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Thought is Grievance: on Žižek's Parallax

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The Real is... simultaneously the Thing to which direct access is not possible and the obstacle that prevents this direct access (Slavoj Žižek)

The Two Answers

Let us forget for a moment the instrumentalist question: what is Žižek good for? Let us ask instead the ontological question: when is it that Žižek becomes Žižek? When is it that Žižek discovers the line of thought that remains the same throughout all of his work, for all of its apparent reversals and changes of mind? Certainly, the moment most often cited by commentators is the first chapter of *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, in which Žižek makes a “homology” (11) between the analysis of the dream by Freud and the analysis of the commodity by Marx. (Ironically, in making this homology Žižek is replaying a connection first proposed by Lacan in his *Seminar XVI* between *plus-de-jouir* [surplus-enjoyment] and *plus-value* [surplus-value].)¹ Both the unconscious elaborated by Freud and the surplus-value developed by Marx introduce a split within things. The unconscious introduces a split within consciousness. Surplus-value introduces a split within value. After they have been put forward, things are no longer what they appear to be but are marked by a “symptom”, a certain excess that comes about in things’ very equivalence to themselves. A symptom, writes Žižek, is a “particular element that subverts

its own universal foundation”, a “point of breakdown heterogeneous to a given ideological field and at the same time necessary for that field to achieve its closure” (Žižek 1989: 21). With this new, more general conception of the symptom, encompassing both the unconscious and the commodity-form, Žižek’s work would accomplish the long-awaited fusion of Marx and Freud (or, rather, Marx and Lacan). We would have finally the bringing together of the individual and the wider social field for which leftist thought has been searching for so long. As one of Žižek’s commentators writes:

The commodity possesses a pseudo-magical value that derives from the way in which it conceals from those who use it the actual economic relations that produced it. Likewise, what Freud calls the ‘dreamwork’ is the operation whereby the desire which gave rise to the dream is repressed and displaced on to its form. The point of comparison between the dream and the commodity, then, is not some tangible content, but something which is lost in our conscious perception of both. This formal analogy between the two opens up a brilliant revision of Marx’s notion of ideology in which the unconscious plays a central role (Kay 2003: 8-9)

Now, this connection between the unconscious and the commodity-form could be thought of as an analogy or as one of those “figural readings” seen in Fredric Jameson or cultural studies more generally (Jameson 1988: 153-165). Here the unconscious (or the individual) is explained in terms of the commodity (the social); but, equally – this would be the post-Frankfurt School gesture of someone like Jameson, who looks beyond the “ultimately determining instance” of the economic – the commodity must be understood in terms of the unconscious. It is a way of relativising both capital and the unconscious: capital is like the unconscious, as the unconscious is like capital. And it is an comparison that must be conceived historically: again with Jameson, we might understand it as corresponding to the cultural moment of post-modernism, in which each previously distinct field of contemporary life (social, economic, cultural, psychic) can now be grasped only in its relationship with all others. (This is a historicisation that cuts both ways, for we could equally argue that we no longer have unconscious symptoms in the classical Freudian sense, but only *sinthomes*, just as surplus-value corresponds only to that first, heroic moment of capitalism, before workers became “equal partners” in the productive process.) But Žižek’s inaugural gesture goes much further than this: it is not a mere *analogy* or historical *coincidence* he is making between the unconscious and the commodity. Neither is relativised or to be seen in terms of the other. Rather, both are total principles, which offer a complete explanation of the other as of all else, between which we have to choose. The unconscious symptom can only be grasped in the form of surplus-value, the inability of capital ever to catch up with itself based on a certain “internal negation” (Žižek 1989: 23). Capitalism not only today but from the beginning

can only function because of the unconscious, something that is repressed but nevertheless present (cynicism, false distance, objects playing out beliefs that are otherwise denied).

It is something like this “homology” between the unconscious and surplus-value, in which each is the explanation of the other, that Žižek returns to some seventeen years later in *The Parallax View*. The book truly does deserve the designation *magnum opus* for the way in which it both returns to and decisively recasts Žižek’s fundamental problematic. It at the same time makes clear what was originally at stake in that initial intellectual gesture of *Sublime Object* and throws another, parallax perspective on to it, before which we might say we never saw it properly at all. Žižek returns to the relationship between the unconscious (thought) and surplus-value (capital) in the central section of *Parallax View*, ‘The Solar Parallax: The Unbearable Lightness of Being No One’, which takes up in its two main chapters the connection between cognitivism and the commodity fetish. What is the overall question Žižek raises in *Parallax View*? It is how, “from within the flat order of positive being, the very gap between thought and being, the negativity of thought, emerges” (6)? But this question must be interpreted very carefully. The first point to note is that, despite initial impressions, it is not a matter of thought arising as an exception within a pre-existing order of being. In the chapter on cognitivism in *Parallax View*, ‘The Loop of Freedom’, Žižek seeks to make clear that it is not a matter of thought coming about within some already established logical or causal order. Rather, as we already know from *Indivisible Remainder*, freedom just *is* the thinking or remarking of this order of positive being, just as this order would not exist before it is remarked (39). If Žižek speaks of cognition in terms of a certain “loop of freedom”, it is a loop that returns us to something that did not exist before us and a freedom that exists only in the loop that comes back to what already is.

So the real question in *Parallax View* should be understood not as how thought emerges from within a “flat order” of being, which inevitably carries with it the implication that thought is an exception in terms of some previously constituted order of being. Instead we might come closer to what Žižek means if we reverse this perspective and ask how being, this flat or necessary causal order, arises from being remarked, almost as though thought comes first and being follows as a consequence. And, in fact, Žižek answers this question twice, each time corresponding to one of those two chapters in the central section of his book. The first time, thought is said to arise with the commodity (158-59). The second time, more conventionally, it is said to arise in the brain. Let us begin with the second answer. Žižek’s point in *Parallax View* is that human consciousness is not to be located anywhere behind the human brain. On the contrary, it is something like a pure and immaterial “appearance” that shines out through the brain itself. The human “self” is only the self-relating of the brain, a kind of remarking or retracing

of the brain by the brain. As Žižek writes: “A new quasi-object thus emerges with neural self-relating, a paradoxical insubstantial object that gives body to the relating as such” (213). Žižek thus disagrees with orthodox cognitivism in its attempt somehow to locate the origin of thought. As opposed to this, thought is by definition what is missing, what cannot be physically located or causally explained. On the one hand, we have the raw physical brain with its neuronal or chemical reactions. On the other, we have the transcendent human spirit and self-consciousness. But in between – to come a little closer to what Žižek means when he speaks of thought arising in the “gap” between thinking and being – is thought. Thought in the sense that Žižek means it is exactly the split between the brain as physical object and the brain as self-consciousness. Thought at once precedes this split and is the very cause of this split. And in occupying the place of this split, thought is by definition unconscious, symptomatic, self-splitting, parallax. It is unable to catch up with itself and arises only as its own “unknowability” (217) to itself.

It is thought in this sense that Lacan speaks of in his analysis of Descartes’ Cogito in the session ‘Analysis and Truth or the Closure of the Unconscious’ of his *Seminar XI*, in which the subject is identified neither with the enunciation of “I am” nor with the enunciation of “I think”, but with the “split” (141) between them, which is also a split within being itself.² Hence Lacan’s interest in Descartes’ hypothesis of a so-called pineal gland, mediating between body and soul (and a similar hypothesis is to be found in such other French materialists of the period as Malebranche and La Mettrie, even when they thought they were opposing Descartes).³ For all of their attempts to render the world mechanistic and logically explicable, they were forced to suppose not an exceptional act of freedom that broke with causality, but some “missing cause” that allowed this mechanistic. The pineal gland, which is not exactly part of the brain, but both inside and outside of it, must be understood as what precedes the split between body and soul. And it is for this reason that the pineal gland, like all such parallax objects, would be unlocatable, because it would always be different from itself. And we would say the same thing – this is the connection Lacan makes – of the subject of transcendental apperception in Kant. The subject of transcendental apperception, we might say, is Kant’s pineal gland. That is to say, the transcendental subject is not at all some *res cogitans* or thinking subject, as the Cogito still is in Descartes. In Descartes in the end there is still a God, who can be known and who ultimately guarantees the truth of our representations of the world. In Kant, by contrast, the transcendental subject is empty of all predicates and cannot be known. It is not, however, some noumenal thing behind appearances – and to the extent that Kant suggests this he betrays his own insight – but only the gap or empty space for which successive appearances stand in. This transcendental

subject, indeed, is the place from which the Cogito itself is remarked, what allows the very bringing together of the “subject of enunciation” and the “subject of the enunciated”. It opens up – and at this point we move perhaps from Kant to Hegel – not a split between appearance and what is behind it, but a split between appearance and itself. Kant’s transcendental subject *is* only the empty space for which successive appearances stand in, only what allows us to remark them as appearance. And the paradox it raises – a paradox we will return to in a moment – is that with it “I encounter *being* devoid of all determinations-of-thought at the very moment when, by way of the utmost abstraction, I confine myself to the empty form of *thought*” (Žižek 1993: 14-15).

In this regard, given Žižek’s ongoing commitment to Hegel, it is surprising that his discussion of brain science in *Parallax View* does not find a precursor in Hegel’s discussion of phrenology in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*. For phrenology preempts cognitivism in making an equivalence, or wanting to make an equivalence, between the brain in the sense of immaterial consciousness (spirit) and the brain as inert, physical container (the skull). Like modern brain science, we would have in phrenology the reduction of the brain to “dead objectivity” (210), pure appearance. And Hegel, like Žižek, does not oppose this. Hegel does not, against the common reading of him as idealist, immediately speak of the mind as some ineffable spirit. Rather, Hegel agrees with the phrenologists (as Žižek agrees with such cognitivists as Francis Varela and Daniel Dennett): the brain *can* be reduced to its outer surface or to “brain fibres and the like” (210). But Hegel takes even further than the phrenologists the consequences of this ability to map the brain on to the skull, for in a certain way consciousness is only an effect of this making-equivalent to the skull. That is to say, just as in the brain sciences, consciousness for Hegel just *is* this equivalence to the skull. In the very equivalence of the brain to the skull – the “infinite judgement” (210) that connects them – an excess or surplus is produced: Spirit. To use the language of parallax, we might say that Spirit is not opposed to the skull, but seeks to think its very equivalence to the skull. In a strange loop, the tracing or remarking of the skull by the brain – this is the profound reversal of the procedure of phrenology that Hegel enacts – gives rise to both the skull and the brain. The skull is not so much a simple physical limit to or container of the brain, but a form of self-positing by the brain: a positing of the presuppositions, of the immovable physical constraints, that is the beginning of all truly spiritual, that is, authentically free acts.⁴ It is indeed a loop – of the brain’s giving rise to itself through the medium of the skull – that Hegel later metaphorises in his *Philosophy of Nature* through the image of the folds or coils of the “nerve-knots” he thought made up the brain. Human self-consciousness, Spirit, is nothing other

than this folding over of the physical brain on to itself, which indeed allows the tracing or folding over of the brain on to its surrounding skull. As Hegel writes (§ 354):

There is controversy as to whether these ganglia are independent, or whether they originate in the brain and spinal cord. This expression 'originate' is a dominant conception in the relation of nerves to brain and spinal cord, but it is without definite meaning. It counts as an undoubted truth that nerves originate in the brain. But if here they are in identity with the brain, they are also separate from it; although not in the sense that the brain is antecedent to the nerves, these coming later... Individual nerves can be severed, and the brain still lives, just as parts of the brain can be removed without destroying the nerves (Hegel 1970: 365).⁵

Here too – this to get us back to Žižek's other answer as to how thought emerges from the "flat order" of being – we might think of the famous Kinder Surprise chocolate egg (which is sometimes in France still called *la tête du nègre*) that Žižek often speaks about (Žižek 2003: 145-46). It would be to suggest that the human mind is like a commodity, or inversely that the commodity is like the human mind. For in pointing to the pure surplus-value the egg represents, it is important to note that nothing is added beyond what is obviously there. It is simply that in covering the toy inside with chocolate some irreducible excess is brought about, something that cannot be explained in terms either of the toy or the chocolate. Marx too when he spoke of the "theological" dimension of the commodity did not mean to point to anything beyond the phenomenal – this, as we can see, is the lesson he learnt from Hegel – but only to a certain remarking of the commodity as such. It is in the very match between content and form – use-value and exchange-value – that a surplus is brought about, an excess of content over form (which is really an excess of form over itself). Surplus-value – the "symptom" of capital – is not beyond value, but inseparable from value as such. As Marx writes in *Capital*: "[Value] differentiates itself as original value from itself as surplus-value, just as God the Father differentiates himself from himself as God the Son, although both are of the same age and form, in fact are one single person" (Marx 1992: 256). Surplus-value in this sense introduces a permanent split into capital. Surplus-value, the difference between the productive forces and the forces of production, against all attempts to historicise or relativise Marx, to argue that the time of his analysis is over, is nothing that can ever be made up, nothing that can ever be incorporated back into capital. In thinking a kind of parallax, we might say on the contrary that capital is itself the attempt to redistribute surplus-value. Capital begins with surplus-value. Surplus-value is both the attempt to overcome the split between use- and exchange-value and the cause of this split.⁶ If this is what Žižek says at the beginning of his career in *Sublime Object* (22-23), it is also the point at which he begins *Parallax View*: with his analysis of the parallax of

political economy and his contention, contra Kojin Karatani, that surplus-value, the exploitation of labour, is not the result of a mismatch between use- and exchange-values, but rather the exact transposition of exchange-value on to use-value, and ultimately of exchange-value on to itself (50-57). And hence again why it is nothing that could ever be rectified or made up by capital, because capital is the very equivalence of use- and exchange-value. Surplus-value is not at all an exception to capital, but exactly what brings about its endless growth without limits, assures that there is no exception to it. Surplus-value is not a split outside but a split within capital, a split with which capital begins.

Cynicism and the Symptom

It is just these parallaxic considerations that are at stake in Žižek's original formulation of the symptom back in *Sublime Object* (indeed, the "sublime object" that is the subject of the book is before all else a parallaxic object: in it, as Žižek says, the "phenomenon's very inability to represent the Thing adequately is inscribed into the phenomenon itself" [203]). The symptom, as Žižek repeatedly emphasises throughout *Sublime Object*, is nothing behind its outward appearance. It is not some latent dream-content obscured or repressed by any manifest content, as in the usual conception of psychoanalysis. Indeed, Žižek is very careful to describe the unconscious not in terms of any deeper content but in terms of its *form*; and, more particularly, as in the Kinder Surprise egg or indeed the brain, an inability to match content with form, an excess of content brought about by its match with form. As a result, when recounting our dreams in a psychoanalytic session it is always as though we are saying "too much", even though we are only using the same words we always do. As Žižek writes in *Sublime Object*: "The structure is always triple; there are always three elements at work: the manifest dream-text, the latent dream-content or thought and the unconscious desire articulated in a dream. The [unconscious] desire attaches itself to the dream; it intercalates itself in the interspace between the latent thought and the manifest text" (13). In fact, we might describe the unconscious in Žižek's understanding of it as the absolute opposite of depth. It is a pure appearance, *Schein*, the appearance of appearance or appearance as appearance. Or, rather, the symptom is the split in form that arises as a result of it remarking some notional content. The symptom is the remarking of form (with content, as in Kant's sublime, or at least Hegel's rereading of it, standing in for this internal split in form, the inadequacy of form to itself). Symptom in this sense is not deeper than appearance, or an alternative to appearance, but is only a split *within* appearance. It is what appearance as all that there is stands in for: again, nothing deeper than appearance, but the

very appearance of appearance. The symptom as Real –we will come back to this in a moment when we come to speak of grievance – is nothing less than the appearance of appearance.

It is this that leads us to Žižek's analysis of the social symptom of cynicism, the other defining aspect of his work. Cynicism, of course, is first understood as revealing the real reasons behind certain actions or statements. It undermines all claims of a general truth or morality by exposing the specific interests behind it, so that the one proposing it is shown not to be neutral or disinterested but part themselves of the same self-serving network they say they are trying to overcome. The result is a form of nihilism or relativism in which there can be no wider truth or morality, in which all claims for a universal set of values are shown to reflect only a particular constituency or alliance of interests. But *Sublime Object* is well known for revealing how this widespread cynicism, in which no one apparently believes any more in the prevailing mores of their society, secretly relies on a hidden or unacknowledged belief by another. And, furthermore, what allows our contemporary post-modern cynicism is not only *subjective* but *objective*: it is not only a matter of *someone* but also of *something* believing in our place (30-35). This can be seen for Žižek in the phenomenon of canned laughter, in which, although we do not actually find what we are watching funny ourselves, the pre-recorded laughter accompanying the television program laughs for us. Or, in financial transactions, even though both we and the other party know that money has no inherent value, we still behave as though the others believes that it has and act on that basis. In both cases, we see that what allows us to maintain our distance on to prevailing values is that someone or something – the Big Other – continues to believe in our place. The universality of cynicism today is necessarily accompanied by this exception, this unconscious symptom, something we continue to do but cannot admit. Nevertheless, Žižek does not simply reject the operation of cynicism. He is often understood to be doing so, but this cynicism is still part of the Marxist "critique of ideology", to which Žižek still adheres (Žižek 1999: 180-81); and, as surprised audiences often remark, in Žižek's own public performances he frequently displays an overt cynicism, that is, does not stand behind and frequently appears even to question the position he has just put forward. Rather, what Žižek does is push cynicism even further than the cynics themselves. Whereas cynicism ends up preserving some place or Big Other that is not questioned, Žižek continues on all the way. If cynicism in its basic operation is the "subversion of the official proposition by confronting it with the situation of its enunciation" (Žižek 1989: 29), then this cynicism is applied even to the interpassive other that laughs for us or that fetishised commodity that believes in our place. Žižek wants to think that "situation of enunciation" from which these come about, from which they get their authority. In this sense,

cynicism is a split no longer between truth and appearance, but within truth itself, showing that there is *nothing* outside of appearance.⁷

It is something like this that explains Žižek's break with Ernesto Laclau and Judith Butler in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*. The terms of the dispute between the three thinkers here can often be misunderstood. Both Laclau and Butler in their different ways are relativist or historicist, for whom such things as class and the phallus do not operate as any kind of "original and final" instance (Butler 2000: 145). However, against this, Žižek does not assert some underlying real, like the old-fashioned class and sexual difference. If anything, he goes further than his opponents in doing away with any such transcendental signified. Indeed, Žižek's point is that it is Laclau and Butler themselves who end up having to posit some ahistorical real in order to explain the endless "requilting" of signifiers they otherwise observe. It is they who end up having to resort to some ahistorical "Rock" that successive hegemonisations fail to symbolise, even though this is the position that Žižek is often associated with and indeed what they accuse Žižek of arguing for in their exchanges with him. So what then *does* Žižek oppose to Laclau and Butler? How does he not himself end up thinking class and sexual difference as some immoveable real that a series of symbolic rearticulations arises as the (necessarily failed) response to? Žižek often jokes that everything stands in for sex and class, except sex and class themselves. This can be understood as a version of that post-modern "transcoding" or "figural reading", in which there is no ultimate motivation or explanation of things, but only a series of metaphorical substitutions of one explanation for another. But Žižek's position is not quite this. Rather, his exact point is that it is true: sex and class *are* never seen as such, do not function as any transcendental signified or ultimately determining instance. Every attempt to propose sex or class as a final explanation *does* only produce another quilting, another metaphorisation. *But this only because of sex and class*. Žižek agrees neither with a simple relativism without any transcendental signified or space outside of signification nor with the notion that sex and class are unchanging ahistorical rocks on which successive symbolisations founder. On the contrary, sex and class, in that manner we have seen before with Hegel's critique of Kant's transcendental subject of apperception, just *are* those successive symbolisations, what allows us to remark them as successive symbolisations. Any attempt to erect sex or class as a transcendental signified, what successive symbolisations stand in for, would reveal itself to be just another symbolisation; but this *is* sex and class, this is the effect of sex and class. In the manner of Hegel's concrete universal – but, of course, also Žižek's parallax object – sex and class exist as both species and genus, only one of a potentially infinite number of master-signifiers and what all of these master-signifiers stand in for. It produces a split not between the

symbolic and the real in terms of what can and cannot be symbolised, but within the symbolic itself. Sex and class are precisely Žižek's parallax objects: in attempting to think the real before the symbolic they produce a split within the symbolic, and thus testify to the real. To rephrase Žižek's joke, we might say that not only does the "presence of the penis indicate the absence of the phallus" (Butler 2000: 131), but the very presence of the *phallus* indicates the absence of the phallus.

All of this allows us to begin to think the difference between cynicism and the "passive aggressivity" (Žižek 2006a: 209-226) or Bartlebyan "withdrawal" (Žižek 2006b: 6, 89, 383) that Žižek has recently begun to theorise. Cynicism, as we have seen, in its search for the truth behind appearances relies upon an assumed Big Other. More particularly, in our prevailing post-modern cynicism, in which we refuse to believe in and take a distance on to the dominant social norms, we still implicitly rely on the Other (either people or objects like money) to continue operating while we express our doubts. But beyond this there is also the more subtle case of the "cynicism" of truth itself, in which for all of the single, crusading, individual-against-the-system aspect of the truth-teller – the idea that they alone will not be fooled – they always rely upon another to recognise this truth. That is, for all of the apparent transgression of cynicism, it relies upon a shared symbolic community. Cynicism is in fact only a shibboleth, an inherent transgression. Truth – and this is the problem of all intellectual "critique", the "objective" assessment and evaluation of others' arguments – is not the impartial, higher exercise it says it is, but is always symbolic, intended for the gaze of the Big Other. (We can see this with the critique of Žižek himself, as in the recent edited collection *The Truth of Žižek* [Bowman 2007]. For all of the criticisms of Žižek there, accusing him of misreadings, of getting the facts wrong, of internal logical inconsistencies, we get the uncanny feeling reading the book that what it desires more than anything is the approval of Žižek himself, as though he would read what was written about him and suddenly change his ways.) This is why, for Lacan, the birth of the Enlightenment is inseparable from a kind of interpassivity or objective cynicism (one of the little remarked-upon lessons of Lacan's 'Kant with Sade' and one of his objections to Descartes' "provisional morality").⁸ But, for Žižek, the "passive aggressivity" or "withdrawal" involved in thought is not like this. Like psychoanalytic speech, it does not seek to work through the Big Other. It is not fundamentally a case either of belief or the lack of belief. It does not understand itself as the search for a hidden or repressed truth that would expose the underlying state of affairs (the meaning of the "obviousness" or even "stupidity" of Žižek's examples). Žižek's work is split, but not in terms of *desire*, what is missing *from* the work, but in terms of *drive*, what is missing *in* the work. It is exactly because the work has no other end than itself, its own internal consistency,

that it is forever divided, unable to be completed. It continues as an incessant reflection upon its own “speaking position”, a reflection (the question of cynicism) with which it first began.

All of this is to say that when Žižek returns to *Sublime Object* in *Parallax View*, it is to grasp the unconscious and the commodity as an effect of parallax. We move from an early conception of thought as critique, which still relies on a notion of a truth outside of the work, to a form of parallaxic remarking, which proposes no such “end” to the work. We move from the split of the symptom elaborated in *Sublime Object* (which still implies a certain exception to a universal) to a parallaxic self-splitting that keeps on repeating (which implies a certain lack of exception in an inconsistent not-all totality). We move from a democratic desire that always fails (and in which the position of truth must always be kept empty) to a Marxist drive (a parallaxic self-splitting, in which failure is not an outside or exception but the very aim). *Parallax View* is not a critique by Žižek of his earlier work, but a kind of folding of it onto itself, a remarking of what is excluded from it to make it possible. The drive of parallax is not so much *outside of* desire and the symptom as the endless repeating or playing out of them. As writes: “While the goal is the object around which drive circulates, its (true) aim is the endless continuation of this circulation as such” (61). That is to say, parallax is not simply the shifting between two different perspectives (this is only an effect of what is really at stake), but a splitting between something and what allows it to be symbolically registered. And the passive aggressivity or withdrawal that Žižek advocates is again not *opposed to* cynicism (which is also, of course, a kind of “withdrawal”, a look “behind” appearances), but rather a cynicism without a Big Other guaranteeing it and that does not seek symbolic recognition. Passive aggressivity or withdrawal – the passive aggressivity or withdrawal that we find in analysis, for example – is an attempt to make the positions of enunciation and enunciated the same. In this, it would be “opposed” to cynicism, which always finally wants to preserve an empty point of enunciation outside of what it speaks of (to echo Kant, in the “transcendental apperception” of cynicism, the empty position of the cynical subject is echoed by the empty position of the Big Other as “transcendental object” [Žižek 1993: 17]). Passive aggressivity or withdrawal is an attempt to *remark* the cynical position, to show the “void of its lack” (Žižek 2006: 15) that allows its so-called “neutral” position of enunciation.

The Parallactic Grievance

Indeed, it is this parallactic split that characterizes the very *form* of Žižek's work. One of the things often noted about Žižek's writing is that it treats an extremely wide variety of topics, so much so that we might think that there is no overall argument but only an endless series of examples. This is the contention both of those who see Žižek as essentially a commentator on popular culture and those who see his work as a series of specific political "interventions". As Ian Parker writes in his *Slavoj Žižek: A Critical Introduction*: "The political co-ordinates he uses to guide his use of philosophy and psychoanalysis are quite pragmatic and opportunist" (Parker 2004: 82). And this is in large part true. There is no "in itself" of Žižek's work; he always seems to be overturning previous positions, engaging in implicit or explicit dialogue with his own work. And yet at the same time we have the uncanny sense that there is an absolutely unchanging machinic drive in Žižek's work. His intellectual position is entirely uninfluenced by passing contingencies, political correctness, moral limits, even in a way internal "consistency" (all of which for him are merely symbolic designations). All that is important is the pursuit of his own immanent line of thought, which he follows in an almost "theological" way to its limit, and in which his examples are replaceable by any number of others. Hence these examples, far from being essential to Žižek's thought, are contingent; and for all of their apparent surface variety and connection to the world, he is ultimately saying the same thing, totally unconcerned with the realities of everyday life, which it is always the task of philosophy to break with. As Marcus Pound says in his *Žižek: A (Very) Critical Introduction*: "It is in this sense that Žižek's work can be said to resemble those sprawling medieval theological tracts, for whom the demand to be relevant, to 'have something to say', to the current situation, was inconsequential compared to the pursuit of 'the Thing itself', i.e., the Lacanian real" (Pound 2008: 18).

Of course, the true dialectical – parallactic – solution is that Žižek is *both* of these: that just as all of those examples with their seeming divergence from the "thing itself" are just what Žižek is talking about, so what Žižek is speaking about is never to be grasped in itself but only in its own divergence from itself. In that way we have seen before, at once form is only the remarking of a prior content and content stands in only for a prior split in form. To put all of this another way, we might suggest that the diversity of Žižek is possible only insofar as he always tries to say the same thing, to bring enunciated and enunciation together. It is exactly this that is at stake in Žižek's revival of Descartes in *The Ticklish Subject*: Descartes is perhaps the first parallactic philosopher in seeing the essential task of philosophy as the putting together of enunciated and enunciation, being and thinking. It is Kant who radicalises and extends the

parallax project by speaking of the transcendental conditions for this, the fact that the assertion of the identity of the subject (“I am”) and the predicate (“I think”) can be undertaken only in the form of another predicate or time. And it is Hegel who in turn radicalises Kant by formalising this result, by speaking of the way that what is missing from this equivalence is not any further predicate (content) but only the space from which it is remarked (form). What is left out is not any noumenal limit we cannot go beyond but only what allows us to speak of the noumenal, the empty place from which this limit could be seen. This is the paradoxical and little remarked upon aspect of Hegel’s (or we might say post-Hegelian) idealism: that the material only stands in for the idealist attempt at self-reflection, the attempt to go back before the split between being and thinking.⁹ It is this conclusion, indeed, that Lacan reaches in his own treatment of Descartes: that thought arises – as in the brain sciences – from the attempt to thing being (“I am”), to overcome the split between being and thinking. In effect, argues Lacan, Descartes conceives of a parallax between being and thinking. And the “ticklish subject” of Descartes is precisely the subject of the drive to overcome this split or parallax between being and thinking.

It is this parallax relationship between being and thinking that Žižek replays at all levels in his work. Recalling Hegel’s fascination with phrenology, in Žižek the most abstract and immaterial of concepts (the surplus-value of capital, the surplus-enjoyment of the unconscious) are to be found only in the most inert and material of objects. We see this in Žižek’s series of privileged examples of the films of Tarkovsky, the planes junked in the Mojave Desert from Don DeLillo’s *Underworld*, the Real Existing Socialism of ex-Yugoslavia and East Germany, the Communism of Cuba and even the slums of the Third World... (Žižek 2006: 158-59) Žižek’s brilliant insight is that it is exactly in the inertia and lack of events of the ex-Communist states and slums that we find an equivalent to the incessant self-revolutionising drive of the immaterial surplus-value of advanced Western capitalism: in both, we have the same post-historicity, the same (apparent) lack of alternatives, the same unbudgeable process that cannot be turned back. Not only does much of the capitalist world today resemble the crumbling decay and sense of being left behind of the last years of Communism, but Communism itself constitutes a kind of forerunner to today’s capitalism. It is not just a matter of bananas and pornography going from the West to the newly “liberated” territories of the East, but equally of the virus of the post-historical and post-political going the other way from East to West. We see all of this in the great novels of W.G. Sebald, who after living through the destruction of Germany during the last days of the Second World War depicts the England of the 1980s with much the same haunted, post-apocalyptic feeling of time having come to an end, of the ceaseless renovation of capital having

come to rest in a state of stasis.¹⁰ Sebald's work constitutes perhaps the best description we have of the contemporary state of "thingness" as such, of being outside of thought. Take, for example, the following passage from his 1997 novel *The Emigrants*:

By early afternoon I was in Manchester, and immediately set off westwards, through the city, in the direction of the docks. To my surprise, I had no difficulty in finding my way, since everything in Manchester had essentially remained the same as it had been almost a quarter of a century before. The buildings that had been put up to stave off the general decline were now themselves in the grip of decay, and even the so-called development zones, created in recent years on the fringes of the city centre and along the Ship Canal, to revive the entrepreneurial spirit that so much was being made of, already looked semi-abandoned. The wasteland and the white clouds drifting in from the Irish Sea were reflected in the glinting glass fronts of office blocks, some of which were only half occupied, and some of which were still under construction. Once I was out at the docks it did not take me long to find Ferber's studio. The cobbled yard was unaltered. The almond tree was about to blossom, and when I crossed the threshold it was as if I had been there only yesterday (Sebald 1993: 178-79).

And yet – this is the paradox of Sebald's novel, brought out by Eric Santner when he speaks of the "spark" of the human in Sebald's work (Santner 2006: 191) – this "thingness", this absolute immersion in quotidian reality without any transcendental horizon (being without thought), is the inevitable occasion of a pure, spiritual reverie on the part of Sebald (thought without being). There is played out in Sebald's work a Benjaminian correspondence between an absolute identification with the destructiveness of history and a messianic redemption of a past that never was. The very thinking of the unredeemed facticity of the world produces a split in it (which is also the meaning of Benjaminian messianism: the "blasting out" of a "past charged with the time of the now" is only the thinking of the empty "historical continuum" (Benjamin 1969: 261) that nothing can ever interrupt.)¹¹

As so often, Žižek's antagonism to the Benjaminian-Derridean notion of messianic redemption arises only because he is so close to it (and in Santner's book, which Žižek praises, no necessary incompatibility is seen to exist between the Derridean and the Žižekian). The connection between Benjamin and Žižek is not often made, however, because in Žižek this "redemption" is most frequently called "passive aggressivity" "withdrawal" or even "grievance" (Žižek 2006: 234, 264, 296). As opposed to the "optimism" of Derridean "messianism", we have the seeming pain and negativity of something like Melville's *Bartleby*; but, nevertheless, in both Derrida's messianism and Žižek's grievance we have a thinking of the "withdrawal" that allows the symbolic order, and therefore the opening up of a certain outside on to it. In Derrida: "This condition of possibility of the event is also its condition of impossibility, like this strange concept

of messianism without content, of the messianic without messianism” (Derrida 1994: 65). In Žižek: “The gap remains, but reduced to a structural minimum: to the ‘pure’ difference between the set of social regulations and the void of their absence” (Žižek 2006b: 382). In both cases – and this is, arguably, where Žižek misreads Derrida – it is not a matter of any simple alternative to what is; it is not a matter of some other horizon that we would reach teleologically or in any other way. Rather, it is the thinking of what is *as such*, without any other alternative, that *is* this other space. This is exactly the “parallactic” strategy of both Derrida and Žižek (and, remember, this parallactic “alternative” is not always signalled by a grimace in Žižek, but also on occasions by a smile). However, in order to make the connection between grievance and parallax a little clearer, let us take four examples of this “grievance” or “passive aggressivity” to be found in Žižek’s work:

- with regard to David Mamet’s play *Oleanna*, Žižek speaks of the way that the fundamental feminist gesture is that the male teacher’s position is “no longer perceived as legitimate authority, but as mere illegitimate power” (Žižek 2004: 118);

- with regard to the 2005 Paris riots, Žižek speaks of the way that the actions of the protesters were undertaken without “particular demands”, and that if they were directed against anything specific it was perhaps first of all interests associated with the protestors themselves (Žižek 2008: 63)

- with regard to the US-led invasion of Iraq, Žižek argues that, although abstract pacifism is “intellectually stupid and morally wrong”, and although the fall of Saddam Hussein undoubtedly brought “great relief” to the Iraqi people, the action was nevertheless “wrong” (Žižek 2004: 50).

- finally, in an observation he repeats throughout his work, Žižek notes that in the moment before the overthrow of power there is always a “brief pause” when suddenly the authority that has been taken for granted no longer applies and the ruling order seems “unjust and arbitrary” (Žižek 2004: 118).

What is common to these four situations? It is the idea that, like Bartleby, we have an “I prefer not to”, without the reasons for this being given or even able to be given. It is a *feeling* or *affect* that in a way precedes reasons, that is unable to be justified, that has no place within the existing symbolic order. It is the feeling of an injustice or of something that is missing, without necessarily having the language to express it. And certainly it proposes no immediate solution, no way of making things better within the existing order. It is in fact a dissatisfaction with the currently existing order as such. This grievance, indeed, might be compared to the “melancholy” that Žižek sees in Fellini’s *Satyricon*, in which the revellers are haunted by the sense that something is missing without being able to say what it is, and in fact without anything

“objectively” being missing. There is a kind of “withdrawal” or distancing at stake here even at the height of the characters’ immersion in the world (indeed, even *allowing* their immersion in the world). As Žižek writes:

Melancholy is not primarily directed at the paradisiacal past of organic balanced Wholeness which was lost due to some catastrophe, it is not a sadness caused by this loss; melancholy proper, rather, designates the attitude of those who are still in Paradise but are already longing to break out of it; of those who, although still in a closed universe, already possess a vague premonition of another dimension which is just out of their reach (Žižek 2000: 88-89).

And yet, as Žižek goes on to argue in *Parallax View*, the symbolic order precisely stands in for the possibility of this withdrawal. That is – and this is to go back to our earlier point as to how thought is not simply an exception within a pre-existing order of things, but also brings this order about – the symbolic order arises as the effect of a positing that could also not have happened. In other words, what is being experienced at the moment of grievance is the repetition of the forced choice. It is the possibility of experiencing – necessarily within the symbolic – what must be excluded, foreclosed, in order to found the symbolic order. It is a way of remarking, as though from the outside, the symbolic order as such, although this is obviously impossible. And it is a way of resisting it, in speaking of, or better feeling, what is lost by it. Grievance is first of all not a grievance concerning any particular wrong, but the very inability to speak of any particular wrong, the fact that any attempt to articulate it within the symbolic is necessarily to lose it. In a parallaxic way, we might say that it is grievance that arises at the lack of any grievance, grievance that gives rise both to itself and to the circumstances at which it is aggrieved.



Michael Haneke, opening shot of *Hidden* (2005)

We see perhaps an example of this in the recent film *Hidden (Caché)* (2005) by the Austrian director Michael Haneke. The film is well known for its unnerving series of long shots, obviously deliberately taken, that mark the beginning and end of the film. And these shots are echoed in the important (but, again, distant) shot of the small Algerian boy being taken away from his foster French family that constitutes the dramatic “centre” of the film. Throughout the film – to the extent that this is dramatically possible – exactly who takes these shots (for they are obviously filmed by someone within the narrative, that is, are remarked) remains unclear. They are unclaimed, “unsutured”, to use the language of film theory. In his discussion of Alfred Hitchcock’s *The Birds* in *For They Know Not What They Do*, Žižek speaks of the famous “bird’s eye” shot from high up of Bodega Bay in flames, which for a moment is a similarly unclaimed gaze of pure unmotivated grievance, before a bird flies into view, telling us that we are looking not from the point of view of “God” (as with those other famously unclaimed point of view shots from above a staircase in Hitchcock’s *Psycho*), but from the point of view of a seagull (77). In *Hidden*, it is almost as though Haneke – as though playing out Žižek’s suggestion of remaking *The Birds* without the birds (Žižek 1991a: 105) – delays the shot of the “seagull” indefinitely, so that there is ultimately no narrative explanation of those mysterious shots of the couple’s house at the beginning and of their son at the end. Or it is perhaps only in the very last shot of the film – in what we might read as a betrayal of its true radicality – that we see the connection between the son of the family and the son of the Algerian boy his father allowed to be taken away. At this point, we pass from grievance to something more specific, in which our sense that something is wrong or some injustice has been committed finds an object or even explanation. Until this moment, the remarkable feature of Haneke’s film is its pure “gaze” on to French contemporary life, its pure remarking of the “void” that makes it possible. *Hidden*, as well as being arguably the great artistic equivalent of the French riots of 2005, is also a great film of parallax. Those opening shots of the film, we might say, constitute a “parallactic” view on to the French society of our period.

It is, indeed, this “tension” between grievance and its symbolic articulation that Žižek is concerned with in those examples above. With regard to feminism, there is in the end something “larger”, more universal, than the “politically correct” demand for equal treatment. Indeed, part of what fuels the woman student’s resentment in *Oleanna* is the very ease her professor has in fulfilling her demands in categorising her as a “feminist”. With regard to the French riots, Žižek opposes all attempts, by either politicians or commentators, to give them a meaning or to provide a solution. He even opposes the attempts by the rioters themselves to articulate their

demands within the existing symbolic order, which ultimately only serves to strengthen the system. And with regard to Iraq, Žižek insists, against all pressure to take a conventional left-wing position, that it is not a matter simply of being against the war but that the whole question of whether we are for or against the war is too late to capture what is truly at stake, that the real decision has already taken place before this. In a sense, therefore, there is a paradox or self-contradiction about this grievance or passive aggressivity. On the one hand, it is lost as soon as it is formulated: it is able to take only the familiar form of the demand for reform or compensation within the existing symbolic order (civil rights, the demand for inclusion, financial reparation). And yet, on the other hand, grievance is a remarking of what is lost by being put into such terms. Grievance is the fact that there *are* only these symbolic solutions; the possibility that the one with the grievance, exactly in expressing it in symbolic terms, is responsible for the situation they find themselves in. Grievance, as Žižek remarks with regard to the French rioters – but it would apply equally to all of those other examples — always has this minimally self-reflexive character: we object also to the response to our grievance, whether positive or negative (Žižek 2008: 64). In a parallaxic way, we might even say that grievance does not properly arrive until the response to this response. Do we not see this with the “original” instance of this grievance, Bartleby? For we cannot help thinking that part of what Bartleby objects to, part of what he resists – even from the beginning – is the very concern to ask him if things are alright. And yet at the same time as grievance marks the fact that there is no alternative within the currently constituted symbolic order, that all alternatives amount merely to an inherent transgression, grievance itself is proof that an alternative *is* possible. Grievance *is* the very opening up of another alternative. This, again, is the ambiguity Žižek sees at stake in *Satyricon*, in which *at the same time* as there is a melancholy that there is no other there is also a realisation that something is missing. As Žižek insists there, it is not a matter of some Paradise from which we are subsequently expelled. Rather, this “paradisiacal satisfaction” as such is not possible without, that is, is unable to be realised outside, “a longing for fresh air, an opening that would break the unbearable constraint” (Žižek 2000, 88). It is exactly this self-splitting that is the parallax of grievance, and what connects it with the Derridean logic – and Žižek explicitly admits in his recent work on grievance is a kind of “reconciliation” with Derrida – of simultaneous possibility and impossibility.

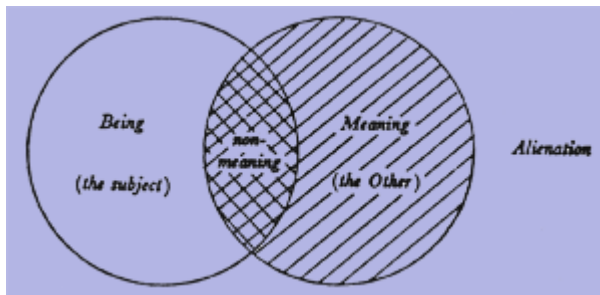
It is the self-splitting aspect of grievance that also connects it with Kantian “enthusiasm”, as seen in Kant’s treatment of the French Revolution in *The Conflicts of the Faculties* (Kant 2001: 302-03). (As we have suggested before, this grievance or passive aggressivity, if it can be understood as a “grimace” or a form of “melancholy”, can also be understood as a “smile” or an

instance of “enthusiasm”). Kant’s exact point – it is the same as Fellini’s in *Satyricon* – is that, if we can now only look with horror at the results of the original revolutionary impulse, if things got even worse than under the *ancien régime*, the enthusiasm with which we greeted the Revolution, and which allows us now to see it as so disappointing, is itself proof of the justice of the Revolution. More exactly, it is our ability to think the failure of the Revolution from somewhere outside of it—literally in Kant’s case from Germany – that points to something in it that is not simply to be reduced to its symbolic inscription. (And, indeed, something like this is also at stake in Žižek’s point vis-à-vis such “failed” Communist states as Cuba: they succeed in opening up a distance on to Western democracy in our very ability to think their failure (Žižek 2001a: 131). And we see the same “sublimity” with grievance. Although in terms of its actual “content” it necessarily exists within the constraints of the symbolic, in terms of its “form” it comes from somewhere else. Grievance is an empty thought, a thought without being, which is why so often in Žižek it is indicated by an empty set: against a double blackmail, a non-existent third way, the intersection of parallel perspectives, the Real... Again, to come back to the problematic of the Cogito that Žižek announces in *The Ticklish Subject*, we might say that the subject of grievance is Descartes’ “empty subject”, the subject of “I think” outside of “I am”. Or, to put it another way, the “ticklish subject” is the subject able to be aggrieved.

For, once more, what is it that happens in grievance? Although it arises out of specific circumstances, and it is something particular that incites it – it is always as a woman, a Muslim, a resident of a French housing estate, an American that we feel it – ultimately it is something much wider that provokes it, something that goes beyond any fixed identity and any attempt to redress it within the current circumstances. Grievance is always an experience of what Žižek calls, after Hegel, the concrete universal. More exactly, for all of our positioning in it as a subject, we are never more of an empty subject than when we feel grievance; we are never more aware that what we feel is not to be reduced to or explained by our own particular circumstances. This is the meaning of Žižek’s insistence that the proper response – the proper grievance, as it were – to 9/11 is not that as an American it should not happen to me, but that it should not happen to anyone (Žižek 2002: 49). At once there is no exception to the universal (we are part of it) and the universal exists only because it is remarked by us (not only that the universal is only ever seen from one particular point of view, but that the universal *is* this remarking). And this is why grievance is parallaxic, self-splitting. We might indeed make a connection in this regard between David Fincher’s *The Fight Club* and what Žižek sees as the proper response to 9/11 (it is undoubtedly significant that both are discussed in *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*). The self-beating in *Fight Club* is an example of grievance and not narcissism because it is not staged

for the eyes of the Big Other. I beat myself not for someone else, but in the very absence of someone else to beat me. (I beat myself precisely to show that there is no Big Other). And perhaps we can even interpret the actions of the French rioters, who similarly destroyed their own property (Žižek 2008, 64-65), in the same light. The inconsistent “not-all” that arises in the absence of the Big Other, the fact that there is no exception to the universal (it should not happen to anyone) means that I am also responsible, that no one is innocent (and therefore I must hit or punish myself).

In a way, that is, grievance is an answer to Žižek’s question of how thought emerges from the “flat order” of positive being; but, again, the key point is that it arises not simply as an exception to an already existing symbolic order but as something that brings about both order and exception, being and thought. Grievance, in other words, is like the emergence of thought from the brain: it is always something of a missing cause. Like the Lacanian anxiety to which we might compare it, it is the remarking not so much of something as of nothing: the nothing that existed before it is now thought or remarked. Indeed, grievance might be thought of in terms of Lacan’s diagram of the relationship of being to meaning (we might say being to thought) from *Seminar XI*:



Lacan, Diagram from session ‘The Subject and the Other: Alienation’, *Seminar XI*

Now, of course, Lacan’s point is that the subject in the symbolic must choose between being and meaning. Insofar as we are inside the symbolic order, there is a kind of forced choice whereby we cannot have both. We can have being, but without being able to think or know it. We can think being, but we cannot at the same time have it. However we choose, we cannot have both being and thinking: the intersection between them, as indicated by that diagram above, is empty or has no meaning. As Lacan writes: “If we choose being, the subject [we might say thinking] disappears... If we choose meaning [we have] the disappearance of being, induced by the very function of the signifier” (211). And it is important to note that Lacan raises this *ve/* or

forced choice in the context of a discussion of Descartes' Cogito, for Lacan's ultimate point is that this impossible intersection or coming together of being and thought is the place of the subject in the proper sense, or what he calls the barred subject (\$). Or, rather, the subject *is* this split between being and meaning. It is the subject that undergoes – and in a way arises out of – this forced choice between being and meaning, being without meaning and meaning without being. Between “I am” (the one who thinks, *res cogitans*) and “I think” (the pure void, the place of enunciation).

In grievance – which, as we might see, occupies the position of “non-meaning” in the diagram above – we try in a way to repeat this forced choice. In grievance, impossibly within the symbolic order, we attempt to overcome the split between being and thought, to put together being and thought. It is, as we have been trying to argue, the attempt to think that there is no alternative to the symbolic order, that nothing is missing from the symbolic order: being without thought. And yet at the same time in thinking that nothing goes missing something goes missing. In the full ambiguity of the term, we are aware that *nothing* is missing: thought without being. This is the precise meaning of the “withdrawal” we have in grievance and of which Žižek speaks in *Parallax View*: it is not a conscious or even unconscious removal of oneself to another place – this is cynicism – but a withdrawal at the same time as a complete immersion. Grievance as thought arises in an impossible loop in making the nothing that existed before it visible. To repeat Žižek's answer to the question of how thought arises, we would say that thought arises as the “gap between thought and being”, as the attempt to think what comes before the split between thought and being. At once thought arises in the thinking of being and being arises in thought attempting to think itself. Thought cannot think itself without being split from itself by being, without a gap arising between thought and being. Thought arises as the thought of what separates it from being, as being arises as the split between thought and itself.¹²

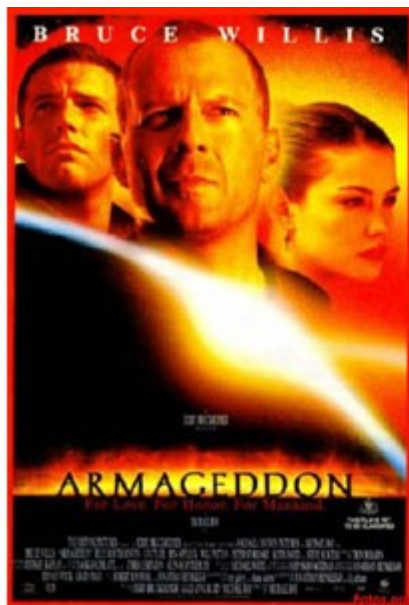
The Thinking of Capital

How could we not – this is how *Parallax View* replays the second of those two “symptoms” in *Sublime Object* – think of all this in terms of the parallax between thought and capital? For the same question might be asked of capital as we put to thought: how does it arise out of the “flat order” of being? Žižek in effect repeats the answer not only of such scholars as Jean-Pierre Faye and Clémence Ramnoux but also of Deleuze and Guattari in their *What is Philosophy?* (Deleuze 1994: 87-88): that the origins of philosophy (in effect, thought) are to be found with the invention of trade in Greece some time in the 6th century BC (Žižek 2005: 11). However, contra

Heidegger, if in one way this is a necessary connection, in another it is entirely contingent, for the point is that there is no outside to capital, which begins by a kind of “salto mortale” by which it posits its own origins (Žižek 2006b: 277). But, of course, it is exactly in this way that capital is like thought. It arises out of the same loop or positing of presuppositions. As Marx argued, it is not a matter of exchange-value arising out of use-value or even of surplus-value arising out of “primitive accumulation”. Rather, both economic value as such and capitalist surplus-value arise at the same time. It is this paradox that Marx grappled with in his idea that the origins of capitalism can be reconstituted only retrospectively. There is always a certain “cause” missing in every attempt to explain capital, and this is what capital is: “The accumulation of capital presupposes surplus-value; surplus-value presupposes capitalistic production; and capitalistic production presupposes the pre-existence of considerable masses of capital and of labour power in the hands of the producers of commodities” (Marx 1992: 873). And, if we dare to read all the implications of what Marx is saying here, we might say that, more than capital and thought being synchronous or arising at the same time, thought *is* capital. Thought as grievance is, in both senses, the thinking of capital. Thinking – grievance – is both capital and the thinking of capital in that parallaxic way we have tried to elaborate throughout here.

To conclude, what is it to understand Žižek’s entire work as a form of grievance? It is to say that it is marked by a kind of constitutive split: those changes of mind or reversals of position that characterise it are not just an updating of argument or a shift in strategy in response to changing conditions, but a parallaxic attempt to think what made the previous equivalence between thought and being possible. More precisely, we might say that Žižek’s thought attempts to put together being without thought (absolute worldliness, contingency, philosophy as an effect of the world) and thought without being (an inherent logic, a “theological” attempt to think capital as real, thinking as the gap between being and thought) And all of this might be one way to understand what Žižek means when he says that the aim of philosophy is not to provide solutions but rather to ask the right questions. This is often understood – and Žižek is complicit in this – simply as arguing for a certain time for reflection before action, philosophy as a way of orienting future conduct. But, in fact, Žižek aims, consistent with all authentic philosophy, to sever all relationship between thinking and action. For in a way all action – this is the insight of grievance – is only a form of inherent transgression, only a hysterical demand on the Big Other, a form of “acting out”. Against this, authentic thought – the acephalous drive that constitutes thought – aims at the very impossibility of action, the absolute equivalence of thought and being. What philosophical thought seeks to bring about is the realisation of the impossibility or futility of “action”; to traverse the fantasy of the “urgency” of the current situation (which is, after all, only

symbolic), of us being able to ask the question of what is to be done. What thought on the contrary endeavours to replicate is a certain Real, in which all alternatives lead to the same end, and in which all attempts to avoid this fate merely help bring it about. The aim of philosophy is to do away with thought by means of the idea that the catastrophe has already happened (Žižek 2003: 156). Beyond any symbolic “urgency”, in which we would still have a choice as to what to do, we would have fate or predestination, in which all has already been decided, in which we have already acted.



Armageddon (1998), dir. Michael Bay

Deep Impact (1998), dir. Mimi Leder

Apropos the “usefulness” of philosophy – to return to the question we began by asking here – Žižek gives us an example of what he means with reference to the films *Armageddon* (1998) and *Deep Impact* (1998). In both of these films when a huge asteroid threatens to hit earth a team of astronauts is sent off into outer space to meet it and blow it up, even though they know they will likely never return. As Žižek says, faced with such imminent catastrophe, in which there is no time for reflection and in which we must act immediately without any alternative being available, philosophy is of no use. It is in a sense too late. To quote him from the film *Žižek!*: “You don’t need philosophy here. You need, I don’t know, strong atomic bombs to explode. But you know what I mean. The threat is there” (Taylor 2005). But, in fact, the real question of philosophy is, how do we get to this situation? That is, if in *Armageddon* and *Deep Impact* we

feel we do not need philosophy because there are no alternatives but only absolute necessity, this is the effect of philosophy itself. It is the very aim of philosophy that there be no thought, but only pure being. (It would not be a matter of symbolic “urgency” here because there would be nothing to be done.) But, as we have tried to argue throughout, this “flat order” of being *would be possible only because of thought itself*. And this is what Žižek means when he says – a propos Jean-Pierre Dupuy’s idea that the catastrophe has already happened – that it is only on this basis (not that there is something we can do but that there is nothing we can do) that we can act. It is this that Žižek means when he says that we should think before we act: not the momentary suspension of thinking before action, but the parallaxic equivalence of being without thought and thought without being. As the ancient Greeks who put together both the predestination of the Gods and great individual dramas knew, it is only insofar as there is nothing to be done that we can act, that we find that we have already acted. It is only on the basis of sacrificing that for which we usually make sacrifices (acting) that the act is truly possible.

With thanks to Scott Stephens

Notes

¹ Žižek speaks of Lacan already making this connection in *Sublime Object* (50).

² We might provide the full quote here: “The subject himself is marked off by the single stroke, and first he marks himself as a tattoo, the first of the signifiers. When this signifier, this *one*, is established – the reckoning is *one* one. It is at the level, not of the one, but of the *one* one, at the level of the reckoning [“compte”: we might say “remark”], that the subject has to situate himself as such” (141). All of what we are saying here would have to be read in the closest relationship both to the chapter ‘On the One’ from Žižek’s *For They Know Not What They Do* (1991b) and Alain Badiou’s recently translated *Theory of the Subject*, particularly with regard to the notion of “scission” developed there (51-110).

³ Lacan’s (largely critical) comments concerning Descartes’ notion of the pineal gland are to be found in *Seminar II* (68-76). But as Žižek, amongst others, has pointed out, it is not until later in his work that Lacan breaks with his own equivalent of the pineal gland, the phallus (Žižek 2009a: 274). Žižek himself speaks of Malebranche in his ‘The Matrix, or, The Two Sides to Perversion’ (Žižek 2001b: 213-34).

⁴ For an excellent account of the relationship of Hegel to phrenology, which makes a similar point to the one we are proposing here, see Mladen Dolar, ‘The Phrenology of Spirit’ (Copjec 1994: 64-83).

⁵ We are following here the suggestion of Catherine Malabou in her *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, who advises that we should re-read Hegel’s *Philosophy of Nature* as a way of telling us about “the transition from the biological to the spiritual, about the way the mind is already a ‘self’, a ‘spirit-nature’ at whose core ‘differences are one and all physical and psychical’” (Malabou 2008: 80).

⁶ Hence Žižek’s long-time fascination with the difference between the inside and outside of spaces, from Robert Heinlein’s *The Unpleasant Profession of Jonathan Hoag* (Žižek 1991a: 14) to his recent writings on architecture (Žižek 2009b). The radical “incommensurability between inside and outside” he sees in much contemporary architecture, and as figured by the spandrel, is architecture’s *surplus-value*, and hence its equivalence to capitalism. And might we not think of the Žižek’s famous analysis of different toilets and their shit as in each case the same toilet seen from one perspective and then another? (Žižek 1997: 4-5) If shit in this case is money, it is precisely money as *surplus-value*.

⁷ Or it is this drive that Robert Pfaller sees as at least potential in Žižek’s works in his essay ‘Negation and Its Reliabilities: An Empty Subject for Ideology’ (Žižek 1998: 225-46), and why he associates this endless self-reflection with the strictly inhuman, mechanical quality of the replicants in *Bladerunner*.

⁸ That is, Lacan reads Kant’s famous moral test of whether we would keep a deposit from someone who had died without leaving a record through Sade’s cynical “reciprocity” as revealing that “the bipolarity upon which the moral law is founded is nothing but the split in the subject brought about by any and every intervention of the signifier: the split between the enunciating subject and the

subject of the enunciation” (Lacan 2006: 650).

⁹ Žižek writes, for example, in *Parallax View*: “The self-relating of the agent of perception/awareness, as it were, creates (opens up) the scene on which ‘conscious content’ can appear; it provides the universal *form* of this content” (213).

¹⁰ We might equally refer here to the notion of the “hauntological”, as developed by Mark Fisher on his blog site k-punk, particularly with reference to a series of British rock bands: The Fall, Joy Division.

¹¹ This is why we might say, following André Bazin, that the great films of the real in cinema are always at the same time spiritual: Italian Neo-Realism, Ingmar Bergman, Abbas Kiarostami... To look “through a glass darkly” is precisely a parallax look.

¹² Another exemplary case of grievance in this sense: the work of Samuel Beckett. And in Beckett too the whole question of how thought begins with grievance (and the “cognitivist” feel of several of his later fictions: ‘Imagination Dead Imagine’, ‘The Lost Ones’, ‘Company’). See on this Federico Bellini, ‘Beckett’s Ticklish Characters’ (2009).

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