

IJŽS Vol 2.1 Special Graduate Issue**Guest Editorial Introduction - Russell Manning and Chris MacMillan**

In Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* the infamous torture scene resonates for many for a variety of reasons¹. For some it has forever ruined *Stealer's Wheel's* 1972 hit *Stuck In the Middle*, for others it has re-marked contemporary cinema in the sense that it announces with vicious beauty the arrival of Tarantino as provocative film maker. Suffice to say in the scene there are three participants; Mr. Blonde, the psychotic perpetrator, the policeman who suffers the ear-ectomy and finally the viewer who has to make sense of the scene. If this scene was cast as a metaphor for the postgraduate student, which role does the student play? The psychotic, hacking (by misrepresentation) the theory of the established Other? Or perhaps as the victim, losing their intellectual dignity to the demands of the big Other of academic convention? Or the viewer, secretly enjoying the scene without really getting involved?

To engage with Žižek as a postgraduate student involves entering a consummate intellectual parallax which facilitates the constant shifting within a position, simultaneously between the opening up and closing down ideas, trailing and tracing Žižek, torturing one minute, being tortured the next. Yet, as onerous as this appears, it is for this reason that Žižek's work is immensely entertaining and interesting, covering a huge range of topics, from shit to F.W.J. Schelling without blinking an eye. Doubtlessly this ability to achieve this mutually enabling movement between enjoyment and torture is one of the reasons Žižek's work is so appealing to post-graduate students, particularly those taken by both Schelling and shit, or those who see a strong resemblance between the two.

Additionally, the breadth and pace of his work opens up many avenues for critique, even for the novice reader, encouraging post-graduates into the fray even

though they may have no idea what they have got themselves into. Yet despite this entertainment value and intellectual attraction to understand Žižek is a torturous affair, one that takes the reader on a roller coaster ride through topics from capitalism to constipation. Nonetheless, in true Žižekian style, while recognising this breadth of enquiry, we must consider the indivisible kernel around which this plurality revolves.

In his introduction to *For They Know Not What They Do*, Žižek states that his work is founded on three centres, Hegelian Dialectics, Lacanian psychoanalytic theory and contemporary criticism of ideology. If these three form a Borromeian knot, Žižek claims that it is his own enjoyment of pop culture which forms the symptom at their centre. Conversely, since the publication of *The Ticklish Subject* one could now argue that rather than pop culture being at the heart of Žižek's ideological critique, the symptom around which his work revolves is now radical politics, particularly in regards to capitalism. Whilst Žižek constantly engages with the political in terms of critique of ideology (much as he continues to with pop culture) his form of politics has not received anything like the acceptance as his theories of psychoanalysis and ideology. As such, many of the contributions in this edition seek to supplement Žižek's political work. They argue that whilst Žižek's theory of enjoyment is brilliantly productive, his form of politics remains fractured and incomplete.

Thus, while we can correctly consider Žižek as a theorist of enjoyment and pop culture, increasingly his work has emphasised enjoyment as a political factor² and it is this that many contributions address, suggesting that this is the future for Žižekian analysis, with or without Žižek. Nonetheless, whilst seeking to highlight what has emerged as the core theme of this edition, we must acknowledge the breadth of contributions encouraged by Žižek's work. Perhaps reflecting the freedom available to graduate students, contributors to this edition have not given way to the temptation to position Žižek as 'the Master'. As such, in this edition of the IJZS students have taken positions both responding to and away from Žižek, both tortured by him and turning the tables, torturing Žižek for answers. Moreover, this has been achieved in a parallax fashion, switching between the positions of torturer and tortured while able to keep the other in view.

Robert Misek's paper, *A Parallax View Of Psycho*, takes us through Žižek's notion of parallax by employing Žižek to assess Gus Van Sant's "failed masterpiece" *Psycho*. Misek employs Žižek's conception of parallax to intertwine two great but previously incommensurable positions; Žižek and film post-theorist David Bordwell. Misek suggests that a dialectical fusion of the two is possible and devotes his essay to developing the ground from which to engage Žižek and Bordwell in a

way other than the irreconcilable. Misek offers a binocular vision, fusing together Žižek's psychoanalytic with Bordwell's more technical reading of *Psycho*. Misek concludes that though his Žižekian eye and his Bordwellian eye are of course unable to see from the other's perspective, he endeavours to show that the resulting view of *Psycho* has provided a kind of binocular vision, through which the cinematography of Hitchcock's and Van Sant's films can be understood in greater depth than if they were analyzed independently.

Continuing with Žižek as a theorist of the cinema, Bryce Lease's contribution, *How Badly Do You Want to Kill Your Father?*, deploys Žižek to assess the work of Polish theatre director Włodzimierz Staniewski. Lease takes this staging of Euripides' play as the conduit to explore the Staniewski's Author properly represents the 'Third Father', the amalgam of the Ego-Ideal and the superego, with whom the capitalist subject must compete rather than obey or aspire to become. For Lease this is the parallax to be employed opening a crack in the edifice of liberal capitalism.

Jan De Vos's intervention, *From Panopticon to Pan-psychologisation or, Why do so many women study psychology?*, concludes that post-modern man is the homo psychologicus living in an a priori psychologised habitat. De Vos' unusual take suggests that the encroaching trope of psychology into the *umwelt* renders the contemporary subject as both academic subject and amateur, (perhaps faux) psychologist. This disseminates the language into all facets of life with the result being that the big Other of common sense now has a degree in psychology (bought on the internet!). The parallax here is that we cannot see the presupposed wood for the psychological trees and the great Enlightenment project ends in the babble of psycho-discourse.

Freeman's *There's a Crack in Everything That's How the Light Gets In: Žižek's Parallax View and the Perverse Core of Christianity* explicitly addresses Žižek's notion of the parallax view by elaborating on the assailable gap between Žižek and the radical teachings of the New Testament. In this essay Freeman sets up the short circuit between Žižek's parallax theory and the radical teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, for both of these radical approaches truth and meaning disrupt any pre-given horizon of expectation with the pure difference of a parallax gap by maintaining an irreducible tension between different points of view. For Freeman the historical social order when seen from this perspective opens a new horizon of thought and action.

The opening of a new space for political thought is the ultimate goal of Chris McMillan's contribution *Symptomatic Readings: Žižekian theory as a discursive strategy*. McMillan argues for the interpretation of enjoyment as a political factor.

McMillan suggests that, despite skepticism from many readers of Lacan, Lacanian theory – particularly that practiced by Žižek – is inherently political because it reveals not only the contingency of the social, but its inherent fixity, based upon the stabilising influence of *jouissance* and ideology. Utilising Žižek's conception of a parallax as applied to universality, McMillan contends that Žižek's work should be reorganised as a 'discursive strategy' for political interventions in order to tame the baroque nature of his theory. This discursive strategy acts as a short-circuit approach, which reveals the potential to dislocate capitalism as the existing hegemonic horizons via what he labels 'Discourses of the symptom' and 'Discourses of the concrete universal'.

Whilst McMillan and Freeman hint at capitalism as Žižek's political target, three contributors explicitly investigate Žižek's work as a theorist of capitalism and Marxism and enjoyment. Peter Bloom's paper, *Capitalism's Cynical Leviathan: Cynicism, Totalitarianism, and Hobbes in Modern Capitalist Regulation*, explicates the relationship between cynicism and totalitarianism, a recurrent theme of Žižek's, offering the unique conclusion that it was Hobbes, and not Kant, who first suggest that the injunction to Obey! Was fundamental to the effective interpellation of ideology. Bloom's parallax view is that standing within the Hobbesian horizon allows us to cast a view of the strategies of modern Capital in which the subject cynically cooperates and identifies with the workplace, while paradoxically seeing the interpellative strategies at work.

Kirk Boyle's *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Slavoj Žižek's Psychoanalytic Marxism* attempts to traverse the bridge between psychoanalysis and Marxist critique of political economy via Žižek's contention that Lacan and Marx share a formal homology in form between surplus-value and surplus-enjoyment. Moreover, Boyle suggests that a further three fundamental concepts animate Žižek's Marxism, these being the couplings symptoms and commodity fetishism, class struggle and drive as well as base-superstructure and the Real. Of these, commodity fetishism emerges as the core element, that which acts as the 'sinthome' of capitalism in terms of a 'embodied piece of *jouissance* that resists interpretation'. Because of the overarching influence of commodity fetishism, Boyle, quoting Žižek, suggests that change must come at the level of the commodity itself. Additionally, Boyle claims that Žižek puts an end to all flirtations with the transgressive nature of the drive when he associates it with the machinations of capitalism. Nonetheless, Boyle suggests that for Žižek the question today is how to revolutionise a system that is naturally self-revolutionary.

Following a similar line to Boyle, Gregory Flemming's paper *From Marx to the Act* attempts to locate Žižek's political practice within a long history of 'psycho-Marxism'. Flemming contends that what differentiates Žižek from this tradition is his focus on enjoyment. Like Boyle, Flemming draws on surplus-value and surplus-enjoyment as the fundamental link which animates Žižek's psycho-Marxism. Conversely, Flemming warns of a potentially fatal flaw in Žižek's psycho-Marxism. If his combination of these two disciplines is predicated upon a structural homology between surplus-value and surplus-enjoyment then any rejection of Marx's labour theory of value, from which Marxist surplus-value stems, is potentially fatal. That it is not, allowing Žižek's psycho-Marxism to continue to be legitimate and destructive mode of ideological critique and radical politics, Flemming contends, is Žižek's wager. Additionally, Flemming suggests that Žižek has attempted to break away from the teleological emphasis on revolution within Marxism by focusing on the Lacanian Act. In this form, Flemming suggests, Žižek is able to couch the revolution of the proletariat not as the teleological movement of history, but rather the end of analysis, where the capitalist subject comes to identify with the proletariat position as the excluded universal and Truth of the capitalist system. Flemming concludes, like McMillan and his 'Discourses of the Symptom', that it is too much to demand a political programme from Žižek, but he can open up a new space for political thought through this emphasis on the proletariat as the subject of history.

Matthew Flisfeder's contribution *Reading Emancipation Backwards; Laclau, Žižek and the Critique of Ideology in Emancipatory Politics* complements Žižek's work with that of discourse theorist Ernesto Laclau. Flisfeder contends that Žižek and Laclau share a common political standpoint in their rejection of utopia politics, but have differing contentions of the form of the politics of emancipation. In doing so Flisfeder engages with their most recent political positions; Laclau's populism and Žižek's work on class struggle. Flisfeder argues that this debate mirror that of the state of the political Left. Whilst Laclau's populist radical democracy argues for a 'naming of the people', by contrast Žižek's political Act is purely destructive. Flisfeder concludes by offering that: 'although the opposition between Laclau and Žižek on the topic of emancipatory politics leaves us without a concrete answer to the question of popular mobilisation on the Left, their approach still provides us with a renewed methodology for undertaking ideological critique'. (p.21)

Charles Wells' reflective performative paper, *Acts of Freedom: Revolution and Responsibility*, seeks to supplement Žižek's political work by contrasting two political 'Acts' – Jacques Derrida's act of absolute responsibility and Žižek's act of revolutionary freedom. Wells argues that political value lies in the minimal distance

between, or rather within, these two conceptions of the Act – an irreducible shared kernel at the heart of both revolution and responsibility. In doing so, Wells seeks to treat these acts as one, based upon their shared ontology of language and the ‘unspeakable’ nature of both acts in their disruption of social reality.

In the end, as is evidenced by this (electronic) journal, the Žižekian oeuvre is continually opening lines of flight into the parallax and facilitating strong debate both at the level of radical aesthetics and politics. It is a case of being with him or against him when his provocations meet with our desires. Žižek, like all considerable philosophers, can never remain silent and, like Spielberg’s shark, his elusive thought remains at the point of the lack. His is a unique point of enunciation, but the reader should always be aware of the seductive call of his voice. If indeed Žižek is the “Elvis of Popular culture” it is clear that this voice resonates strongly in the academy but is still to find a coherent niche in the mainstream, despite his claim that some of his texts are written for “grandmothers to understand”. With Žižek we can never know quite where we stand and this is perhaps his greatest strength, the subjective responsibility to think for ourselves, rather than to be the subject of thought, Žižekian or otherwise. In the end what is important that, like the aforementioned Reservoir Dogs patron, we don’t avert our eyes to what is presented to us.

¹ The guest editors of this edition of the IJZS wish to acknowledge the patient and valuable assistance of editor Paul Taylor

² Notably the subtitle of *For they know not what they do*