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The Horror of the Real: Žižek's Modern Gothic

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[T]he kernel of reality is horror, horror of the Real, and what constitutes reality is the minimum of idealization the subject needs in order to be able to sustain the Real.

Slavoj Žižek (1997: 22)

Approaching the Real

The opening of H. P. Lovecraft's short story 'The Call of Cthulhu' (1928) offers a concise statement of his philosophy of cosmic horror:

The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age. (1999: 139)

This modern Gothic vision of science opening up 'terrifying vistas of reality' that defy our everyday commonsense view of existence is uncannily consonant with the work of Slavoj Žižek. For Žižek it is the science of psychoanalysis that pieces together our 'dissociated knowledge' into the truth that threatens us with madness: the kernel of reality is the horror of the real. We flee from this insight into the 'dark age' of the 'minimum of dealization' that allows us to bear this horror.

If, as Sarah Kay argues, all of Žižek's theoretical production can be considered as 'thinking,

writing and reading about the Real' (2003: 1) then his work is implicitly Gothic through and through. Žižek glosses the Lacanian concept of the Real as 'the irreducible kernel of *jouissance* that resists all symbolization' (1999: 14) – an experience of shattering enjoyment that lies outside the field of representation.¹ Whereas Lacan noted that the concept of the 'Real' initially presented itself to psychoanalysis 'in the form of trauma' (1979: 55), Žižek figures this trauma as a moment of *horror*. Although the 'Real' is positioned by Žižek as unrepresentable he constantly tries to approach it by allusion to contemporary horror Gothic texts, from Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979) to the works of Patricia Highsmith and Stephen King. These texts provide the figuration of the breakdown of representation in the revelation of the appearance of the Real as a horrifying 'Thing'. I want to go further, however, and argue that Žižek not only props his reading of the Real on these texts but also deploys Gothic conventions within his own writing. In particular he uses that convention, identified by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in which the Gothic text traces the effects of an 'unspeakable' horror through the fragmentation and disruption of its own narrative devices (Sedgwick 1980: 15). The repetitiveness of Žižek's texts, their leaps of subject and their fragmentary nature mimic, in narrative form, what Sedgwick describes as the Gothic's 'despair about any direct use of language' (1980: 15); hence, his use of Gothic texts as a mode of indirect allusion, as a kind of stop-gap measure, in the exemplification the 'unspeakable' Real.

Therefore, I propose reading Žižek's work as a form of modern Gothic, taking as a precedent Stephen Marcus's well-known analysis of Freud's case-study of Dora as a *roman-à-clef* (Marcus 1985). Žižek, we could say, is a 'master of horror', alongside writers such as Lovecraft and Ligotti, or filmmakers like John Carpenter or Jaume Balagueró. This is not to reduce the theoretical import of his texts to the status of fiction, exactly the kind of 'soft' postmodernism that is anathema to Žižek. Rather it is to take seriously the Lacanian point that truth takes the structure of fiction, and the Hegelian point that truth resides in the 'stupidity' of appearances. In this sense I want to trace the theoretical shifts in Žižek's approaches to the Real through a literary reading attentive to the particular Gothic *forms* his text inhabit and operate with. As Žižek himself has noted the innovation of the Freudian approach to the dream 'text' is not to be found in the recovery of a repressed latent meaning hidden beneath the manifest content. Instead, it is a question of the unconscious desire that is not hidden but 'more 'on the surface'' and to be found 'in the *form* of the dream' (Žižek 1989: 13, *italics in original*). Psychoanalysis, for Žižek, is not a hermeneutics but a new kind of 'formal' analysis that 'read' the distortive effects of the Real. In the case of Žižek's own texts this 'formal' analysis reveals how his shifting modes of writing the Real relies and puts pressure on what Sedgwick calls the coherence of Gothic conventions, and at the same time stages an increasingly sophisticated engagement with the 'Real' as this moment of distortion. We might say, to use Žižek's own terminology, that we can read theory as fiction and fiction as theory by holding them together through a 'parallax view' (Žižek 2006) whose vanishing point is the moment of the 'Real'.

In particular we can trace the parallels in Žižek's work between his deployment of the Gothic and his understanding of the Real, and the formal shifts in these parallels. Žižek himself has

indicated a definite 'break' in his work, as he represents it, between the concept of the Real as 'a traumatic kernel which forever eludes our grasp' to the fact that 'the problem with the Real is that it happens and *that's* the trauma' (Žižek and Daly 2004: 69-70). The first concept of the Real seems most directly Gothic: maintaining it as the 'unspeakable' and horrifying disruption of our sense of reality. The second step, towards a more direct rendering of the real, involves Žižek in a process whereby he increasingly restricts the role of the Gothic as the privileged example of the Real. However, this disavowal of the Gothic is not absolute and it continues, appropriately, to haunt his own texts. At the same time his own formalization of the Real develops new possibilities for grasping this displaced place of the Gothic, as a series of 'limit-texts'.

The Hard Kernel of the Real

Žižek's first Gothic mode is to regard the Real as the 'hard kernel' of enjoyment outside of representation. This model derives from Lacan's *Seminar 7 The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (1959-1960), which moves, according to Žižek, 'from the dialectics of desire to the inertia of enjoyment (*jouissance*)' (Žižek 1999: 13). Lacan's own language and structure in this seminar bears its own traces of the Gothic. For example Lacan describes the concept of the 'Thing' (*Das Ding*) – the forbidden maternal object of enjoyment – as 'alien' (Lacan 1992: 52),² and it is a small step from here to Žižek's reading of Ridley Scott's *Alien* in his first major work in English, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989) (Žižek 1989: 78-9). In that work Žižek analysed ideology as an objectified fantasy-structure permeated with *jouissance* and *jouissance*, correlated with the Real, tended to occupy the status of the unrepresentable in the figure of the sublime *qua* horror. Following Lacan's argument that we can only touch on the Real with the support of fantasy, '[t]he real supports the phantasy, the phantasy protects the real' (Lacan 1979: 41), Žižek traced our ideological symptoms (*sinthomes*) as coded forms of enjoyment (*jouissance*). A symptom is not simply an error in meaning, but is actuated by enjoyment and this is what binds us to it. As Žižek puts it: 'the *sinthome* is a certain signifier which is not enchained in a network but immediately filled, penetrated with enjoyment' and it appears as 'a terrifying bodily mark which is merely a mute attestation bearing witness to a disgusting enjoyment, without representing anything or anyone' (Žižek 1989: 76).

Already, in this reference to 'terrifying' bodily marks and 'disgusting enjoyment' we can see the adjectival marks of the Gothic creeping in to Žižek's writing. It will, as I've mentioned, be Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979) that plays a key role in exemplifying the 'ideological *sinthome*' (Žižek 1991: 125) According to Žižek the emergence of the Alien from John Hurt's stomach is the emergence of the parasite that materializes enjoyment – in the form of an excessive and painful *jouissance*. It is the Alien spaceship, in which the Alien 'eggs' are found, that designates what Žižek calls 'the pre-symbolic Thing' – the maternal inter-uterine space. In his discussion he refers to it inaccurately as '[t]he cave on the desert planet' (Žižek 1989: 78), and Žižek has become notorious for such 'slips'.³

In this case it serves to make his presentation of the film more traditionally 'Gothic', eliminating the science-fiction element of the spaceship. This space, which is characterized as maternal in a way that Žižek describes as 'almost too intrusive,' is transgressed by the human crew. The Alien then forms the left-over remainder of incestuous enjoyment from which we are barred; it plays the role of both gathering the group together in the struggle against it and also dissolving the sense of reality as well. The transformative power of the alien, moving from tiny creature to the towering monster suggests its function as a semblance outside of the order of the Symbolic. In Žižek's analysis the film demonstrates the horror of touching on the pre-symbolic Real and the elusive effects of this Real that both cements and dissolves the Symbolic order.

This analysis, and Žižek's other work from this period, presents a seemingly clear-cut opposition between the Real, as unrepresentable impossible 'Thing', and the Symbolic order, as the order of language and law. What forms momentary, but unstable, bridges are the function of the *sinthome* and the function of fantasy. These are elements that temporarily connect us to enjoyment, while at the same time keeping the barrier up as well. To breakthrough this order, to traverse the fantasy, involves 'extracting the kernel of *enjoyment*' (Žižek 1989: 125) through the transgressive act – facing the horror. In terms of the Gothic, on the one hand we have the Real as the monstrous outside, the 'Thing', which we cannot ever truly approach but can only ever protect ourselves against through the formations of fantasy. On the other hand, the injunction of Žižek's Gothic is to recognize the monster as the projection of our own excesses, as our own refusal to admit the negativity at the heart of our existence. We relocate the horror from the outside back to the inside. This can only ever be a temporary transgressive manoeuvre as the Real always remains fundamentally untouchable: outside the law and language.

Žižek's Gothic mode is structured like those Gothic texts in which although the horror might be temporarily vanquished, and the social order suspended or altered through the emergence of the monstrous, there is always a left-over that sets the whole process in motion again. Consider Larry Cohen's film *Q The Winged Serpent* (1982), which concerns the return of the Aztec God Quetzalcoatl to New York and the reign of terror that ensues. The film presents a comic vision of the venality of New Yorkers, both the police and other symbols of authority, as well as the citizens of the city. In this sense the creature Q exposes the idiocy of everyday ideological enjoyment, at one point swooping down to carry off an unfortunate rooftop sunbather. Eventually the monster is cornered and destroyed in its skyscraper nest by the representatives of order, however, unknown to the police, the creature had another nest in which a new creature is being born – the cycle of horror begins again. In the same way although Žižek's Gothic mode might be premised on offering radical change it seems that we are doomed to forever circle around the impossible Thing, even if it should take new forms. The horror emerges through the transgressive gesture but remains, fundamentally, untouchable and exterior.

As Žižek remarks this seems to imply a continual story of 'how we always fail the Real' (Žižek and Daly 2004: 70). We can fail it in a 'bad' way, fleeing into a new 'dark age' when faced by

the Real, or, more radically, trying to exterminate the Real, treating it as disposable excrement. This second choice is made by the 'clean-up' squads at the end of George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), who are so cavalier in their extermination of zombies they 'happen' to kill the film's still-human (and African-American) hero. Else we can fail the Real in a 'good' way, by allowing our approach to the Real to force us to confront our own projections and to recognize the negativity at the heart of our social order. This can be seen in Romero's second zombie film *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), in which it is not the zombies *per se* which are the threat but the stasis of the bourgeois order itself, recreated by the survivors in the shopping mall. Again though, by translating this horror into the Real it appears to become transformed into an eternal psychological structure that is immovable, whereas Romero's film could be analyzed as awakening us to the inertia of the practico-inert of capitalist/bourgeois social relations. What remains is the question of how to *truly* confront the Real; but does this, as in Lovecraft's statement, only lead us to the impasse in which we 'either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age'?

The Knot of the Real

It is to avoid, or force a pass through, this impasse that Žižek develops a more complex understanding of the Real, and one that is more faithful to the development of Lacan's text. In *Seminar XI* Lacan argued that '[n]o praxis is more orientated towards that which, at the heart of experience, is the kernel of the real than psycho-analysis' (Lacan 1979: 53). This suggests that although the Real cannot be simply assimilated to the Symbolic the praxis of psychoanalysis relies on a transformative relation to the Real. Psychoanalysis, as the 'talking cure', only works through the Symbolic and in doing so it allows us 'to treat the real by the symbolic' (Lacan 1979: 6). What might this relation, this treatment, be? As Lacan puts it: 'an act, a true act, always has an element of structure, by the fact of concerning a real that is not self-evidently caught up in it' (Lacan 1979: 50). The exception of the Real, as what cannot be integrated into structure, provides the act that touches on it with a structure.⁴ Contra Žižek's initial formulation, it appears that the real is no longer simply opposed to the Symbolic, as the 'outside' of the ineradicable monstrous 'Thing', instead it appears that the Real provides an element of structure to the act, to the praxis of confronting the Real.

We can argue that Žižek parallels Lacan's own shift from conceptualising the Real as 'Thing' in Seminar 7 to his clarification and re-formulation of the Real in *Seminar XI*, given in 1964. In this later seminar Lacan still has recourse to Gothic articulations of the Real, most famously in his example of the emergence of the Real, 'in its pulsatile, dazzling and spread out function' (Lacan 1979: 89), as the anamorphic skull in Holbein's painting *The Ambassadors* (1533). He also notes that his reading of the Freudian unconscious as the 'pre-ontological gap' could be figured as an 'infernal opening' (Lacan 1979: 30). Lacan, however, would reject or downplay these remains of

the Gothic and instead chose increasingly to formalize his understanding of psychoanalysis, and the Real, through mathematics. This involved not only the famous Lacanian formulas but also the extensive use of figures from mathematical topology. In the early 1970s Lacan turned to the Borromean knot to represent the 'trinity' of Real, Symbolic, and Imaginary. With this knot if any of the three rings, or links, are cut then the other rings fall away. In this way each of the rings 'leans' on the other, representing the imbrications of the three orders of the Real, Symbolic, and Imaginary in their mutual dependence.

Žižek re-capitulates Lacan's turn away from the Gothic and towards mathematical formalization. In *On Belief* (2001) he develops the consequences of the Borromean knot for a thinking of the Real. The Real can no longer be considered solely in its detachment as 'pre-symbolic Thing', but now presents itself in three different modalities:

[W]e have the 'real Real' (the horrifying Thing, the primordial object, like Irma's throat), the 'symbolic Real' (the signifier reduced to a senseless formula, like the quantum physics formulae which can no longer be translated back into – or related to – the everyday experience of our life-world), AND the 'imaginary Real' (the mysterious *je ne sais quoi*, the unfathomable 'something' that introduces a self-division into an ordinary object, so that the sublime dimension shines through it). (Žižek 2001a: 82)

As the capitalisation of 'AND' suggests Žižek places a new emphasis on the concept of the 'imaginary Real' as key – 'the Real in the illusion itself' as an 'elusive feature which is totally non-substantial' (Žižek and Daly 2004: 68-9). Concomitantly it suggests a devaluing of the overtly Gothic 'real Real', the Real as substantial, to, in Žižek's words, [avoid any reification of the Real' (Žižek and Daly 2004: 78).

In his Forward to the 2nd edition of *For They Know Not What They Do* (2002) Žižek argues that this new reading offers a corrective self-criticism of his own earlier tendency to create 'a quasi-transcendental reading of Lacan, focused on the notion of the Real as the impossible Thing-in-itself' (Žižek 2002a: xii). The result is a new plurality of Gothic modes, although oriented around the primacy, now, of the Real as insubstantial Imaginary fiction. In terms of writing the Gothic this suggests sensitivity to the Gothic of ambiguity rather than Gothic horror organised around the monstrous 'Thing'. Such a Gothic mode can be found in Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959). It plays with the ambiguity of the house itself as disturbing 'Thing', as 'not sane' (Jackson 1984: 3), and the psychological state of the character of Eleanor. The horror is conveyed through the fractured disturbance of the group, figured in the geometry of the house itself: the undetectable 'unhappy coincidence of line and place which suggests evil in the face of a house' (Jackson 1984: 34). It is the antagonistic social relations between the group members, especially the 'dangerous' quasi-sexual desire of Eleanor for Theodora, which are reflected, or refracted, by the uncanny appearance of the house (and for Lacan the uncanny is a category belonging to the Imaginary, to the domain of images). In Žižek's own work this is reflected by a new attention to the spectral appearance of the Real, implicit in his earlier descriptions of the 'Real' as anamorphic

stain or 'blot' (Žižek 1991: 88-106).⁵

What remains problematic is the third modality of the 'real Real'. Is this still mediated by the other rings or still an unmediated Real? It is puzzling that Žižek appears to have given us back what he had previously declared to be an error – 'the Real as the impossible Thing-in-itself' – and again through a reference to the contemporary Gothic. Now it appears that he is positioning the Gothic as naïvely relying on the monstrous whereas psychoanalytic discourse knows better, so confining the 'real Real' to a Gothic misunderstanding. The difficulty is that it still remains as a crucial category and so we have not left behind the earlier quasi-transcendental reading of Lacan. In fact we appear to have only come full circle – perhaps unsurprisingly when one of Lacan's definitions of the Real 'is that which is always in the same place' (Lacan 1992: 70).

The Real Effect

The 'de-reification of the Real' requires further work, and in *The Puppet and the Dwarf* (2003) Žižek provides a more precise and, we could even say, more Lacanian reading of the Real. Against what now appear as his own earlier confusions, he argues that '[t]he Lacanian Real – the 'Thing' – is not so much the inert presence that 'curves' the symbolic space (introducing gaps and inconsistencies in it), but, rather, the effect of those gaps and inconsistencies' (Žižek 2003: 67). So, it is not so much a matter of the Real as an underlying substance or 'hard kernel', but of the Real as the 'curvature' of space (-time) itself. This then involves a radical insistence of the relation of the Real to the Symbolic, as 'the Real is not external to the Symbolic: the Real is the Symbolic itself in the modality of non-All, lacking an external limit/Exception' (Žižek 2003: 69). There is nowhere outside to go to find the Real, instead it is coterminous with the Symbolic in its inconsistency. Žižek returns us to Lacan's insistence that 'there is no Other of the Other' (Lacan 2004: 298), because there is no 'Other' who guarantees the consistency of the Symbolic order (the 'Other'), not even, or especially, the Real. In this way the 'threat' of the Real is no longer external – the 'hard kernel' of reality – nor is it simply internal – the 'hard kernel' of the subject – instead it permeates and 'holes' the Symbolic. The Symbolic, as the domain of language and law, is not self-contained in opposition to the Real as unrepresentable disruptive force.

We can see here the passage from the 'Imaginary Real', which stresses the Real as non-substantial mark, towards the Real as pure 'effect'. It appears we have left the Gothic behind, or have moved towards the mode of contemporary Gothic which disturbs the usual conventions of the Gothic. This mode involves the coincidence of Gothic horror with the horror of social reality itself. In the works of the Austrian writer Thomas Bernhard we find the use of Gothic tropes, such as the isolated house or castle, incest, madness, and death. His second novel *Gargoyles* (*Verstörung*) (1967) involves a gallery of rural Austrian grotesques and leads to the castle of a prince who is 'forever compelled to make a stupid society realize it was stupid' (Bernhard 1970: 156). This

modernist Gothic refuses any supernatural elements; the horror here is social horror, especially of the failure of contemporary Austria to come to terms with its wartime past. This is reinforced by the fact that the isolated houses in which several of his characters and narrators live are not 'evil' so much as self-imposed prisons, or even, as in *Correction (Korrektur)* (1975) self-constructed. These novels present the Real as the inconsistency of the Symbolic, an inconsistency which is politically overdetermined by the 'false' continuity of postwar Austrian life after Nazism.

It is this mode or form of Gothic, Gothic at the limits or dissolution of Gothic, that is followed by Žižek, and which conforms to the increasingly strident political claims to revolutionary Marxism in his work – especially the legacy of Lenin (Žižek 2001b) and the Maoist Cultural Revolution (Žižek 2004: 183-213). The Real is no longer the eternal circulating form of political failure, but rather the point of intervention to violently and radically alter the coordinates of the existing capitalist order. This is evident in his return to the analysis of *Alien* in *The Parallax View* (2006), and Žižek has said, in answering the charge of repetition, 'it is, rather, that I have to clarify, I have to make the point which I missed the first time' (Žižek and Daly 2004: 44). The clarification here turns on the political and on the Real, and is an implicit self-correction:

fascination with the monstrous alien should not, however, be allowed to obfuscate the anticapitalist edge of the *Alien* series: what ultimately endangers the lone group on a spaceship are not the aliens as such but the way the group is used by the anonymous earthly Corporation who wants to exploit the alien form of life. (Žižek 2006: 118)

This is not, according to Žižek, a matter of arguing that the aliens 'really mean' Capital but a demonstration of how Capital parasitizes itself on 'pure life'. The horror is not the 'Thing', or even the ambiguity of its emergence, but of Capital as parasite.

Rather than judging this particular reading it is possible to see a wider problem with Žižek's new rendering of the Real. While insisting that the Real is only to be found as an effect and that the idea of 'the horrible Thing behind the veil' is an illusion that ultimately conceals the Real (Žižek 2006: 67), Žižek still retains the idea of the Real as a 'terrifying primordial abyss' (Žižek 2006: 66). This possibility, this fiction of the Real 'in-itself', the 'real Real', is held at a distance by being confined to literary, and Gothic, text as 'well known in literature in its multiple guises, from Poe's maelstrom and Kurtz "horror" at the end of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* to Pip from Melville's *Moby-Dick*' (Žižek 2006: 66-7). Certainly, Žižek unequivocally positions it as 'the ultimate lure' (Žižek 2006: 67), but we might still wonder for whom? Žižek carries out a kind of legerdemain by which he passes off his own retention of the Real as 'primordial abyss' on to literature, and, particularly, on to the Gothic. The price of theoretical advance is the downgrading or dismissal of the literary, as the naïve other to psychoanalysis. But, as Žižek's remark about not conceding to the 'fascination' of the alien suggests, it appears to be more *his* 'naïve' fascination with monstrous horror that is in question.

The Gothic Supplement

We can argue that the Gothic text plays the function of the supplement, in the Derridean sense, for Žižek's theoretical text. In his deconstruction of Rousseau Derrida extracts from his writings the double function of the signifier *supplément*. As Derrida notes it embodies two contradictory meanings: on the one hand the supplement is the exterior and inessential element that is later added but, on the other hand, the supplement is also the essential element that makes up for a deficiency (Derrida 1974: 144-145). This 'structure' remains, constitutively 'undecidable' and cannot be delimited by Rousseau's text. In the case of Žižek the Gothic is pushed further away, as inessential to thinking the Real, or even as the false lure. But at the same time the Gothic persists as essential to thinking the Real as 'Thing' – providing its own distortive effect on the form of Žižek's theoretical text. As the Real is increasingly conceptualised in terms of 'fiction' or 'effect' then this only exacerbates the problematic exclusion of Gothic fiction. Žižek discards his central resource for alluding to the Real as naïve but this is at the cost of a naivety in his own understanding of the form of the Gothic. Is the result that Žižek's text condemned to recompose its initial aporia, between the Symbolic and the unrepresentable Real, at another level: between a psychoanalytic conception of the Real as 'not-all' and this 'Gothic supplement' that embodies the Real as the impossible, and horrifying, 'Thing'? Is the result, *à la* Rousseau, a fatal aporia that divides Žižek and condemns him to an impasse?

In his reply to a collection of critical essays Žižek notes the tendency of his critics to accuse him of 'oscillation' between different theoretical positions (Žižek 2005: 219). He objects to this charge for several reasons, the most interesting of which is, for him, the fact that this 'oscillation' might actually be 'a feature of the described socio-symbolic process' (Žižek 2005: 221). Could we then suggest that there is something of an 'oscillation' built-in to the conceptualisation of the Real? How, though, is this conceptualisation to be given precision in terms of this seemingly structural antinomy? Žižek's solution, in the case of the Real, is to further insist, 'the Lacanian Real has no positive-substantial consistency, it is just the gap between the multitude of perspectives on it' (Žižek 2006: 7). This is what he calls the 'parallax view' of the Real. Whereas we might condemn Žižek for theoretical sleight of hand for him it is more a matter of watching both hands at once: '[t]he Real is thus simultaneously the Thing to which direct access is not possible and the obstacle that prevents direct access; the Thing that eludes our grasp and the distorting screen that makes us miss the Thing' (Žižek 2003: 77; Žižek 2006: 26). The Real is actually the shift in perspective from the first standpoint to the second, and it is this shift in perspective that we have traced in Žižek's own work.

This final de-reification of the Real requires two particular reading strategies: first, to read the Real not as a hard kernel but as some kind of fiction; secondly, to read the Real as 'a topological twist' (Žižek and Daly 2004: 78): the inherent curvature of space. We can take these two strategies as the two sides of the 'parallax view' of the Real: the kernel is a kind of fiction and

our view of 'it' is actually the effect of the topological twist. This suggests a new mode of reading the Gothic away from the fascination with the monstrous and transgressive 'Thing' and towards the analysis of this effect of changing perspective. It also suggests the importance of analysing this distortion in perspective as the result of social antagonism, as a result of the inconsistency of the Symbolic. Certainly this counters those representations of Lacan that stress the conservatism of the Symbolic, as the final guardrail of the social organised through the paternal function. It also challenges transgressive readings of the Gothic, which find in the Gothic text the breaking through or out of the social bond through to the monstrous. In Žižek's own text this new mode is reflected in a writing that is not so preoccupied with the 'despair about any direct use of language' but attempts to give us the 'parallax view' on the 'Thing' as our own reification of social antagonism.

In *Seminar XI* Lacan takes issue with 'the myth of the God is dead' arguing that 'perhaps this myth is simply a shelter against the threat of castration' (Lacan 1979: 27). We can argue that Žižek finds it difficult to discard the 'myth of the Real' as what plugs the gap of castration. Although he progressively divests himself of the 'myth of the Real' as exterior 'Thing' he then passes off this myth onto the Gothic, when, in a final irony, his own perspectival reading of the Real can actually already be found in the Gothic. To take only the case of Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*, we can see how the house as 'Thing' is paralleled by the house as screen for the fragmentation of the social bond. The very distortions of the geometry of the house figure the distortions in perspective that are staged in the complex misapprehensions between the group members hired to investigate the haunting. This Gothic text holds the 'parallax view' in an undecidable fashion: between a 'real' haunting and naturalistic psychological disintegration. In comparison Žižek's understanding can seem naïve, when he confines the Gothic to a naïve belief in the myth of the Real, which it has actually discarded before him.

What Žižek's modern Gothic demonstrates for us is this possibility of reading the Gothic towards the de-reification of the Real and the registering of the distorting effects of antagonism. This process also involves a reading *from* the Gothic *to* psychoanalysis, to refuse Žižek's tendency to expel the Gothic from his text. Rather than forming a vicious circle, in which psychoanalysis finds its confirmation in the Gothic and the Gothic finds its truth in psychoanalysis, we have the possibility of a hermeneutic circle of deepening understanding. It is the Gothic text itself that offers sophisticated resources and narrative strategies for holding together the 'parallax view' of the Real – neither collapsing the Real into an immediate symbol of antagonism nor reifying the Real as monstrous. This, we could say, is an instance of the problematic role of narrative fiction or literature in psychoanalysis, which all too often treats texts as mere exemplars. In the case of Žižek his love affair with the Gothic sours at precisely the point when a return to the Gothic is most necessary, dismissing the Gothic as believing in the 'real Real' leads him to miss the 'geometric' Gothic that registers the disturbing effect of the 'topological twist' in the parallax view between the Gothic and psychoanalysis. It is in this topological twist that horror itself is rendered as the appearance of social reality, the Gothic distortions and curvatures of capitalist space, and here where

psychoanalysis can and should re-encounter the Gothic.

Notes

¹ In Lacan's definition of *jouissance*, from his 1966 lecture 'Psychoanalysis and medicine', he makes clear the paradoxical status of *jouissance* as 'pleasure in pain':

What I call *jouissance* – in the sense in which the body experiences itself – is always in the nature of tension, in the nature of forcing, of a spending, even of an exploit. Unquestionably, there is *jouissance* at the level at which pain begins to appear, and we know that it is only at this level of pain that a whole dimension of the organism, which would otherwise remain veiled, can be experienced. (qtd. in Braunstein 2003: 103).

Lorenzo Chiesa also offers an excellent account of this experience of *jouissance* as pain in relation to the work of Artaud (Chiesa 2006: 351-360).

² In fact, Lacan makes a very 'Žižekian' maneuver in drawing on popular culture, and cinema, to exemplify the 'Thing,' citing the sea-monster creature from Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* (1960) (Lacan 1992: 253). I owe this reference to Lorenzo Chiesa.

³ In *Organs Without Bodies* (2004) Žižek chides writers on Hitchcock for their 'extraordinary amount of factual mistakes' (Žižek 2004: 151) and argues that these 'hallucinatory supplements or distortions' reveal libidinal investment (Žižek 2004: 152). Of course, as Kay notes several examples of Žižek's own inattention to detail (Kay 2003: n3 173), rather than condemn Žižek for hypocrisy we could develop an analysis of his slips on similar lines. This article could be treated as a contribution to that endeavour by tracing Žižek's disavowed libidinal investment in the Gothic.

⁴ This is noticeably similar to Alain Badiou's contention that the event is the void that disrupts the state of the situation, its structure, but that also sets in place a new 'structure' of truth elaborated from the point of this void (Badiou 2005). In his recent work Žižek has extensively drawn on, and criticized, Badiou. Bruno Bosteels has provided an excellent account of this relation, from a perspective sympathetic to Badiou, in his article 'Badiou Without Žižek' (Bosteels 2005).

⁵ This can be seen particularly in his essay on the attacks of September 11 2001. In addressing the attacks he stresses the "spectral" and cinematic dimensions of the attacks, whereby the eruption of the Real is figured as this effect of fiction rather than as the emergence of the traumatic "Thing" (*Welcome* 11-32).

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