

ISSN 1751-8229

IJŽS Volume Two, Number Two

# CHRIST, HEGEL, WAGNER

Slavoj Žižek

In pre-digital times, when I was in my teens, I remember seeing a bad copy of *Vertigo* - its last seconds were simply missing, so that the movie appeared to have a happy ending, Scottie reconciled with Judy, forgiving her and accepting her as a partner, the two of them passionately embracing... My point is that such an ending is not as artificial as it may seem: it is rather in the actual ending that the sudden appearance of the Mother Superior from the staircase below functions as a kind of negative *deus ex machina*, a sudden intrusion in no way properly grounded in the narrative logic, which prevents the happy ending. Where does the nun appear from? From the same pre-ontological realm of shadows from which Scottie himself secretly observes Madeleine in the florist's. And it is here that we should locate the hidden continuity between *Vertigo* and *Psycho*: the Mother Superior appears from the same void from which, "out of nowhere," Norman appears in the shower murder sequence of *Psycho*, brutally attacking Marion, interrupting the reconciliatory ritual of cleansing.

And we should follow this direction to the end: in a strange structural homology with the between-two-frames dimension of a painting, many of Hitchcock's films seem to rely on a between-two-stories dimension. Here is a simple mental experiment with two of Hitchcock's late masterpieces: what if *Vertigo* were to end after Madeleine's suicide, with

the devastated Scottie listening to Mozart in the sanatorium? What if *Psycho* were to end seconds prior to the shower murder, with Marion staring into the falling water, purifying herself? In both cases, we would get a consistent short film. In the case of *Vertigo*, it would be a drama of the destruction caused by the violently-obsessive male desire: it is the very excessive-possessive nature of male desire which makes it destructive of its object – (male) love is murder, as Otto Weininger knew long ago. In the case of *Psycho*, it would be a moral tale about a catastrophe prevented in the last minute: Marion commits a minor crime, escaping with the stolen money to rejoin her lover; on the way, she meets Norman who is like a figure of moral warning, rendering visible to Marion what awaits her at the end of the line if she follows the path taken; this terrifying vision sobers her up, so she withdraws to her room, plans her return and then takes a shower, as if to cleanse her of her moral dirt... In both cases, it is thus as if what we are first lured into taking as the full story is all of a sudden displaced, re-framed, relocated into, or supplemented by, another story, something along the lines of the idea envisaged by Borges in the opening story of his *Fictions*, which culminates in the claim: “Un libro que no encierra su contra-libro es considerado incompleto.” (A book which does not contain its counter-book is considered incomplete.) In his 2005-2006 seminar, Jacques-Alain Miller elaborated this idea, referring to Ricardo Piglia.<sup>1</sup> Piglia quoted as an example of Borges’s claim one of Michail Chekov’s tales whose nucleus is: ‘A man goes to the casino at Monte Carlo, wins a million, returns to his place and commits suicide.’

If this is the nucleus of a story, one must, in order to tell it, divide the twisted story in two: on the one hand, the story of the game; on the other, that of the suicide. Thus Piglia’s first thesis: that a story always has a double characteristic and always tells two stories at the same time, which provides the opportunity to distinguish the story which is on the first plane from the number 2 story which is encoded in the interstices of story number 1. We should note that story number 2 only appears when the story is concluded, and it has the effect of surprise. What joins these two stories is that the elements, the events, are inscribed in two narrative registers which are at the same time distinct, simultaneous, and antagonistic, and the construction itself of the story is supported by the junction between the two stories. The inversions which seem superfluous in the development of story number 1 become, on the contrary, essential in the plot of story number 2. There is a modern form of the story which transforms this

structure by omitting the surprise finale without closing the structure of the story, which leaves a trace of a narrative, and the tension of the two stories is never resolved. This is what one considers as being properly modern: the subtraction of the final anchoring point which allows the two stories to continue in an unresolved tension. This is the case, says Piglia, with Hemingway, who pushed the ellipse to its highest point in such a way that the secret story remains hermetic. One perceives simply that there is another story which needs to be told, but which remains absent. There is a hole. If one modified Chekov's note in Hemingway's style, it would not narrate the suicide, but rather the text would be assembled in such a way that one might think that the reader already knew it. Kafka constitutes another of these variants. He narrates very simply, in his novels, the most secret story, a secret story which appears on the first plane, told as if coming from itself, and he encodes the story which should be visible but which becomes, on the contrary, enigmatic and hidden."<sup>2</sup>

Back to Hitchcock's *Vertigo* and *Psycho*, is this not precisely the structure of the narrative twist/cut in both films? In both cases, the story number 2 (the shift to Judy and to Norman) only appears when the story seems concluded, and it certainly has the effect of surprise; in both cases, the two narrative registers are at the same time distinct, simultaneous, and antagonistic, and the construction itself of the story is supported by the junction between the two stories. The inversions which seem superfluous in the development of story number 1 (like the totally contingent intrusion of the murdering monster in *Psycho*), become essential in the plot of story number 2.

One can thus well imagine, along these lines, *Psycho* remade by Hemingway or Kafka. In Hemingway's version, Norman's story will remain hermetic: the spectator will simply perceive that there is another (Norman's) story which needs to be told, but which remains absent - there is a hole. In Kafka's version, Norman's story would appear in the first plane, told as if coming from itself: Norman's weird universe would have been narrated directly, in the first person, as something most normal, while Marion's story would have been encoded/enframed by Norman's horizon, told as enigmatic and hidden...

This is how, from a proper Hegelo-Lacanian perspective, one should subvert the standard self-enclosed linear narrative: not by means of a postmodern dispersal into a multitude of local narratives, but by means of its redoubling in a hidden counter-

narrative. (This is why the classic detective whodunit is so similar to the psychoanalytic process: in it also, the two narrative registers – the visible story of the discovery of crime and its investigation by the detective, and the hidden story of what really happened - are “at the same time distinct, simultaneous, and antagonistic, and the construction itself of the story is supported by the junction between the two stories” ...

One of the few remaining truly progressive US publications, the *Weekly World News*, reported on a recent breath-taking discovery<sup>3</sup>: archeologists discovered an additional ten commandments, as well as seven “warnings” from Jehovah to his people; they are suppressed by the Jewish and Christian establishment because they clearly give a boost to today’s progressive struggle, demonstrating beyond doubt that God took side in our political battles. Say, the Commandment 11 is: “Thou shalt tolerate the faith of others as you would have them do unto you.” (Originally, this commandment was directed at the Jews who objected to the Egyptian slaves joining them in their exodus to continue to practice their religion.) Commandment 14 (“Thou shalt not inhale burning leaves in a house of manna where it may affect the breathing of others”) clearly supports the prohibition of smoking in public places; commandment 18 (“Thou shalt not erect a temple of gaming in the desert, where all will become wanton”) warns of Las Vegas, although it originally refers to individuals who organized gambling in the desert close to the camp of wandering Jews; commandment 19 (“Thy body is sacred and thou shalt not permanently alter thy face or bosom. If thy nose offends thee, leave it alone”) points towards the vanity of plastic surgery, while the target of commandment 16 (“Thou shalt not elect a fool to lead thee. If twice elected, thy punishment shall be death by stoning”) is clearly the re-election of President Bush. Even more telling are some of the warnings: the second warning (“Seek ye not war in My Holy Lands, for they shall multiply and afflict all of civilization”) presciently warns of the global dangers of the Middle East conflict, and the third warning (“Avoid dependence upon the thick black oils of the soil, for they come from the realm of Satan”) is a plea for new sources of clean energy. Are we ready to hear and obey God’s word?

There is a basic question to be raised here, above the ironic satisfaction provided by such jokes: is the search for supplementary Commandments not another version of the search for the counter-book without which the principal book remains incomplete? And insofar as this Book-to-be-supplemented is ultimately the Old Testament itself, is

the counter-Book not simply the New Testament itself? This would be the way to account for the strange co-existence of two sacred books in Christianity: the Old Testament, THE Book shared by all three “religions of the book,” and the New Testament, the counter-book that defines Christianity and (within its perspective, of course) completes the Book, so that we can effectively say that “the construction itself of the Bible is supported by the junction between the two Testaments”... This ambiguous supplementation-completion is best encapsulated in the lines on the fulfilment of the Law from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mountain, in which he radicalizes the Commandments (*Matthew 5, 17-48*, quoted from NIV):

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. /.../

You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. /.../

You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.

It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.' But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.

Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.' But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.

You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to

the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

The official Catholic way to interpret this series of supplements is the so-called *Double Standard View*, which divides the teachings of the Sermon into general precepts and specific counsels: obedience to the general precepts is essential for salvation, but obedience to the counsels is only necessary for perfection, or, as St. Thomas Aquinas put it (in *Did.* 6:2): "For if you are able to bear the entire yoke of the Lord, you will be perfect; but if you are not able to do this, do what you are able." In short, Law is for everyone, while its supplement is for the perfect only. Martin Luther rejected this Catholic approach and proposed a different two-level system, the so-called *Two Realms View*, which divides the world into the religious and secular realms, claiming that the Sermon only applies to the spiritual: in the temporal world, obligations to family, employers, and country force believers to compromise; thus a judge should follow his secular obligations to sentence a criminal, but inwardly, he should mourn for the fate of the criminal.

Clearly, both these versions resolve the tension by way of introducing a split between the two domains and constraining the more severe injunctions to the second domain. As expected, in the case of Catholicism, this split is externalized into two kinds of people, the ordinary ones and the perfect (saints, monks...), while in Protestantism, it is internalized into the split between how I interact with others in the secular sphere, and how I inwardly relate to others. Are these, however, the only ways to read this operation? A (perhaps surprising) reference to Richard Wagner might be of some help here: a reference to his draft of the play *Jesus of Nazareth*, written somewhere between late 1848 and early 1849. Together with the libretto *The Saracen Woman* (*Die Sarazenin*, written in 1843 between *The Flying Dutchman* and *Tannhauser*), these two drafts are key elements in Wagner's development: each of them indicates a path which might have been taken but was abandoned, i.e., it points towards a what-if scenario of

an alternate Wagner, and thus reminds us of the open character of history. *The Saracen Woman* is, after Wagner found his voice in the *Dutchman*, the last counter-attack of the Grand Opera, a repetition of *Rienzi* – if Wagner were to set it to notes and if the opera were to turn out to be a triumph like *Rienzi*, it is possible that Wagner would have succumbed to this last Meyerbeerian temptation, and would have developed into a thoroughly different composer. Similarly, a couple of years later, after Wagner exhausted his potentials for the Romantic operas with *Lohengrin* and was searching for a new way, *Jesus* again stands for a path which differs thoroughly from that of the music-dramas and their “pagan” universe – *Jesus* is something like *Parsifal* written directly, without the long detour through the *Ring*. What, among other things, Wagner proposes in *Jesus*: what Wagner attributes there to Jesus is a series of alternate supplementations of the Commandments:

The commandment saith: Thou shalt not commit adultery! But I say unto you: Ye shall not marry without love. A marriage without love is broken as soon as entered into, and who so hath wooed without love, already hath broken the wedding. If ye follow my commandment, how can ye ever break it, since it bids you to do what your own heart and soul desire? – But where ye marry without love, ye bind yourselves at variance with God’s love, and in your wedding ye sin against God; and this sin avengeth itself by your striving next against the law of man, in that ye break the marriage-vow.<sup>4</sup>

The shift from Jesus’ actual words is crucial here: Jesus “internalizes” the prohibition, rendering it much more severe (the Law says no actual adultery, while I say that if you only covet the other’s wife in your mind, it is the same as if you already committed adultery, etc.); Wagner also internalizes it, but in a different way – the inner dimension he evokes is not that of intention to do it, but that of love that should accompany the Law (marriage). The true adultery is not to copulate outside marriage, but to copulate in marriage without love: the simple adultery just violates the Law from outside, while marriage without love destroys it from within, turning the letter of the Law against its spirit. So, to paraphrase Brecht yet again: what is a simple adultery compared to (the adultery that is a loveless) marriage! It is not by chance that Wagner’s underlying formula “marriage is adultery” recalls Proudhon’s “property is theft” – in the stormy 1848 events, Wagner was not only a Feuerbachian celebrating sexual love, but also a Proudhonian revolutionary demanding the abolition of private property; so no wonder

that, later on on the same page, Wagner attributes to Jesus a Proudhonian supplement to “Thou shalt not steal!”:

This also is a good law: Thou shalt not steal, nor covet another man’s goods. Who goeth against it, sinneth: but I preserve you from that sin, inasmuch as I teach you: Love thy neighbour as thyself; which also meaneth: Lay not up for thyself treasures, whereby thou stealest from thy neighbour and makest him to starve: for when thou hast thy goods safeguarded by the law of man, thou provokest thy neighbour to sin against the law.<sup>5</sup>

This is how the Christian “supplement” to the Book should be conceived: as a properly Hegelian “negation of negation,” which resides in the decisive shift from the *distortion of a notion to a distortion constitutive of this notion*, i.e., to this notion as a distortion-in-itself. Recall again Proudhon’s old dialectical motto “property is theft”: the “negation of negation” is here the shift from theft as a distortion (“negation,” violation) of property to the dimension of theft inscribed into the very notion of property (nobody has the right to fully own means of production, their nature is inherently collective, so every claim “this is mine” is illegitimate). The same goes for crime and Law, for the passage from crime as the distortion (“negation”) of the law to crime as sustaining law itself, i.e., to the idea of the Law itself as universalized crime. One should note that, in this notion of the “negation of negation,” the encompassing unity of the two opposed terms is the “lowest,” “transgressive,” one: it is not crime which is a moment of law’s self-mediation (or theft which is a moment of property’s self-mediation); the opposition of crime and law is inherent to crime, law is a subspecies of crime, crime’s self-relating negation (in the same way that property is theft’s self-relating negation). And does ultimately the same not go for nature itself? Here, “negation of negation” is the shift from the idea that we are violating some natural balanced order to the idea that imposing on the Real such a notion of balanced order is in itself the greatest violation... which is why the premise, the first axiom even, of every radical ecology is “there is no Nature.”

These lines cannot but evoke the famous passages from *The Communist Manifesto* which answer the bourgeois reproach that Communists want to abolish freedom, property and family: it is the capitalist freedom itself which is effectively the freedom to buy and sell on the market and thus the very form of un-freedom for those who have nothing but their labor force to sell; it is the capitalist property itself which

means the “abolition” of property for those who own no means of production; it is the bourgeois marriage itself which is universalized prostitution ... in all these cases, the external opposition is internalized, so that one opposite becomes the form of appearance of the other (bourgeois freedom is the form of appearance of the unfreedom of the majority, etc.). However, for Marx, at least in the case of freedom, this means that Communism will not abolish freedom but, by way of abolishing the capitalist servitude, bring about actual freedom, the freedom which will no longer be the form of appearance of its opposite. It is thus not freedom itself which is the form of appearance of its opposite, but only the false freedom, the freedom distorted by the relations of domination. Is it not, then, that, underlying the dialectic of the “negation of negation,” a Habermasian “normative” approach imposes here immediately: how can we talk about crime if we do not have a preceding notion of legal order violated by the criminal transgression? In other words, is the notion of law as universalized/self-negated crime not auto-destructive? This, precisely, is what a properly dialectical approach rejects: what is before transgression is just a neutral state of things, neither good nor bad (neither property nor theft, neither law nor crime); the balance of this state of things is then violated, and the positive norm (Law, property) arises as a secondary move, an attempt to counter-act and contain the transgression. With regard to the dialectic of freedom, this means that it is the very “alienated, bourgeois” freedom which creates the conditions and opens up the space for “actual” freedom.

This Hegelian logic is at work in Wagner’s universe up to *Parsifal*, whose final message is a profoundly Hegelian one: The wound can be healed only by the spear that smote it (*Die Wunde schliesst der Speer nur der Sie schlug*). Hegel says the same thing, although with the accent shifted in the opposite direction: the Spirit is itself the wound it tries to heal, i.e., the wound is self-inflicted.<sup>6</sup> That is to say, what is “Spirit” at its most elementary? The “wound” of nature: subject is the immense – absolute - power of negativity, of introducing a gap/cut into the given-immediate substantial unity, the power of *differentiating*, of “abstracting,” of tearing apart and treating as self-standing what in reality is part of an organic unity. This is why the notion of the “self-alienation” of Spirit (of Spirit losing itself in its otherness, in its objectivization, in its result) is more paradoxical than it may appear: it should be read together with Hegel’s assertion of the thoroughly non-substantial character of Spirit: there is no *res cogitans*, no thing which

(as its property) also thinks, spirit is nothing but the process of overcoming natural immediacy, of the cultivation of this immediacy, of withdrawing-into-itself or “taking off” from it, of – why not – alienating itself from it. The paradox is thus that there is no Self that precedes the Spirit’s “self-alienation”: the very process of alienation creates/generates the “Self” from which Spirit is alienated and to which it then returns. (Hegel here turns around the standard notion that a failed version of X presupposes this X as their norm (measure): X is created, its space is outlined, only through repetitive failures to reach it.) Spirit’s self-alienation is the same as, fully coincides with, its alienation from its Other (nature), because it constitutes itself through its “return-to-itself” from its immersion into natural Otherness. In other words, Spirit’s return-to-itself creates the very dimension to which it returns. (This holds for all “return to origins”: when, from 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, new Nation-States were constituting themselves in Central and Eastern Europe, their discovery and return to “old ethnic roots” generated these roots.) What this means is that the “negation of negation,” the “return-to-oneself” from alienation, does not occur where it seems to: in the “negation of negation,” Spirit’s negativity is not relativized, subsumed under an encompassing positivity; it is, on the contrary, the “simple negation” which remains attached to the presupposed positivity it negated, the presupposed Otherness from which it alienates itself, and the “negation of negation” is nothing but the negation of the substantial character of this Otherness itself, the full acceptance of the abyss of Spirit’s self-relating which retroactively posits all its presuppositions. In other words, once we are in negativity, we never quit it and regain the lost innocence of Origins; it is, on the contrary, only in “negation of negation” that the Origins are truly lost, that their very loss is lost, that they are deprived of the substantial status of that which was lost. The Spirit heals its wound not by directly healing it, but by getting rid of the very full and sane Body into which the wound was cut. It is a little bit like in the (rather tasteless version of the) “first-the-bad-news-then-the-good-news” medical joke: “The bad news is that we’ve discovered you have severe Alzheimer’s disease. The good news is the same: you have Alzheimer’s, so you will already forget the bad news when you get back home.”

In Christian theology, Christ’s supplement (the repeated “But I tell you...”) is often designated as the “antithesis” to the Thesis of the Law – the irony here is that, in the proper Hegelian approach, this antithesis is synthesis itself at its purest. In other words,

is what Christ does in his "fulfillment" of the Law not the Law's *Aufhebung* in the strict Hegelian sense of the term? In its supplement, the Commandment is both negated and maintained by way of being elevated/transposed into another (higher) level.

<sup>1</sup> Piglia's text to which Miller refers without providing any references is "Tesis sobre el cuento," *Revista Brasileira de Literatura Comparada*, vol. 1 (1991), p. 22-25.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques-Alain Miller, "Profane Illuminations," *lacanian ink* 28, p. 12-13.

<sup>3</sup> "The Ten Commandments Were Just the Beginning..." *Weekly World News*, Nov 6 2006 p. 24-26.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Wagner, *Jesus of Nazareth and Other Writings*, Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press 1995, p. 303.

<sup>5</sup> Wagner, *op.cit.*, p. 303-304.

<sup>6</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics*, Volume 1, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1998, p. 98.