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Žižek's Brand of Philosophical Excess and the Treason of the Intellectuals: Wagers of Sin, Ugly Ducklings, and Mythical Swans.

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Introduction – Žižek's Brand of Excess and Le Traison des Clercs

No one who has tried to work in cultural studies from a perspective which is even conscious of the global hegemony of neo-liberalism and its social consequences can fail to be dismayed by the atmosphere of complete disengagement which seems to infuse so much 'cultural studies' and related areas of thought ... (Gilbert in Bowman and Stamp 2007: 77)

I heard recently Oliver Cromwell's address to the rump parliament in 1653 (online, I'm not a Time Lord) where he bawls out the whole of the House of Commons as "whores, virtueless horses and money-grabbing dicklickers". I added the last one but, honestly, that is the vibe. I was getting close to admiring old Oliver for his "calls it as he sees it, balls-out" rhetoric till I read about him on Wikipedia and learned that beyond this brilliant *8 Mile*-style takedown of corrupt politicians he was a right arsehole; starving and murdering the Irish and generally (and surprisingly for a Roundhead) being a total square. The fact remains that if you were to recite his speech in parliament today you'd be hard pushed to find someone who could be legitimately offended. (Brand 2013 website)

Through his inimitable use of philosophical excess in the form of frequently offensive examples and dirty jokes, the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek has risen to either academic celebrity status or notoriety depending upon one's personal taste. The briefest survey of his work reveals serious philosophical points conveyed through jocular descriptions of sphincters, interracial threesomes, and the Hegelian nature of shit. This paper uses the specific case of Žižek and his use of filthy humour to explore wider questions about the viability of excess as a compensatory strategy for today's version of *le traison des clercs* - the intellectual pusillanimity and lack of engagement with the social and cultural consequences of neo-liberal ideology, a problem recognised above by even one of Žižek's fiercest critics. This lack of engagement has produced an intellectual climate in which even the most basic critical concepts have become decaffeinated. Ironically, this is not because critical theory's insights have proved inaccurate, but rather the opposite. "Pragmatic" accommodations by academics with capitalist *realpolitik* have plumbed such quotidian depths that familiarity has bred not contempt but consent. For example, instead of constituting a cautionary concept, Adorno and Horkheimer's deliberate oxymoron - 'the culture industry' – is now simply either blithely accepted or uncritically embraced by such new capitalism-acquiescent fields of study as 'creative and cultural industries', and in the UK university sector, scholars scrabble indecorously to prove the real world "impact" of their work to funding councils. This paper argues that within such an acquiescent environment, comedic excess can serve a valuable corrective and countervailing role. As the advertising slogan for Heineken beer put it, it can still refresh the parts that other forms of political analysis no longer reach.

The second quotation above comes from a guest editorial by the comedian Russell Brand for the British political magazine, *The New Statesman*. Whilst calling for a revolution in the way we think about our current political situation, Brand does so in a manner that shares Žižek's strategic use of ribald humour's excess as an ideological tool with which to critique the contemporary mediascape. Shortly before the publication of his article, Brand appeared on a BBC flagship news programme *Newsnight* questioned by the doyen of aggressive British TV political interviewing, Jeremy Paxman. By the end of the interview, due to a combination of Brand's strength of feeling, the radical nature of his views and the paradoxically earnest

nature of his defence of the right to be facetious, despite being widely referred to in the press as a 'Rottweiler', Paxman appears to be visibly chastened and the video of the encounter went viral (Paxman 2013 website). It is important to emphasize that, to a significant extent; neither politically aware comedians nor humorous philosophers tell us anything that we didn't already know. More than this, the very perception of their excess is fuelled by surplus repression - the strain of the emotional investments we make in maintaining open secrets is displaced on to those who dare to criticize. Zizek and Brand have predictably become *bête noirs* for sections of the press because, like the small boy in Hans Christian Anderson's tale, 'The Emperor's New Clothes', they have pointed out a truth that we would all prefer to ignore. In the words of Marcuse, 'The unrealistic sound of these propositions is indicative, not of their utopian character, but of the strength of the forces which prevent their realization.' (Marcuse 1964 website)

In solidarity with the ethos manifested in Diogenes' philosophical use of public defecation and the belief system of Bulgakov who, '... always loved clowning and agreed with E. T. A. Hoffmann that irony and buffoonery are expressions of "the deepest contemplation of life in all its conditionality"' (Pevear in Bulgakov 2007 [1966-67] xviii), it is suggested that today, maintaining a sense of excessive humour's political importance is more important than ever. Thus, in recent years, faced with a dearth of convincing ideology critique amongst the traditional cognoscenti, a number of comedians have engaged more directly in substantive political debate than the usual forms of political satire. In 2004, *The Daily Show* satirist Jon Stewart appeared on the political discussion programme *Crossfire* (Stewart 2004 website) and lambasted the conservative journalism of its presenters so effectively that the incident is thought by many to have hastened the subsequent demise of the programme for an eight year period (perhaps something of a Pyrrhic victory given that the show has recently reappeared with Newt Gingrich now at the helm). Again, in 2010, Stewart demonstrated the political use of excess by calling Fox News "the lupus of the news" proceeding to sing "Go Fuck Yourself" backed by a Gospel choir. In the UK, meanwhile, Frankie Boyle, a notoriously offensive Glaswegian comic, published *Work! Consume! Die!* (2012) a scathingly crude and damning indictment of capitalist society in which he quotes Žižek more than once and the character comedian Steve Coogan has played a leading role in the press

regulation campaign *Hacked Off* including a strident newspaper debate with another comedian David Mitchell (see Coogan 2013 website).

Frequent recourse to obscene topics for political intent represents a secondary form of obscenity. The primary, but routinely overlooked, form of obscenity is the framework of under-acknowledged values and processes that maintain the gross iniquities of the status quo, 'This obscene underground of habits is what is really difficult to change' (Žižek 2007a website). Despite (because of?) the difficulty of changing these habits, Žižek like Freud before him finds affinity with Virgil's expression: '*Flectere si nequeo, Acheronto movebo*. (If I cannot bend the higher powers, I will move the infernal regions)' (cited in Freud 1957-74, 4: xi). Brand also feels a politically-motivated need to provoke arguing that, '... apathy is in fact a transmission problem, when we are given the correct information in an engaging fashion, we will stir.' (Brand 2013 website) After first describing Žižek's use of excess (the highly engaging quality of which is ambivalently recognized in the media's mantra-like introduction of him as "the Elvis of Cultural Theory") to undermine the obscene underground of habits, Žižek's reception within the media and academia is examined. The uncritical response to the inherent ideology contained within TV programmes like *Ugly Betty*, *Louie*, and *The Swan*, is then used to show how, frequently under the guise of superficially good intentions, the ideological state apparatuses (ISA) of both the media and academia propagate under-acknowledged obscene ideologies of their own.

Since the concept of excess is innately relational, the obvious question arises "excessive to whom?" Seeking to go beyond Žižek's obvious *épater le bourgeois* tendencies, it is suggested that both Žižek and politically engaged comedians tend to be deemed too excessive and provoke negative responses less because of what they say and more because they represent a threatening return of the repressed. The smooth functioning of both media and university systems requires the routinized exclusion of the sorts of uncomfortable subjects they address with atypical vigour and earthy directness. It is recognized, however, that humour-infused critique faces a double threat of its own – the more po-faced critics deliberately fail to appreciate the deeply serious role comedy plays in the service of ideology critique whilst in terms of its more enthusiastic audiences, its critical, oppositional, element risks being drowned out in the unalloyed enjoyment of the performance: 'There are many great

authors of the past who have survived centuries of oblivion and neglect, but it is still an open question whether they will be able to survive an entertaining version of what they have to say.' (Arendt 1993 [1954]: 207-8). In an age dominated by "casino capitalism", Žižek stakes his project on a deliberate gamble with Arendt's open question.

Žižek's Wagers of Sin ... and the puritanical response

The wager behind Berlusconi's vulgarities is that the people will identify with him as embodying the mythic image of the average Italian ... Yet we shouldn't be fooled: behind the clownish mask there is a state power that functions with ruthless efficiency. Perhaps by laughing at Berlusconi we are already playing his game. (Žižek 2009 website)

In the context of academia, Žižek appears excessive and unrealistic because his passionate and (self-confessed) dogmatically Lacanian adherence to an ideologically-reflexive theoretical perspective stands out markedly from the usual degree of academic disengagement that C. Wright Mills so insightfully termed "the curious passion for the mannerism of the non-committed" (Mills 2000 [1959]: 7-8) "Wagers of sin" describes Žižek's contrasting gamble, his pseudo-masochistic willingness to subject himself to the inevitable depredations of media formats and academic humourlessness that meet his passionate curiosity conveyed through dirty jokes. The phrase illuminates the underlying strategy by drawing upon the notion of "Pascal's Wager" that Žižek frequently references in his work. Pascal's Wager portrays the performative element of belief, the bet that the cumulative effect of somatized habit (in the case of Pascal's church-goer, the kneeling down and the voicing of incantatory prayers) means that even a non-believer will eventually come to believe notwithstanding their conscious preferences. Likewise, laugh with, or even at, Žižek for long enough and, just as Silvio Berlusconi plays the clown to such an extent that it is all too easy to forget that he retains real power, so we may also only belatedly realize that behind the 'engaging fashion' of Žižek's joke-laden performances lurks material that, à la Brand, is full of 'correct information' and which still has the power to stir.

I have previously (Taylor 2010) explored both the style and purpose of Žižek's wagers of sin through the notion of "the dog's bollocks" - a British phrase used to

express the idea that something or someone is excellent. The precise etymology of the phrase is unclear, but it is thought that it stems from the manner in which dogs' testicles stand out. This is true not only in the sense of a basic physical extrusion, but also due to the manner in which, through constant self-licking, the presence of the dog's bollocks are shamelessly highlighted in self-conscious human company. A related joke which portrays something of the strategy behind Žižek's excess goes as follows - into the midst of a very polite dinner party the hostess's old, flatulent dog stumbles into the dining room and begins to lick its scrotum. In an attempt to diffuse the sudden atmosphere of embarrassment, a male guest quips "I wish I could do that", to which the hostess tartly replies, "if you give him a biscuit you can". In this scenario, the hostess shares with Žižek a desire to undermine the social conventions that create a sense of excess through the strength of their constraining influence (in this case, the dog's perfectly natural behaviour only seems excessive in comparison to the achingly polite behaviour of the dinner party scenario). Both Žižek and the hostess up the ante, they force those otherwise resistant to do so, to consider the uncomfortable underlying realities that people would prefer to ignore.

As much as he enjoys being gratuitously provocative, it is important to appreciate the degree to which Žižek's power to stir up a reaction derives its ultimate strength from a resistance which tends to manifest itself in two particular forms akin to a patient's experience of the psychoanalytical process:

- i) *Positive and negative transference* – whether it comes from adulatory fans in packed-out auditoria hanging on Žižek's every word but missing the substance of his critique (see Taylor in Flisfeder [ed.] {in press}), or scathing repudiation by fellow intellectuals (see Chomsky below), Žižek serves as a repository of people's emotional response to the *sujet supposé savoir* (subject supposed to know) that threatens to divert attention away from the substance of his thought. As Freud put it: 'The reawakened passion, whether it is love or hate, invariably chooses as its object the figure of the doctor.' (cited in Davis 2010: 116)
- ii) *Discourse of the Master* – The reawakened passion belies a craving (disavowed or openly embraced) for answers. Žižek's admirers are seduced by his convincing interpretations of popular culture whilst his

detractors pour scorn on his lack of substantive solutions to the myriad questions he poses.

The combined effect of these two elements means that Žižek becomes the subject of, at times, quite passionate criticism – he is resented for raising issues in analysis that we would rather keep repressed and he offers us no easy solutions.

Chomsky's dismissal of Žižek as the embodiment of theory's misdirected energy encapsulates the negative transference created by Žižek's philosophical use of excess.

when I said I'm not interested in Theory, what I meant is, I'm not interested in posturing – using fancy terms like polysyllables and pretending you have a theory when you have no theory whatsoever. So there's no theory in any of this stuff, not in the sense of theory that anyone is familiar with in the sciences or any other serious field. Try to find in all of the work you mentioned some principles from which you can deduce conclusions, empirically testable propositions where it all goes beyond the level of something you can explain in five minutes to a twelve-year-old. See if you can find that when the fancy words are decoded. I can't. So I'm not interested in that kind of posturing. Žižek is an extreme example of it. I don't see anything to what he's saying. (Chomsky 2012)

The basis for rejecting out of hand any substantive content to his work when it involves close readings of such major figures of Western thought as Hegel, Marx, and Lacan, to name but three, is clearly for Chomsky a result of Theory's failure to constitute a scientific mode of enquiry or something similarly "serious". To go from this empirically fundamentalist position to not seeing *anything* in his work (beyond what could be explained in five minutes to a twelve-year-old), however, obviously requires a level of emotionally invested antipathy that is not adequately explained by an all-excluding love of scientific punctiliousness alone. It is similarly present in the response of other scholars for whom '... this work does not even approach the standards of academic rigour that would normally be expected of an undergraduate essay'. (Gilbert in Bowman and Stamp 2007: 63) This ideologically-loaded excess of feeling can be illustrated by a series of additional examples of negative transference taken from Žižek's most voluble critics within both academia and the media in which the criticism clearly goes beyond either catty academic in-fighting or genuine intellectual disagreement.

Fifty Shades of Gray Transference - The Violent Visions of Žižek's Critics

Achieving a deceptive substance by endlessly reiterating an essentially empty vision, Žižek's work—nicely illustrating the principles of paraconsistent logic—amounts in the end to less than nothing. (John Gray 2012 website)

In John Gray's *New York Times* condemnatory review of Žižek's 'essentially empty vision' entitled "The Violent Visions of Slavoj Žižek", Gray cites Žižek's description in of how, in Stalinist Russia, paranoid denunciation became institutionalized so that:

The art of identifying a kulak was thus no longer a matter of objective social analysis; it became a kind of complex "hermeneutics of suspicion," of identifying an individual's "true political attitudes" hidden beneath his or her deceptive public proclamations. (Žižek cited in Gray 2012 website).

Gray then proceeds to argue, 'Describing mass murder in this way as an exercise in hermeneutics is repugnant and grotesque; it is also characteristic of Žižek's work. (ibid) Contra Gray, what *is* characteristic is this statement's excessive misinterpretation of Žižek's point. It clearly would be repugnant and grotesque to *reduce* a discussion of mass murder to an exercise in hermeneutics, but Žižek does not do this. He does indeed describe how, in Stalinist times, mass murder was carried out according to the dictates of a "hermeneutics of suspicion", however, the important distinction to be made here is between Žižek's explanation of the cultural and psychological processes that enable mass murder and a repugnant and grotesque attempt to justify mass murder itself. Ironically, the fact that a professional philosopher is willing to deliberately conflate a justification and an explanation serves to illustrate how the institutionalization of paranoid denunciation works in a contemporary, non-Stalinist context.

A similar example is provided by Richard Wolin who, exhibiting his trademark active refusal to understand the initial premises of critical theory, describes how, in relation to the events of 9-11, Žižek said:

"America got what it fantasised about" - which Žižek insinuates, echoing Baudrillard, is merely another way of saying *that America got what it had coming* ... Amid the fog of postmodern relativism disseminated by Baudrillard, Žižek, and others, something essential is missing. (Wolin 2004, 307)

Again using the accuser's own terms, the something essential that *is* missing in this instance is any grounding for Wolin's charge that Žižek is sneering at America. It is a psychological fact that people have fantasies. It is also a psychological fact that to have a fantasy enter one's reality, in an act of violence, for example, can be doubly traumatic – there is the trauma of the violence and to add to this there is the trauma of reliving one's fantasy in conditions not of your own choosing. Žižek uses the movie *The Piano Teacher* (Haneke 2001) as a sustained artistic expression of this point. For Wolin to proceed to argue that commenting upon the role of fantasy in trauma is the same as saying that someone is "getting what they had coming" itself insinuates something – a truly excessive and unhealthy desire to misrepresent.

Perhaps the most excessive misrepresentations of Žižek have focused upon the theme of violence, as Gray claims: 'The celebration of violence is one of the most prominent strands in Žižek's work.' (Gray 2012 website) Žižek's interpretation of violence is emblematic of misrepresentations of his work because it goes straight to the heart of the role excess plays in his ideology critique. Violence shares with ideology the paradoxical quality of being most effective when it is least obviously present. The true ideological danger resides in the notion that one is in a non-ideological situation, whilst similarly, an absence of explicit violence can hide the unacknowledged violence that underpins any given social situation. To encourage people to reflect upon the underlying violent grounds of their erstwhile normality requires a compensatory form of symbolic violence with which to prod them - Žižek's method of "looking awry" and adopting a "parallax view". This desire to look afresh at what, *pace* Barthes, otherwise "goes without saying", frequently involves from the perspective of critics like Wolin, Gray, and Chomsky, recourse to an unacceptable degree of playfully non-scientific, unserious over-reading. The stark difference in perspective can be seen in how, 'Eco describes as an "excess of wonder" ... the inclination to treat as significant what might simply be fortuitous [whilst] Culler argues that this excess is "a quality to be cultivated rather than shunned". (Davis 2010: xi) Contra Chomsky's exclusive privileging of "serious" scientific discourse, 'The force of these readings depends upon their dual ability to shock and to persuade. The philosophical interpreters court outrageousness whilst also seeking to create a context which will lend plausibility to their claims. (ibid: xii)

The successful courting of outrage is demonstrated in the carefully cultivated sense of outrage that arose from Žižek's statement that historical despots like Hitler, Stalin, and Pol Pot were (only in a very specific sense that Žižek explains in detail but which the critics ignored) 'not violent enough'. Of particular note in this regard, was Adam Kirsch's *New Republic* article "The Deadly Jester" (2008) the unequivocal general tenor of which is summed up in statements like: 'Žižek's allegedly progressive thought leads directly into a pit of moral and intellectual squalor'. (Kirsch 2008 website) With typical mischievousness, Žižek, co-opted Kirsch's title of for his subsequent book cover publicity blurb. The deliberate misunderstanding and/or misrepresentation of Žižek's analysis of violence is emblematic because it demonstrates, more clearly than any other theme, precisely what is at stake with Žižek's wagers of sin. Outrageousness needs to be courted because, left undisturbed, the mediascape's standard operating procedures act to process away recognition of the normalized forms of violence required by capitalism's day-to-day functioning. Periodically, events such as Hurricane Katrina and Abu Ghraib may puncture its veneer by revealing society's infernal regions, at least temporarily, but, directly contra Eco's reading, moments of deep political significance are soon re-interpreted either as being merely fortuitous, or reduced through such depoliticizing ideological filters as the superficially neutral non-political politics of personality and celebrity.

The subtitle of the book *Violence* (Žižek 2008) - *Six Sideways Reflections* - reflects the search for a method of producing an ideologically-sensitive calibration of society's various forms of violence capable of going beyond the surface level of over-familiarity that breeds consent. In this work, Žižek uses three terms *subjective*, *symbolic*, and *objective* to demonstrate how 'What might simply be fortuitous' is in fact the deeply ideological response trotted out when the excessive implications of one-off events threaten to disturb the political *status quo*. The notion of symbolic violence is inherent to language itself. The most basic act of communication necessarily involves a reduction and simplification of the initial reality that is being re-presented. It acts as the contested bridge between the other two notions. Subjective violence refers to that violence which has a directly attributable source whilst objective violence relates to systemic violence that is no less horrible in its effects, but which is less readily shocking due to the ease with which it can be

accommodated into conventional social structures – a distinction summed up by the significantly named (from this paper’s perspective) movie character The Joker:

Nobody panics when things go "according to plan." Even if the plan is horrifying! If, tomorrow, I tell the press that, like, a gang banger will get shot, or a truckload of soldiers will be blown up, nobody panics, because it's all "part of the plan". But when I say that one little old mayor will die, well then everyone loses their minds! (Nolan 2008)

The “Deadly Jester” label conveys an important sense of the ambivalence that results from the “indivisible remainder” of seriousness that stubbornly persists after the media leavens and co-opts serious ideas with entertainment values. Because of our knowledge of his subsequent death Heath Ledger’s performance of The Joker in *The Dark Knight* has poignancy, but more than this, a deeper, more disturbing political effect is created by the viewers’ sense that behind The Joker’s excessive statements lie genuine, uncomfortable truths.

The truth of the Joker’s analysis can be seen in our default approach to the historical record. We tend to compensate for our inability to conceptualize excess in the form of the largely incalculable number of deaths that occurred as a direct result of Russia’s Tsars and France’s *Ancien Régime* by means of a correspondingly excessive fixation upon the more easily identifiable and eventful deaths of individuals. Thus, the systematized death of Russian and French peasants through overwork and malnutrition remain in the historical subconscious whilst the guillotining of aristocrats and the execution of the Tsar’s family are dwelt upon time after time. This tendency to subsume systemic excess with an excessive focus upon individuals/individual instances is a key part of the contemporary mediascape’s ideological make-up, no more so than in Hollywood and, within Hollywood, no more so than in the metonymic image from *Schindler’s List* in which, in an otherwise monochrome film, a small girl is shown wearing a bright red coat – the *objet petit a*, an uncanny stain of Spielberg’s ideology that Terry Gilliam interprets in terms of taking sides:

There was a wonderful quote in a book that Freddy Raphael wrote about the making of *Eyes Wide Shut*, it’s called *Eyes Wide Open*, and he’s talking to Kubrick about *Schindler’s List* and the Holocaust, and he says: “The thing is, *Schindler’s List* is about success, the Holocaust was about failure.” And that’s Kubrick, and that’s just spot on. *Schindler’s List* had “save those few people” happy ending. “A man can do what a man can do”, and stop death for a few

people. But that's not what Holocaust is about, it's about complete failure of civilization, to allow 6 million people to die. And I know which side I'd rather be on. I'd like to have a nice house like Spielberg, but I know which side I'd rather be on." (Gilliam 2011)

The violence of the critical response to Žižek's analysis of violence may partly be a result of the inchoate resentment caused by his direct engagement with the infernal regions of historical excess normally left repressed and unstirred – the sort of displeasure aimed at the whistle-blower who undermines the group solidarity that is deemed more important than the truth. An additional degree of resentment is caused by a combination of Žižek's willingness to philosophize on the media's terrain with lots of questions but precious few solutions.

The Real Excess of the Joker's Success and the search for missing rabbits

I'm a bit of a tree-hugging, Hindu-tattooed, veggie meditator myself but first and foremost I want to have a fucking laugh. When Ali G, who had joined protesters attempting to prevent a forest being felled to make way for a road, shouted across the barricade, "You may take our trees, but you'll never take our freedom," I identified more with Baron Cohen's amoral trickster than the stern activist who aggressively admonished him: "This is serious, you cunt." A bit too fucking serious, actually. As John Cleese said, there is a tendency to confuse seriousness with solemnity. Serious causes can and must be approached with good humour, otherwise they're boring and can't compete with the Premier League and *Grand Theft Auto*. Social movements needn't lack razzmatazz. (Brand 2013 website)

Reality is structured by belief, by a faith in fantasy that we know to be fantasy yet we believe nonetheless. This is a stunning diagnostic insight, yet my question is and always has been: what does one *do* with this insight? ... I remember asking Žižek years ago about the implications of his work for political action and he answered, characteristically, 'I have a hat, but I do not have a rabbit.' My question is: where is the rabbit? We need at least one rabbit, maybe more if we want them to breed. (Critchley in Bowman and Stamp 2007, xv & xvi)

Brand and Critchley's above statements encapsulate the two main competing elements of Žižek's perceived excess that leads to a corresponding excess of criticism:

- i) By academic standards, Žižek is disproportionately successful. Despite his superficially unprepossessing appearance and tic-ridden mannerisms, his obvious earnestness, masterful ability to produce disorientating but convincing analyses of popular culture, and refusal to confuse seriousness

with solemnity, all combine to produce the razzmatazz championed by Brand.

- ii) His huge output of theoretical interpretation is not accompanied by matching political solutions.

The first objection relates to the perennially vexed relationship critics of have in relation to capitalism when they voice their critique of the system from within that same system, or, as Adorno and Horkheimer put it 'Talented performers belong to the industry long before it displays them' (Adorno & Horkheimer 2005 [1944] website), and with regard to the possibilities opened up by capitalism, '... the same principle that has opened up these opportunities also ties them to big business'. (Adorno cited in Hansen 1981-2: 186) In Žižek's case, the one solution he has provided is to the transmission problem Brand identified earlier, however, the practical success of his 'engaging fashion' is also used as evidence of his failure. In Gray's eyes for example:

In a stupendous feat of intellectual overproduction Žižek has created a fantasmatic critique of the present order, a critique that claims to repudiate practically everything that currently exists and in some sense actually does, but that at the same time reproduces the compulsive, purposeless dynamism that he perceives in the operations of capitalism. (Gray 2012 Website)

Arguably the "Real" problem critics have with Žižek's 'Idiotic Enjoyment' (see Davis 2010) is an unwillingness or inability to appreciate the significance of the difference between the Lacanian concept of the *symptom* and the *sinthome* and the importance of the relationship between the two.

Symptoms, like those a physician uses to identify the cause of an illness, are signs of an underlying code to be solved. The sinthome relates to how *jouissance* is processed. Jouissance is routinely translated into English as "enjoyment" but this fails to express fully its excessive character. Jouissance is a form of enjoyment that goes beyond the pleasure principle with frequently self-destructive outcomes, to paraphrase a common saying - lots of pain and no gain. So annoying to his critics, Žižek's idiotic enjoyment matches content and form. He explores the profound ideological implications of the excess contained within jouissance through an approach that is itself suffused with jouissance. For Žižek, 'it is the "stain" or "uncanny excess" of the text which is the true object of his reading. Rather than

eliminating this excess, he aims to encounter it as the trace of what he calls “the traumatic presence of the Real”. (Davis 2010: 123) Encountering that trace of the Real, however, also involves the *jouissance* of attempting to enunciate that which, by definition, resists enunciation. This explains why:

His writing is repetitious, it takes surprising twists and turns, goes back on itself and revises what has been said previously. Žižek’s style enacts a hesitant edging towards a theoretical position which is never quite finalized, in the attempt to enunciate the Real of desire, when in the Lacanian account, both the Real and desire are beyond the reach of enunciation. (ibid: 112)

The accusation that Žižek is a problematic part of the same system he critiques tends to be closely associated with the supplementary charge that he fails to provide any answers. This can be seen in the following representative selection of criticisms:

Laclau explains that he knew what Lenin and Trotsky meant when they issued calls for revolutionary seizures of state power, but Žižek? Does ‘he have a secret plan of which he is careful not to inform anyone?’ Laclau asks ... (La Berge in Bowman and Stamp 2007: 21)

Žižek is one of very few voices in recent times to have posed a particular and particularly urgent set of questions for the post-Marxist theoretical Left, even if the answers that he proffers are very far from being useful to anyone. (Gilbert ibid: 63)

While he rejects Marx’s conception of communism, Žižek devotes none of the over one thousand pages of *Less Than Nothing* to specifying the economic system or institutions of government that would feature in a communist society of the kind he favors. (Gray 2012 Website)

A yearning for solutions is a perennially voiced desire routinely directed at anyone who argues for a need of revolution (and predictably enough occurs in Paxman’s interview with Brand). It requires, however, a particular notion of philosophy and its purpose not shared by Žižek for whom, *pace* Heidegger, questioning, not answering, is the piety of thought and therefore, ‘Faced with the demands of the protestors, intellectuals are definitely not in the position of the subjects supposed to know: they cannot operationalize these demands, or translate them into proposals for precise and realistic measures.’ (Žižek 2012: 1007) In his case, the subject-supposed –to-know is a subject that doesn’t mind admitting that he has no rabbits to pull from his hat.

The criticism that Žižek lacks solutions that he never intended to produce in the first place is made because of a refusal to accept the reason for his constant

circling around the gap between the sinthome and symptom. Žižek's point is that, in a very real political sense, it is not solutions that we lack. For example, global resources do exist to solve starvation in the developing world but the *real* problem rests in finding a way to defeat the ideological processes and barriers that make sure that those eminently feasible solutions never come about. The problem that really needs solving is how to tackle the open contradictions of today's pervasively cynical form of ideology – *je sais bien mais quand même* (Manoni 1969).

There Once Was an Ugly Ideological Duckling - A Poster Boy for the Treason of the Intellectuals

It is as if in late capitalism 'words do not count', no longer oblige: they increasingly seem to lose their performative power; whatever one says is drowned in the general indifference; the emperor is naked and the media trumpet forth this fact, yet nobody seems really to mind—that is, people continue to act as if the emperor is not naked ... (Žižek 1994: 18)

Whilst words may have lost some of their performative power it remains an important ideological element of belief. To convey the sense of this, Žižek describes Pascal's advice to non-believers struggling to make the leap of faith. ' "Kneel down, pray, act as if you believe, and belief will come by itself." Or, as Alcoholics Anonymous put it today more succinctly: "Fake it until you make it." (Žižek 2007b website) This leads to something of a paradox – we are frequently tempted to look down on "primitive" peoples because we hold a much more sophisticated and critical distance to myth. In reality, ancient cultures recognized the cultural adhesion gained from myths whilst simultaneously retaining the right, indeed the practical need, not to believe in those myths literally. Paul Veyne explores this paradox with reference to Dan Sperber's account of the belief system of the Ethiopian Dorzé tribe in order to answer the central question, 'How is it possible to half-believe, or believe in contradictory things?' (Veyne 1988: xi). For the Dorzé,

... the leopard is a Christian animal who respects the fasts of the Coptic church, the observance of which, in Ethiopia, is the principal test of religion. Nonetheless, a Dorzé is no less careful to protect his livestock on Wednesdays and Fridays, the fast days, than on other days of the week. He holds it true that leopards fast and that they eat every day. Leopards are dangerous every day; this he knows by experience. They are Christian; tradition proves it. (ibid: xi)

“Primitive people” have therefore what might be called an “organically cynical attitude”, the Dorzé know on a day-to-day level that a leopard doesn’t change its spots to suit their religious beliefs (and so they take all necessary precautions), but for the purposes of group solidarity they are prepared to pretend to believe that it will. In late capitalism, by contrast, various cynical forms of belief exist. One is the type of belief contained in those institutions and processes that we pretend to pretend to believe in. For example, parents say they only keep the Father Christmas myth going “for the children”, when in fact is *their* naïve need to believe in a child’s naïve belief that drives the whole ritual. The end result is that, notwithstanding our protestations to the contrary, we may hold certain beliefs despite ourselves. More interesting still for a discussion of the ideological role of excess, however, is the type of cynicism that derives from knowing something to be true, but proceeding to ignore it in a state of bad faith.

The US TV show *Ugly Betty* exemplifies this new cynical form of belief. *Ugly Betty* is premised upon the eponymous heroine’s travails in the fashion industry and her good-hearted battle against its inherently superficial values. The show illustrates the notion of *lying in the guise of truth*. In terms of content, the show purports to be against superficiality but this is belied by the direct contradiction at its heart. Underneath her manufactured dowdy appearance, the real life actress playing Betty (America Ferrara) is highly attractive, whilst this is obvious to viewers; we nevertheless continue to watch as if we didn’t know. It is because of the pervasive nature of this cynicism within popular culture that Žižek says:

we must avoid the simple metaphors of demasking, of throwing away the veils which are supposed to hide the naked reality. We can see why Lacan, in his Seminar on The Ethic of Psychoanalysis, distances himself from the liberating gesture of saying finally that “the emperor has no clothes”. The point is, as Lacan puts it, that the emperor is naked only beneath his clothes, so if there is an unmasking gesture of psychoanalysis, it is closer to Alphonse Allais’s well-known joke, quoted by Lacan: somebody points at a woman and utters a horrified cry, “Look at her, what a shame, under her clothes, she is totally naked” [Lacan, 1986, p.231]. (Žižek 1989: 28-30)

Ugly Betty needs to be taken more, not less, literally than its ironic title would suggest. Its superficially fake ugliness purportedly designed to undermine superficiality is, in practice, an example of a genuinely ugly ideology – “Look at her, what a shame, under her clothes, she is totally gorgeous”. Lacan emphasizes the

need to be able to recognize and then denaturalize what we know to be true so that we can fully appreciate *how* it is true, the profound significance of the form in which the truth appears to us. To paraphrase the title of a James Bond film - *the truth is not enough*. It is perfectly possible for a lie to be told in the guise of the truth and *vice versa*. Žižek's provocatively excessive examples are an attempt to crack today's cynical ideological carapace. Its thickness is demonstrated by the *status-quo*-supporting role played by those satirists and intellectuals one might reasonably expect to be predisposed to combating political indifference and apathy.

C.K. Louie is an American stand-up comic whose reputation is built upon his acerbically cynical rants about contemporary mores which form an integral part of the hybrid format of his stand-up/sitcom show *Louie*. Even allowing for cultural differences in the ability to tolerate schmaltz (in the figurative rather than literal avian form), the 2011 hour-long special appropriately entitled "Duckling" encapsulates the underlying ideological ugliness of the comedian's superficially critical outlook. The plot is that his young daughter plants a duckling in his luggage just before he flies out to Afghanistan on a USO tour. According to a TV "critic" from the *Huffington Post*:

In even the uniquely unvarnished, autobiographical world of *Louie*, an hour-long episode that tenderly draws together Middle East war zones and ducklings is a particular accomplishment A remarkable hour of television in its breadth, it was surely the most ambitious *Louie*. Most telling, perhaps, is that its normally self-critical creator actually allows for some modicum of satisfaction ... Near the end of "Duckling," a tense moment between soldiers (mostly played by former military) and Afghan farmers (played by Afghani immigrants), is alleviated when Louie falls chasing his duckling. The daunting journey – both for the character of Louie on the show and for Louis C.K. making it – ends with the irresistible, cross-cultural comedy of the pratfall, a comic's peace sign. (Coyle 2011 website)

It is in such an episode of extreme mawkishness that we can see the true manifestation of the "deadly jester", a comic, who, rather than using comedy as an act of critical expression like Brand and Žižek, takes a pratfall to make a peace sign with the death-dealing military industrial ideology of the non-complex. The geopolitical realities of mass civilian deaths in Afghanistan and post-invasion Iraq are displaced by saccharin depictions of peace-creating ducklings. C. K. Louie thus perfectly fits Žižek's claim that:

Cynicism ... recognizes, it takes into account, the particular interest behind the ideological universality, the distance between the ideological mask and

the reality, but it still finds reasons to retain the mask. This cynicism is not a direct position of immorality, it is more like morality itself put in the service of immorality ... (Žižek 1989: 29)

This tendency is also evident amongst intellectuals who have chosen to take the ruling ideology's mask very literally at "face" value.

A stark example of the contrast between ideology critique and those intellectuals who actively work to betray it is contained within Mark Poster's essay about the US cosmetic surgery make-over show *The Swan* – 'Swan's Way: Care of the Self in the Hyperreal' (Poster 2007). To help set out his position, Poster disapprovingly cites Mark Andrejevic's contrasting ideological analysis of reality TV. He points out that in Andrejevic's eyes, 'Like the Internet, reality TV promises democracy through interactivity, but ends only by strengthening the grip of neoliberal capitalism on the population' (Poster 2007: 159) Poster then proceeds to take issue with Andrejevic's claim that instead of being a democratizing influence, in actuality it only encourages "submission to comprehensive forms of monitoring as a form of empowerment and self-expression." (ibid: 159) The kicker in Poster's denunciation comes from the same realm of excessive reaction that we have previously seen in relation to Žižek's work. Thus, for Poster:

Although Andrejevic credits himself as a "critic," the rhetorical effect of his denunciation of reality TV is not an impetus to struggle, but paralysis: nothing can be done that the reigning powers cannot co-opt. Academic cultural studies at the hands of such scholars betray a tendency to refuse any hint of a negative dialectic in popular culture. (Poster 2007: 159)

The suggestion that scholars like Andrejevic betray a tendency of refusal is inadvertently ironic. Even if it is accepted for the sake of argument that a betrayal is present, it pales into insignificance compared with how the type of "negative dialectic" that Poster finds in shows like *The Swan* and *Extreme Makeover* risks bringing the formerly critical concept into disrepute:

The shows validate and legitimize an ethic of self-transformation in an age of mediated culture, one certainly different from that of the Hellenistic era discussed by Foucault, but one perhaps more consonant with a time when information machines are in a new relation with humans. From this perspective, the surgeries on reality TV might be seen as moves toward new forms of care of self that, while not liberational or resistant in themselves,

explore possibilities of subjectivation in the current formation of mediated culture. (ibid: 172)

A better example of supine accommodation to an oppressive *status quo* is difficult to either imagine or parody. For Poster, it appears that no form of capitulation to capitalist values is too excessive and this allows him to conclude that: 'If taking oneself seriously and caring for oneself in the twenty-first century requires ... surgery to change the body, even with its dangers, then so be it.' (ibid: 175) The ideological mask of apathy, indifference, and voluntary servitude is not just to be retained, it is to be surgically enhanced and then celebrated once the anaesthetic has worn off. The contemporary cynical treason of some academics means that far from being the intellectual shock troops of a revolutionary vanguard, they act as the rear-guard non-shockable troops for whom "I know very well, but even so" becomes "I know very well, but I will do my best to make sure others don't". Pretending to act as if the emperor is not naked is no longer enough, now his courtiers design new imaginary clothes for him.

Conclusion – The Curious Case of the Academics Who Failed to Bark in the Night

Žižek's ... 'public position' foregrounds what may otherwise remain below many radars: namely, the complex imbrication of intellectual production in academic and commercial institutions, forces and imperatives. Intentionally or inadvertently, Žižek's very success – or his plight – demands an intellectual interrogation. It promises to teach us a great deal about our own 'position' or location, and as such, about the limits and possibilities of the imbrication and reticulation of academic intellectual life with society, culture and politics. (Bowman and Stamp [eds.] 2007: 7)

Despite being taken from an otherwise highly critical, at times *ad hominem*, collection of essays somewhat archly entitled *The Truth of Žižek*, Bowman and Stamp's above summary of the wider implications of Žižek's individual success constitutes a succinct and insightful development of Arendt's earlier formulation of the perennial conundrum faced by thinkers who attempt to engage with popular culture. The "possibilities" they mention imply the perennial question of "what is to be done?" The one possibility not allowed, however, is Žižek's insistence on the primary

philosophical responsibility to, above all else, question rather than provide answers where there may be none. Adorno memorably made this point: 'When the doors are barricaded, it is doubly important that thought not be interrupted. It is rather the task of thought to analyse the reasons behind this situation and to draw the consequences from these reasons. (Adorno 2001 [1978]: 200)

Figures like Žižek and Brand seem so excessive because they speak enthusiastically (framed as near-mania by the media) about challenging ideas that do not normally fit within neither the media's almost exclusively image and sound-bite centred purview, nor contemporary theorists' misguidedly utilitarian conceptualization of what theory should be. To contain and domesticate any deeper implications that may arise for consideration from such excess, Žižek, the philosopher, is presented as someone merely entertaining and, as an entertainer; Brand's right to speak at all is questioned. The media and academia's rejection of conceptual excess represents a practical example of today's pervasive need to subjectivize. The struggle is on to turn figures like Žižek and Brand into a sublime objects of ideology even as they speaks of how such objects pervade and permeate our culture. Brand cautions that, 'The right seeks converts and the left seeks traitors.' (Brand 2013 website). This is indeed a trap worth avoiding but fear of it is not reason enough to avoid pointing out the sins of commission and omission of treasonous intellectuals when they do occur.

Žižek and Brand are obvious, self-consciously privileged parts of the system they denounce but they are caught in a stubborn Catch-22 in so far as they would not be listened to if they were not. Žižek's humorous wager rests on the hope that an uncanny, hard-to-remove, stain remains behind after his performances. This is the reflexive power of the critical (in both senses of the word) excess that challenges the constraining power of "mere" facts - the glib indifference distilled in the phrase *je sais bien mais quand même*. The excessive *ad hominem* reaction to figures like Žižek and Brand ultimately has little to do with any interpretive or analytical excesses on their part. Rather, it stems from the strength of the complicitous ties that bind together those who resent the exposure of their open secret. The Slovenian and Essex jokers continue to take brickbats on our behalf, not because they are the theory-heroes that we deserve, but because they are the batmen in the belfry that we need. In the preface to *The Philosophy of Right*, Hegel famously observed that:

“Only when the dusk starts to fall does the owl of Minerva spread its wings and fly”. For the cultural conservatives encountered in this paper who masquerade as polysemically-sophisticated intellectuals, it is the middle of the night, the guard dogs are silent, and the owl is still in the barn ...

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