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Off-Kilter Affects and Sublime Split-Subjects: A Group Self-Interview by some Žižekian Performers

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Performatives are, at their most fundamental, acts of symbolic trust and engagement.

– Slavoj Žižek (2006, p. 45)

Introduction

The following article is reminiscent of a DVD extra (critical and creative commentary) in its relationship to our performances (the feature presentation). It was partially initiated on the day after the *2014 International Žižek Studies Conference: Parallax Future(s) in Art and Design, Ideology, and Philosophy* (held at the College of Design, Architecture, Art, and Planning at the University of Cincinnati in Cincinnati, OH, from April 4th to April 6th). In a conversation between conference chair Antonio Garcia, documenter and presenter George Elerick, and Žižekian performer Daniel Oliver on the way to the airport, the possibility of a conference-related issue of the *International Journal of Žižek Studies (IJŽS)* came up, and the various ways that our panel of performances might be included was discussed. The idea of submitting an interview emerged from the shared regret Garcia, Elerick, and Oliver had about the lack of time

left for formal questions from the audiences at the end of the “Žižekian Performances” panel on the final day of the conference. It was proposed that, making the most of *IJŽS*’ online platform, these interviews could either be presented as written texts with embedded links to video documentation or as audio recordings of each Žižekian performer being interviewed that would then overlay the videos (more closely matching the DVD extra model).

Building on the rapport, friendship, and probing curiosities that kept us four Žižekian performers talking long after our panel was over, late into many nights, and even across multiple time-zones, we decided to put together a response that would aim to address the queries and reactions that a post-performance question-and-answer session might have prompted. Lacking an impartial “outsider” or even an obvious interlocutor who would interview each of us in turn, we took a literal page from one of Žižek’s books and embarked upon our own (group) self-interview “in which [we], in the guise of the questioner, endeavor[ed] to assume the role of the Lacanian ‘big Other’” (Žižek 1994, p. 167). As we addressed the parallax theme at the conference – our performances evincing the divide betwixt being on display and being ourselves – it made great sense to us to push this further and endeavor to perform again – this time, on the page, straddling the roles of the interviewee and the interviewer. We collated questions for each other (and for ourselves) over email, and then we met virtually over *Skype* in order to settle on two overriding questions: “What is a Žižekian Performance?” and “Why do a performance rather than deliver a paper?” Our answers to these questions were intended to clearly reveal the overlaps and differences in our individual approaches as well as the key themes of our contribution as a collective. In this meeting, we also agreed that providing first-hand descriptions of our own presentations would, in fact, reveal more than the second-hand video documentation.

What follows is meant, firstly, to provide insights into what happened during the “Žižekian Performances” panel at the conference. Secondly, it provides a series of provocations, propositions, and instructions for what a “Žižekian performance” might be, what it might be *for*, and how it might come about. These are the thoughts and responses to an idea of “Žižekian performance” by four international people, artists and academics – American, British, Canadian – who, at times, would describe themselves as Žižekian performers. In these accounts, we see that such performances can be unashamedly subjective and personal, or can unabashedly embrace pretense and inauthenticity. They can be inceptions of parody; dreams, dresses, distresses, and

disavowals. They can be encounters with alterity; recitals, repetition, and remonstrance alike. They can provide more clarity on a subject than a paper, or can be used intentionally to embrace and perform its complexity and obtuseness. They can immerse themselves in the untidiness that precedes the carefully prepared formality of a paper, or can put in meticulous labor to work through that preparedness and out the other side, decorating, costuming, and transforming (or preparing for transformation). It can be bravely self-exposing and sincere, or it can be brutally deceptive and slippery, but nonetheless always maintaining a productive tension with the program's call to "raise the specter of parrhesiastic speech within an ethic of care" ("Preamble to the Žižek Studies Conference").

A conference goer this year could have left a keynote speech, walked into an impromptu meeting about insurrectionary pedagogical techniques in the age of exchange-value knowledge, and then have been lured by a curious sound upstairs—only to find out that somebody had recorded a Žižek joke, made it a [song](#), and left it on repeat for days. What, then, one might ask, would be the motivation for a performative panel at a conference that already clearly blurs the lines between tomfoolery, political intervention, and academic innovation? As the Preamble also stated: "[The entire] conference space [was a] place of *production* – not description, of *generation* – not legitimation" (emphasis original). The entire conference itself *was* an event, and this group's self-interview is, as we mentioned, the complimentary DVD extra of our micro-happening. This menagerie of interweaving mini-manifestos implicitly calls for Žižekians everywhere to embrace performance, not only as a subject to observe through a "Žižekian" lens, but also as an ideal form for presenting "Žižekian" readings and interventions.

***First as Tragedy Then as Farce: A Traumatic Act*¹**

[Daniel Oliver \(Queen Mary University of London\)](#)



Image Credit: Daniel Oliver

Abstract

First as Tragedy Then as Farce: A Traumatic Act (Oliver 2014) was a farcically awkward real performance about a tragically traumatic fictional one. It was a raucous, participatory presentation that engaged playfully with the Žižekian theory of the “Act” and was influenced by his approaches to authority, violence, and resistance (Žižek 2008; 2009; 2010). It opened with an unannounced outburst, shouted haphazardly from the back of the large lecture hall in which Žižek had delivered his keynote on the previous afternoon. Costumed with a crumpled smartness that was undermined by an unkempt hirsuteness, splatters of baby powder, bare feet, and an obviously fake radio-mic cobbled together from 3D spectacles, hazard-tape, and some broken in-ear headphones, I screamed repeatedly, “Antonio, Antonio, what have we done?! They’re all dead Antonio!” (Oliver 2014). Over the next fifteen minutes, the audience was subjected to an awkwardly intense, frustratingly fragmented, and stubbornly repetitive series of injunctions, references, accusations, and instructions.

In the clumsily maintained fantasy world of the performance, we were in the future: it was several weeks after the *2014 International Žižek Studies Conference*. My actions and words responded manically to an elusive “traumatic act” that, I claimed, had occurred during the conference (Oliver 2014). This fictional tragedy to which my farcical performance referred resulted from my own reckless and misguided attempt to initiate an

¹ Oliver would like to thank the *Glynn Wickham Scholarship* for providing him with financial support to attend the conference.

“Act” – “a symbolic intervention capable of undermining the big Other (the hegemonic social link), of re-arranging its co-ordinates” (Žižek 2010, p. 327). There were only four survivors of the supposed catastrophic incident that resulted from this call for a “Žižekian Act with a massive A” (Oliver 2014). Each of these survivors made an appearance in the performance, and each bore some of the responsibility for its occurrence. Unprepared audience members played three of these survivors, the roles forcibly thrust upon them. I played the fourth survivor. The majority of the performance consisted of my own character interacting awkwardly, obtusely, and nonsensically with each of the other three survivors, dishing out accusations, demands, apologies, outbursts of rage, and uninvited acts of physical affection.

“Big Other” Question:

What is a “Žižekian Performance”? Why do a performance rather than deliver a paper?

For me, an ideal Žižekian performance is one that encourages performers, audience members, and participants to attempt acts that engage in the “performative’ role of retelling” (Žižek 2014, p. 151). In *Event*, Žižek makes an essential distinction between the “transformative power of the Master-Signifier” and the “so-called *performatif* (speech act)” (Žižek 2014, p. 136-153 – italics original). On the one hand, J.L. Austin’s performative “speech acts” – for example, “I apologize” – are able to do something in the moment of saying something, enacting change in the present (Austin 1962). On the other hand, the “intervention of a Master-Signifier” is able to work retroactively, enacting change in the past (Žižek 2014, p. 136). Following Lacan, Žižek uses the example of love in order to illustrate this concept: “Falling in love is a contingent encounter, but, once it occurs, it appears as necessary, as something towards which my entire life was moving” (Žižek 2014, p. 141). Likewise, a “performative retelling” enacts a retroactive change on the meanings, affects, and efficacies, of an action or event. This does not mean the performance merely offers an endless range of possible interpretations – the hackneyed cliché, “It means whatever you want it to mean.” It means that the performance attempts to trigger the post-show intervention of a Master-Signifier through acts of retelling “that open up the space (the possibility) of acting in a new way” (Žižek 2014, p. 151). Thus, in attempting to meet this ideal, my own performance not only performatively retold the story of a fictional, tragically misguided attempt at initiating a “Žižekian act” in the past, but it also attempted to trigger a future “Žižekian act” in the

form of another “retelling.” This retelling would shift my performance’s contingencies into necessities that would retroactively become “always-already” there (Žižek 2014, p. 153).

In response to the second half of this question, I would suggest that one reason that performance is particularly fertile ground for such triggering is because of the way that tone, volume, spatial proximity, costume, and indulgences in fiction can contradict, compliment, or undermine the reception of spoken words. This layering of words, tone, actions, and sights allows for attention to be focused on what the performer and performance are doing (and doing *to* the audience) as well as on *how* things are being said just as much as on *what* is being said. As a result, audience members and participants are encouraged to revisit and retell not only the information and arguments received but also the way that information and argument was delivered and the actions and experiences that happened alongside the spoken words. For example, one might find the delivery of an academic paper boring or engaging, but that experience would not be read as part of the presenter’s argument. For me, the foregrounding and importance of such responses in performance plays an essential role in the triggering of “performative retelling.”

Gerard’s Question to Oliver:

Was the aggression in your performance a dare to the audience to experience an authentic emotional state or to enter into a theatrical exchange with you, or both? By confronting them with such intensity and naming them Daniel, did you seek to encounter something beyond the scripted material? I believed in your rage and vulnerability – was I duped?

In my performance, as Gerard observes, I occasionally broke into outbursts of hysterical aggression. These outbursts were directed at the three other “characters” of the performance – the above-mentioned “survivors” who were “played” by two unprepared audience members and the conference chair Antonio Garcia (who “played” himself). Aggression arose in the performance in a variety of different ways. I aggressively enforced the above roles on unsuspecting audience members, then wildly admonished them for their own acts of aggression, each of which had contributed to the fictional “traumatic act.” One survivor was told he had “over-identified” with my demand for an “Act” and that, as a consequence, he had become quickly physically violent to his colleagues, which then quickly spread through the conference. The second was admonished for his passive-aggressive Bartlebian strategy of “preferring not to” get

involved, a strategy that had saved his life but not allowed him to save anyone else's. Finally, Garcia was repeatedly accused of confusing matters by insisting that he was the conference's "big Other." The way participation unfolded was also seeped in aggression; the audience members who were cajoled into taking on these roles were then given nothing to do except to sit there and hear my accusations. As Gerard points out, my lack of desire for them to actually contribute anything was exemplified in the fact that even their names were deemed irrelevant, each participant being given my name before unwittingly stepping into their roles.

The aggression in my performance emerges from an on-going research interest in the socio-political efficacy of negative affects. I wanted to present flawed and unfulfilled aggression that became drowned in an assortment of the "explicitly amoral and *noncathartic*" emotions that Sianne Ngai describes as "ugly feelings" (Ngai 2005, p. 6). Examples of these "ugly feelings" include awkwardness, irritation, and anxiety. It was my intention that these tones should pulse throughout my performance. The ambiguity around whether my aggression was authentic or theatrical, and whether those I interacted with should treat it as a genuine provocation or as an invitation to engage in a fleeting role-play, was key in conjuring these tones. I am invested in exploring the potentials inherent in the fact that these feelings offer "no satisfaction of virtue, however oblique, nor any therapeutic or purifying release" (Ngai 2005, p. 6). [The Famous Lauren Barri Holstein](#), a London-based feminist performance artist who also has a keen investment in the efficacies of ugly feelings, refers evocatively to her use of them as "blue-balling" (Holstein 2014, p. 102).² Whilst, for Holstein, this refers to "disrupting and 'incompleting' the pop-feminist narratives of trauma and survival," I am interested in their potential to undermine masculine displays of machismo, confidence, and control (Holstein 2014, p. 102). I also believe in the potential power of lingering dissatisfaction and obliqueness to niggle audience members long after the performance has finished. These niggles should encourage them to revisit, re-question, and "performatively retell" my performance's meanings, motivations, and efficacies. In this way, whilst I welcome the kinds of off-script interventions and responses that intense interaction with audience members can inspire, I am more excited in the material that emerges *after* the script has ended and everyone has left the auditorium.

² "Blue-balling" is a slang term that here refers to the uncomfortable feeling, for a male, of becoming sexually aroused but not having an orgasm.

Oliver's Question to Himself:

Which forms of audience participation do you explore in your work and how do these relate to Žižek's critique of liberal capitalist versions of agency and democracy?

As described above, my performance repeatedly demanded and then denied participation. I often devise performances with a bait-and-switch relationship to inclusion, agency, and choice. I work across a range of dictatorial demands, emotional blackmail, and moments of manipulative “nudging” aligned with what R.H. Thaler and C.R. Sunstein describe affectionately as “libertarian paternalism” in order to get participants involved (Thaler and Sunstein 2009, p. 5). Sometimes participants’ “involvement” can end up rendering them more passive and less likely to exact changes in the performance than if they had remained spectators. After my shows, I am often asked by people how I would have reacted if they had done something different (or, as in the case of *First as Tragedy Then as Farce: A Traumatic Act*, just done *something*). I like to think that, through years of practice, I have the ability, like neoliberal capitalism, to absorb such rebellions into the narrative and carry on regardless. The blunter version of this question, therefore, is, “What possible benefit might there be in participating in one of my performances?”

In the book from which my performance takes its title, Žižek discusses one of the key problems of Western liberal democracies:

In this sense, in a democracy, every ordinary citizen is effectively a King – but a king in a constitutional democracy, a monarch who decides only formally, whose function is merely to sign off on measures proposed by an executive administration. This is why the problem of democratic rituals is homologous to the great problem of constitutional monarchy: how to protect the dignity of the king? How to maintain the appearance that the king effectively makes decisions, when we all know this not to be true? (Žižek 2009, p. 39)

Žižek implies that it is ourselves who work at maintaining that dignity, that we “act as if we are free to choose, while silently not only accepting but even demanding that an invisible injunction (inscribed in the very form of our commitment to ‘free speech’) tells us what to do and to think” (Žižek 2009, p. 39 – emphasis original). It could be argued that those who participate in my performances are put in a similar position to “a king in a

constitutional democracy,” working hard to maintain both their own dignity and the dignity of the performance they are part of. Following this, I would argue that whilst, admittedly, my performances might struggle to fulfill their aim of triggering a “performative retelling” that would, in turn, trigger a Žižekian act that would obliterate the brutal falsities and indignities of neoliberal democracy, it might at least give us a break from maintaining its charade. This is because in reality, in my performances, participants are invited to act as if *not* free to choose. Of course, unlike in neoliberal democracy, they can just leave the auditorium. Thus, the pleasure of participating lies not in the crude sense often applied to the CEO or politician who visits the sadomasochistic dungeon in order to take a break from the responsibility of decision making, but as a cathartic relief from the day-to-day maintenance of democratic rituals and the appearance of choice.

“You Betta Werk!”: Growing Up Trans- (& Fabulous!) Under the Academic Banner
[Tommy Mayberry \(University of Waterloo\)](#)



Image Credit: Tommy Mayberry and Tommy Bourque

Abstract

I am an academic drag queen. *Werk, hunny!* For my Žižekian performance, I performed an autobiographical talk that explored my relationship to academic and popular culture with my relationship to (and existence in) drag as the fabulous crux that binds them in the most intimate and public of ways.

As a drag queen, I did not come up through the club system; I came up through the university system: I was born in the academy. When I, as a budding scholar, looked in the mirror that first real time with my make-up and wig on, I was shocked to see me. *Still* me. Thus, Lacan (re)entered my life in a way that I never once thought possible, for we are not supposed to remember our mirror stages...yet, I *re-member-ed* mine. From that moment onward, I dedicated my (drag) body not to science but (narcissistically) to myself in the Academy to pull together everything I could from the seemingly disparate poles of high and low culture, of Ivory Tower and Queer Club culture, because they do not have separate motives in their approaches to engagements with queer, hybrid, and even human bodies. While I hold [Lady Gaga](#) and [RuPaul](#) as my drag mothers (and fathers!), as artists and philosophers themselves, and even as political activists, they become crucial figureheads in my work alongside Lacan, Žižek, and Judith Halberstam (now fabulously J. Jack Halberstam!) as I work...and *werk!*...from within/-out cultures, genders, bodies, etc.

My performance was a shamelessly sincere and engagingly e(a)rnest look at my own life, which is one congruent of academic and of pop cultures, that simultaneously shared and explored how my body, and how bodies (un)like mine, live and can live wherever they are, from wherever they have come, and to wherever they will go. Tears were shed, yes, for this performance helped me to realize and to articulate the very special place that my own mother has within my life – both fabulously as a queen and fiercely as a man.

“Big Other” Question:

What is a “Žižekian Performance”? Why do a performance rather than deliver a paper?

For me, a “Žižekian Performance” will always be the presentation of research, theory, and thought in which the investigating subject is radically present at the center of his/her public delivery to the point where the paper, lecture, keynote, etc. is inarguably performed. High-spirited, outrageous, messy, perhaps scandalous, yet impeccably ethical. The embodiment of Slavoj Žižek’s delivery style, really; that academic-crack, can’t-get-enough, productively masturbatory oration that is iconic of the Žižek brand of academic presentation. *Academic performance*, to be sure. For me, a Žižekian performance is an academic presentation aligned with and inspired by Žižek’s own celebrity persona and renown. And that is precisely what first drew me to Žižek, and it is also how I came to do my first performative paper emulating his energetic bravura.

The inaugural *International Žižek Studies Conference* in 2012 was called *Neoliberal Perversions: Fantasy and Gaze in Contemporary Culture*, and when I first saw its call for submissions, I had only for a few months been doing drag as part of my academic work, and I was entirely interested in this conference because every single word of its title seemed to fit me better than my corset. While I did not have a great grasp of Žižek's *oeuvre*, what I did know of him from *YouTube* and from my background in Cultural Studies was of this brilliant and stunningly original man who yelled at his audiences, was fascinated by psychoanalysis and popular culture, and had a penchant for the eff word. This 2012 conference seemed the perfect place to perform my work, so I wrote up a paper proposal (outlining, very diligently, that, should my work be accepted, I would not need any audio/visuals because my own body would suffice as visual aid since I would present my paper in drag), and awaited the response. After its acceptance and my working it up into its oral script, I found myself in Brockport, New York, in six-and-a-half inch stilettos, talking about [RuPaul's Drag Race](#), [Pimp My Ride](#), and vehicular puns in a conference hall full of hard-hitting, highly-nuanced papers that met with the idea of "Žižek Studies" in its textual domain. I had met with it in its personality. Whoops.

But a fabulous "whoops." Since that first *International Žižek Studies Conference*, Žižek's work (both in text and in person) has been a guiding framework for my work and my self. And that is why I do performances rather than deliver papers because my paper deliveries *are* performances. Every conference paper of mine since I became a drag queen has been a performance rather than the more traditional delivery of a paper because I cannot separate myself from my work. I open my mouth, and I am performing.

Oliver's Question to Mayberry:

Where does your performance stand in relation to Žižek's critique of autobiography and the liberal idea of the subject as a collection of personal stories? I am mainly referring to his chapter "Fear thy Neighbour as Thyself" in Violence (2008), especially the section on "The Neighbour Thing."

I see "*You Betta Werk!*": *Growing Up Trans- (& Fabulous!) Under the Academic Banner* (Mayberry 2014) as not only standing right beside Žižek's critique of autobiography and the liberal idea of the subject as a collection of personal stories but as intimately holding hands with it. The specific moment in that chapter to which I believe you are referring is when Žižek writes about the "presupposed subject" who, for him, is

“not another human being with a rich inner life filled with personal stories which are self-narrated in order to acquire a meaningful experience of life, since such a person cannot ultimately be an enemy” (Žižek 2008, p. 46). “An enemy,” Žižek continues, quoting an epigraphed quotation from Wendy Brown, “is someone whose story you have not heard” (Žižek 2008, p. 46). He continues to expand on this using Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818; 1831) – a text and cultural phenomenon that I not only referenced in the opening of my performance for this conference but that is also very close to my heart as a Nineteenth-Century literary scholar with a retrospective fascination of Lady Gaga as Mother Monster as well as of the contemporary Gothic-ness of drag culture that is, as I outlined in my performance, a culture “of duplicity, of disguise, and of masking” (Mayberry 2014). Žižek argues that in Shelley’s “allow[ing] the monster to speak for himself, to tell the story from his own perspective” that “the monster is not a ‘thing,’ a horrible object no one dares to confront” but that “he is fully *subjectivised*” (Žižek 2008, p. 46 – emphasis original). He is and can be “fully subjectivised” because he is, as your question, Oliver, poses to me, “a collection of personal stories.”

In this manner, coming out of Žižek’s critique, I, myself, am and can be “fully subjectivised” because the main goal of my performance was to share with the audience “[my] whole-lotta-heart-’n’-soul” (Mayberry 2014) that RuPaul says is “behind [drag queens’] fabulous faces and fierce façades” (RuPaul 2009). And I shared this via a smooth interweaving of theory, pop culture, and some of my most favourite, and even most haunting, personal anecdotes about my life and how I came up through and to it in drag. Žižek goes on to note that “[t]he experience that we have our lives from within, the story we tell ourselves about ourselves in order to account for what we are doing, is fundamentally a lie – the truth lies outside, in what we do” (Žižek 2008, p. 47). This critique holds hands with my performance as well because what I do/did *is* the story I tell myself about myself in order to account for what I am doing, which is the experience I have of my life from within. And drag, to be sure, is always a lie that reveals itself to be true – from the inside of us outward.

Mayberry’s Question to Him-/Herself:

What happens when/if you perform your work out of drag - i.e. in hair, face, clothes, and shoes socially and culturally gendered Male? Is there still a performance to be experienced, and (in either case) how does this bodily subjective (mis)alignment affect your work, ideas, reception, etc.?

To be completely honest, a very different kind of fabulousness happens *when* I perform my work as a boy. When I deliver my conference papers or give lectures out of drag, there is, of course, a performance to be experienced because, as I mentioned in one of my responses above, every time I open my mouth I am performing. And the same decision making processes do go into my hair, face, clothes, and shoes for my boy performances as they do for my girl performances (albeit, *much* less time-consuming and labor-intensive from showering to leaving the hotel room, but I do plan ahead how I will present myself to command the room at each venue). As drag queen Glenda Snow says, “Whenever I get dressed, I try to consider where I’m going, who I’m going to see, and how I can blow them away” (“Ruby Slippers”).³ Performing my work in my boy’s clothes sometimes means that my rhetoric and oral-delivery writing style do have to be much more on point because there will not be a six-foot Glamazonian woman “blow[ing] them away” at the front of the room – there is just an ordinary, young bloke talking about his research. But my research and the way I talk about it *can* blow my audience away, and it does this best when I perform *twice*: once as a boy, and once a girl, to realize fully and embody completely the totality of my work.

This specific double-performance *did* get to happen at the *2014 International Žižek Studies Conference*. On the Friday of the conference weekend, during Session 1.3, I performed my paper “Dr. Moe Bius and Mrs. Auntie Metabole: The Post-coital Wake of Cognitive Psychology & Psychoanalysis” in full *boy* drag before I did my Žižekian performance on the Sunday of the weekend in full *girl* drag. The magic of this found itself in my audience getting to know and to interact with me at both panels in both of my bodies for both of my performances (the paper more “academic” than the more “personal” autobiographical talk that was my specific performance). Conference-goers also had the unique opportunity of re-meeting me as either as the weekend commenced and concluded, for during the post-conference celebratory drinks out on the town, I wore my boy clothes again. This bodily subjective (mis)alignment *is* my work, my ideas, and its reception is most sublime when, from start to finish, from tucking to untucking, my work transcends the more-academic confines and bleeds into real life.

³ Glenda Snow is a fictitious character (played by Carlton Wilborn) in the episode “Ruby Slippers” from Season Four of CBS’ crime drama *The Mentalist*. She says this in response to Senior Special Agent Teresa Lisbon (played by Robin Tunney) asking her, “Do you always go out like this? In drag, I mean” (“Ruby Slippers”).

Memories, Dreams, Obsessions

[Mira Gerard \(East Tennessee State University\)](#)



Image Credit: George Elerick [Video Documentation Still]

Abstract

I performed a series of readings consisting of entries from diaries, dream journals, and notes from my five-year (ongoing) Lacanian psychoanalysis (Gerard 2014). While reclining on a fainting (psychoanalytic) couch, I picked up various notebooks and diaries and read random passages aloud to audience participants who took turns in the analyst's chair. While confessional in nature, the performance points to the impossibility of truly knowing a person while acknowledging my own (and everyone's) desire to be understood and to be seen, recognized, gazed upon.

The conference theme spoke directly to my piece: attendees first observed and formed judgments about me (me: a middle-aged woman, etc), after which the contents of the spoken material, and their interactions with me, potentially altered their assumptions. The fractured readings, reconfigured like a Surrealist "exquisite corpse," referenced the free-floating madness of psychoanalytic discourse, providing a patched together "new body" through memories and associations.

"Big Other" Question:

What is a "Žižekian Performance"? Why do a performance rather than deliver a paper?

Žižekian performance is uncomfortable and excited at the same time. It is urgent, abnormal, fascinating, and grotesque. Žižekian performance is like analysis as opposed to therapy – instead of a soothing balm, it agitates.

Why a performance? Because memory is made out of things like the smell of perfume and old books, or the quality of the light in a space. We perform to put visual signifiers to language. I wanted that which I was trying to say to be implicit – my discomfort with being on stage, my desire to occupy a position of being watched, and my shame at being in that position.

Merlin's Question to Gerard:

If a dream that is not interpreted is like a letter unread; what happens or happened, psychically and/or politically, when a letter proffered or purloined lands in the hands of analytic laity, and, whose (actual, structural or hypothetical) pleasure was served as the analytic scene was inversed, perverted, and spectacularly turned into spectacle?

My fake analytic scenario was intended to function as some sort of pox-like virus in the mind of the observer, like much of performance art, a thing that might grow in the mind over time. Yes, I meant it to be an uncanny, inappropriate, open “confessional” that I invited strangers into, and as much as I knew they might be lured by the spectacle, I also knew that something in me reveled in the revealing. Their comfort or discomfort with it, I hoped, would force open some kind of crack in their minds to look at their own paradoxical relationship to their own self-definitions, not only their assumptions about whatever their first impressions of me were.

Further, I wanted to serve my own compulsion to over-share or confess as a way of shifting aspects of my symptomatic structure into the container of an art project as opposed to the unbounded parameters of everyday life. By exposing myself through readings from my real journals and dream journals in this manufactured dyad, I felt protected by an invisible bubble. What happened was somewhat surprising to me – and dangerous. I noticed that some participants who sat in the chair seemed deeply uncomfortable with the material I was reading to them, almost as if they should not be hearing it, while others were keen on making demands of me: “Find me something really juicy!” said one young man, while another ran to the stage and stole one of my journals. (He did return it later, but I did not know if he would or not.)

I was shaken by both of those situations, and, in fact, felt a little embarrassed – even violated – by them. Later, when Oliver and I were talking, he pointed out that his

performance was an interrogation and mine was an invitation – which got me thinking about the very base nature of phallic discourse versus “the feminine position.” I gave people an opportunity to fantasize in the position of the analyst, forcing them to encounter something incomplete and fractured alongside the assumptions and mental descriptors they had formed about me. The phantasm serves a function: my performance is like analytic junk food, but for me it forwards the cause of psychoanalysis itself by making it into an easily digestible and sensory-rich nugget, tantalizing, but unsatisfying, leaving the observer wanting more.

Gerard’s Question to Herself:

The image of a reclining woman on a chaise has been repeated throughout the Western canon of visual art. Was this a consideration in your highly visual and intimate performance, and, if so, how did your presence/image satisfy or disappoint expectations of the so-called “male gaze,” especially in relation to the history of confessional performance art by women who often also happen to be young and beautiful?

I was deeply uncomfortable with the fact that I was on display. I have a lot of issues about my body. Something about the performance itself was a way of admitting to that. Placing myself in that scene allowed me to claim some territory that I almost feel unworthy of by unmasking an aspect of my desire (the desire to be desired). There is an unspoken assumption/expectation that if a woman puts herself into a spotlight of sorts, she should visually “merit” being there. The irony, I suppose, is that since this performance, I have lost a significant amount of weight. I did not want this performance to be about that issue, but the truth is that it was at the forefront of my mind. It got in the way of me fully encountering the material that was coming out of the readings. In a way, that was and is part of the parallax, even if it is an internal aspect of it. What, I wonder, would the performance have been like if I was thinner and younger? I suspect more people would have taken my picture, listened to my readings, and interacted with me. I know this because I was once those things, and I know what it means to become invisible. Obviously I have issues with this – I do not know any woman who does not.

Everything you ever wanted to know about my penis (but were afraid to ask Lacan)

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Image Credit: Ilya Merlin

Abstract

I had initially planned on giving a playful paper on Anality and Agape. The original abstract read something like,

[...] This presentation conjectures athwart topology, theology, scatology and cosmology: jarring jargon ajar from anaclitic amore to anally moored agape. The purchase of such perpetration is that of purposefully untangling such proleptic parapraxes. Teasing and tossing sensual word salad into paternally palatable sensibility, resentfully—sadistically, satirically, pathetically, prophetically, perversely—mawkishly and cunningly...

...But, upon hearing Žižek's call, at his keynote, for more confrontation and conflict, I decided to present a less poetic piece tracing Lacan's discussion of Jewish penises and circumcision throughout five or so seminars. I also spent considerable time reading Freud's "letter 52," and pertinent early correspondences, against Lacan's musings over such letters in his seventh seminar.

“Big Other” Question:

What is a “Žižekian Performance”? Why do a performance rather than deliver a paper?

I chose to deliver a performance rather than a paper for two reasons: 1) my presentation, although read aloud word-for-word from a prepared document, lacked any overt commentary on Žižek’s works, and neither was it held together by a Žižekian epistemic fulcrum, and 2) my delivery sought to provide its listeners and viewers with a small death: to affectively reorganize the other’s relation with defensive phantasms by embodying and transforming the very fantasy that I sought to identify (with). My performance was perhaps Žižekian, then, insofar as it was: 1) a sustained penis joke, and 2) geared towards the communal horizon of *cum*—togetherness—by way of bestowing a shared smile...(with the understanding that Freud likened the upturned lips of a smile to deadly psychic proximity)...

Were I to read a tidier version of my paper in order to academically, or otherwise incisively, problematize Lacan’s image of the Jew, or Jewishness, I could reasonably expect deaf ears. In lieu of a straightforward sort of litigation, then, I juxtaposed Lacan’s relevant musings on circumcision, Hebrew etymology, and mustard pots, as an implicit immanent critique of the assumptions necessary for his logic to appear coherent. The conceptual result hoped for was not that of reconciling contradiction but rather of putting on display the violence of Lacan’s own attempts at resolving imaginary fixations when the particular (often conflated as universal) is sourced as the Jew, as it often was, throughout his *oeuvre*. As a nuanced and perhaps inverted methodological application of Hegelian and Lacanian technique, with a shared proclivity for dick jokes and confronting bigotry, this performance was, in the final analysis, something close to “Žižekian.”

Mayberry’s Question to Merlin:

In the lively group discussion that followed the more formal question-and-answer moment after our performance “panel,” a resounding theme that the audience and we performers found between all of our pieces was the uncanny paralleled link between narcissism and the (un)willing split of ourselves as we shamelessly put ourselves on display and at play – how do you see your piece uniquely fitting into this idea, and how do you see your piece participating in this dialogue collectively with the other three performance pieces?

In the myth of Narcissus, we have the river nymph’s son trapped in his own specular image—an image reflected, after all, by a river. The narcissistic disposition can

then be understood as an infatuation not only with the specular “self,” but with the pre-oedipal, Punctum-esque streams that contour along the mirroring surface’s ideological tain: a deadly yet conditionally pregnant attraction insofar as it draws the subject away from the paternal law, back towards the phallic mother, and eventually to death. Such ripples shape the possibility of desire, and, therefore, inform the perforated boundaries that separate enjoyment from pleasure.

As a fleeting embodiment of this threateningly sinuous, present yet invisible, current, the Jew in the post-secular—read: passively nihilistic and antinomian—landscape functions, in the logic of phantasy, as a reminder of the remainder of the father’s castration. That is, as Lacan stated of the Jew qua *object a*, “The solidarity of these three principal functions which we have just traced [Real, Symbolic, Imaginary] finds its point of intersection in the existence of the Jews” (Lacan qtd. in Haddad 1994, p. 208). As the unassimilable remainder, which predicates the very possibility of narcissistic reflection, or self-same libidinal cathexis (fusional cannibalism turned *hom(m)osexual* metaphysics in other religious traditions), the Jew comes to serve as a structural analogue of a fantastic material container for excessive *jouissance*. When the lack that makes this dynamic possible is lacking – that is, when the Jew is present and embodies his or her presumed imaginary function – we have the possibility of a Lacanian cure *par excellence*: a dose of the small death, which is the affective means of bringing the imaginatively erected fantasy to detumescence—splash!

Perhaps, ultimately, although Lacan theorized that the Jewish penis was mythically primed to accomplish the impossible (successful sexual rapport), and he likewise claimed that the Christian unconscious identified with the foreskin of Christ, my experimental delivery might have missed the mark of its drive—which only makes me a normal subject, after all. To inhabit subjective coordinates wherein the choice of performative iterance is not necessarily wholly within my power (as historically and incessantly proven) is, to say the least, precarious. Despite this implied difference, my performance dovetailed smoothly with the other three performances insofar as they all shared in bending the form of academic conventions, relying on form over content, and engaging the audience either implicitly or explicitly in an exchange that exceeded the bounds of typical conference wanking. Such willingness and participation is in itself a form of resistance to, or subversion of, the (too) human propensity of allowing fantasy to inhibit, or arrest, the encounter.

Merlin's Question to Himself:

What are the current stakes of "the Jewish question" vis-à-vis your presentation, Žižekian paradigms, hypostases of thought's doing, and the stakes of religiosity in/and/as scholarship?

By way of Lacanian, Hegelian, and Marxist deployment of terminology and concepts, Žižek's work runs close to several dangers, which are more volatile, after all, in the grips of those less versed in the primary sources from which Žižek's thought draws. For example, a vulgar Hegelian stance might come to the conclusion, once reached *by* Hegel, that Judaism is/was a "dunghill" that will succumb, by way of logical necessity, to supersession (Hegel 1948, p. 312). This risk is amplified when caught in the swarm of cognate "Pauline revolutions," which, for some reason, seem to envision an escape, or reinvigoration, from sameness, through more pronounced sameness. Something similar happens in certain university-strands of scholastically informed Marxist thinking wherein Judaism is equated with regressive guilt and Christianity is equated with salvific love... Instead of inciting thought, such sentiments tend, at least in lay academic discussions, towards giving license to stupidity.

Perhaps less obvious is the danger that runs throughout Lacan's seminars and writings. Lacan's return to Freud was, undeniably, one of virulent Christological, even apocalyptic (*Seminar VII*, and others, come to mind), supersession. However, anti-Judaic thought (almost the entirety of German idealism and the undercurrent of most Christian theology) and anti-Semitism are distinctly different phenomenon. Moreover, facile accusations of bigotry do little other than demonstrate where power *really* lies by virtue of delimiting what can and cannot be properly said.

That said, given the contemporary world political climate and tangential conversations of otherness, foreigners, tolerance, etc., those interested in the implicit politics and manifestations of such rhetoric *within* the theory we employ would benefit from reading Roudinesco's new book, *Revisiting the Jewish Question*. Therein, most pertinently, she revisits some of Jeffrey Mehlman's earlier diatribes apropos Lacan and the Jewish question. I would encourage anybody with related interests to read his, Mehlman's, relevant work as well. This invitation has horizons much larger than the particular of the Jew. We would benefit from remembering Žižek's reminder from some time ago that, regarding the logic and structure of fantasy—and the political consequences of such psychic structures—"it doesn't have to be a Jew" (Žižek qtd. in Ayerza).

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