

Žižek and Cinema - Vol 1.3

Žižek's Choice

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It should not surprise us that the one film Žižek would take with him to a desert island is the 1949 melodrama *The Fountainhead*, based on the famous novel by Ayn Rand.¹ While Rand's proto-fascist work posits the egotistical architect Howard Roark (Gary Cooper) as a symbol of uncompromising individualism against a cut-throat and conformist world, Žižek finds in him an ethical hero who becomes a subject of complete freedom.² Rand's heavy-handed screenplay, like her idiosyncratic philosophy, portrays all men as either powerful and corrupt or weak and submissive, and Roark stands alone in his integrity because he opts out of this dualism by becoming his own self-made man. Finding himself on the verge of poverty after being blacklisted for his unique talent, Roark refuses a handout of money, declaring, "I neither ask for nor offer help." He is interested neither in profit nor charity, but he is more than a self-made man. In Žižek's Lacanian reading Roark becomes a subject completely free of the need of a big Other, for he has no concern for what others think of him or his work; he cares only that his

creations are not altered and that he be allowed to keep on working. Unconcerned with his role in ushering in an entirely new era of modern architecture, Roark is nonetheless unstoppable in his determination to design and remain true to his creations; he is in Žižek's words, a "being of drive" (1997: 87).

In a rare instance Roark negotiates the paradox of himself as a subject destitute of an Other who would recognize and confer meaning on his creations, and he does so *without going crazy*. Further, and similarly strange, it is only at this very moment of subjective destitution that an authentic connection with others becomes possible, because what Roark's being of pure drive and the Act of destroying one of his own buildings does, is to reveal that what we take as universal standards of justice and judgment are configured in a virtual realm; to confront this is to be offered a glimpse of something traumatic yet possibly emancipating. The connection, then, between all men that Žižek has in mind is not one of empathy born of mutual suffering, but rather a "benevolence" born of freedom, freedom from the virtual hold of an Other that we treat as universal and absolute. Referring to the courtroom scene where Roark is being tried by a jury of his peers, Žižek quotes at length from Rand's work:

Roark stood before them as each man stands in the innocence of his own mind. But Roark stood like that before a hostile crowd – and they knew suddenly that no hatred was possible to him. For the flash of an instant, they grasped the manner of his consciousness. Each asked himself: do I need anyone's approval? – does it matter? – am I tied? And for that instant, each man was free – free enough to feel benevolence for every other man in the room. It was only a moment; the moment of silence when Roark was about to speak. (quoted in Žižek, 1997: 85-86)³

Here, utilitarian calculations of justice and moral culpability give way to a fleeting recognition that Roark's ethics offer a kind of complete freedom, even if his character

appears at first as an automaton and his actions seem absurd. As Žižek repeatedly shows, “this inhuman dimension is for Lacan at the same time the ultimate support of ethics” (Žižek, 2007), because what subjects such as Roark do is to confront us in various forms with “the latent monstrosity of being human” (*ibid*), and from this we reconfigure a way to go on.

But if, as Lacan recognized in his reformulation of Dostoevsky, God’s death signals a universal immobility (if God is dead, then nothing is permitted), then how do we grasp Roark’s ethics and his ability to keep creating? The answer lies in the recognition that Roark, under conditions of complete freedom, keeps on creating because in this very act he ensures the space for creation itself. What Žižek sees in Roark is similar to what he sees in many fictional characters who “fully assume the paradox of human existence” (2006: 105); that is, the negotiation of a central Kantian paradox of knowing that the condition of impossibility of ethical activity is at the same time its very condition of possibility.⁴ What would stop most subjects in their tracks, what would make it impossible for them to carry on, or at the extreme, lead to insanity, becomes for Roark the condition of his own possibility.

Žižek’s choice of this one film above all others makes eminent sense also if we take it as an exemplar of the logic presented in his magnum opus, *The Parallax View*. It is in this work where Žižek offers the most developed presentation of the conditions and consequences of Lacanian ethics and the many paradoxes of existence, politics, religion and philosophy it entails. Most crucial here is the logic of parallax which is a structure of constitutive polarities. In Žižek’s words, “The minimal ontology of parallax is therefore that of the Moebius strip, of the curved space that is bent onto itself...the

minimal parallax constellation is that of a simple frame: all that has to intervene in the Real is an empty frame, so that the same things we saw 'directly' before are now seen through the frame" (2006: 29). In the logic of parallax, you can have reflective realms of high theory only because there is also pornographic sexuality; you are allowed a Law only because you take the obscene underside with it; you can have desire only because there is also drive. These dual dimensions are not to be treated as distinct and mere opposites because they are mutually constitutive. As Žižek explains: "drive and desire are nonetheless inherently interwoven: not only does desire always rely on some partial drives which provide its 'stuff'; drives also function only insofar as they refer to the subject whose desire I desire" (2001a: 95). These polarities are not two distinct phenomena, but rather revolve around a gap at their center, the space where the subject can create "the new" in Badiou's meaning or "the impossible" in Lacan's. What Žižek attempts to achieve in all of his cultural and especially film analyses is the interjection of a "short circuit" between two realms, which can reveal to us starkly the configurations and limits of things like rationality, causality and other "universals." He says, "The unpleasant weird effect of such short circuits shows that they play a symptomal role in our symbolic universe: they bring home the implicit, tacit prohibition on which these universes rely" (2006: 12-13).

This logic of parallax requires a contingent universe of encounters where a paradoxical choice is made, when free will and determinism collapse in a kind of signaling of something different and new to come.⁵ That is, we can only postulate any kind of universal within the configuration of a universe of contingent encounters, where choice in an authentic Act functions as meta-choice and disturbs definitions of what we

take to be rationality, reason, and sanity. By way of filmic references this essay offers a closer look at the conditions of this “impossible” space of choice; that is, the contingency of our existence, and also how the logic of “tacit prohibitions” as mentioned by Žižek above, works in terms of desire (the prohibition of prohibition) and drive (the negation of negation). The former allows us to do all kinds of things in the name of love, while the latter allows us to reconfigure how love itself is possible.⁶

Žižek has long been enamored of the “fuck me” scene in David Lynch’s *Wild at Heart*, citing it repeatedly in various works in order to demonstrate that the “no thanks, I can’t fuck you today,” of Willem Dafoe’s character Bobby Peru catches us in a moment of recognition of our own forbidden desires, and as such reconfigures our orientation to them.⁷ What this scene also illustrates is how the “no” can function itself as confrontation, as the most defiant confrontation. Indeed, the opposite of the “fuck me” scene would have been for Peru to have actually raped Lula (Laura Dern) even after extorting her tacit acceptance, for this would have been a transgressive act against the Law. But the “no” became even more transgressive in the sense that when Peru stepped back after evoking ambiguous feelings of desire, submission, and violation, it made us (as well as Lula) confront squarely the underlying prohibition that elicits the excitement in the first place, thus generating feelings of shock and shame. The unlikely and obscene character of Bobby Peru becomes another ethical hero to Žižek, in a sense, playing the part of the Lacanian Analyst, because he “forces out and arouses, and then abandons” our fantasy based on prohibition (Žižek, 2006: 69). In a similar way as the character of Roark, Bobby Peru exposes the Real of the neighbor, the thing that doesn’t quite “fit” as either lure or love object.⁸

The “fuck-me” scene in *Wild at Heart* is a correlate to Žižek’s analysis of Melville’s character Bartleby and his ethics discussed at the end of *The Parallax View*, for this figure also makes a conscious withdrawal from participating in the system itself with a “no, I would prefer not to.” This Act of withdrawal reconfigures the metaphysics of the subject’s universe and serves as the ground for what will be termed the “new,” the structure, the symbolic universe that follows. To Žižek, this is the logic of subtraction at its purest, “the reduction of all qualitative differences to a purely formal minimal difference” (Žižek, 2006: 382). It is the move, as he writes, from the superego-parallax to the Bartleby-parallax; “the move from something to nothing, from the gap between two ‘somethings’ to the gap that separates a something from nothing, from the void of its own place” (Žižek, 2006: 382). Like St. Paul, Bartleby’s Act serves to subtract the obscene underside of the Law, to say “no” simultaneously to the Law and all resistance, and in doing so he unveils the gap of the ambiguous place of the sexual relation and reveals that the Law itself is excessive.

In what sense does this internal splitting lead to something new, to impossible coordinates for the subject and to the unveiling of something excessive in the Law itself? The mistake would be to look for evidence of some ontological or moral change in the subject, some misuse of power somewhere, or some irrational criminal act, because the new here means a different ethics, a different attachment to *jouissance*, and a different sense of the nothing as constitutive of the something. The internal splitting opens onto new terrain where, again, fidelity to a pre-existing Cause is supplanted by a redefinition of the very terms of Cause itself. Referring to Lacan’s formula of the non-existence of the sexual relation, Žižek writes: “The subject who

commits an Act maintains an ethics which can no longer be accounted for in terms of fidelity to a pre-existing Cause, since it redefines the very terms of this Cause” (2000: 155). As Roark defends himself in the courtroom scene at the end of *The Fountainhead*, he explains that he is fighting for “a man’s right to exist for his own sake,” yet with this sentiment, Roark has managed to overturn the vision of himself as a selfish automaton and now portrays the rest of society as the “brainless soulless robots” without a will of their own, fighting for “the good” of all mankind.

Essential here is again the distinction between acting in defiance of a Law and acting without regard for whether a Law is in existence. There is, as Rex Butler reveals in his lucid explanation of Žižek’s interpretation of Antigone and Medea, a crucial distinction between Antigone’s sacrifice of everything in the name of her Cause (e.g. familial love), and Medea’s sacrifice of her Cause (e.g. her children) itself in the name of nothing (2005:103). As Butler explains, herein lie two different kinds of exception, “the exception in Antigone’s case which is opposed to and allows universality; and the exception arising only as a retrospective effect of the failure of universality” (Butler, 2005: 103). Antigone’s sacrifice after the fact brings into existence another Other, one configured according to her own notion of brotherly love, while Medea, on the other hand “sacrifices the exception Antigone seems to cling to” (Butler, 2005:104). Paradoxically, the feminine ethical act involves “the suspension of the exception itself,” thus signaling again a negation of negation (Butler, 2005: 104). There is neither guilt nor remorse experienced by these subjects, and their seemingly absurd incoherent Acts are seen from “our” side of the big Other. As Butler writes, “the totally successful or accomplished act continues to be understood as impossible, as a sign from another,

transcendent, order of being” (2005: 101). At the moment of an authentic Act, meanings and delimiters of madness and sanity do not apply. What is opened up in the wake of an authentic Act is not another realm outside of the subject of a new ethics, but an internal re-marking of the subject’s experience of the void at its core. Roark does not supplant the Cause of traditional Law with his own Law of individualized creation; rather his Act reveals that the continual need to re-mark a cause is the universal condition of the subject; “even though the Cause always has to be named as a kind of exception, as what everything stands in for, it in turn only stands in for another, which allows it to be re-marked.” Roark, like Medea, reveals that whatever Cause a subject adheres to, it is never going to be the ultimate and necessary one; both their acts reveal the drive underlying the law itself, “(the law from the beginning as only its own exception)” (Butler, 2005:106).

The Act that appears to us as disturbing, as unplaceable in terms of “ordinary” realms of the Law is brilliantly illustrated in director Stephen Daldry’s 2002 film *The Hours*, based on Michael Cunningham’s novel. Here, the character of Laura (Julianne Moore), unable to be a loving mother and housewife in 1950s America, abandons her family without explanation and lives a quiet life alone as a librarian with no recognition of or contact with her children. Many years later, at the funeral of her grown son (Ed Harris), who committed suicide, Laura confronts her choice of abandonment so many years ago and confesses that she cannot feel regret. She asks: “What does it mean to regret when you have no choice?” She does not seek forgiveness, because her choice was the only one possible. Family life brought her to a limit of what she could bear; as

she relates to Clarissa (Meryl Streep) about her decision, “It’s what you can bear ... it [family life] was death, I chose life.”

It is in this Act where, like Roark, Laura became the cause of herself, and where free will and determinism were combined in a way that went beyond the binary. Laura enacted a Bartleby ethics because she neither tried to fit in nor became politicized in order to work for the emancipation of mid-century America’s housewives and mothers; instead, she simply said no. Like Bartleby she disengages, and as such her “refusal isn’t so much the refusal of a determinate content as, rather the formal gesture of refusal as such.” Her “no” takes the form of “a signifier-turned object, a signifier reduced to an inert stain that stands for the collapse of the symbolic order” (Žižek, 2006: 384-85). In *The Hours* this is seen when Clarissa and her daughter (Claire Danes) confront “the monster” Laura, talk with her and finally find that she isn’t a monster at all. But there is a definite inability to configure Laura in “normal” ethical terms. No one could fathom how her act of abandonment might work to reconfigure notions of motherly love itself or how mothers who come to a limit and abandon their children might somehow be choosing a good over another evil.⁹ What she did and what remained inexplicable to others was all that she could do, and like Roark, there was no guilt or shame possible, because there was paradoxically “no choice” in her choice, yet, for a moment under conditions of complete freedom, she did choose.

The excess of the Law in this film is portrayed not in the figure of Laura’s well-meaning but very traditional and patriarchal husband (John C. Riley), but in her overdone flamboyant neighbor Kitty (Toni Collette), who wanted nothing more than to become the quintessential wife and mother. Her excesses (her bright red lips, her

voluptuous body, her perky attitude) were all met with a sudden and unexpected full kiss on the lips from Laura. This kiss was not the kiss of a lesbian lover, instead it was a sudden and excessive eruption of *jouissance* in the face of something unsettling, for underneath the flamboyant exterior of this 1950s housewife was the secret of diseased feminine parts, to be removed surgically the next day, and which would end all chances of motherhood. Laura is left shaken from this brief episode and is unable to deal with the excess of her mirror image that does not reflect her; she at first tries to play the role, to be the good wife and mother, but there are no real desires, no sustaining fantasies to help her. What changes in the course of Laura's ordeal is not her character, but rather "the very ethical standard by which we measure her character" (Žižek, 2006: 27).¹⁰

With this logic of Lacanian ethics Žižek puts forth no prescriptive or coherent political program, he subscribes to no universal necessity; "his interventions are always specifically historical and contextually determined" (Butler, 2005: 122). Moments when subjects enter the in-between place, the gap between two incompatible points, are moments that define the human universe as contingent. There are, as Žižek writes, only "partial and contingent knots – symptoms (quilting points, points of gravitation) [that] can generate a limited and fragile co-ordination between the two domains...." (2000: 116). What's crucial for Žižek here, is not to think of radical contingency as "ontological openness" or the ability to choose "the correct path" of alternative future realities, but rather the ability to assume "a self-referentiality of knowledge," a tautology of causality and subjecthood (Žižek, 2006: 204; and Žižek, 2003: 109).

Perhaps nowhere is this universe of contingency more vividly portrayed than in Paul Haggis's 2005 film *Crash*, whose plot summary reads: "For two days in Los

Angeles, a racially and economically diverse group of people pursue lives that collide with one another in unexpected ways.” While the film is about how the apparent necessity of the phallic function turns out to be “merely contingent,” there are also embedded in the stories a number of radical encounters where in the gap that contingency allows, a space for choice as meta-choice emerges. What we uncover here is the trace of the connection between what emerges as excess and the choice made in the contingent encounter, but we do so only as an exercise in reconstruction, because the moment of choice does not allow for a calculation of options or a weighing of consequences.

In this film a white police officer John Ryan (Matt Dillon) encounters an affluent married black couple (Thandie Newton and Terrance Howard) who have been playfully having sex while driving. Ryan pulls them over and proceeds to degrade and demean them, fondling the wife sexually while the husband looks on powerless to stop him. It is a seemingly capricious act that embitters the couple and although it makes use of racial hatreds, what shouldn't be missed here is how the officer's use of power, even in corrupt form, belies his own simultaneous impotence: his inability to save his dying father; his failure to acquire health care for him after first insulting and then pleading with the black female supervisor Shaniqua (Loretta Devine) at Social Services. Critics of this film feel that it is overdone, that it depicts caricatured stereotypes of racial hatred, but these critics miss the crucial point that the Law itself is already excessive and overdone. In this film, in particular, we are offered a brilliant illustration of this excessive big Other at work in all kinds of small places, with all kinds of unintended consequences. Most importantly, we are offered a view as to how the excesses of

“larger forces” such as racism are enacted in everyday contingent encounters. This “unseen” structural connection is revealed in various encounters in this film. For example, Jean Cabot (Sandra Bullock), the wife of the white Los Angeles District Attorney (Brendan Fraser), expresses an ever-present anger and loneliness after being mugged by two young black men. She then proceeds to demean the Hispanic locksmith because of his tattoos and race, while concurrently confessing her loneliness and friendship to her Hispanic maid. Her anger is directly but only tacitly connected to her husband’s in-attendance; to his over-concern with “the black vote,” and his preoccupation with the Imaginary of his political image.

In another encounter, Officer Ryan pleads with Shaniqua at the Social Services office for benefits for his dying father. Ryan angrily tells the story of his father, a man who willingly hired black people while losing his business contracts to affirmative action programs, and while he admits that he himself is a prick and a racist, he asks that his father not be made to pay the price. Shaniqua’s denial of the benefits in this instance is a response not to the father’s need, but to Ryan’s excessive racial hatred. Unlike Roark, Bartleby or Laura’s “no,” Shaniqua’s “no” sustained the structure of power and continued to feed the hatred between blacks and whites.

Yet another connection between the Law’s excess and the contingent encounter arises in an angry interchange between the “good” white cop, Tommy (Ryan Phillippe) and Lieutenant Dixon (Keith David) of the Los Angeles Police Department, a black man who has learned how to “succeed” among the racism and ensure his political and economic survival. Tommy’s request to be re-assigned to someone other than the “prick” Ryan belies his inability to deal with one small case of racism; thus to recognize

his request, as Lt. Dixon alludes, would impugn his own character, and expose everything (including the tacit racism) he has “not” worked against himself to get to the top of the LAPD as a black man. The Lieutenant’s “no” also sustained both the structure of power (the Law on the surface) and its obscene supplement of racial hatred. All of these episodes lay bare the stark and unexpected appearance of the Real at the core of the Symbolic in people’s contingent encounters. As Žižek makes repeatedly clear, any Master Signifier at once covers over its own impotence, which is structurally always there; it is the appearance of the object *a* in whatever manifestation that suspends the symbolic order of the Master Signifier (Butler, 2005: 37). There is in all of these contingent encounters an excess at work that always belies a structural impotence.

Later in the film we see Ryan come onto the scene of a car crash where the black woman he previously molested and degraded is a victim, lying upside down and pinned in the car. Ryan in that moment rushes to save her and pulls her from the car. This leaves us, the viewer, confused, as we try to fathom what kind of man Ryan is. We look for rational explanations of his inconsistent and confusing behavior: is he a sadistic cop or a hero? The answer is that he is both, but in two different contingent encounters. He constantly confronts the excess of the world of Los Angeles race relations and he has made a reputation for himself as a bastard, but a bastard who is not above risking his life to save another. Yet, crucially, we must not miss here how the two contingent encounters are structurally linked. That is, Ryan’s second encounter, where he showed heroism and benevolence, is intricately connected to the use of his excessive (abuse of) power in the first. He enacts in the first episode the obscene underside of the public

Law, and as Žižek relates, “This obscene excess is a necessary constituent of the notion of sovereignty...the asymmetry here is structural, that is, the law can sustain its authority only if the subjects hear in it the echo of the obscene unconditional self-assertion” (2006: 337). Ryan’s heroic act in the second contingent encounter, however, is done neither to demonstrate the power of an authority nor to resist it; it is rather an act done for its own sake. His actions in the two contingent encounters make us aware once again that any Law might not be so sovereign, that indeed, our behavior, our choices constantly occur in the presence of the Real of human relations. This Real, as Žižek makes clear in his response to Judith Butler’s criticisms, exists because there is “no a priori formal structural schema exempt from historical contingencies – there are only contingent, fragile, inconsistent configurations” (Žižek, Butler, and Laclau, 2000: 310). One should not, therefore, attribute to Lacan, as Butler does, the idea of a big Other as a persistent norm towards which all attempts of actualization fail. Rather, in Lacan’s topology there is “a tension between some traumatic ‘particular absolute’, some kernel which resists symbolization, and the ‘competing universalities’ ...that endeavour in vain to symbolize/normalize it” (Žižek, Butler, and Laclau, 2000: 310).

Crash is filled with two-sided reversals of the love and hate that are directed toward an other’s being, amidst the contingent encounters that happen against larger frames in terms of social and racial hatreds. This is revealed at the end of the film when the “good” white cop Tommy, the partner of Ryan, shoots and kills a black hitchhiker while the latter innocently reaches for a religious trinket, while the more sinister black criminal (Ludacris) inexplicably foregoes an opportunity to make money by selling illegal Asian aliens and instead sets them free. In *Crash* one contingent encounter links up

with another and another, and so on. Humans act without the knowledge of how their behavior leads to certain consequences for others. It is only us, the viewers, who can see things from a God's-eye view, as the camera pulls back or hovers above a scene to add to this universalizing perspective. Reading this film philosophically, we get a picture of the paradoxical simultaneity of the transcendent and the empirical, of Kierkegaard's God who as Žižek reveals, "is not an entity whom people relate to, rather he is this very relating" (2006: 79).

The scenes in *Crash* of open-ended and convoluted contingent encounters reveal that there exists no end point encompassing the Necessary ultimate purpose; instead there is a choice to enact, a path to take, and here opens the space in the contingent encounter for something impossible. In the film's final scene as ashes fall from the sky, it seemingly begins to snow in Los Angeles, thus signaling that in any contingent encounter a choice can change everything and make the impossible happen. But again we need to be careful to understand that the impossible here is not to be taken as the simple obverse of possibility, rather, and as Žižek explains in his critique of Agamben, such an impossibility becomes "the ultimate unthinkable limit of possibility itself" (2002: 139). Something happens in the "incarnation" of a contingent encounter that reconfigures the boundaries and limits of possibility itself.¹¹ This is Lacan's feminine ethics, which is now no longer posed in opposition to a masculine ethics of exclusion, but rather ushers in something beyond "ethics" itself; it is located at the core of a subject's choice yet it radically reconfigures everything from causality to new coordinates of "impossible" love. Thus, in terms of Lacanian ethics we are redirected away from trying to decipher a person's character, because an "evil" character in one

setting could take on the attributes of a moral hero in another. What we look to instead is the choice a subject makes in conditions of contingency, when one excess confronts another; when the realm of parallax between two different spheres is accessed, and the subject must face the ambiguity of both, for nothing is ever certain and everlasting.

When contingency becomes “in-carnated” in the interactions of subjects, something unbearable is confronted, and it is here where film narratives and fiction are best suited to present the Real that escapes symbolization. Žižek goes so far as to say that it is only through fiction that the truth can be apprehended: “at the most radical level, one can portray the Real of subjective experience only in the guise of a fiction” (2006: 30). It is, as Žižek relates, the reason why Kieslowski moved from making documentaries and filming real tears, to making fictional films and the use of fake glycerine tears with his actors. Lacan already knew this when he wrote in *Seminar XX*: “The subject can’t not desire not to know too much about the nature of the eminently contingent encounter with the other. Thus he shifts [his focus] from the other to the being that is caught up therein ... and it is love that approaches being as such in the encounter” (Lacan, 1998: 145).

Fantasies frame our desire and with them we proceed as subjects on our path of prohibiting the knowledge of prohibition itself, which keeps us from ever attaining the object of our desire. In the dimension of drive this prohibition becomes a negation, and the paradox of negating negation itself takes the subject to a zero point, to a place where something new can come only from an internal splitting, the subject’s determination of its own Cause. As Žižek says repeatedly, this ethics does not seek to separate the virtual from the real, material reality from metaphysics, but it offers a way

to see the real as already virtual, to see how the material real world can be separated from itself. It is the subject that must deal with the void at its core, by means of desire, drive, and, more rarely, by reconfiguring the parameters of both.

An film that illustrates this is Robert Zemekis's 1999 film *Cast Away*, where Tom Hanks' character Chuck Noland finds that the fears he faces, the loneliness, the isolation, and the loss he experienced while living for over four years on a deserted island are exactly the same he experiences back among humans in civilization. While alone on the island he creates the Imaginary other (Wilson, the Volleyball), which allows him a mirror identity, and he maintains the placeholder (the unopened FedEx box), which serves to save a space for him in the world of signifiers. With this, and with the marking of days on a rock and his desire for his girlfriend back home, he manages to stave off insanity by keeping a distance from the Real, the measureless ocean all around him. But the traversal of his darkest fantasy came at the moment when he knew he would not commit suicide; and he confronted the knowledge that he was simultaneously in control and not in control of his destiny. Reflecting on the moment of this profound shift, Noland tells his friend: "a feeling came over me like a warm blanket, and I knew then I had to keep breathing." It was at this moment that time's alterity released its hold, and that he took himself out of the quandary of living between the remembrances of the past and the expectations of the future. He began to live in the present, to keep breathing, to stop worrying about his ultimate destiny. In a real sense, he took away the question whether to live or to die, and thus traversed the fantasy of himself as a temporal being with a possible future rescue. Nothing happened at that moment to change his ontological and physical coordinates; rather, the split occurred

within himself as he became the cause of his own existence; and after that his subjecthood was in a different proximity to the Real. In order to live within and beyond the trauma of utter isolation and loneliness, in order to live without the question of life and death and without hope of rescue, he realized he simply had to keep breathing. His breathing, his ability to exist in total isolation, is in its own form precisely what Roark in *The Fountainhead* does to survive, which is to keep on doing his work for the sake of the work itself, unencumbered by an Other, by the judgments of others, by any feelings of self-doubt or obligation to others; Roark like Noland is a being of complete freedom.

After being rescued and finding himself back among other people, Noland can, finally, see something he failed to see before; he can live without meaning conferred by an Other, without the woman he so desired and loved back on the island, without time being structured by work, and without a future, if he has to. He is now not tethered to any person, or time-frame, or purpose. As he proved, and as I suspect Žižek knows, the island is not out there, existing as a dreaded place of exclusion and isolation; it is part of what subjects must already bear in their everyday contingent universe.

¹Endnotes:

Žižek declares this choice in Glyn Daly's *Conversations with Žižek* (2004: 51).

² The crucial difference between Žižek and Rand is in the way ethics is conceived. For the latter, reason is treated as an absolute (as stated in Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* and throughout Rand's writings), whereas to the former reason is caught up in the twists and turns of the moebius strip of the subject's universe; therefore, what is reasonable and sane now may not be so in another setting or another time. What resonates with Žižek in terms of Roark as a subject is his re-setting of ethical boundaries rather than individualistic defiance of same. Crucially, Roark is not interested at all in ushering in a new era for architecture, or leaving his mark for posterity; he is interested only in continuing to design and create whatever the outcome. As he says in one scene: "I don't work in order to have clients; I have clients in order so that I can work."

³ Significantly Roark is found not guilty, which also signals a kind of momentary recognition that his Act was done in another dimension of ethics. I would argue also that the authentic connection that such freedom allows is found in the unexpected friendship between Wynand and Roark, who are in love with the same woman, but who transcend all rivalries in order to be true to their integrity and work in the newspaper and architecture worlds respectively. The friendship is spoiled when Wynand ultimately sells out and condemns Roark's act, which inevitably leads to his suicide.

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As he writes, "humanity's limitation to finitude, that is, the very condition that prevents it from fulfilling its ethical destination, is, at the same time, a positive condition of its ethical activity" (Žižek, 1997: 86).

⁵

I make a distinction here between contingency as a descriptor of life circumstances and Lacan's notion of the contingent encounter as worked out in Seminar XX. In the latter, what's crucial is that two excesses are confronted in an encounter of subjects. Social scientists in particular treat contingency as a set of possibilities or "what-ifs," which is in stark contrast to my Lacanian meaning used here.

⁶ In desire, all kinds of paradoxes from the tragic to the comic can be put into play, as seen in a legion of films from *Titantic* to *Some like it Hot*, but when love emerges as drive, we are confronted with something not readily placeable, something enigmatic that signals an encounter with another's being rather than an object of desire, and a different type of negation. As Lacan writes, the suspension to which all love is attached is found in the displacement of the negation from the "stops not being written" or contingency to the "doesn't stop being written" or necessity (1998: 145), but what is posited as such can only be seen in hindsight.

⁷ His actual line is: "No thanks, I don't have time today, I've got to go; but on another occasion I would do it gladly."

⁸ In *The Parallax View* Žižek elaborates a multi-dimensional analysis of this scene and advances the reading that Dafoe's character simultaneously acts as a "wild analyst," for Dern's character and as the obscene excessive "cunt-face" of overripe woman versus Dern's mild-mannered and naive blonde boy persona. Žižek writes: "Again, what is so unsettling about the Bobby Peru figure is its ultimate sexual ambiguity, oscillating between the noncastrated raw phallic power and the threatening vagina, the two facets of the presymbolic life substance" (2006: 70).

⁹ In this sense Laura did the impossible, because her abandonment can be seen as a gift, since it was a choice she made above suicide and the murder of her unborn child. We (society) equate such an act to be against motherhood, as a cruel and inexplicable case of child abuse, yet, perhaps her act was done out of the only kind of love that was possible for her. If we were to compare her act with the countless stories of child abuse that occur within so many “normal” families today, we would perhaps be able to see her Act in a different light, from different coordinates.

¹⁰ Significant in this case was the choice of Laura not to commit suicide while pregnant, which became the narrative her writer/son took up in his book, where he staged her death. Even he could not fathom how his mother’s act might have been an act of love, rather than one that ended the life of herself and her unborn child.

¹¹ Lacan was very careful in his choice of words when speaking in *Seminar XX* about contingency. He wrote that he has “incarnated” contingency for us; that we should “beware the imaginary” as it has a lot to do with “a-natomy”; and also that we should be careful to distinguish the imaginary and the real (Lacan, 1998: 88).

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