himself remarks, that in the course of the process of the analysis the subject won't encounter much that is good for him, in fact, all the good that he can do for himself, but only if he eliminates from his wishes – false goods (Lacan, 1986: 300). In fact he will go so far as to say that a radical repudiation of the ideal of the good is necessary (Lacan, 1986: 230).

These comments on the moral dimension of psychoanalysis and on the question of the goodness of the being of the analyst, and let us say, the 'good' that he/she wishes to do for the patient (so condemnable by Freud<sup>10</sup> and Lacan), echo statements made by Lacan in *The Direction of the Treatment* on the analyst's being and the radical lack of freedom to act with one's being (Lacan, 1958: 491, 493). In his essay *Connections of the Freudian Field to Philosophy and Popular Culture*, Žižek admits that what he likes so much about Lacan is that he is such a 'Leninist in his style' (Žižek, 2005: 63)! What does he mean by this? Žižek asks: "How do you recognize a true Leninist? The typical Leninist twist is that, for example, when somebody says 'freedom', the Leninist question is 'Freedom for whom? To do what?' (Žižek, 2005: 63). For Žižek, this is the same twist that Lacan effects when he asks the analyst to consider 'the good' that he/she has in mind for the patient when he/she acts in the name of the good on their behalf (e.g. whose good? Good for whom?). Indeed, in his essay 'Superego by Default' in a discussion of Lacan's ethics and its proximity (or otherwise) to Kant's, Žižek remarks, following Lacan, that the abyss that separates 'ethics' from the consideration of the Good is insurmountable (Žižek, 1994: 68).

### **Fantasmatic Communications**

Now, since the thrust of Lacan's trajectory in *The Direction of the Treatment* is in part put into service as a critique of American ego-psychology, he will explicitly condemn such practices that on the one hand advocate psychoanalysis as a 'two-person situation', and on the other, posit the aim and goal of analysis as a strengthening of

the analysand's ego (Lacan, 1958: 491, 492, 494, 504-505, 507, in particular) towards its ultimate idealised identification with the analyst's ego (Lacan, 1958: 534-535)<sup>11</sup>. Žižek is fond of citing an anecdote from one of James Baldwin's novels which for him indicates the relationship of analysand and analyst as radically other than that of a two person intersubjective situation (see Žižek, 2005: 56-57; 1994: 168-169). In the American South before the Civil War, in the whore houses of old New Orleans, the 'African-American black servant' was not perceived as a person, such that whilst a white couple (a prostitute and her client) were engaging in intercourse, they were not at all disturbed when the black servant entered the room to deliver drinks. Žižek remarks here that the servant's gaze did not count as the gaze of another person and claims that in this way it is the same with the black servant as with the analyst. He considers that we rid ourselves of all shame when we talk to the analyst, confiding our innermost secrets, our loves and hates, and that our relationship to the analyst is 'entirely impersonal, lacking the intimacy of true friendship'. He goes on: "[T]he relationship with the analyst, as you probably know, is not an inter-subjective relationship because the analyst in the analytic disposition is not another subject" (Žižek, 2005: 57). Again, in his chapter *Love Thy Neighbour? No, Thanks!* in *The Plague of Fantasies*, he will stress the difference between a 'true friendship' of two subjects and the relationship of analyst/analysand: with friends we know not to *tell everything*, whereas with the analyst we do tell everything and precisely for that reason he (sic) can never be our friend (Žižek, 1997: 69). In keeping with Lacan's profound contempt for ego-building in certain versions of psychoanalysis, Žižek, in the same chapter, on discussing the line of separation between 'healthy' nationalism and 'excessive' (xenophobic, aggressive) nationalism, proposes an analogy with (Lacanian) psychoanalytic treatment. Whereas it is a mistake, he claims, to assert that when one 'throws out the bathwater of excessive fanaticism, one runs the risk of also getting rid of the 'baby' of healthy nationalism, in the same way, in certain psychoanalytic practices (ie. the 'dreaded' ego psychologising), the aim of safeguarding the kernel of the healthy ego (the 'baby' in the analogy) poses an obstacle to confronting the patient with his 'dirty water' (the symptoms and fantasies which structure his *jouissance*). In Lacanian psychoanalysis, this practice is anathema to 'good' practice since the inverse is of course desirable. It is precisely the suspension of the ego that is required in order to analyse the structuring of *jouissance*. Žižek argues thus that the 'baby' qua 'spiritual purity of the national identity' should be thrown out in order to 'reveal the phantasmic support which structures the *jouissance* in the national Thing' (Žižek, 1997: 62-63).

Insofar as the analyst relies on his ego, and ‘on the reality about which he knows a thing or two’, insofar as he insists upon the two-person situation of analysis, the ‘I’ and ‘me’ of ego psychology, the direction of the treatment is always and ever, misguided for Lacan (Lacan, 1958: 493, 494-495). Of course much of what Lacan has to say in this article restates in briefer form some of his eloquent discussions in *The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis* (Lacan, 1953). In what is usually referred to as his ‘Rome Discourse’, Lacan rails against ‘two-body psychology’ as foregrounding a practice in which a ‘fantasmatic communication is established in which the analyst teaches the subject to apprehend himself as an object’ (Lacan, 1953: 251). In such a practice subjectivity is admitted into an analysis but only as long as it is bracketed as an illusion, it being no guarantee of healthy ego functioning *vis à vis* the ‘reality function’. This safety rail of ‘reality’ upon which the analyst relies then (as an indication of his/her absolute misunderstanding of analysis and absolutely misplaced location in the transference, Lacan, 1958: 517) involves nothing other than a practice which for Lacan, is stamped with ‘the obscene, ferocious figure of the superego’, where the only way out of transference neurosis is a kind of forceable suggestion to the patient about his/her reality really being rather nice and the injunction served upon the patient is to simply ‘go for it’.

Of course the Lacanian ‘obscene, ferocious figure of the superego’ is one which serves Žižek in a variety of discussions. In his discussion on ‘*Law is Law*’ (Žižek, 1989: 37), reading Pascal against Kafka, Žižek is led to distinguish between an ‘external obedience to the law’ qua submission to an external ‘brute force’ and obedience to the ‘incomprehensible command’ which is the proper place of the psychoanalytical superego. The superego injunction is here experienced as ‘traumatic’ and ‘senseless’. Again, in his chapter *Superego by Default* in *The Mestastes of Enjoyment* (Žižek, 1994: 56-57), Žižek will draw out the differences between Law and superego. Whereas Public Law, by virtue of the fact that it is written cannot be ignored (indeed our ignorance of the Law – in both senses – doesn’t serve as any excuse for not adhering to it, nor does it exculpate us when we ‘break it’ – because ‘we didn’t know’), the status of the superego, in contrast, ‘is that of a traumatic voice, an intruder persecuting us and disturbing our psychic balance.’ The ‘law’ of the superego, cannot be ignored. Moreover, whereas symbolic Law guarantees meaning, superego guarantees enjoyment (*jouissance*). As such, the obscene, ferocious figure of the superego functions as the obscene underside of the Law. Later in this chapter, in a discussion of the structure of the superego and the Lacanian ethical maxim: ‘Do not give up on your desire!’, Žižek sketches the opposition of ethics and morals into a ‘Greimasian’ semiotic square. The figure of the

Hero is theorised (*pace* Lacan) as immoral, yet ethical, insofar as he/she violates 'existing moral norms in the name of a higher ethics', whereas the figure of the Superego designates the very opposite of the Hero, i.e. 'an unethical moral Law, a Law in which an obscene enjoyment sticks to obedience to the moral norms'. And of course insofar as those 'moral norms' regarding 'doing good for others', 'curing them', 'helping them' etc.,<sup>12</sup> are emphasized in some 'psychoanalytic' treatments, what of course is also emphasized for Lacan, is the *obscene enjoyment* that sticks to the analyst who seeks to cure, to help, to do good etc. We all know perfectly well, that the Other can enjoy giving us some medicine (even going so far as to giving us 'a taste of our own!') which may taste disgusting but it is given to us 'for our own good'. In his commentary on 'the sadism of the law', Žižek points to the superego agency that sadistically enjoys the 'subject's deadlock' as akin to the 'proverbial teacher who tortures pupils with impossible tasks and secretly savours their failings' (Žižek, 2008: 165).<sup>13</sup> Now what Žižek does really well is to tease out on the one hand, the 'between the lines' of Public (symbolic) Law which even as it prohibits something or another, also tolerates it, and on the other hand, how the superego injunction (to just 'go for it' in Lacan's words above from *The Direction of the Treatment*, or as he emphasized so often...enjoy!<sup>14</sup>) 'hinders the subject's access to it much more efficiently than any prohibition' (Žižek, 1997: 114). What Lacan knew, and what is evident from even a limited amount of clinical experience is that directing the patient – in whatever form that might take – effectively prohibits the patient taking the directed (prescribed) course of action, but of course that doesn't mean that the patient won't ask for direction(s)!<sup>15</sup> In another twist in his discussion of the Lacanian superego, Žižek will indicate how the superego can act *in counterpart* with public law, as its 'obscene, shadowy realm'. In *I Hear You With My Eyes*, in a hugely entertaining analysis of the figure of Captain Bligh of HMS Bounty fame, Žižek argues that Bligh's 'mistake' in restraining older sailors' terrorizing of younger sailors (a mistake that led to mutiny) was an index of his complete blindness to the 'structural function of the ritualized power relations among the sailors' (i.e. the right of older, more experienced sailors to humiliate and otherwise exploit and torture younger and inexperienced ones). As such, Bligh failed to understand that these rituals provided an 'ambiguous supplement to public-legal power relations', acting in fact, as their 'shadowy double', apparently transgressing and subverting such relations whilst ultimately serving as their support (Žižek, 1996: 99). In just the same way, Žižek argues that the English public school system's 'civilised, open-minded, liberal surface of daily life' contained within it 'another world of brutal power relations between younger and older pupils'. The point that is crucial for Žižek, is that this

obscene shadowy realm 'far from undermining the civilized semblance of the public power, serves as its inherent support.' (Žižek, 1996: 100). Indeed, the penalty for breaking unwritten rules is much harsher, Žižek notes in both of these examples, than for breaking the public rules.

In *Interrogating the Real*, Žižek draws attention to the line of demarcation that Lacan draws between the two facets of the law (Žižek, 2005: 146). There is on the one hand, Law as symbolic ego ideal, 'that is, Law in its pacifying function, Law qua guarantee of the social pact, qua the intermediary Third that dissolves the impasse of imaginary aggressivity'. On the other hand, there is Law in its 'superego dimension', law, that is as 'irrational' pressure, 'force of culpability, that gives body to 'the impossible imperative of enjoyment'. Now, we find the roots of this 'demarcation' in Lacan's very early work on *Family Complexes in the Formation of the Individual* (Lacan, 1938). In this work, especially in the sections devoted to the 'Oedipus Complex', and 'Family Neurosis', Lacan will emphasise the functions of super-ego and ego-ideal with respect to what he calls 'the existential drama of the individual'. The ego-ideal is precisely figured as the function that effectively dissolves what Lacan refers to as the aggressive ambivalence 'immanent in the primary relationship'. In what he calls the 'degraded form of the Oedipus Complex', a certain lawlessness prevails such that there is a narcissistic bastardization of the idealization of the father (at that time a subject dear to Lacan's heart was the 'decline of the paternal imago'). That is to say, that at this stage in Lacan's thinking, the Ego-Ideal was the necessary agency arising from the Oedipus Complex that situated the subject with respect to the Law insofar as that Law might be understood as symbolic. The Superego, the (unconscious) psychic agency involved in the repression of the desire for the Mother ("the biologically inadequate object that the first sexual maturation proposes to desire", Lacan, 1938: 61), could, whilst necessary, take on an 'exaggerated' form however. In his discussion of the 'character neuroses' in general, and of the 'self-punishing neuroses' in particular, Lacan refers to a 'pathogenic reinforcement of the super-ego in the individual as a function of both the rigours of patriarchal domination' and 'tyrannical forms of prohibitions' (Lacan, 1938: 70). Again, in *The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis* (Lacan, 1975) in a discussion foregrounding the relationship between censorship and the super-ego, Lacan emphasizes the tyrannical face of the Law that the super-ego manifests: "it takes very little, very little at all, being locked up in the toilets, or having a father falsely accused of Lord knows what crime, for the law all of a sudden to appear to you in a *lacerating* form" (Lacan, 1975: 130, my emphasis). When we read how Žižek pressgangs Lacan's take on the superego (as the 'obscene savage

law') into service in his discussions of the reassertion of barbaric violence as filling in the gap of a 'failing symbolic law' (see Žižek, 2002: 142 and 2008: 170), what is recapitulated is precisely Lacan's early preoccupations with the 'decline of the paternal imago' and its consequences. In the formation (sic) of the ego-ideal and super-ego functions, a bastardization of the paternal imago is formed as that of 'just' a 'bigger fucker' rather than an (ideal) ego-ideal, and commensurately 'being fucked over by the bigger fucker' indexes the tyrannical obscene version of the super-ego, rather than its original 'repressive' function. In *Whither Oedipus* (Žižek, 1999), Žižek points out how Lacan's take on the Oedipus Complex<sup>16</sup>, reveals in fact the 'truth' of the Oedipus complex. What is this 'truth'? None other than a condensing of the 'two functions of the father' (the pacifying Ego Ideal, the point of ideal identification, and the ferocious superego, the agent of cruel prohibition), united in one and the same person (Žižek, 1999: 313). As such, Lacan's *Oedipus Complex* can function normally and 'accomplish its job of the child's integration into the socio-symbolic order' only insofar as this dual function of the father is concealed: the moment it is posited as such, '*the figure of paternal authority potentially turns into an obscene jouisseur in whom impotence and excessive rage combine, a 'humiliated father' caught in imaginary rivalry with his son*' (Žižek, 1999: 313).

### **Whose (and What) Reality is this Anyway?**

Lacan's critique of psychoanalytic practice which condones the fostering of healthy ego functioning *vis à vis* some adequate 'reality function' and indexes the success of the cure as the extent to which healthy ego functioning is brought about, relies of course upon a particular notion of 'reality', which is of course, completely at odds with Lacan's take on *reality*. The 'well-adapted response' so desirable in certain psychoanalytic practices is for Lacan nothing other than a well-adapted response to the Other's demand. As such, he asks: '*why would this demand have any more or less consistency than the response obtained, if the analyst didn't believe he was authorized to deny all value to fantasy in using the yardstick he takes from his own reality?*' (Lacan, 1958: 534)<sup>17</sup>. In *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, Žižek notes that a 'common-sense' idea of what psychoanalysis should do entails the notion that it should liberate us from the hold of idiosyncratic fantasies, and enable us to confront reality as it really is (Žižek, 2002: 17)! However, he goes on to say that that is exactly what Lacan does not have in mind. In our daily lives, we are immersed in 'reality' (structured and supported by the fantasy) and this immersion is disturbed by symptoms which bear witness to the fact that another, repressed, level of our psyche

resists this immersion. It is of course, the Lacanian notion of the Real that is so opposed to this 'common-sense' notion of reality. Indeed, as Žižek argues in *Looking Awry*, 'social reality' is nothing other than a 'fragile, symbolic cobweb' that can at any moment be torn aside by an intrusion of the real' (Žižek, 1991: 17). In a crisp commentary on the Lacanian Real (Žižek, 2003), Žižek draws out the distinction between the Real and "real reality". Envisaging by way of a thought-experiment, the possibility of biogenetics research and virtual-reality combined to invent new forms of pain infliction by 'directly attacking the brain centers for pain, bypassing sensorial perception', Žižek suggests that a way is opened up for the experience of pain no longer localizable in the 'real body', in the sense of being part of the reality in which we live, but rather, as an impossible-real, i.e. the impossible real of virtual reality. Thus, the gap between reality and the Real is restated in a way that undermines the 'division between objects in reality and their virtual simulacra'. In virtual reality, as such, impossible fantasies can be staged and experienced that are more "real" than anything that can be experienced in "real reality" (Žižek, 2003: 74-77).<sup>18</sup> Elsewhere Žižek (1996: 113), makes the point that all attempts to draw a clear line of separation between "true" reality and illusion fail to take into account that if what we experience as "reality" is to emerge, something has to be foreclosed from it. "Reality" is never completely 'itself' since it relies upon a failed symbolization to represent itself. For Žižek, what emerges in the gap between reality and the Real is 'the spectral apparition that fills up the hole of the real' (Žižek, 1996: 113). In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan refers to the 'other reality' hidden behind the lack of that which takes the place of representation. The real as such though hidden from us, is so hidden behind the 'lack of representation': the only representative of this 'real' is that which governs our activities more than any other and it is that which psychoanalysis properly designates for us, as opposed to any 'reality' that can be in any way whatsoever unambiguously apperceived (Lacan, 1973: 60).

### **A Strange new symptom**

X is in analysis with me. Has a little bit of Zizek stuck in the throat. It is this bit: "[...] *psychoanalysis is the only discourse in which you are allowed not to enjoy (as opposed to "not allowed to enjoy")*" (Žižek, 2006: 304). The very desire that no longer needs to be sustained by the superego injunction is here restated by Žižek as the Lacanian 'desire of the analyst'. Perhaps those Lacanian psychoanalysts who find themselves *not allowed to enjoy* Žižek are suffering in the same way as my

analysand here? But in so suffering are they not indeed compromising their desire, the very desire that indexes the position of the Lacanian psychoanalyst? My (overwhelming) question – why not Žižek(?) – requires no more, no less, than a response commensurate with a radical reversal of the superego injunction so predominant in academic scholarship in general (*vis à vis required* reading lists), and in Lacanian training associations increasingly (*vis à vis acceptable*, hence legitimate, commentaries on Lacan written by and for clinicians). As a Dubliner, growing up in an Ireland very much pre-‘Celtic Tiger’, I remember very well a whole folklore devoted to the telling of the clandestine acquisitions of Irish authors’ books – from Joyce to Edna O’Brien - whose work whilst available for ‘enjoyment’ outside Ireland was banned in Ireland. We well know (thanks to Freud, Lacan, and now Žižek) the conditions and effects of a discourse in which the superego injunction is fully mobilized. We have as yet, it seems, to experience those of a discourse in which being ‘allowed not to enjoy’ is a really viable, interesting, and truly *desirable* alternative!

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<sup>1</sup> Rather like that surgical procedure you hear about where an obese person can opt to have their stomach internally bound in such a way that they *must* limit their food intake and thereby lose weight, rather than tediously adhering to a restrictive diet over a long period of time in order to achieve the necessary outcome! I have even heard it said (by a psychoanalyst friend) that reading Žižek turns you on, seduces you, but in the end, unlike Lacan, fails to get you off!

<sup>2</sup>

Hereafter referred to as *The Direction of the Treatment*

<sup>3</sup>

Though of course Lacan also speaks to this theme in his 'Rome Discourse', 'Variations on the Standard Treatment', 'The Situation of Psychoanalysis and the Training of Psychoanalysts in 1956', all published in English in his *Écrits* (Lacan, 1999) and also in the unpublished fifth seminar *Formations of the Unconscious* (Lacan, 1957-1958), and the published first and seventh seminars (especially the last section of the latter) (Lacan, 1975 and 1986).

<sup>4</sup>

From always hating to miss the phone ringing, afraid of being too late to pick it up, anticipating disappointment anyway that its not going to be *the* call (see Žižek, 1997: 30), to obsessively recording movies that he never gets around to watching (ibid: 112) etc.

<sup>5</sup>

It is of course 'the mother' who is always on your back in Lacan's phrase. See Lacan, 1962-1963 (p.10 of the session of 5<sup>th</sup> December, 1962).

<sup>6</sup>

See also chapter XXII in Lacan's seminar on the *Ethics of Psychoanalysis* for a restated exegesis of what the analyst pays if 'he is to play his role' (Lacan, 1986: 291).

<sup>7</sup>

In fact Lacan notes that in Poe's original text, the letter lies below the mantelpiece whereas in the Baudelaire translation it lies atop (Lacan, 1966: 26).

<sup>8</sup>

In Tony Myers' short text on Žižek, he comments on the Žižekian gesture of formulating an interpretation by way of a negative question. For Žižek, the 'is it not/are we not' style of question, marks out, according to Myers, the point where Žižek translates one system of meanings into another system of meanings (Myers, 2003: 4-5). I was particularly struck with the above passage in Lacan where there are two such negative questions presented consecutively. We cannot interpret the function of the negative question in Lacan in the same way as Myers does with Žižek but indeed in the sense of reading Žižek with Lacan, it was a moment for me of reading Žižek *in* Lacan! Nonetheless the rhetorical function is similar in the sense that one cannot *but* agree with the interpretation!

<sup>9</sup>

I recall here the outrage expressed by a training analyst whose mother was dying for months in hospital and during this time her analyst insisted that she continue to attend her sessions and in any case pay for the missed sessions. The business of payment is often the most difficult function to install in an analysis and yet a crucial one as it belies both the function of the transference and the transference to the work.

<sup>10</sup>

It is useful to recall Freud's own distance from the notion of the psychoanalyst as the 'do-gooder' made quite explicit in the following passage: "*We refused most emphatically to turn a patient who puts himself into our hands in search of help into our private property, to decide his fate for him, to force our own ideals upon him, and with the pride of a Creator to form him in our own image and see that it is good. [...] Our honoured friend, J.J. Putnam, in the land of America which is now so hostile to us, must forgive us if we cannot accept his proposal either – namely that psycho-analysis should place itself in the service of a particular philosophical outlook on the world and should urge this upon the patient for the purpose of ennobling his mind. In my opinion, this is after all only to use violence, even though it is overlaid with the most honourable motives*" (Freud, S.E. XVII, pp. 164-165).

<sup>11</sup>

See also Lacan's paper on *The Situation in Psychoanalysis and the Training of Psychoanalysts in 1956* (Lacan, 1966).

<sup>12</sup>

Indeed all of those 'norms' which are discoursed in relation to the so-called caring professionals and of which Freud was so scathing in his 1919 paper, *Lines of Advance in Psycho-Analytic Therapy* (Freud, S.E., XVII) and which Lacan condemns in his seminar on the *Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (Lacan, 1986, Chapters XXII and XXIII in particular).

13

See also Žižek's discussion of the humorous superego as 'the cruel and insatiable agency' in his most recent book *In Defence of Lost Causes* (Žižek, 2008).

14

By now, this oft-cited phrase of Lacan's has obtained the status of a mantra! The passage in full reads: "*Nothing forces anyone to enjoy (jouir) except the superego. The superego is the imperative of jouissance – Enjoy!*" (Lacan, 1975: 3).

15

Of course, insofar as the patient 'asks for directions' and insofar as the analyst responds to this 'request', the whole problematic of 'demand' is evoked which Lacan treats very seriously throughout his work such that the very concept of 'demand' is one which we take to be a Lacanian innovation as far as any discussion of a specifically Lacanian 'technique of psychoanalysis' is concerned. Lacan does speak about demand in *The Direction of the Treatment* (Lacan, 1957: 514-516 in particular), but also in a contrapuntal manner in his fifth seminar on the *Formations of the Unconscious* (Lacan, 1957-1958) and in *The Signification of the Phallus* (Lacan, 1958). In an article I wrote a few years ago on the function of 'demand' in analysis, I sketched out the main aspects of Lacan's treatment of the concept in the 1950s as well as illustrating by way of a clinical vignette the difficulties and responsibilities of the analyst vis-à-vis demand including what happens in an analysis when the demand of the analysand is responded to inappropriately (Owens, 2002: 133-161).

16

Žižek is referring here to Lacan's early writings on the subject (see Lacan, 1938).

17

See also Lacan (1986: 293) where he says " Goodness only knows how obscure such a pretension as the achievement of genital objecthood remains, along with what is so imprudently linked to it, namely, adjustment to reality".

18

In *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, in his commentary on the effect of September 11 as introducing American citizens to the 'desert of the real', the whole notion that our material reality (as radically virtual) is subjected to a 'dematerialization' of 'real life' via a reversal into a spectral show (for e.g. in the Hollywood 'catastrophe' movie) is illustrated by Žižek by reference to the sort of thing that occurs in the film *Matrix* when the hero awakens (from a 'real' virtual 'reality') into 'real reality' and is welcomed to the 'desert of the real'. Following his reference to the ironic greeting uttered by Morpheus in *Matrix*, Žižek asks: "Was it not something of a similar order that took place in New York on September 11? Its citizens were introduced to the 'desert of the real' – for us, corrupted by Hollywood, the landscapes and the shots of the collapsing towers could not but be reminiscent of the most breathtaking scenes in big catastrophe productions" (Žižek, 2002: 15).