

Žižek and Cinema - IJŽS Vol 1.3***Introduction: Enjoying the Cinema***

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Most critics who find fault with Slavoj Žižek's engagement with cinema object to his tendency to obliterate the specificity of the text he is interpreting in order to advance some aspect of his theoretical framework. According to this line of thinking, the filmic text for Žižek is merely exemplary and never acquires any significance outside of its utility as an explanatory mechanism. In an essay in a recent collection of critiques entitled *The Truth of Žižek*, Richard Stamp laments, "Žižek's examples are, in fact, incidental illustrations of an already installed machine" (2007: 173).¹ Unlike thinkers who explore different texts on their own terms—Derrida is, for Stamp, the model of this kind of thinking—Žižek always finds within the texts he analyzes the presuppositions of his own theory. The filmic text, according to this line of critique, fails to acquire the capacity to surprise Žižek or to shake the foundation of his theoretical underpinning. Like his intellectual forbearer Hegel, he is an abstract thinker with no regard for the particularities of the concrete.²

The abstract nature of Žižek's approach to the filmic text results in analyses that do not engage films in their entirety. Even those sympathetic to Žižek must admit that at no point in his vast amount of interpretive work does Žižek provide a thorough and sustained interpretation of a single film. Even his one book completely devoted to a single film—*The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime: On David Lynch's "Lost Highway"*—fails to remark on many important aspects of the film. He consecrates much less than half of the short book to a discussion of *Lost Highway* (1997), and as a result, one could find more direct analysis of the film in a medium-length essay on it than in Žižek's book. For his critics, this lack of thoroughness indicates not so much a methodological choice or an exigency of his theoretical approach as inattention to the text, a failure to take the time to look seriously at the filmic text in all its complexity. This failure suggests that Žižek does not adhere to the standards of scholarship that define the discipline.

It is David Bordwell (perhaps Žižek's fiercest critic) who lays out this accusation in its most complete form. According to Bordwell, Žižek is simply an irresponsible scholar. He wonders, "Are we wasting our time in expecting Žižek to offer reasonable arguments? Fundamental questions of responsibility arise here, especially in relation to a writer not hesitant to condemn the beliefs and actions of others" (2005). Žižek's failure to be responsible is the product of his glibness, his proclivity for wild pronouncements instead of serious engagement. For Bordwell, Žižek's work does not belong to the intellectual community that makes up the discipline of film studies—or to any intellectual community. He claims, "Whatever their personal motives, scholars are united in seeking logically

sound theories that illuminate a range of phenomena. That's what allows debate to flourish. When the community norms flag, debate withers and theory becomes a chorus of monologues. Arguably, though, Žižek fails to grasp the intersubjective dimension of theorizing because he doesn't believe in theory as a conversation within a community, a process of question and answer and rebuttal. This construal of his attitude toward theory fits what we know of his intellectual demeanor" (2005). The absence of sustained engagement with any filmic texts in their specificity becomes in this analysis part of an overall monomania that characterizes Žižek's character.

In addition to obscuring the specificity of individual films, critics suggest that Žižek's interpretations also downplay the significance of the filmic medium itself. In terms of his importance for film studies, this is an even more serious problem. Outside of *The Fright of Real Tears* (clearly his most filmic book), Žižek tends to treat films in the same way that he treats novels and short stories, with the exception of a few isolated comments about shot structure or the use of sound. As Stephen Heath puts it, "it is indicative that Zizek has, in fact, little to say about 'institution,' 'apparatus,' and so on, all the concerns of the immediately preceding attempts to think cinema and psychoanalysis (films and novels will thus mostly be referred to without any particular distinction between them as forms)" (1999: 44). Vicky Lebeau echoes this point, contending that "it is the specificity of cinema that seems to go missing in Žižek's account—the connivance between spectacle and image, projection and narrative" (2001: 59). By failing to distinguish adequately between the interpretation of a film and that of

a novel or to account for the particular way that the cinematic apparatus impacts film's deployment of narrative, Žižek downplays the importance of form, and it is the distinctiveness of film as a formal structure that gives the discipline of film studies its existential justification. To refuse to respect the formal distinctiveness of film as a medium, this critique argues, is to eliminate the need to study film as an entity unto itself. Ironically, the sustained treatment of film form that Žižek undertakes in *The Fright of Real Tears* has had little impact on thinking about film. In that work, Žižek elaborates an entirely new conception of suture and invents his own supplementary concept of interface. Neither of these theoretical innovations specific to the filmic medium caught on in the world of film studies.³ But Žižek's thought itself has managed to catch on.

Given Žižek's lack of attention to the specificity of filmic texts and of the filmic medium, it is difficult to understand his prominence in the film studies world, a prominence especially pronounced among young film theorists. It seems difficult to explain phenomena such as Angela Restivo's panel devoted to Žižek's thought at the 2007 Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference in Chicago or the recent spate of articles and books devoted to the kind of Lacanian analysis of cinema clearly inspired by Žižek. There have been more than can be mentioned, but the recent articles include Kirk Boyle's "Reading the Dialectical Ontology of *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou* Against the Ontological Monism of *Adaptation*" (2007: 1-32) in *Film/Philosophy*; Clifford Manlove's "Visual 'Drive' and Cinematic Narrative: Reading Gaze Theory in Lacan, Hitchcock, and Mulvey" (2007: 83-108) in *Cinema Journal*; and Hugh Manon's "Some Like It

Cold: Fetishism in Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity*" (2005: 18-43) in *Cinema Journal*, along with all of the essays in *Lacan and Contemporary Film* (McGowan and Kunkle, 2004). And some of the contributors to this special issue of *The International Journal of Žižek Studies* have written books indebted to Žižek's thinking on psychoanalysis and cinema. These include Jennifer Friedlander's forthcoming *The Feminine Look: Sexuation, Spectatorship, Subversion* (2007) and Henry Krips's *Fetish: An Erotics of Culture* (1999). In addition, classes on film theory in almost every film program across the country now include a section on the new Lacanian film theory that Žižek's thought has helped to spawn and generally include readings from Žižek's work.

Žižek has sparked a renewed interest in Lacan and psychoanalysis in the world of film studies because his thought opens up possibilities within the interpretation of cinema that that would otherwise not exist. It does so through the particular focus that runs through all of Žižek's filmic analyses. Though Žižek does often ignore textual and medium specificity, what he doesn't ignore is the way that films organize and deploy the spectator's enjoyment. From *The Sublime Object of Ideology* in 1989 (his first book in English) to *The Parallax View* in 2006, Žižek has consistently foregrounded the question of enjoyment and the way in which texts structure it, which is a question that bears directly on the cinema. Spectators go the movies, first and foremost, because they enjoy doing so, and when they cease to enjoy it (or when another medium promises greater enjoyment), the cinema will effectively die out.

And yet, the great theorists of the cinema have not made the category of enjoyment central to their speculation about the cinema's significance as an art. A brief look at the major film theorists reveals a lacuna surrounding the enjoyment that film produces. Hugo Münsterberg locates the spectator's interest in the cinema in the similarity between the structure of the film and the human mind. Sergei Eisenstein highlights the cinema's ability to induce a revolution in the spectator's consciousness through the experience of montage. André Bazin sees in devotion to the cinema a phenomenological yearning for the reality that lies obscured within our everyday experience. The psychoanalytic film theory of the 1970s and 1980s stresses the role of identification in the film's mode of address toward the spectator. For each of these theories, the phenomenon of enjoyment is not the primary phenomenon in the cinema but at best the byproduct of some other appeal that the cinema makes. Spectators enjoy the cinema, if they do, because it mirrors their mental functioning, because it changes them, because it acquaints them with reality, or because it offers them a point of identification.

By basing itself in the primacy of the filmic text's organization of enjoyment, Žižek's approach offers film theory grounding in the fundamental appeal of cinema. When Žižek focuses on just one scene from a film rather than analyzing the entire film, he does so because this individual scene encapsulates the way that the film organizes the spectator's enjoyment. This is evident in Žižek's analysis of the famous sexual assault scene in David Lynch's *Wild at Heart* (1990). In this scene, Bobby Peru (Willem Dafoe) comes into the motel

room of Lula Fortune (Laura Dern) and coerces her into saying to him, “Fuck me.” Anyone who has read more than a couple of Žižek’s essays or books from the mid-1990s to the early 2000s will be acquainted with his affection for this scene. In fact, its recurrence in multiple works has led critics—and even some loyal supporters—to wish that Žižek’s computer was not equipped with a cut-and-paste function.⁴ Though he might have branched out from this scene to various other compelling and equally disturbing moments in the film—the account of the character Jingle Dell (Crispin Glover) placing cockroaches on his anus, for one—his analysis of this single scene serves to encapsulate an interpretation of the whole film in terms of the way that it mobilizes enjoyment.

Despite the changes in Žižek’s interpretation of this scene changes throughout his different works, what remains the same is an understanding of the scene’s depiction of the structuring role that fantasy has in acts of violence. Though Žižek does not go on to interpret *Wild at Heart* in its entirety, one can easily see the direction in which this interpretation might go. The film is an exploration of the causes and the nature of violence, and it depicts the role that fantasy has in triggering a violent outburst. Characters in the film act violently, as Sailor Ripley (Nicolas Cage) does in the film’s opening scene, because something or someone threatens their fantasy frame, and the violent act reinforces that frame. Violence assaults not simply the physical being of the other but, more importantly, the other’s fantasy frame. Žižek focuses on Bobby’s sexual assault of Lula because it brings the fundamental preoccupation of the film to light, and as such, it functions as a nodal point for the spectator’s

enjoyment of the film. If one enjoys *Wild at Heart*, one's enjoyment reaches its zenith during this sexual assault, not because spectators are sadists or would-be sexual assaulters but because it allows them to witness characters' relationship to their own enjoyment become evident as their fantasies are laid bare.

The interpretation of *Wild at Heart* that Žižek implicitly advances in his analysis of this one scene does not address directly any of the formal qualities of Lynch's film. None of his books that mention this scene address the way that the scene has been edited, the use of sound, the lighting, or any aspect of the shot composition. And yet, despite this apparent oversight, the analysis does manage to capture the specific nature of the film's relationship to the spectator. *Wild at Heart* is an effective film—and this is an especially effective scene—because all of its filmic aspects contribute to forcing the spectator to experience the violence of having one's fantasy publicly exposed. As Žižek puts it, “What we have here is rape in fantasy which refuses its realization in reality and thus further humiliates its victim—the fantasy is forced out, aroused, and then abandoned, thrown upon the victim” (1998: 185). Only film can enact this violence in this way, and it can do so because of its ability to appeal to the spectator through editing, sound, lighting, and shot composition. Even when Žižek is not speaking directly about the film form, his analyses betray a concern with it.

This concern becomes even more apparent in his influential interpretations of the films of Alfred Hitchcock, interpretations which, like his analysis of *Wild at Heart*, focus on making sense of crucial scenes rather than dissecting any film as a whole. Along with Joan Copjec's pathbreaking work on

psychoanalysis and film in *Read My Desire* (1994) and *Imagine There's No Woman* (2002), Žižek's reflections on Hitchcock have played a central role in producing a new understanding on the gaze in film theory.⁵ For decades, the gaze was the central concept in psychoanalytic film theory, and it was identified with the camera's and the spectator's look of mastery—a look that could see without being seen and thus embodied the ultimate power. But Žižek and Copjec helped to usher in a concept of the gaze linked to desire rather than power, thereby opening up an avenue of theorizing about films in their formal complexity instead of condemning them for their ideological complicity.

Through his analysis of the scene where Norman (Anthony Perkins) tries to sink the car belonging to the murdered Marion (Janet Leigh) in a swamp in *Psycho* (1960), Žižek identifies the gaze with the upsurge of the spectator's desire and consequent loss of mastery. Again, Žižek does not describe this scene in filmic terms, but his interpretation owes its weight to a grasp of Hitchcock's formal inventiveness in creating the scene. By depicting Marion's car suddenly stop as it sinks into the swamp and then immediately cutting to Norman's worried face, Hitchcock implicates the spectator on the level of desire itself with Norman's project of covering up the murder. One cannot watch this scene without sharing in Norman's anxiety that the car will not sink and that he will not be able to cover up the crime. As Žižek puts it, "when the car stops sinking for a moment, the anxiety that automatically arises in the viewer—a token of his/her solidarity with Norman—suddenly reminds him or her that his/her desire is identical with Norman's: that his impartiality was always-already false"

(1992: 223). The gaze, according to this analysis, occurs not when spectators or camera looks on from a safe distance and remains unaffected by what they see but when the structure of the film manages to make spectators aware of their libidinal investment in the film that exists despite their apparent aloofness. The gaze marks the point at which the spectator's desire itself stains the filmic picture in a way that the film makes evident.

Though Žižek doesn't work through the new understanding of the gaze as it is deployed cinematically or theorize its role in film interpretation, his brief analyses of scenes like the one in which the car sinks into the swamp in *Psycho* help to open the door to the theoretical elaborations that have followed in the wake of these analyses. Given the predominance of the old concept of the gaze in the psychoanalytic film theory of the 1970s and 1980s, the theoretical transformation that Žižek has played the lead role in ushering in has been revolutionary. However brief or merely exemplary his filmic analyses have been, they have lead to the rebirth of psychoanalytic film theory.

It is this revival to which each of the contributors to this issue of the journal belongs. Though the title of the issue is "Žižek and Cinema," the essays that follow do not exclusively focus on Žižek's thought in their elaboration of different aspects of film theory or their interpretation of various films. But they do find some part of their inspiration in Žižek's focus on the enjoyment of the spectator, and they do owe their very existence to his efforts to reawaken psychoanalytic film theory and rouse interest in the universal questions that the cinema raises.

¹Endnotes:

What is perhaps most surprising about *The Truth of Žižek* is the near-total absence of substantive critiques of Žižek's thought. The most common line of argument among the essays consists primarily in ruing the lacunae in his theorizing: he "very rarely takes cognizance of the institutional and commercial forces that act upon him and make his interventions possible" (Bowman and Stamp, 2007: 6-7); he "rarely ventures into the political economy of Marx's work" (La Berge, 2007: 11); he "fails to give an adequate account of capital or of political economy" (Devenney, 2007: 47); he doesn't "shock his audience" in the way that he intends (Gilbert, 2007: 70); and so on.

² Walter Davis provides the most cogent version of this critique. He argues that Žižek's method of interpretation obscures the necessarily subjective nature of trauma and thus strips it of its existential significance. According to Davis, Žižek finds in every cultural text and in every historical event the same form of trauma. It is always "The Trauma of the Real. Which is always the same it turns out" (2006: 90).

³ The perceived unimportance within the intellectual world of *The Fright of Real Tears* is evidenced by the fact that at this writing it is the only one of the many books that Žižek has authored in English that is no longer in print.

⁴ For just the books alone (ignoring the many essays) where an analysis of this scene occurs, see *The Plague of Fantasies* (1997), *The Fright of Real Tears* (2001), and *The Parallax View* (2006).

⁵ In *The Real Gaze: Film Theory After Lacan* (McGowan, 2007), I attempt to construct a universal film theory on the basis of the new understanding of the gaze.

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