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Žižek with Lacan: Editorial

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“You will remember that Freud asks the now famous question, what does woman want? ... We do not have the answer, despite thirty years of Lacan.

... I have another question which is,

what do American's want?

... I have the answer.

They want Slavoj Žižek.”

Jacques Alain Miller, 10 July, 2008

Given the enormous impact of Žižek on people's, not only Americans', understanding, or even awareness, of Lacan, it is understandable that many would take Žižek's work as an explanation of or easier access to Lacan's thought. The publication of his *How to Read Lacan* in 2007, in its title at least, furthers this notion. But there are dangers in so taking Žižek, dangers which operate in two directions. In a number of ways, what Žižek presents is not a straightforward reading of Lacan at all. He places a different emphasis on certain concepts from the emphases we might find in Lacan's writings and seminars and, at times,

at least, he mobilises concepts in such a way as they do not necessarily appear to have the same meaning or force as when Lacan uses them. Moreover, where Lacan was primarily concerned with the practice of psychoanalysis and extending a theory of this practice, Žižek is not a psychoanalyst. His project lies elsewhere.

This raises the second danger of confusing Žižek with Lacan. Žižek qua Žižek can easily get lost. That is to say, Žižek, as the very existence of this journal suggests, is a thinker, a theorist who should be read, heard and understood in his own right. By thinking Žižek too close to Lacan, we run the risk of not only losing other ways of reading Lacan, but we run the risk of losing something of Žižek himself. To make one rather obvious point, Žižek is engaged in an overtly political project, aligning himself with a form of Marxism. Lacan, on the other hand, was keen to point out that he was “not a man of the left” (Lacan 2007: 114). How, then, ought we to understand Žižek’s project in relation to Lacan?

The articles in this special edition draw out, discuss and explore many of these points of difference and indicate different perspectives on, reasons to and difficulties entailed in reading Žižek with Lacan. Levi R. Bryant points out that Žižek’s own understanding of his project is that of affecting something like the discourse of the analyst. We could understand this as Žižek situating himself or his theoretical persona – his words as he himself reads and hears them – in the place of *objet petit a*. Like the analyst in the analytic setting, Žižek sees himself not as working to provide an answer, not striving to direct us towards a proper goal, but rather as endeavouring to unsettle our thinking. The difference here is that while an analyst might function in such a way with regard to the individual client, Žižek would see himself as functioning in such a way for a wider cultural, political audience. The four discourses, which Lacan elaborates in Seminar XVII, describe four possible modes of social relation. Against what we might understand as Žižek’s claim to be engaged in the discourse of the analyst, Bryant argues that we should understand Žižek’s discourse as something new; a discourse of critical theory which should be read alongside three other discourses of our time – the discourse of the capitalist, the discourse of bio-power and the discourse of immaterial labour.

This distinction, between the discourse of the analyst and the discourse of critical theory, indicates a new configuration of social relations in and to which we can understand Žižek as speaking, suggesting that, however Lacanian to the letter Žižek may appear, he is formally, necessarily, distinct. Kareen Ror Malone’s article can be understood to engage precisely in this new configuration of social relations as she explores aspects of the ways in which both Lacan and Žižek have been misunderstood by feminist critics. Far from launching

a straightforward defence of Lacan's comments and arguments regarding feminine sexuality or sexuation more broadly, Malone seeks to clarify aspects of the theory which, when taken from an informed reading of Lacan, can be seen to lead critics astray. Positing Žižek as being often taken as a first stop for many (mis)understandings of Lacan, Malone adroitly demonstrates not where Žižek mishandles Lacanian ideas so much as where partial readings of Žižek himself lead to mistaking Lacan.

In a different take on the configuration between Lacanian analysis, or analytic structures, and Žižek, while still focused on questions of a Lacanian take on the feminine, Kate Briggs considers how we might operationalise a Lacanian understanding of obsessional neurosis in order to situate and thus provide a particular way of reading Žižek. Through juxtaposing Žižek's discussion of Courbet's *L'Origine du Monde* with a discussion of the work of Juan Davila, Briggs confronts questions of difference and representation with particular emphasis on Lacan's argument in *Seminar XX* that the feminine position is not one side of a difference but is rather that it describes the very possibility of difference itself.

It is perhaps worth noting that many of the contributors to this special edition are themselves practicing Lacanian analysts. Carol Owens, one such practicing analyst, presents a much needed consideration of how we might read Žižek with, rather than as or opposed to, Lacan in the context of the clinical setting. As Owens points out, many of those who now find themselves in (Lacanian) analysis will already have found themselves reading Žižek and this is fact of 21st Century Lacanian practice which cannot really be ignored. Specifically, Owens draws on Žižek to illuminate something of the analytic relation, pointing to the positioning of the analyst as the subject supposed to know and, through this non-reversible relation, to the peculiar relating which necessarily occurs within analysis.

This is a theme picked up upon in Rob Weatherill's article. Presenting a nuanced reading of Žižek's *The Parallax View*, Weatherill, also a practicing analyst, elucidates the richness and significance of Žižek's use of the notion of parallax to indicate not only the irreversibility entailed in the analytic relation, but, beyond this, to point to radical irreversibility and thus radical problematic entailed in communication and, thus, relating per se, even and ultimately, in our relating to or conceiving of ourselves. Through a detailed yet broad consideration of Žižek's text, Weatherill both separates and articulates what we might understand as three contemporary instances of parallax; the philosophical parallax, the parallax implied and imposed by dominant cognitive-neuroscientific models and the parallax of the contemporary political. In and through each moment of parallax, Weatherill indicates the irreducible force of an ethical possibility. Against the closure or totality which might

otherwise be discerned in these contemporary structures – the post-modern perspective that there are only perspectives, only stories to be told; the notion forwarded by cognitive science that we are reducible to biologic, quasi-Lacanian machines; the post-political stance that ideological truths are a thing of the past – Weatherill argues for the recognition of an unavoidable subjective position which emerges in relation to these totalities and, despite the force of the discourses which dominate, cannot be accounted for within these discourses themselves.

Remaining with the notion of the parallax – a concept which Žižek has increasingly made his own – Sheila Kunkle, in her article, focuses on Žižek's often seemingly paradoxical uses of examples. Specifically, Kunkle seeks to address the argument, the misconception, that Žižek's philosophical embracing of the Lacanian real, with its emphasis on the concomitant excess and impossibility of subjective experience, necessarily implies or entails the refusal of any substantive engagement. For an example to function as an example it needs to exemplify something beyond itself. If not, the illustration in question assumes a particularity which negates its functioning as an example. Put simply, either it is an example, in which case it stands in, through an ontological generality, for something beyond itself, or it is a particular instance and, therefore, stands only for (a particular perspective on) itself. Against these two possibilities, Kunkle argues that Žižek's examples should neither be conceived as simply yet more substantive examples nor simply isolated cases but, rather, that they work performatively to indicate a constitutive deadlock, the seeming paradox of continuing to say something while acknowledging the Lacanian truism of not being able to say it all. It is in this conceptual space between the universal and the particular that the real singularity of the subject can be seen to emerge. Recognising and embracing such a position without reserve can be understood as what Badiou has termed *the passion of the real*. As Rob Weatherill puts it, it is such a position that "clears a space for radical 'freedom'". While this formulation can be understood to be very much in line with Lacan's own theorising, it is also and moreover one which is truly Žižekian. In this way we might understand Žižek's project as being neither collapsable into a specifically Lacanian account nor simply one which draws on Lacanian ideas. Rather, Žižek's project emerges in the very gap between remaining Lacanian *à la lettre* and merely borrowing from Lacan.

It is this difficult specificity of Žižek that Robert Samuels confronts in his article through an exploration of the manners in which Žižek mobilises Lacanian concepts in such a way as to, at times, appear to collapse their significations. Žižek, according to Samuels, ought not necessarily to be accused of inaccurately deploying Lacanian concepts or of

deploying them in 'illegitimate' ways. In order to understand Žižek's position – or what we might term a *Žižekian position* – Samuel's coins the important term 'automodernity' which we should read as pointing towards *auto-reflexivity* and *auto-critique*, where the zero level of the subject, the subject as impossible void, insists nonetheless and demands, albeit impossibly, to be accounted for. The danger here, in automodern theory such as Žižek's, is that it can so easily collapse back into the very kind of (imaginary) totality against which both Lacan and Žižek warn. While Samuel's positions Žižek, critically, as having fallen foul of such a trap, at least insofar as he is read, we might also see Žižek, through the paradox of his position, through the gap between the form and content of his work, as forcing a subjective response to this totalising tendency. That is to say, as all of the articles in this edition illustrate, individually but particularly when read together, pinning down exactly what it is that Žižek is saying is extremely difficult, if not impossible. With this, then, situating Žižek in relation to Lacan is also necessarily problematic. But it is this very problematic which should keep us thinking; thinking Žižek not as Lacanian but with Lacan.

Reference

Lacan, J. (2007) *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, New York: W.W. Norton & Co.