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Žižek's *The Fright of Real Tears*:Theory, Post-Theory and Kieslowski

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Introduction

> *So who are these Lacanians? …In the global field designated by Post-Theorists as that of Theory, we are dealing with a no less mysterious 'case of the missing Lacanians': except for Joan Copjec, myself and some of my Slovene colleagues, I know of no cinema theorist who effectively accepts Lacan as his or her ultimate background. The authors usually referred to as Lacanians (from Laura Mulvey to Kaja Silverman) as a rule 'engage with' Lacan: they appropriate some Lacanian concepts as the best description of the universe of patriarchal dominance, while emphasising that Lacan remained a phallogocentrist who uncritically accepted this universe as the only imaginable framework of our socio-symbolic existence. So as a Lacanian, I seem to be caught in an unexpected double-bind: I am, as it were, being deprived of what I never possessed, made responsible for something others generated as Lacanian film theory. My response to this, of course: what if one should finally give Lacan himself a chance?*
>
> Žižek in *The Fright of Real Tears.*

These are jinxed times for both Lacanians, who are scrambling to hold their theoretical ground, and cognitivists, who wish to bring to an end the Lacanian approach to film theory. What emerged as a perceptible divide during the 1980s with the publication of David Bordwell's *Narration in the Fiction Film* (1985), and numerous other works by others on film cognitivism,[1] reached a flash point with the publication of David Bordwell and Noel Carroll's work, *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies* (1996). Since then the divide between the Theorists (alternatively known as Lacanians, culturalists, or Grand Theorists) and the Post-Theorists (alternatively known as cognitivists, piece-meal or middle level theorists) has only widened exponentially to keep film studies' theoretical ground in a state of flux. In this context, Žižek's *The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieslowski between Theory and Post-Theory* (2001), comes as a source of strength for those who put their faith in *SLAB*. In this work, Žižek deploys his Lacanian, Hegelian, Kantian and Hitchcockian influences in mounting a spirited and balanced defence of the Theory through the readings of Krzysztof Kieslowski's masterpieces *Decalogue* (1988), *The Double Life of Veronique* (1991) and the *Three Colours* (1993-94) trilogy. *The Fright of Real Tears* is also uniquely placed in terms of what it uses as the texts for driving home the merits of the pure Lacanian approach. The films of Krzysztof Kieslowski provide the contexts for Žižek to embark on his mission to redeem the Lacanian approach even as he endeavours to redeem the works of Kieslowski in the process.

The End of Theory?

Film studies remains one of the fertile grounds for putting to test the suppositions of theories that fall within domains as varied as structuralism, post-structuralism, cultural studies and post-modernism. Film studies also has the unique distinction of dividing its theoretical constituency vertically and horizontally. It is vertically divided because of the irreconcilable positions of the proponents of Grand Theories and its opponents, the cognitivists. It is horizontally divided in terms of the theoretical progressions from the times of Hugo Munsterberg through the periods of formalism, realism, *auteurism*, structuralism, post-structuralism and post-modernism.

The Post-Theorists and the Theorists are now engaged in a raging debate over which is more suitable for advancing the prospects of the field. Cognitivists have been blaming the votaries of the Theory for their 'subject-position' and 'culturalism' approaches[2]. A wide ranging list of concepts such as *suture, gaze, interpellation, voyeurism, masquerade, fetishism, imaginary signifier, identification* etc., are also railed against as they are seen as defying the logic of empirical research. The project of the Theorists is seen essentially as something that must go regardless of whether the alternative that is touted as the solution

fits the bill. Theorists of diverse affiliations are uncharacteristically and mistakenly dubbed as Lacanians, even though Lacanians of the true kind only number a few. The Theory, like any dominant theoretical approach, in any other field or discipline, has inherent flaws but also innate strengths. It must go the way of other dominant paradigms of the past in other fields and disciplines. But in film studies, its end is sought after long before the due date.

David Bordwell and Noel Carroll's *Post-Theory* (1996) aims to advance not only Post-Theory, but reconstruct film studies, as the sub title of the book suggests. David Bordwell and Noel Carroll mince no words in expressing their opposition to what has endured since the end of auteurism as the driving dogma of film studies. The Lacanian and Freudian psychoanalytical variants of theoretical approaches rooted in the continental philosophy become the primary target of attack by the book, particularly in the chapters by Bordwell, Carroll and Prince. In short, the book seeks to advance cognitivism as a replacement for what Bordwell calls as the 'subject-positioning' and 'culturalism' approaches of the Theory (Bordwell,1996:3). The proponents of cognitivism argue the case of piece-meal theorising in the place of the dominant paradigm of Grand Theories. They put their faith in the rational potential of the viewers instead of rooting for the power of the unconscious in defining the relationships between films and their viewers. Films and their viewing contexts are sought to be studied in terms of conventions like *shot/reverse shot*, which are also seen as regularities, as opposed to the irregularities studied by Grand Theories. More than anything, cognitivists root for the need to begin the knowledge seeking journey first with the films and their events and then using localised/piece-meal theories.

To the uninitiated, the labels Post-Theory, Grand Theories and Theory may sound strange, and even perplexing. Why divide the theoretical constituency in terms of rigid boundaries? Why call some traditions Grand Theories (or Grand Theory) or Theory and others as Post-Theory? Why confound the confusion in the minds of film studies students who are already overburdened with theories? In their provocative introduction, the authors of *Post-Theory* explain why they call some approaches as Theory and the same as Grand Theory and "what can and should come after" as Post-Theory.

> What we call Theory is an abstract body of thought which came into prominence in Anglo-American film studies during the 1970s. The most famous avatar of Theory was that aggregate doctrines derived from Lacanian psychoanalysis, structuralist semiotics, post-structuralist literary theory, and variants of Althusserian marxism. Here, unabashedly, was Grand Theory - perhaps the first that cinema studies has ever had. The Theory was put forth as the indispensable frame of reference for understanding all filmic phenomena: the activities of the film spectator, the construction of the film text, the social and political functions of cinema, and the development of film technology and the industry. (Bordwell and Carroll,1996:xiii).

Bordwell amplifies further the definition of Grand Theories in his review of the field in the chapter entitled "Contemporary Film Studies and the Vicissitudes of Grand Theory. "I try to delineate two large-scale trends of thought: subject-position theory and culturalism. … Subject-position theory and culturalism are both "Grand Theories" in that their discussions of cinema are framed within schemes which seek to describe or explain very broad features of society, history, language and psyche" (Bordwell,1996:3).

But Bordwell and Carroll, despite their seemingly convincing arguments against Grand Theories, appear to ignore the fact that the appeal of the dominant tradition of Freudian and Lacanian approaches held sway on its own merits, in tune with the trends in critical scholarship and philosophy, and succeeded in defining the routines of film studies scholars from a host of diverse backgrounds ranging from feminism to marxism, proving in the process that Theory was only progressing solely on its merits and it could not be faulted for what did not emerge as strong alternatives.

Even Bordwell concedes that there were emerging alternatives even at the heyday of Grand Theories such as the rise of 'middle level' research (Bordwell,1996:27-29). Interestingly, 'middle-level' research, along with Carroll's 'piece meal theorising' and the general notion of cognitivism forms the backbone of the Post-Theory. But despite the obvious literal meaning, the so-called 'middle-level' research does not get the advantage of a clear definition in Bordwell's overview of the 'middle-level' research studies. They are only described as in-depth, empirical and problem-driven. There is no clear answer to the natural question in the mind of the reader, Why call it 'middle-level research'? even though Bordwell seeks to capture the essence of the trend in detail when he writes:

> …We need not choose between practising Lacanianism and compiling a filmography. The scholarly work of the last ten years has shown that one robust rival to Theory is a middle-range inquiry that moves easily from bodies of evidence to more general arguments and implications. This piecemeal, problem-driven reflection and research is as far from data shuffling as it is from the ethereal speculations of Grand Theory" (Bordwell and Carroll,1996:xiii).

The problem with such a position accorded to 'middle-level research' springs from not what it seems to embody but what it replaces as the other choices. Bordwell and Carroll are no doubt polemical when they declare "we need not choose between practising Lacanianism and compiling filmography" (Bordwell and Carroll,1996:xiii), but one can not be a researcher by being a mere practitioner of Lacan or one can not fail to qualify as researcher for being in the area of filmography.

Filmographies can go beyond being mere compilations and practising Lacanians can not be researchers always. To call something 'middle-level' research, when one does not believe in the existence of the other two levels, where research is a reality and a long

running possibility, defies logic. How could research of a particular kind, middle, high or low, unseat a theory of a particular kind, Grand or pedestrian. Bordwell errs a second time on this count when he declares, while concluding the chapter, "Grand Theories will come and go, but research and scholarship will endure" (Bordwell,1996:30), seeking to implicitly trash the works inspired by the minds of Freud, Lacan, Althusser, Barthes, Metz etc., as not worthy of being termed scholarly and research-orientated. It would have been more appropriate and objective for Bordwell to say that theories will come and go, but research and scholarship will profit from the evolution of theories, Grand or otherwise.

And as Torben Grodal (1999) rightly said, there are only benefits to be drawn by the alternatives by relying upon what came before them. Grodal's criticism of Bordwell's position is by far the most incisive of the negative comments Bordwell attracted for his position on Grand Theories. In his 1999 conference paper, Grodal sounded emphatic about the confusion in Bordwell's scheme of things. "The problem with Bordwell's argument is that he confuses a critique of bad theories and bad applications of deductive reasoning and unconvincing exemplifications, with a critique of a theory-driven procedure as such. From my point of view grand theories are necessary, not only in themselves, but also as guidelines for middle-level research" (Grodal,1999:2). Vouching for the usefulness of Grand Theories, Grodal further adds:

> What makes some theories 'grand theories' is that they have a series of implications for research on a middle-level. That is the beauty of grand theories, they provide deep insights to a series of problems on many different levels. But the beauty is of course also the possible danger: A wrong grand theory provides a massive series of false insights in a series of levels and fields. The antidote for this danger is however not to shun grand theories, but to replace bad grand theories with better ones. (Grodal,1999:2-3).

It looks as though, notwithstanding the merits of either camps, that more than the natural causes that should define the entry, survival or exit of theories, Post-Theorists are enamoured of the purpose to work in the mission mode to unseat what has been ruling since the birth of the field and enthrone the alternative somehow. The dominant logic of *Post-Theory's* major essays is "Theory must go and Theory must end". The opening two lines of the book say it all: "Our title risks misleading you. Is this book about the end of film theory? No. It's about the end of Theory, and what can and should come after" (Bordwell and Carroll,1996:xiii). Obviously, despite the merits of the arguments, by upping the ante, the book suffers from the same polemical stand it wants to work against.

Notwithstanding the realms in which Grand theories or their alternatives locate themselves, film theories are also faulted for the neglect of the production processes that define filmmaking. In fact, film studies remains negatively unique for bursting at seams with

theories of all hues which make the journeys of the film scholars and students exciting while remaining oblivious of the journeys of the persons on the production floors or locations. The trajectories of those who practice filmmaking and those who practice film theorising appear to have no meeting point. What is turned out as the end product for audience consumption through theatrical and non-theatrical releases exist only as a raw material for building theoretical edifices that cannot be linked by the important constituent of film cultures, the practitioners of film making.

In locating the problems of a theory for practice, Kalos K'Agathos (2000), recalls the words he heard from Andrey Tarkovsky, even as he pictures the irrelevance of what is being written about cinema.

> Andrey Tarkovsky once said to me: "Theory of film is in existence since the beginning of the century, almost as long as cinema itself, yet it has not done any good. Theory has not answered the question what film art is." I talked to Tarkovsky in 1985. Since then I tried to agree with him more and more. My experience is, that for each year passing a growing number of irrelevant (and dull) things have been written, (and said), about cinema. Irrelevant in any case for the art of film, that is my primary concern. There may be relevant sociological, psychological, structuralist and other studies of the phenomena, but generally they do not relate to my passion for good cinema. …The main problem is that most contemporary theory, even film history, seems not to be stimulating. Film makers, including students, sense that, and will therefore usually not have it.

But the question should not be who should monopolise film theorising, film makers-turned theorists or non-film makers who exist as theorists, but whether theories as repositories of knowledge have any thing to offer to deal with questions of film making, film art and film audience. The primary challenge before the discipline is to get away from the monopolising tendencies of Grand theories or Post-Theory and address the issue of relevance of any kind of theory in terms of its meaningful applications by film makers, film students and film viewers. As is expected in any divisive politics in the theoretical worlds of disciplines such as film studies, the primary challenges are seldom addressed. What moves the discipline are the parameters of divides between vertical and horizontal divides. Theoretical proliferation is sought to be placed in high gear mode by the scholars caught up in such divides, not for bridging the divides, but widening them wildly so that every divide breeds more concepts, more boundaries and more problems for those who wish to apply theories to understand films and film cultures. Moreover, what appears as a logical progression from the stage of Grand Theories to Post-Theory only seems misplaced as Lacanians (or pure/post Lacanians) like Žižek, who question that Theory, as attributed to Lacanian tendencies, was not articulated correctly to qualify as Theory in the first place.

Žižek, Kieslowski and Theory

To students of film studies, the words of Žižek come as a whiff of fresh air. He is witty but not ridiculously witty, caustic but not the kind who goes wild, argumentative but without losing his moorings, and, most importantly, a great thinker but not a boring one at that. The Lacanian worlds of the imaginary, symbolic and real are dear to Žižek. As a post-modern Lacanian, Žižek is seized by the challenges lying before Lacanians in the new age. He works as a Professor in the European Graduate School, Switzerland and is a senior researcher in the University of Ljubljana, Slovenia.

Kieslowski, like Žižek, needs no introduction to film studies students and scholars. Born in Poland in 1941, Kieslowski died in 1996. But he lives in his masterpieces *Decalogue* (1988), *The Double Life of Veronique* (1991) and the *Three Colours* (1993-94) trilogy. Kieslowski's early works were documentaries, made during the 1970s, but he turned to fiction to escape from the burden of capturing the real and the attendant 'fright of the real tears.' His logic borne of the 'fright of real tears' is by far the most difficult challenge of the ethical kind confronted by documentary film makers but one that took Kieslowski to new heights as the fiction film maker. Quoting Kieslowski, Žižek says that Kieslowski's move was "at its most radical, an ethical one." Said Kieslowski:

> Not everything can be described. That's the documentary's great problem. It catches itself as if in its own trap. …If I'm making a film about love, I can't go into a bedroom if real people are making love there. …I noticed, when making documentaries, that the closer I wanted to get to an individual, the more objects which interested me shut themselves off. That's probably the reason why I changed to features. There's no problem there. I need a couple to make love in bed, that's fine. Of course, it might be difficult to find an actress who's willing to take off her bra, but then you just find one who is. …I can even buy some glycerine, put some drops in her eyes and the actress will cry. I managed to photograph some real tears several times. It's something completely different. But now I've got glycerine. I'm frightened of real tears. In fact, I don't even know whether I've got the right to photograph them. At such times I feel like somebody who's found himself in a realm which is, in fact, out of bounds. That's main reason why I escaped from documentaries. (Žižek,2001:72).

Kieslowski's fame reached new heights when he made *Decalogue*, a series of television films, widely rated as his best work, at the height of the *Solidarity* movement, during the final days of the Cold War era. And even though he deserves to be seen as the unique product of the political turmoil and the attendant social conditions in Poland during the 1980s, Žižek reverses such a logic and says that:

> …One should avoid here the historicist trap:this unique circumstance does not account for the 'truth' and universal scope of the analysed phenomenon. It is precisely against such hasty historicisers that one should refer to Marx's famous observation apropos of

Homer: it is easy to explain how Homer's poetry emerged from early Greek society; what is much more difficult to explain is its universal appeal, i.e. why it continues to exert its charm even today. And, *mutatis mutandis*, the same goes for Kieslowski: it is easy to identify his 'roots' in the unique moment of Polish socialism in decay; it is much more difficult to explain the universal appeal of his work, the way his films touch the nerves of people who have no idea whatsoever about the specific circumstances of Poland in the 80s. (Žižek,2001:8).

There is no doubt that by subjecting the films of Kieslowski to a Lacanian reading, Žižek only pays a remarkable tribute to a film maker who distinguished himself on multiple planes. Adding further encomium to the author of his texts of analysis, Žižek said that the purpose of *The Fright of Real Tears* was "not to talk *about* his (Kieslowski) work, but to refer to his work in order to accomplish the *work of* Theory" (Žižek,2001:9).

Even though, Žižek registers his disappointment in *The Fright of Real Tears* at the very outset with the advocates of Post-Theory for seeing a Lacanian in every film theorist, he vows to give Lacan himself a chance in the face of Post-Theorists' diagnosis that what ails film studies is Theory and what ails Theory is the Lacanian psychoanalysis. Getting over his disappointment quickly, Žižek realises that the heart of the problem lay not with Post-Theorists but with the way Lacan has been appropriated by film theorists over the years and responds in a typical Žižekian manner:

…What if one should finally give Lacan himself a chance? So, to continue in a Maoist vein, I am tempted to determine the opposition between the ambiguous reference to Lacan that has predominated in cinema studies and those who fully endorse Lacan as the second, non-antagonistic contradiction of cinema studies, to be resolved through discussion and self-criticism. (Žižek,2001:2)

In his true style, Žižek also likens the duels between the two camps as emblematic of a much wider "crisis in cultural studies." Says Žižek:

What looms in the background is a whole set of dilemmas, from the purely epistemological to politico-ideological ones: do cultural studies provide an adequate instrument to counteract global capitalism, or are they simply the ultimate expression of its cultural logic? Will cognitive scientists and other representatives of the so called 'Third Culture' succeed in replacing cultural critics as the new model of 'public intellectuals'? (Žižek,2001:2).

In his opinion, such conflicts have their roots in history as 'scandals.' Since the times of Socrates, 'scandals' have been running their course as deceptive philosophical affairs in so far as they transform the very nature of the crisis. Žižek says:

…To put in Hegelian terms, a properly *philosophical* scandal erupts when some philosophy effectively disturbs the very substance of the communal being, what Lacan referred to as the 'big other', the shared implicit set of beliefs and norms that regulate

our interactions. The deception of 'scandals' is not so much that they are superficial public events, but that they *displace* the true dimension of the conflict" (Žižek,2001:3).

Post-Theorists are well known for touting their 'problem-solution' model wherein the particular is privileged over the universal. The particular is the manageable part of the big questions, which Theorists seek to tackle. Piece-meal theorising is the name for the same. In piecemeal theorising, central concepts like *suture* and *gaze* upon which the edifice of Theory is built should give way to something as practical and particular as continuity editing or depth-of-field or point-of-view editing. Noel Carroll believes "that in the present context piecemeal theorising is the way to go. In many cases, this means breaking down some of the presiding questions of Theory into more manageable questions, for example, about the comprehension of point of view editing instead of global questions about something vaguely called suture" (Carroll,1996:58). The point here is not what piece meal theorising is capable of but driving home the message that what Theorists consider as central (*suture*) should be dismissed as vague. As mentioned earlier, this condescending view of the Theory and Theorists starts even from the very first lines of the book and runs through the essays of Bordwell, Carroll and Prince. Not surprisingly, for this reason, many consider the position of Post-Theorists like Bordwell and Carroll as arrogant despite the supposedly idealistic nature of their project. Bruce Bennet (2000), for instance, calls Bordwell's tone as peevish arrogance in his review of the book, *Post-Theory*. Bennet says:

> he employs two main strategies: the first is to locate what he sees as damning logical contradictions or flaws which would undermine the soundness of the argument; the second is to deliberately misunderstand an argument by construing it literally or ingenuously in order to emphasize its absurdity. Discussing semiotics, for example, he dismisses out of hand the commonplace idea that language is so naturalized that we will automatically confuse the representation of a cow for the animal itself. 'If this is true', he writes, 'then people react with surprising equanimity when they find tiny cows grazing inside their TV sets'. This tone of peevish arrogance quickly makes for tiresome reading (Bennet, 2000).

Žižek deals with such matters of peevish arrogance in his dialectical best, without sounding arrogant or submissive, but without losing the first opportunity to call a spade a bloody spade. He is also more clever in choosing the right questions for his dialectical engagement. They seem right because their very choice provides the scope for Žižek to weave his Kantian, Hegelian, Freudian and Lacanian wisdom on a brilliant dialectical tapestry, wherein his logic simply overwhelms the position of Post-Theorists. This becomes evident even in the introductory chapter of the book wherein Žižek raises the right questions as a counter to what has been raised by the Post-Theorists. His questions are straightforward, laden with dialectical potential and carry the necessary punch. "Who are

these Lacanians?, What if one should finally give Lacan himself a chance?, Does what they describe as Theory, or what they attribute to theory, not read as a comically simplified caricature of Lacan, Althusser et.al.? and Can one really take seriously Noel Carroll's description of Gaze theorists?" (Žižek,2001:1-4).

Moreover, Žižek seems to know the blind spots in the terrain charted out by Post-Theorists only too well, given his theoretical acumen, dialectical world view, philosophical loyalties and an eagle eye that goes in for its prey in a snap. One obvious blind spot in the Post-Theorists' field view is their less rigorous use of terms which are philosophical nightmares even for those who live by Kant and Hegel day in day out. When Noel Carroll advocates the dialectical framework of film studies and says with a tone of 'peevish arrogance', to paraphrase what Bennet said with regard to the tone of Bordwell, "Speaking as a self-appointed reformer, I wish to emphasize the need for film theorizing to become more conscious of its dialectical responsibilities" (Carroll,1996:57), Žižek responds bluntly:

> Post-Theorists often claim to pursue a dialectical path; this claim, at least, should be flatly rejected. What Post-Theorists mean by a 'dialectical approach' is simply the notion of cognition as the gradual progress of our always limited knowledge through the testing of specific hypotheses. …What separates dialectics proper from its cognitive version is the way the subject's position of enunciation is included, inscribed, into the process: the cognitivist speaks from the safe position of the excluded observer who knows the relativity and limitation of all human knowledge, including his own" (Žižek, 2001:14).

Likewise, the 'problem-solution model' of Bordwell subsequently takes a hit from Žižek. While Žižek puts his faith in the Hegelian 'concrete universality' and its exception and Laclau's notion of 'hegemonised universality,' Bordwell's 'problem-solution model' is all about trans-cultural universals like cross-cutting, depth of field, shot/reverse shot and classical continuity narrative. Moreover, their *universality* is only immoderate. Žižek says:

> When Post-Theory insists on clear theoretical classifications and gradual generalisations based on careful empirical research, one should bear in mind that this apparently modest position involves a much more immoderate position of enunciation of the Post-Theorist himself/herself as the observer exempted from the object of his/her study. The immoderate aspect is clearly discernible apropos of the status of *universality*. …While the problem-solution model of historical research can undoubtedly lead to a lot of precise and enlightening insights, one should nonetheless insist that the procedures of posing problems and finding solutions to them always and by definition occur within a certain ideological context that determines which problems are crucial and which solutions acceptable (Žižek,2001:16-17).

And talking of Bordwell's demonstration of cross-cutting as a trans-cultural universal, Žižek mentions the exception in Griffith's cross-cutting:

> What makes Griffith's cross-cutting of such interest is the way this procedure, although universally applied to create tension by showing alternatively the two independent courses of action, is in his work obviously anchored in a very specific situation that serves as its paradigmatic case: that of the so-called last-minute chase in which a saviour comes to the rescue of the victim under siege at the very last moment" (Žižek, 2001:21).

According to Žižek, in Hegelian 'concrete universality':

> …at every stage of the dialectical process, the concrete figure 'colours' the totality of the process, i.e. the universal frame of the process becomes part of (or, rather, drawn into) the particular content. To put it in Ernesto Laclau's terms, at every stage its particular content is not only a subspecies of the universality of the total process: it 'hegemonises' this universality, the 'dialectical process' is nothing but the name for this permanent shift of the particular content which 'hegemonises' the universality" (Žižek,2001:23-24).

To drive home the message about what qualifies as dialectics to Post-Theorists, Žižek rounds off the chapter by saying:

> The basis rule of dialectics is thus: whenever we are offered a simple enumeration of the subspecies of a universal species, we should always look for the exception to the series. For example, it is my conjecture that the key to Hitchcock's entire opus is the film which is integral and at the same time an exception, i.e. whose benevolent natural-cycle life-rhythm underpinning obviously violates the basic out-of-joint, 'derailed' tenor of his universe, *The Trouble With Harry* (1954)" (Žižek,2001:27).

After his dialectical engagement of the dialectics proper and cognitivists version of dialectics, Žižek turns his attention to the concepts of *suture, gaze, impossible subjectivity* and *interface*. Žižek knows only too well that despite the merits seen by Lacanians in their concepts like *suture,* the decline of *suture* as a central concept has been steady and as he says: "The time of *suture* as a central concept has irrevocably passed: in the present day cultural studies version of the Theory, the term barely occurs; however, rather than accepting this disappearance as a fact, one is tempted to read it as an indication of the decline of cinema studies" (Žižek, 2001:31). But the decline of *suture* also provides an opportunity for Žižek to take a new look at the concept in the context of the Theory *Vs* Post-Theory debate. As redeeming the Lacanian approach would not be complete without redeeming its central concepts, Žižek sees it fit to devote two chapters to *suture* and its close theoretical cousins such as *interface*, *impossible subjectivity* and *gaze*. After throwing in a few glimpses from the history of *suture,* Žižek calls our attention to the basic steps in *suture*, which any student of Theory knows well. But what flows from him thereafter represents an interesting amalgam of simple and complex notions of the basic version of *suture.* Keeping Hitchcock, Kieslowski and scores of other filmmakers' works as examples,

Žižek provides an illuminating Lacanian account of the various scenarios in the exchange of subjective and objective shots. *Suture* is only the first link in the process of exchange. Where it succeeds, it *sutures* the gap between the first shot, wherein the spectator slips from his imaginary world and becomes aware of the absent agent, to whom he attributes the show. In the second shot, this lack is compensated, enabling the spectator to get back to his imaginary world. And according to Žižek, "…In Lacanian terms, the second shot represents (within the diegetic space of representation) the absent subject for/of the first shot. When the second shot replaces the first one, the 'absent one' is transferred from the level of enunciation to the level of diegetic fiction" (Žižek, 2001:32).

What happens when this scheme of exchange of objective and subjective shots is seen to be operating in the opposite manner by the Post-Theorists in the case of classical Hollywood cinema? Žižek does not ignore this as it holds the key to his notion of *gaze*. Says Žižek:

> A more fundamental reproach to the standard notion of suture is that the elementary matrix of Hollywood narrative cinema is rather the opposite one: it's not that each objective shot has to be reinscribed as the subjective (point-of-view) shot allocated to a certain protagonist within the space of the narrative fiction; it's rather that each subjective (point-of-view) shot has to be firmly allocated to some subject *within* diegetic reality. …In short, the ultimate threat is not that of an objective shot which will not be 'subjectivised', allocated to some protagonist within the space of the diegetic fiction, but that of the *point-of-view* shot which will not be clearly allocated as the point-of-view of some protagonist, and which will thus evoke the spectre of a free-floating Gaze without a determinate subject to whom it belongs" (Žižek, 2001:33)

To Post-Theorists, *gaze* represents itself as a mythical entity and *suture* as a vague global concept. Žižek sees no place for *gaze* in the Post-Theory's version of the spectator-screen relationship as it is commonsense bound and does not allow for the logic of Lacan that *gaze* is made possible by the object's eye. The concept of *impossible subjectivity* is on account of the *gaze* enacted by the object or thing. Žižek here refers to the objective shot in a horror movie which may be subjectivised and again subjected to a reversal:

> …when the spectator is all of a sudden compelled to acknowledge that *there is no possible subject within the space of the diegetic reality who can occupy the point of view of this shot.* So we are dealing here with the simple reversal of a subjective into an objective shot: but in constructing a place of *impossible* subjectivity, a subjectivity which taints the very objectivity with a flavour of unspeakable, monstrous evil" (Žižek, 2001:36).

The stunned face of Arbogast, the detective, from the point-of-view of the murderous object, in Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) and the shot of the aerial survey of the ravage by the birds

which caused them in *Birds* (1963) are cited as "exemplary cases of *impossible subjectivity*" by Žižek who says something interesting about:

> how this Hitchcockian procedure undermines the standard procedure of *suture*. Firstly, already the elementary Hitchcockian exchange between the objective shot of a person approaching the Thing and the point-of-view shot of the Thing fails to produce the 'suturing' effect of appeasement: the tension remains unresolved. Then, it is as if this tension is released and simultaneously explodes, gets out of control, by being raised to a higher potency *i.e.* by being accelerated into another, much more radical, duality: the shift from the objective 'God's-view' shot into its uncanniness. Another subjectivity intervenes here, which is no longer the standard diegetic subjectivity of a protagonist of the fiction, but the impossible/traumatic subjectivity of the Thing itself (Žižek, 2001:36-38).

Žižek also points to other "subversions" of the standard exchange of subjective and objective shots in the films of Hitchcock, Kieslowski and Antonioni. They include the violent entry of an object into a frame (as in *Birds*) and the deceptive point-of-view shots which reveal the objective position only after pretending to be subjective. Kieslowski's *Blind Chance* (1981) is replete with such shots. Žižek also cites Antonioni's *Cronaca di un amor* (1950) in this regard. Žižek says that the "uncanny poetic effect of these shots resides in the fact that it appears as if the subject somehow *enters his/her own picture* - as Lacan put it, not only is the picture in my eye, but I am also in the picture" (Žižek, 2001:39). Herein, Žižek also talks of *interface,* which does the job of closing the gap when *suturing* fails. It is likened as a 'fantasmatic spectral image' that helps to deal with the 'Real' of reality, as in the films of Kieslowski. *Interface* occurs "when the gap can no longer be filled by an additional signifier, it is filled by a spectral *object,* in a shot which, in the guise of the spectral screen, includes its own counter-shot" (Žižek, 2001:54). Among other examples of *interface* producing counter-shots, Žižek quotes the examples of shot/counter shots from Kieslowski's *Red* and *Blue.* In *Blue,* the eyes of Julie fill the screen with the reflection of the doctor as the shot with its counter-shot. In *Red*, the poster shots of Valentine, wherein we first see the poster, when it is photographed, and then the poster itself, and finally the frozen shot of the same on television screen.

In part II of the book, Žižek focus shifts entirely to the works of Kieslowski and his philosophy of filmmaking. At the surface, understanding Kieslowski's approach to filmmaking seems fairly easy but as one goes through the paces orchestrated by Žižek, we are made to realise the complexities involved in relating to Kieslowski's philosophy and his three major works, *Decalogue, The Double Life of Veronique* and the *Three Colours* (Blue, White and Red). Despite the seemingly different contexts of the diegetic worlds in these films, there are certain unifying elements which define the universes of his films. His films are all about alternative realities, wherein the characters are given choices between 'mission-cause' and

life. His films are also about the tussle between moral and ethical choices. He was always caught in the dialectics between ethical and moral choices even though he was firmly wedded to the principle that ethics are more sacred than morals.

Anybody who knows Kieslowski's rationale for abandoning documentary filmmaking would appreciate that throughout his career he was caught in the problematic of dealing with the 'Real'. Escaping from the *fright of real tears*, he could not, however, get rid of the documentary approach. For instance, the problem of organising the overabundance of footage through a single narrative in Kieslowski's fiction filmmaking finds the solution in alternative realities and multiple narratives, as in documentary filmmaking. Žižek says that "Even in his fiction films, Kieslowski *treats the footage as documentary material* which, consequently, should be decimated, so that all that remains are fragments which are never fully comprehensible, i.e. in whose final cut something - the element that would provide the crucial clarification - is always missing" (Žižek, 2001:76-77).

The problematic of redeeming the reality differs for documentary film makers and fiction filmmakers. While the *fright of real tears* conveys one dimension of the problem, the other dimension resides on the side of recovering reality through fiction. Žižek says that "…if our social reality itself is sustained by a symbolic fiction or fantasy, then the ultimate achievement of film art is not to recreate reality within the narrative fiction, to seduce us into (mis)taking a fiction for reality, but, on the contrary, to make us discern the fictional aspect of reality itself, to experience reality itself as a fiction" (Žižek,2001:77).

But more than any other dominant trait of Kieslowski's film-making, the single most important feature that warrants closer scrutiny is alternative realities/histories. No doubt, there is a role for chances and choices in Kieslowski's scheme of alternative histories. The chances are repeated so that characters in alternative universes could learn from the failed lives of others and seek resolution of their problems. For instance, in *The Double Life of Veronique* (1991), we have two characters, Weronika, who lives in Poland, and her double, Veronique, who lives in France. They have similar interests, in singing, and similar conditions, in their state of poor health. The Polish Weronika, chooses to go ahead with her singing career and dies of heart attack. The French Veronique stays clear of the failed choice of her Polish counterpart, chooses teaching over singing and survives. In *Blind Chance*, the lead character, Witek is made to live through three alternative realities after trying to catch a train. In the first version, he succeeds in getting into the train and into the Communist party after he befriends a party member on board. In the next version, he gets arrested for crashing into the railway official while running to catch the train and becomes a radical. In the third version, Witek fails to catch the train, becomes a doctor, leads a normal life, goes to attend an international conference and dies in the plane crash. What Žižek says of this?

Each version involves a reflexive stance towards the previous one, like the second Veronique, who seems to be aware of the experience of the first one. It is only the third version which is 'real': just before dying. Witek runs through the two alternative life-stories in which he does not die ('What would have happened if I had caught the train; if, while running to catch it, I had bumped into a railway guard?'), but they both end up in a dialectical deadlock which pushes him to the next story (Žižek,2001:80).

Žižek also finds a downside to such a universe of alternative realities. They are seen as ambiguous as games wherein we are always returned to level one despite facing disastrous ends, only to make another start (Žižek,2001:93). Kieslowskian realities are not only multiple and alternative, but expressive of the imperfect nature of their universes, where one is provided chances to choose a better reality. Another related constant in Kieslowski's works is the tussle between morality and ethics. In *Decalogue*, we are told in ten parts individual stories which contain obvious moral connections to the Ten Commandments, individually and otherwise. In *Decalogue*, more than any other Kieslowski's work, the transformation of the moral dimension to the ethical dimension is clearly discernible. In his films, this transformation is also linked to how the choices concerning 'mission-cause' and life are played out. Talking of the choice between 'mission-cause' and life, Žižek sources a twister and takes a dig at the Post-Theorists: "…Is the topic of our first chapter, the choice between Theory and Post-Theory, not yet another case of the ethical choice between event and Being, between ethics and morality, between mission and life? (Žižek, 2001:148).

Kieslowski's *Colours* trilogy, like *Decalogue*, marks another important plane of analysis for Žižek. The three films *Blue*, *White* and *Red*, have less in common with the Old Testament Commandments, which governed the contexts of the *Decalogue* films, but are seen by Žižek as having a relationship with the New Testament Commandments. "In so far as *Decalogue* relates to the Old Testament Commandments, one is tempted to read the *Colours* trilogy as implicitly referring to the three New Testament virtues: Faith, Hope, Charity (Love); the triad of Liberty-Equality-Fraternity can only function in authentic way if supported by the *other* triad" (Žižek, 2001:155). The *Colours* trilogy is also seen by Žižek as marking the emergence of a new dimension in Kieslowski's work. "From Kieslowski's early documentaries to *Veronique* runs the straight line of reflection upon the fundamental ethical choice between mission and life: the spontaneous flow of life tending towards calm is interrupted by the violent intrusion of interpellation" (Žižek,2001:161).

Conclusion

Ultimately, it is easy to spot a downside in any work and Žižek's *The Fright of Real Tears* has its share. The balance between the two parts of the book is made weaker by the silence of Žižek on Post-Theory in the second part. The focus on Kieslowski is not clearly

brought to bear on the basic premises of his dialectical engagement on the notions of Theory and Post-Theory. Žižek's *The Fright of Real Tears* succeeds in blunting the arguments of Post-Theorists through his dialectical reasoning. His theoretical and philosophical wisdom undoubtedly provides a remarkable plane of analysis of a wide range of films he uses to amplify concepts, argue his positions and throw the questions raised by the detractors back at them.

Endnotes

1. Bordwell's *Narration in the Fiction Film* is only one of the several works in film studies which used cognitivist perspectives. For a select list of the important works on film cognitivism, see, Grønstad.A. "The Appropriational Fallacy: Grand Theories and the Neglect of Film Form," *Film-Philosophy*, Vol.6, No.23 (August 2002). Retrieved June 12, 2005 from http://www.film-philosophy.com/vol6-2002/n23gronstad.

2. Bordwell's essay in *Post-Theory*, "Contemporary Film Studies and the Vicissitudes of Grand Theory," fails to provide the basis for the choice of the label "culturalism," despite his elaboration on what distinguishes it from the subject-position theory and what constitutes it. In defining culturalism only in terms of its constituents such as Frankfurt School's theory, post-modernism and cultural studies, and subject-position theory as acultural and ahistorical, the very nature of the parameters of cognitivists' targets seems difficult to understand.

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