

IJŽS Vol 2.1 - Graduate Special Issue

## Symptomatic Readings: Žižekian theory as a discursive strategy.

Chris McMillan - Massey University, Auckland Campus, New Zealand.

Lacanian psychoanalysis has a tense relationship with political philosophy. The Lacanian world of desire, fantasy, *jouissance*, and the Real can appear quite divorced from contemporary politics. Indeed, Jacques Lacan himself was sceptical about the relationship between psychoanalysis and politics. This unease continues amongst contemporary readers of Lacan. Many regard Lacanian philosophy to be inherently conservative and nihilistic, based as it is on a fundamental lack which constitutes the impossibility of society and thus utopian politics. This impossibility has led some theorists, such as Elizabeth Bellamy, to suggest that psychoanalysis and politics do not mix. However, although Lacan established his system of thought - following Sigmund Freud - primarily for application in the clinical field, through the work of Slavoj Žižek in particular Lacanian theory has become a vastly popular tool for the analysis of socio-political formations.

The central psychoanalytic insight into the socio-political realm is the incompleteness of the social/symbolic order. The symbolic is always characterised by a lack, which is the primary site of interest for Lacanian study. Conversely, the operation of fantasy and *jouissance* is such that the lack in the Other cannot be revealed. It is only through subjects' attempts to suture this lack that the social maintains its stability. Thus, because reality is symbolically constructed and the symbolic is essentially contingent, any partial fixation of meaning that occurs is political in nature. As Lacanian psychoanalysis is able to both understand and reveal the stabilising influences, the limit

points and the symptoms of the social, it is inherently political and is thus capable of sustaining direct interventions into politics. These interventions do not seek, however, to present positive ideological positions, such as liberalism, socialism, feminism, and so on. Rather, they identify the elements whose exclusion is required in order for an ideological formation to be secured, to expose the reliance of those formations upon foundations that they must disavow.

For this reason, this paper supports the use of psychoanalysis as a discipline of the political. However, there is much debate around the exact usage of psychoanalysis as a political discipline, even among readers of Lacanian. The goal of this paper is to propose a psychoanalytically inspired approach to understanding and intervening in hegemonic political formations. This approach is constructed around a core discursive strategy. This strategic approach is generated via Slavoj Žižek's particular construction of Lacanian psychoanalysis. Žižek's theoretical and political method follows a rehabilitated notion of universality and a Hegelian/Lacanian take on dialectical materialism. The strategy being developed here, likewise draws upon those foundations, in particular the notions of ideological fantasy and the symptom.

### **Constructing a Discursive Strategy**

The discursive strategy relies heavily on Žižek's approach to the political and philosophy in general as outlined in *The Parallax View*. Žižek describes his approach as being a 'short-circuit'. A short circuit approach is a critical reading of a political power apparatus such that the hidden underside of its discursive expression is revealed, through which the apparatus functions. Hence; "(T)he reader should not simply have learned something new; the point is rather to make them aware of another – disturbing - side of something they knew all the time" (2006: ix). Žižek believes, and it is the position adopted in this paper, that Lacanian psychoanalysis is the privileged instrument of the short-circuit approach, although it is necessary to note that a short-circuit relies heavily on Hegelian dialectical logic.

The 'short-circuit' approach aims to 'practice' concrete universality by confronting a universal with its 'unbearable example' (2006:13). This is the core orientation at the heart of the argumentation in this paper; the identification of the internal fault points within a political formation. These internal limit points -symptoms- can be revealed as constitutive of the universal horizon constructed by the discourse and thus a concrete

universal. The symptom is a modality in which we experience the Real insofar as it is the point at which the hegemonic order – national identity, human rights, and so on – fail. This point of failure reveals the existence of an irresolvable gap within a universal discourse and, thus, ultimately, the presence of a universal exception that is disrupting the coherence of that horizon.

The constitutive failure within the construction of a national identity provides an illustration of the formation of a symptom. For example, in New Zealand, a nation which is experiencing something of a debate over national identity, the tautological slogan 'We are all New Zealanders' has directed the debate. Here, the symptom operates as evidence of the failure of this hegemonic horizon. The symptom is not, however, that which is outside of the identity 'New Zealander', but is rather an internal failure which marks the gap between the identity and that which it must exclude. In this example, immigrants – those who hold the official status of 'New Zealander', yet do not fit the universal image of the term – may be considered a symptom.

In order to produce a short-circuit analysis, one cannot simply interpret the discursive field. Rather, as Stavrakakis suggests, the role of critical discourse is to deconstruct the fantasmatic background that sutures the social and to find the symptomatic elements that signal the internal point of failure – the limit point – of the abstract imaginary. Similarly, Žižek suggests that "(T)he aim of the critique of ideology is the analysis of an ideological edifice, is to extract this symptomatic kernel which the official, public, ideological text simultaneously disavows and needs for its undisturbed functioning".

As a consequence of the fantasmatic background of a universal edifice, ideological critique comes to involve two important moves. The first is to reveal the contingency of each and every construction, to demonstrate that reality is neither natural nor positive. The second is to consider the manner in which an ideology grips its subjects; the operation by which political formations maintain their stability, despite this apparent contingency. The substance that achieves this outcome, in Lacanian psychoanalysis, is *jouissance*.

*Jouissance* is a paradoxical state of suffering/enjoyment that lies 'beyond the pleasure principle'. This troubling pleasure gives materiality to psychoanalytic thought, as such it is the only substance known to psychoanalysis. *Jouissance* is not simply enjoyment or pleasure, although it can operate in these modes, but it also goes beyond pleasure into a kind of troubling, excessive pleasure that includes elements of

transgression and suffering. The power of *jouissance* is such that the subject can be aware of the contingency of their situation and the symptoms inherent to this construction, yet continue to act as if they are unaware of this circumstance. Within capitalist ideology, a primary site of *jouissance* is the commodity. The commodity may come from exploited labour and be totally unnecessary, but the seductive pull of *jouissance* prevents the full acknowledge of these facts. Thus Žižek states, '(I)t is not enough to convince the patient of the unconscious truth of his symptom; the unconscious itself must be induced to accept this truth' (2006: 351).

Thus, the abstracted 'short-circuit' method through which Žižek has interpreted Lacan has much potential for analysing the political domain. This potential has, however, been obscured somewhat by the abstract, baroque nature of Žižek's theorising. While Žižek's theory has proven excellent for the discipline of political philosophy, Žižek's work remains at times a little too divorced from the concrete, grounded world in which the political occurs, that is, politics. This has enabled a certain misinterpretation of Žižek's political position to proliferate, centred around a critique that suggests that Žižek has no stable political position .

My aim in formalising a discursive political strategy from Žižek's psychoanalytic political philosophy is to develop a portable approach for concrete political interventions without losing the theoretical insights that are central to psychoanalytic theory. Herein lays the problem in achieving this task. Any reification of methodological form and content defies the politics of any political methodology- it needs to also be contingent. Therefore, while it is submitted that the strategy suggested by this paper provides a settled form for analysis, it cannot suggest any concrete content. Rather this must, by definition, change with every application.

Ultimately though, this paper attempts to develop a form of short-circuit analysis for investigating the different discursive strategies used in the treatment of symptoms, initially in terms of the inclusion of the symptom within the abstract universal. Beyond this though, the approach seeks to use the presence of the symptom to identify the concrete universal and thus, in Žižek's terms, practice concrete universality. The difficulty of this procedure is that it seeks to utilise Lacanian psychoanalysis, which works against the positivisation of social knowledge predominant in other forms of discourse. However, any form of analysis must feature a minimum degree of positivisation; such is the necessity of the discourse of the university under which this paper operates. Nonetheless, this Lacanian strategy, based around a formally negative

ontology, seeks to evade a positivisation of its own analytic method through an acknowledgement of its own concrete contingency.

The core aim of this discursive strategy is to produce an approach which *both* identifies the symptomatic point within a discourse, and the underlying fantasmatic organisation used to domesticate these symptoms. It also goes further than this in examining the potential strategies that could potentially be used to deconstruct the abstract universal. Thus the approach developed in this paper concentrates on two separate areas. The first focuses on the manner in which symptoms are contained by the imaginary of the abstract universal, so as that they do not produce a shift to the concrete universal. There are two alternative approaches within this category. The first involves a repression of the symptom, the second, more effective strategy involves an acknowledgement, but domestication of the Real within the symptom. Understanding the manner in which a universal horizon protects itself from the symptom is vital to comprehending the manner in which the symptom can be used against the universal imaginary.

The latter section of the paper focuses on this alternative task, reviewing the manner in which symptoms can be utilised to reveal the presence of the concrete universal and to produce radical social change. Again, two approaches are examined; the acknowledgement of the concrete universal from within the abstract universal and the effect of discourses within the concrete universal. Ultimately, this form of analysis relies on Žižek's understanding of dialectical materialism.

### **Dialectical Materialism**

Žižek's recent work on dialectical materialism has operated through his concept of the 'parallax view' (Žižek, 2006). The parallax view combines the issues of universality, dialectics and the materialism of *jouissance*. Žižek argues that there are several different modalities of the parallax (2006: 7) the most appropriate parallax for this paper occurs within the universal; a parallax of universality. A parallax - that is, an optical illusion - occurs between two perspectives of an object that appear in the same frame but which have no common ground between them.

The parallax of universality best reflects Žižek's thinking on universality. The notion of parallax, in dialectical fashion, splits the idea of totality into an abstract and a concrete form (producing an *abstract* universal and a *concrete* universal). The abstract universal provides the hegemonic imaginary horizons – the signifiers and images the

support any concept of shared social life – that people use to guides their actions, e.g. the concept of individual freedom or that of human rights. This universal imaginary stands in for the lack that constitutes the social domain. The abstract universal is normally based around an empty signifier, or an *objet a*, which in Lacanian terms provides a suture for that primal lack and, because of the sense of fullness that it gives, provides the subject with *jouissance*.

As an example, liberal democratic discourses may be structured around the empty signifier ‘freedom’, which can be taken to mean any number of things. The content of these meanings is not important. What is important is the structural form that allows ‘freedom’ to stand in for the presence of absence and structure the ideological field of liberal democracy. In turn, the abstract universal extends this horizon as an ideological formation, taking on further signifiers in what Laclau terms a ‘logic of equivalence’. The condensation of particular elements around a central imaginary horizon through a logic of equivalence offers the prospect of a return to fullness and *Jouissance*.

In contrast to the condensing effect of the abstract horizon, the universal exception acts as a dislocating factor again this horizon. The exception, known as the concrete universal, lies on the ‘flip-side’ of the parallax of universality, being ‘the other’ to the abstract universal. In this sense of it being the ‘flip-side’ of the coin, there is no connection between the abstract and concrete universals, no symbolic point of translation. Vitaly, however, they nevertheless remain linked as a totality. Although the concrete universal exists as the singular exception to the universal horizon, at the same time this exception comes to exceed that horizon; it is necessary for the continued functioning of the abstract universal.

The absolute poverty of many 3<sup>rd</sup> world workers is an example of the concrete universal. These workers, not so much those who toil in sweatshops, but those outside of sweatshops – the reserve army of unemployed workers whose presence allows for the continuation of sweatshop conditions – are necessary for the efficient functioning of capitalism and its abstract universal horizons. These horizons, which in capitalism we may consider to be structured under such notions as ‘wealth’ and ‘progress’, require the presence – and most likely death – of these workers, yet this condition cannot be acknowledged within capitalist ideology; it is the concrete universal – the exception which cannot the unbearable Truth of the abstract universal horizon.

Because abstract horizons rely on the exclusion of particular elements (they being ‘the exception’ to those abstract horizons) for their stability, strong tension exists

between the exception and the universal horizon. However, as no means exist for translating between the two, this tension comes out through the effect that the Real has upon the abstract universal.

The irresolvable nature of the difference between the two modalities of universality gets enclosed within, and thus occluded by, a particular element, the symptom. The symptom is the link between the two areas of analytical investment for a political approach drawing upon psychoanalysis; the abstract universal imaginary and the concrete universal. Within the abstract universal, the symptom embodies the universal exception and thus the Real. As such, the domestication of this potentially dislocating Real element in the symptom is vital for the smooth functioning of the abstract universal. Such domestication involves a multiplicity of different strategies. These strategies can appear to be evidence of social change, but instead they are a 'revolution' around a fundamental impossibility, that impossibility being the concrete universal.

Yet, despite the disturbing presence of the symptom, its existence is still necessary for the functioning of the universal horizon. The symptom keeps a distance between the universal imaginary and the contradiction between the fantasmatic postulation of the positivity of the social and the inherent negativity of the Real. On the other hand the presence of the symptom creates a gap between within the universal, revealing the presence of the Real and the concrete universal. Thus whilst symptoms are enjoyed, they are also potentially the cause of anxiety and dislocation.

A variety of mechanisms exist within ideological formations that can domesticate the effect of the symptom, just as each universal horizon is vulnerable at many points to the symptoms (the 'unbearable examples') that they must repress in order to sustain their appearance as legitimate statements about social life. These two separate but vitally related aspects constitute the torsion around which pivots the discursive position created in this paper. The challenge in constructing this short-circuit approach to analysis is to identify and examine both the techniques that are used for maintaining an ideological position (that occurs through the domestication of symptoms) as well as the potential for achieving radical structural shifts. We shall now move onto a discussion of the varying elements of this discursive strategy.

### **Symptomatic analysis**

## **1. Repression of the symptom**

The first discursive strategy to be discussed relates to the repression of the symptom. All discourses within the abstract universal operate with a degree of repression, that of the impossibility of society; because of the mediating imposition of language, society can never achieve a utopian fullness, but must instead settle for the illusionary horizons of ideology and *jouissance*. As such, a certain repression of the symptom is the condition of possibility for the construction of the abstract universal, which functions as the illusion that society is possible. When we talk of discursive strategies as a response to the symptom, all of these strategies operate as modalities of repression. However, in this paper a distinction shall be made between this form of repression and a more direct form of repression where the very existence of the symptom is repressed. This type of repression is known as secondary repression, where a signifier is excluded from the symbolic, as opposed to primary repression which relates to castration and the original constitution of the unconscious. Additionally, within Lacanian psychoanalytic thought there is a vital distinction between repression and a term often used in conjunction with repression, disavowal. Repression and disavowal are different defence mechanisms for dealing with trauma, such as the trauma of the Real of the symptom. Lacan uses disavowal in terms of the structure of perversion, where the subject simultaneously disavows and acknowledges the symptom. This is a process of fetishism, to which we shall soon return.

In contrast, repression is the process where a signifier or discourse is expelled from the conscious into the unconscious. This expulsion is never complete, in that the symptomatic signifier does not disappear, but rather continues to operate within the unconscious realm. Because it functions within the unconscious, the repressed symptom continues to have an affect upon of the symbolic order and as such perpetual efforts are made to contain the symptom, given its traumatic effects. Repression often occurs when the threat of dislocation is high because the symptom cannot be included within the universal imaginary. This has most often occurred in totalitarian societies, where society is considered to be explicitly complete. In contrast to free-market societies, where the abstract universal imaginary may emphasise wealth and freedom, the most prominent aspect of the abstract universal of totalitarian societies is unity and solidarity. Therefore elements of non-unity in totalitarian societies are treated in a different manner from societies in which unity is not such a strong ideal. Because of the strong libidinal investment in this unity, the stability of society is entirely dependent on the repression or



extermination of the symptom. Thus repression and antagonism often operate together because of the need to exterminate the fantasised external cause of the symptom. Indeed, these antagonism are themselves generated by the abstract universal through the positing and then repression of an element deemed alien in order to maintain the abstract universal, often in a violent manner- for example in the Tiananmen square massacre of 1989. The treatment of Jews by Nazi Germany is another seminal example of this strategy.

This is not to suggest that non-totalitarian societies do not use repression as a discursive strategy against the symptom. Many discourses within capitalism actively repress symptoms of global capital, such as environmental degradation and absolute poverty. Conversely numerous capitalist discourses acknowledge these symptoms, not as a concrete universal that exceeds the abstract universal, but rather acknowledges their presence by constructing them in fantasy. These discursive strategies are used when the symptom can no longer be repressed because of the pressure the symptom is placing on the symbolic order through the unconscious. Paradoxically though, an acknowledgment of the symptom is also functional for an abstract universal in order to keep a distance from the impossibility of society. It is to these strategies that we now turn.

## **2. Acknowledgement of the Symptom in fantasy**

The symptom is unavoidable; it is a constitutive element of the social. Nonetheless, the gap opened up by the symptom can be avoided and with it the Real effect of the symptom. The gap opened by the symptom is sutured by the construction of the symptom in fantasy. By constructing the symptom in fantasy the symptom itself does not disappear, rather its effect is tamed. Instead of a force of anxiety, trauma and dislocation, the symptom within fantasy (as opposed to the symptom as embodying the Real) becomes a point of *jouissance*. The symptom is a site of enjoyment because it gives cause to the excessive negativity inherent within the social. In this sense the symptom translates as with *objet a*, the cause of an impossible desire for fullness. The symptom, as an element of the Real, opens up a gap within the social - much like *objet a* as the cause of desire does within subjectivity. The process of attempting to fill that gap generates *jouissance*. Was the symptom to be totally sutured then the subject would be faced with the full, naked, negativity of the social. Thus the symptom is maintained, albeit at a distance, within fantasy. There are several different devices used within

fantasy to accomplish the paradoxical task of acknowledging, yet domesticating the symptom so as to avoid the potential dislocation that comes with the active presence of the concrete universal. These include ideological fantasy, external antagonism, super-ego demand and disavowal and fetishism. We shall discuss each in turn.

## 2.1 Ideological Fantasy

Ideology and fantasy are the main drivers through which the symptom is firstly acknowledged and then domesticated. Together they build the subject's sense of social and psychic coherence, belonging to the Lacanian register of the imaginary. Fantasy, a modality of the imaginary, provides an unconscious supplement of *jouissance* which acts as the base for the operation of ideology. This operation is known as ideological fantasy, the discursive strategy by which an illusory *jouissance* is obtained through the fantasmatic postulating around the possibility of a return to primal *Jouissance*. This possibility relies on ideological fantasy externalising the symptomatic elements which threaten the abstract universal, but also the maintenance of these symptoms. As an illustration, a strong abstract universal imaginary tends to form around national identity. This imaginary construction - in New Zealand, for example, we talk of what it means to be a 'New Zealander' - is a strong source of *jouissance* for the subject. In order to maintain this *jouissantic* identification, symptoms of the failure of national identity - domestic violence, for example - are externalised; displaced to another cause, such as immigrants. At the same time, however, national identity requires the presence of these symptomatic elements in order to find an explanation for the continued failure of identity. The displacement and maintenance of symptoms in the name of *jouissance* is the role of ideological fantasy.

The reconstruction of ideology has been a vital move in psychoanalytic thought. Ideology had been predominately presented in modernist thought as distinct from 'reality' in the sense that it was an illusionary appearance as opposed to essence, at which modernism was driving. For this reason, with the advent of post-structuralist thought and the related post-modern journey into relativism, ideology as a concept was rejected . Through an operation of determinate reflection in which the very negation of ideology has become its positive condition, Lacanian theory has transcended these definitions of ideology and has rehabilitated the term. Ideology stills operates as misrecognition, but of a different nature as ideology is transferred from the epistemological to the ontological .

Rather than a distinction between reality and ideology, ideology is seen as the guarantor of the consistency of the social; there is no reality without ideology. Because all discourses are ultimately dislocated and lacking, ideology provides the role of covering this lack, and hence the contingent political nature of any such ideological construction (2001: 191). Thus through ideology the subject suffers from misrecognition of the negative ontology of the social (Stavrakakis, 1997: 123).

The key role of ideology in the construction of normality, it can thus be surmised, is to include and pacify the symptom through its staging of the symptom within fantasy formations to which the subject holds. It is the symptom that disrupts the consistency of the social and thus the presence of the symptom must be negated (1997: 128). Paradoxically, in order to achieve this, the symptom must be included in the ideological fantasy of the abstract universal as a point of enjoyment. As Glyn Daly states “The central paradox of ideology is that it can only attempt closure through simultaneously producing the ‘threat’ to that closure” . The fantasmatic construction, and deconstruction, of the symptom is of vital political importance. A political approach seeking to reveal the concrete universal must not focus on fantasmatic postulations around the symptom, but rather the existence of the concrete universal from which the symptom stems.

As an example, the current debate around climate change recognises the symptom and attempts to domesticate its effect so as to maintain the universal horizon of the social; global capitalism and the production of wealth. Although it is often argued that change must occur to prevent environmental collapse, change is only thought necessary *within* the capitalist imaginary. This is an ideological construction; it includes the symptom, but gives it external cause, such as the failure of markets or governments to take pollution externalities into account. It is contended that once these contingent factors are remedied, the capitalist imaginary will be restored to its fantasised state of fullness. What this brand of fantasmatic construction denies is the concrete universal; that the logic of capital (the ever-increasing demand for profit) is fundamentally unsustainable. A properly Lacanian psychoanalytic political approach would be to identify the concrete universal and expose it as the unbearable example within the universal horizon. This is opposed to regular critical analysis which operates within the hegemonic fantasy, dealing only with the symptom as it is presented in fantasy or perhaps trying to generate an alternative fantasmatic position which equally ignores the concrete universal e.g. various Green movements’ attempts at producing ‘Green’ capitalism.

## 2.2 External Antagonisms

An important ideological operation in the domesticating of the symptom occurs through the production of 'straw' enemies, through the construction of external antagonisms. Again, this is another paradoxical operation of ideological fantasy; it operates by acknowledging and representing its impossibility in the form of an external obstacle (Daly, 1999: 224). As with the symptom, because the subject receives *jouissance* from the failure of ideology, the subject experiences antagonism as a site of enjoyment. In order that the anxiety of the radical negativity of the Other is avoided, antagonism, like the symptom, produces compensatory *jouissance*. Daly suggests that the production of an 'Other' that blocks the full constitution of identity and universality is the foremost fantasy because it gives cause for the fundamental lack in the subject (1999: 234). Hence the difficulty in displacing symptoms or revealing the contingency of antagonisms.

Ideological fantasy reproduces the encounter with the Real in the symptom in a much more manageable fashion than through the strategy of repression, reviewed above (Daly, 1999; 224). It does not simply repress the symptom, but rather domesticates it as either a temporal failure to be resolved, or the fault of an external impediment. Symptoms still exist, but society is no longer so reliant on the extermination these symptoms. Because of this, the social or the subject is rarely exposed to the Real in its naked, raw form, but rather as a domesticated encounter that maintains the belief that 'society', in all its consensual plentitude, is possible. This effect operates in the universal horizon of a market-led capitalist system. The market is presented as an abstract universal; it is a natural, objective device that brings maximum wealth and well-being to all. When the market fails to achieve the impossible vision of its abstract universal, such failures are fantasised as simple impediments to the market; failures which can be overcome through various compensatory measures, particularly in relation to the removal of antagonisms. The negation of the universal horizon by the symptom, which represents the exception of the universal, is therefore not considered a condition of the market, but rather something external to be fixed; a solution-in-coming.

This kind of analysis fits with a formalist understanding of identity, that A (the market) cannot be non-A (the constitutive failure of the market). Rather, any failure of the market is conceived to be caused by B, an external factor. However, the market can be both the market as an efficient wealth-producing device and its constitutive failure, such as the radical injustice of market mechanisms, as evident in global poverty. In terms of Žižek's parallax view, market failure is the symptom/negation of the abstract universal

market-economy system, the concrete universal being the determinate reflection of this negation in its constitutive role: that markets can only operate through their own failure. This constant failure, and thus the constant need for minor alteration in the name of universality provides *jouissance* to the subjects involved in the same manner as ideology.

### **2.3 Super-ego demand**

As well as fantasy and ideology, the other major factor in the domestication of the symptom is the super-ego. The super-ego is an imperative, an imperative to fill the gaps in the symbolic order (Evans, 2004: 200-201). The super-ego is vitally related to castration, it is a constant reminder within the symbolic order of the name-of-the-father. The name-of-the-father is the force of castration that insists that the subject follow the symbolic law, rather than that of the mythical primal *Jouissance*. Therefore the more the subject follows the law, the guiltier they feel for having given up on the *Jouissance* before castration, so the more they seek compensatory surplus enjoyment by following the law. The ultimate imperative of the super-ego is to enjoy; not only must the subject follow the symbolic law, but they must also enjoy it.

Thus the super-ego is not a subversive force within a discursive structure. Despite this inherent conformity, the super-ego is often the major discursive strategy used by those seeking to make political changes within an abstract universal. The most salient example of the use of the super-ego imperative as a discursive strategy for change is in charity appeals, such as World Vision. Indeed, the super-ego is actually a strong discursive strategy for the maintenance of the abstract universal. It appeals to the subject to maintain the symbolic order, in which they have invested, to fix the faults - the symptoms - within this order. Therefore the super-ego appeal can have a short-term progressive affect, appealing for the subject to recycle more, or to sponsor a Third World child, but ultimately these effects are only made in the name of maintaining the order which is producing these faults. More than this, the super-ego domesticates the Real effect of the symptom because these efforts to repair the symbolic fabric indefinitely postpone a confrontation with the Real.

The link between the super-ego and the symptom is best considered through the complementary influence of ideological fantasy in maintaining the consistency of the social. As with ideology and antagonism, the operation of the super-ego is such that the demand of the symptom is to be enjoyed; the super-ego suggests the prospect of suture,

but also keeps a distance from this (impossible) fullness. As an illustration, rather than critiquing the capitalist edifice as a totality to reconsider climate change, a gesture towards the goal is made, such as global talks and agreements. This act will never accomplish the fantasised end goal, but it does enough to subdue the demand of the symptom. This is not, however a wholly productive strategy either for the efficient maintenance of the universal or its dislocation via the symptom/concrete universal. Super-ego *jouissance* cannot be avoided simply by attending to its demands; the more that the subject submits to its demands, the more that those insatiable demands are taken on. Herein lays the crucial link between the operation of ideological fantasy and the super-ego. Rather than taking on the demands of the super-ego so as to repair the social (say, to join the 'Eradicate Poverty' social movement so as to correct the failures of capitalism to end poverty), the subject can turn to ideology and in particular, ideological fantasy, because ideological fantasy is able to externalise and *appear* to treat the cause of the symptom. The more the super-ego demands, the greater the need for ideological fantasy; the demands of the super-ego can be avoided by transferring them into the realm of ideology.

Although the super-ego demand is more 'beneficial' for a cause in the short-term (at least, here, attention is paid to symptoms such as poverty, ecological damage, etc), ultimately both the super-ego and ideology fail to invoke radical structural change. Rather, they produce what appears to be change, but is ultimately a rotation around a central axis, the Real. The super-ego prevents the subject from acting against the symptom and instead provides surplus-enjoyment from the imperative to repair the symbolic fabric. What is required in order for thorough-going social change to occur is for the fantasmatic system which constructs the symptom as a temporal impediment to fullness to be broken, and the symptom revealed as the very condition of that system.

## **2.4 Fetishism and Disavowal**

The major factor preventing this movement is the *jouissance* inherent in fantasy. *Jouissance* creates a bond between the subject and the universal imaginary such that any disconfirming evidence is impotent in its effects, even if the symptom is openly acknowledged. Accordingly, Žižek contends that the analyst or critic also has to go past the point of interpreting discursive formations because of the cynicism through which belief functions. Cynical belief operates through disavowal, where the presence of something is acknowledged yet paradoxically at the same time ignored. The subject may

acknowledge the presence of the symptom which negates the abstract universal, but continue to strongly believe and invest in the abstract universal. This paradoxical form of belief is allowed to operate because of the presence of a fetishised object in which the subject invests. The object of the fetish mediates between the Real of the symptom and the abstract universal. Thus the concept of 'cynical distance' or disavowal is another modality through which ideologies operate and through which the Real obtains palpable form within the symptom.

Here, Žižek makes a distinction between repression and fetishism as two different modalities of defence against the effect of the Real. In repression, the subject refuses to acknowledge the symptom to the degree that they are unaware of its distorting influence. In contrast, in fetishism, the subject is aware of the symptom and experiences it as a site of enjoyment. Thus the subject can appear to be a pragmatic realist who fully accepts reality. This acceptance, however, is only founded on the existence of a fetish. When this fetish is removed, the subject has no defence against the lack in the Other (Johnston, 2004). Such has the potential to devastate the psychical state of the subject because it is through the fetish that they relate to reality.

Fetishistic belief is the last modality of defence through which discourses that acknowledge the presence of the symptom are able to pacify the dislocating effects of the symptom. Fetishism occurs where a discourse not only acknowledges the symptom, but also, in a purely interpretive manner at least, accepts this symptom as necessary. Thus the subject may acknowledge faults in the universal, its symptoms, but still believe that the universal is possible. As an example, a subject in the capitalist system may suggest that they know that markets must fail, but nonetheless they have a large libidinal investment in capitalism, and thus act as if markets are not constituted by their failure. Daly gives an interesting example here in relation to the welfare state. The modern welfare state apparatus acknowledges that poverty is not the fault of its victims; they are the product of capitalist development. Nonetheless the welfare state requires its clients to act as if their circumstances are their own responsibility. This belief also operates in Jeffery Sachs' work on poverty. Essentially, while Sachs constantly refers to the global economy, on his major topic, poverty, he acknowledges only domestic factors as causes within Third World countries.

Žižek believes that this is the unfortunate stalemate presented by global capital. As we see in reports from the United Nations and the Bretton Woods organisations, the state of the world - particularly climate change and environmentalism, and its effects - is largely well known and documented. This evidence, which should dislocate the

imaginary coherence of capitalism because it stands in stark opposition to these elements, is instead displaced by commodity fetishism. Commodity fetishism, a Marxist concept redeveloped by Žižek, occurs where the capitalist subject places a large libidinal investment in an object of consumption. This object becomes the object of desire; *objet a* which allows for a temporary suturing of the symbolic order. This suturing provided by the fetishism of commodities, mediates against the dislocatory effect of the symptoms of capitalism. Such is the grip of this economy of pleasure there has been a closure in the political imaginary that has led Žižek to suggest that only a huge global event could possibility displace capital (Johnston, 2004).

Adrian Johnston (2004) contends that perhaps the biggest issue with fetishism is that those who fetishise do not feel they have a problem; they gather too much enjoyment from the symptom. Johnston cites the example of George W. Bush who refuses to take on any environmental policy that may endanger the American libidinal object 'the American Way of Life'. The efficiency in which the symptom is domesticated and included in the realm of the abstract universal means that any political method that seeks to promote radical change cannot do so from within the boundaries set by the universal horizon. Instead, political formations seeking to evoke a structural shift must seek to perform the concrete universal, the materialist Truth of the hegemonic discursive formation. There are two salient approaches relevant to this task. These are discourses which constitutively reveal the symptom and discourses of concrete universality. It is to these strategies that we now turn.

### **3. Discourses of the symptom**

Discourses of the symptom, of which this paper is an example, reveal symptoms in terms of the concrete universal. However, these discourses cannot be articulated from outside of the terms that are set by the hegemonic horizon. This issue stems from the incommensurability within the parallax view. While those who view the symptom awry can sense the presence of the parallax Real and hence the concrete universal, a translation of terms between the two is impossible. This impossibility, however, is not a limit to the dialectical process. While the parallax view may appear to have commonalities with formalist logic because of the lack of symbolic translatability between levels of the parallax, the dialectical movement continues through the effect of the Real



via the symptom. The underlying effect of the Real allows for the possibility of a radical shift in positions from the abstract universal to the concrete universal.

The conditions of possibility for such a shift rely on the unconscious dislocating pressure of the Real upon the abstract universal, rather than through any effect of the symbolic. As has been described previously, the pressure of the symptom is regularly subverted through the symbolic and the imaginary, either through the acknowledgement of symptoms in fantasy, or their repression. However, when these devices are not wholly successful, the symptom can become unruly and have the potential to produce a shift against the universal imaginary by evoking the concrete universal through the underlying affect of the Real. The initial affect of major events such as 9/11 or Hurricane Katrina is an example of the dislocating affect of the Real against the abstract universal<sup>ii</sup>. Discourses of the symptom can simulate the concrete universal by revealing the gap created by the symptom within the universal horizon. Conversely, the very act of symbolising the symptom domesticates and particularises its potential effects; without the force of the Real which comes from a lack of symbolic resources, the symptom is not a dislocatory force in itself and neither are discourses of the symptom. Instead, the biggest role that this kind of discourse has is to open up a space within the abstract universal, to force an internal dislocation. Thus Žižek suggests that; "Today ... it is more important than ever to HOLD THIS UTOPIAN PLACE OF THE GLOBAL ALTERNATIVE OPEN, even if it remains empty, living on borrowed time, awaiting the content to fill it in".

Examples of discourses of the symptom include Green Radicalism and Marxist political economy. The example of Marxism is instructive here. Marxism, at a time when the 'working-class' of capital still existed as a strong force in developed/capitalist societies, could have been considered to belong to the category of discourse that I will soon develop below, that is, discourses of concrete universality. Contemporary Marxist thought, however, tends not to identify strongly with today's working class in the Third World or 'developing countries'. Marxist theory still operates within the terms dominated by the western experience of capitalism. It may usefully identify the role that the symptom plays in constituting the universal (say, Third World poverty and western capitalist life-styles), but it still lies outside of the terms of the concrete universal; it does not inhabit this space.

It is also of limited use to simply present an alternative imaginary that is external to the current universal. This kind of discursive strategy fits into the formalist mode of thought. The excluded element, the 'anti-A' to the dominant A or the formalist external 'B' discourse, is most likely to simply entrench differences on the identity of both opposing

universals rather than pose a serious challenge to the existing order. This is because discourses which are simply external to the abstract universal do not enter into the realm of the Real, the underlying absence that can dislocate the abstract universal. Rather they battle in purely symbolic terms. Whilst, as Laclau contends, this 'war of position' over the content of an empty signifier - around which an abstract universal is structured - can bring change *within* this form of universality, empty signifiers do not interact with the underlying foundations of the order; the concrete universal. We see such an operation in the global conflict between Islam and the West. Rather than seriously threaten the hegemonic power of the Western world, Islamic militants are posited as external antagonisms which can be removed through conflict and force.

Having detailed the manner in which such 'unbearable examples' in the form of symptoms are so efficiently re-constructed and domesticated, one might doubt whether any possibility of radical change remains. As I have noted, while symptoms like poverty and global climate change are sometimes disavowed or repressed completely, they are generally acknowledged. Yet in the process of being acknowledged, symptoms are domesticated by the devices of fantasy and ideology. The alternative approach relies on a shift in position within the parallax; from the abstract to the concrete universal. These discourses are external to the abstract universal in that they cannot be understood within its terms. As such, discourses of the concrete universal are Real from within the perspective of the abstract universal. It is to the analysis of these discourses that we shall now turn.

#### ***4. Discourses of the concrete universal***

The concrete universal exists as the flip side of the abstract universal within a parallax. That is, the content of the discourse(s) within the concrete universal cannot be perceived from within the abstract universal, only from its effects through the parallax Real. This effect comes through within the abstract universal as the symptom, which is Real until it is symbolised and domesticated through fantasy, as I have laid out in the preceding sections. Therefore, because discourses from within the concrete universal are Real, then they have a potentially disruptive affect on the abstract universal. This affect does not come through a symbolic/imaginary translation or interaction, but rather through the pressure the concrete universal places on the abstract universal via the Real effect of the symptom.

An example is illustrative. If we posit an abstract universal within capitalism as the production of wealth, the concrete universal is the exploited foundation of this wealth, the Third World poor. This factor, that the abstract universal is based upon the concrete universal, comes through in the effect of the symptom. The symptom here is the construction of this poverty within the wealthy capitalist world. The construction of the symptom, through fantasy, is generally one of charity, of a humanitarian situation which removes the political consequences and thus domesticates the Real. Indeed, the very act of symbolising the symptom within capitalist discourse tames the effect of the symptom. In this example, discourses of the concrete universal are the discourses that occur within the Third World, which cannot be understood within the abstract universal. They can be acknowledged, but not fully taken on. Such an act would dislocate the abstract universal because of the unbearable contradiction between the two universals. Only through a radical structural shift in positions can two discourses within a parallax and the gap between them, be perceived.

The key for this method of discursive strategy is not to present the concrete universal as simply external to the abstract universal, but vitally as an internal element of the moment of universality. If a discourse of concrete universality is constructed as external to the abstract universal, it subverts the Real element inherent to the concrete universal through the parallax gap. Discursive positioning of this sort allows for the opportunity for the abstract universal to construct the symptom (which stages the concrete universal) as an external antagonism against which it is in conflict. Rather the excluded element must present itself as the internal, constitutive exception of the abstract universal. The recent pro-immigrant protests in America are instructive of such an appeal to concrete universality. The main banner held by the immigrant protesters was 'We are America'. Here the protesters' appeal has taken the form of concrete universality. The immigration (alien) workers have been under attack in the United States as an impediment to the fullness of the social - as a source of crime, taking jobs etc. Alternatively, what the workers are trying to suggest is that they are a necessary condition of U.S society, and should be treated as such. The workers perform a major role in taking the underclass jobs that maintain the American economy; without them the economy would fall. Therefore the immigrants are a necessary condition rather than an impediment to the system. Hence the appeal 'We are America'.

The key here is not to simply put pressure on the abstract universal (in this case, Americanness) to include the marginalised group within its terms, using a particularised approach common to identity-based politics. This might result, in such a case, in the

lodging of human rights claims with the law courts, seeking special application of legal protections to the otherwise illegally-positioned immigrants. Neither would it proceed through the proposing of an alternative universal that could surpass the failure of the former universal to represent the marginalised interests, perhaps leading to a new universal condition such as 'North Americanness' . These approaches will result in domestication of the marginalised's claims and to open conflict, respectively. Instead, the discourse, like that of the American immigrant protestors, has to occupy the position of the concrete universal; the constitutive exception.

## **Conclusion**

The method of short-circuit analysis which has been created in this paper is a grounded reflection of this abstracted strategy. By revealing the deadlock that is inherent to any universal imaginary, its incommensurability within itself as a totality, one can practice concrete universality through a short-circuit analysis. Such an analysis involves both identifying excluded and symptomatic points, but also the fantasmatic structures in which they are embedded. It is this strategy which reveals the political potential of psychoanalysis. Specifically, rather than having to choose between alternative conceptions of the universal, its abstract and concrete forms, dialectical logic allows an analyst the ability to think both options at once; for example, that global capital brings both great wealth and extreme poverty, that capitalist societies can become increasingly energy efficient, yet be destroying the climate at the same time. This Žižekian style of analysis allows symptoms to be considered not as contingent failures, but rather as disavowed elements that constitute its very possibility. Therefore, this paper suggests that the most construction form of radical political engagement is to reveal the disavowed hard kernel upon which hegemonic horizons are based, not as an element in itself, but rather as the concrete universal. It is the ability to think both elements of the parallax at once, to contrast the concrete universal with the hegemonic imaginary which brings the possibility of dislocation, rather than the concrete universal alone.

## References

- Bellamy, E., J. (1993). Discourses of impossibility: Can psychoanalysis be political. *Diacritics*, 23(1), 24-38.
- Braunstein, N. (2003). Desire and Jouissance in the teachings of Lacan. In J.-M. Rabate (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Lacan*. Cambridge: Cambridge University.
- Daly, G. (1999a). Ideology and its paradoxes: Dimensions of Fantasy and Enjoyment. *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 4(2).
- Daly, G. (1999b). Politics and the Impossible: Beyond Psychoanalysis and Deconstruction. *Theory, Culture and Society*, 16(4), 75-98.
- Evans, D. (1996). *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*. London: Brunner-Routledge.
- Fink, B. (1995). *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Glynos, J. (2001). The Grip of Ideology: A Lacanian Approach to the Theory of Ideology. *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 6(2), 191-214.
- Homer, S. (2001). It's the political economy, stupid! On Zizek's Marxism. *Radical Philosophy*, 108(July/August).
- Johnston, A. (2004). The cynic's fetish: Slavoj Zizek and the dynamics of belief. *Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society*, 9(3), 259.
- Kay, S. (2003). *Zizek: A Critical Introduction*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Laclau, E. (2000). Constructing Universality. In J. Butler, E. Laclau & S. Zizek (Eds.), *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*. London: Verso.
- Sachs, J. (2005). *The End of Poverty; Economic Possibilities of Our Time*. New York: Penguin Press.
- Stavrakakis, Y. (1997). Ambiguous Ideology and the Lacanian Twist. *Journal for the Centre for Freudian Analysis and Research*, 8-9, 117-130.
- Zizek, S. (1993). *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel and the Critique of Ideology*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Zizek, S. (1996). *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters*. London: Verso.
- Zizek, S. (1999). *The Ticklish Subject*. London: Verso.
- Zizek, S. (2000). Da Capo senza Fine. In J. Bulter, E. Laclau & S. Zizek (Eds.), *Contingency, Hegemony and Universality*. London: Verso.
- Zizek, S. (2002). *For they know not what they do: Enjoyment as a political factor* (2nd ed.). London: Verso.
- Zizek, S. (2006). *The Parallax View*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

## Endnotes:

<sup>i</sup> Fink , distinguishes between two orders of *jouissance*,  $J_1$  and  $J_2$ .  $J_1$  refers to *Jouissance* 'before the letter'. This *Jouissance* is the Real link of unity between the mother and the child, in this sense it is 'pure', unmediated *Jouissance*.  $J_2$  is *jouissance* 'after the letter', that which occurs once the subject enters language. Here *Jouissance* gives way to *jouissance* because of the mediating affect of language upon the subject of the signifier. The subject loses access to *Jouissance*, but is able to procure a second-order form of *jouissance* that compensates for that loss. This procurement occurs through the staging of fantasy. Compensatory *jouissance* revolves around the necessarily impossible attempts at regaining the original unity of *Jouissance* (such as through universality) which are supported by fantasy. These attempts cannot succeed because the subject cannot return to a time before language, a time of  $J_1$ , but this very impossibility is repressed in fantasy. Conversely, Žižek contends that  $J_1$  itself is a fantasmatic creation. This form of *jouissance* does not really exist, it is only a fantasmatic construction produced because of the lack of *jouissance* within the symbolic order. Fantasy initiates the idea for the subject that there was once a time or space before lack. However, like the Real before-the-letter,  $J_1$  only exists because it is given a name in language. Žižek contends that this conception (of a lost, primal *jouissance*) ignores a paradox that is caused by the Real, that there is no enjoyment for the subject before their enmeshment in surplus-enjoyment. The fundamental illusion is that behind *jouissance* there is, or once was, an original *Jouissance* .

<sup>ii</sup> It is worth noting, however, that once events of this magnitude are symbolised, they lose much of their dislocatory affect and with it the potential for radical change. In the case of 9/11, the anxiety produced by this event served only to strengthen the existing hegemony by a displacement of trauma onto an external cause; in this circumstance, 'evil' terrorists and Islam in general. By contrast, Hurricane Katrina, and other such natural events such as the Boxing tsunami of 2004, have proved more difficult to displace. In the case of Katrina, this anxiety continues to haunt the Bush Administration.