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Baudrillard and Žižek: Short-circuiting the Parallax?

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May '68 will serve well enough as an example. Everything would lead us to believe in the subversive impact of the media during this period. Suburban radio stations and newspapers spread the student action everywhere. If the students were the detonators, the media were the resonators. Furthermore, the authorities quite openly accused the media of 'playing the revolutionary game' ... I would say to the contrary that the media have never discharged their responsibilities with more efficiency, and that ... in their function of habitual social control, they were right on top of the action (Baudrillard, 1981, p. 173).

Autumn 2005's suburb riots in France saw thousands of cars burning and a major outburst of public violence. But what struck the eye was the absence of any positive utopian vision among protesters. If May '68 was a revolt with a utopian vision, the 2005 revolt was an outburst with no pretense to vision.

Here's proof of the common aphorism that we live in a post-ideological era: The protesters in the Paris suburbs made no particular demands. There was only an insistence on recognition, based on a vague, non-articulated resentment (Žižek, 2008).

The idea for this issue arose from Žižek's notion of the short-circuit, coupled with his formalisation of the Parallax view. This set us wondering, how would, how could we short-circuit Žižek, and more specifically, who with? Of course central to the claim of the short-circuit is to set off a tension, a connection, a spark between a major and a minor thinker, to read the major thinker through the

minor. For Žižek, a short-circuit reading is a practice reveals and disrupts hidden theoretical assumptions, its “procedure can lead to insights which completely shatter and undermine our common preconceptions” (Žižek in Chiesa, 2007, p. vi). Žižek goes on to state that the short-circuit has a specific intervention: “the reader should not simply have learned something new: the point is, rather to make or her aware of another – disturbing – side of something he or she knew all the time” (p. vii). Yet, as stimulating as such a Žižekian short-circuit might prove, we wanted to push the idea further. Here Žižek’s notion of the Parallax gap proved fertile. The Parallax gap is those ideas, movements and claims that run alongside each other, not touching or crossing, but providing in this sense an alternative to how consider taken for granted ideological conceptualisations. Žižek’s parallax is an impossible short-circuit between the Parallax. Our innovation was to ask what if we undertook the *possible* short-circuit, the short-circuit of the Parallax? Of course, this would not be a short-circuit in the traditional Žižekian sense because we wished to take Žižek as what we saw as one track of the Parallax and short-circuit him with another major thinker. To recapitulate and given that the Parallax is two tracks running alongside and not touching, we decided to reconceptualize what we wished to do with and through Žižek’s ideas. Here perhaps, rather than short-circuiting two tracks, especially between two major thinkers, the better analogy is that of magnets. Each magnet is either a positive (+) or negative (-). Thinkers, theorists, philosophers can be magnetic in their interactions with others engaged in similar projects. Their thought, their projects can engage either positively (+) or negatively(-) with the thoughts and projects of others. Through this metaphor we are able to tantalise one Žižek’s off-the-cuff, yet significant suggestion that two philosophers cannot completely be in conversation with one another.

Let’s consider the magnet as a metaphor of Lacan’s mirror stage. Looking in the mirror creates a rationality which, for the most part is not so. Such an assumed image of what one sees in the mirror constructs a way in which to order oneself in the world, how one might take on images and language already constructed and how to negotiate tensions around these that derive from unconscious desires. The irony is that while one seeks unity, subjective wholeness, the mirror

starts the mechanism for inevitable subjective destitution – and for the path of knowledge to have possibility to be in emergence. The mirror stage constitutes the Other – in this case, being the desire for knowledge. While can be repelled or attracted by illusory identifications as perceptions of our image, our gaze continues in the hope that we might glimpse, even for a moment, a difference, a uniqueness, a recognition of ourselves as being distinctive and closer to the Other. The gap that exists between two magnets – images – provides the space, which tantalise fantasy, possibilities for knowledge and a desire to unify incompleteness and (im)perfect reality. It is sometimes somewhat fashionable and tantalising to pitch two philosophers as having a conversation and imagine the content and sparks which fly. Here, however, we undertake a different task. The screen (mirror or the gap, whether it be tension or attraction, that exists between the magnets) is a necessary constituent of the conversation that takes place. Each philosopher, in broaching a concept or idea, must consider and respond to the gap and in doing so, must accept the provisional nature of knowledge and truth.

If we consider Žižek as one Parallax track as a method of undertaking this procedure, we accept that this track in engagement with others contains both positive (+) and negative (-) force, then what occurs if the Žižek track is laid alongside the track of another's thought? We theorized that the reaction would be similar to that set out in Žižek's notion of the short-circuit but not, importantly, as the crossing of wires sitting central to the short-circuit. Further, in many ways, all of us who engage with and use Žižek ourselves short-circuit with Žižek. We, more specifically the contributors, reviewers and readers of this issue, are the minor current to the major current of Žižek. However, we also wished to do something different. What if we took another major philosopher and ran he or she alongside Žižek? What might occur, we theorized, would not be a short-circuit but rather a type of positive (+) and negative (-) magnetic interaction that would keep each track separate but thoroughly engaged with the other. Any short-circuit would be within the positive (+) or negative (-) magnetic reaction, a new type of short-circuit within the writing-out of the magnetic reaction.

Could our approach therefore be labelled anti-Hegelian? The answer is itself an anti-binary Yes-and-No. It is anti-Hegelian in its rejection of a dialectic between Parallax Z and Parallax Y; but it does acknowledge a possible dialectic within x to Z and within x to Y. The use of *possible* acknowledges that x might not be in antithetical position to Z but may be to Y – and vice versa. There is also the possibility that x is not antithetical to either Z or Y. Rather, finding themselves inserted between Parallax Z and Parallax Y, x establishes their own minor Parallax that runs between the two major tracks. In this case the new minor Parallax x creates and experiences at one position a positive (+) response to Parallax Z or Parallax Y and at another point experiencing a negative (-) response to one or other Parallax tracks on either side. Alternatively, minor Parallax x could create and experience a positive reaction to both Parallax Z and Parallax Y at the same point [that is a type of positive (+) short-circuit within x] or perhaps a double negative (-) response [what can be termed the negative (-)short circuit within x].

This possible minor Parallax insertion can be represented as such:

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xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx(+Z)xxxxxxxx(-Y)xxxxxxxx(+Y)xxxxxxxx(-Z)xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

YY

This preamble is to lay out the tracks from which a new conception of short-circuiting the Parallax can occur. From this the question then arises, who is to be the other Parallax track to Žižek? Sitting underneath such a question is that larger question since 1989 of what is, what can be, the philosophy or the theory of the Left? In short, what is, where is, who is the outside to Capitalism and more so, to an often seemingly hegemonic Neo-Liberalism? Further to this, we wished to run a Parallax that was as heterodox to any continuing left-wing orthodoxies as is Žižek. We also wished to run a Žižekian Parallax alongside a thinker who, in his or her own time, assumed a Žižekian-type position of what can be termed

heterodox orthodoxy. That is, a heterodox thinker on the Left who came to be positioned as type of normative orthodoxy as a major thinker, although maybe, not as popular but just as controversial. In this such a major thinker assumes, in a manner itself perverse to heterodoxy, his or her own school of thought and followers who to greater or lesser degree assume the nomenclature of this heterodox school – just as Žižek has given rise to a perverse Žižekian school of thought. In itself this *Journal*, being labelled *Žižek Studies*, ought to be a prime example of such perverse heterodox orthodoxy.

In considering the Parallax track *Y* to Žižek's Parallax *Z*, that of Baudrillard emerged as an obvious magnet. Žižek and Baudrillard run on Parallax tracks. The positives (+) are that both are Leftist heterodox thinkers who cross out of traditional fields of continental thought and politics into a critical engagement with contemporary and popular culture. Both Baudrillard and Žižek range widely in their critical engagements, they both position themselves in a location within the Left, and yet are both critical of leftist orthodoxies. Both acknowledge the failure of the orthodox Left in 1989 and yet recognized the need to reconfigure leftist thought in response. There are also the central tensions of age and nationality. Baudrillard (1929-2007), French, sociologist and in the legacy of semiotics, poststructuralism, Mauss, Bataille and McLuhan runs a completely different track to Žižek (1949-), Slovenian, philosopher, in the legacy of Marx, Lacan and Hegel, is a type of dissident supporter of both Lenin and Stalin. Centrally, Baudrillard is no Lacanian while a psychoanalytical approach is central to Žižek's thought. Baudrillard lived and thought in France, experiencing the collapse of European democracy, the German occupation and the post-war French tensions of de-colonialization, Marxism, Maoism and the failure of Paris 1968. He refused to embrace a much desired Master and sat in opposition to Lacan's mantra of the time, "You want a new Master. You will surely find one". In all of this Baudrillard was free to live, think and write as he wanted, he fully subsumed intellectual freedom. The term bourgeois leftism, a criticism of his stance, is too easy to apply – and if it is then it can be applied to all leftist intellectuals in the west to whom the realities of a failed socialism and its horrors and limitations was never a permanently lived experience. Yet it should be noted

that Baudrillard's leftism is that of the intellectual within Western democratic capitalism – and a leftism that has within it the traditional French desire to be non-aligned. Žižek, in contrast, experienced firsthand the life of a failed socialist experiment. Of course, what became Slovenia was within the heterodox Yugoslavian socialism, itself striving for its own Parallax track within post-war Communism.

Therefore Baudrillard's differences are threefold at a most basic level: age, nationality, and context. Yet, if we consider the orthodox tracks of Continental thought since World War Two they could be named as Heidegger, Sartre, Foucault, Gadamer, Ricoeur, Deleuze, Habermas and Derrida. These tracks may have fallen into disrepair- as in the case of Sartre – or are found to have highly suspect and unstable foundations – as in Heidegger. Yet all of these occupied a central ground that, to greater or lesser degree can be labelled orthodoxy. Baudrillard and Žižek are examples of heterodox tracks, thinkers who assume in themselves a form of Baudrillardian hyper-reality whereby the name "Baudrillard" or "Žižek" or the label "Baudrillardian" or "Žižekian" circulate into wider intellectual pop culture in a fashion increasingly distanced from the reality of the person and thought giving rise to them.

In this monograph we wish firstly to undo the hyper-real usage and formalisation, and uncover just what positive (+) and negative (-) engagements there could be undertaken by writers *x et al* who situate themselves between the Parallax tracks. Some align themselves with Žižek, others moreso with Baudrillard and yet others in a heterodox position to both. In considering the issues possible, there are the opposing engagements with popular culture and especially cinema. For if Baudrillard thinks and writes *on* contemporary and popular culture, Žižek writes and thinks from *within* it. This is not only a generational difference, nor one that can be attributed to the post-socialist society thinker who grew up with a deep fascination and knowledge of the popular culture of the oppositional society. Baudrillard also lacks Žižek's Lacanian-derived fascination of what is *within* the expression of popular culture and the ways these give expression to those drives and desires which are often

hidden, distorted or perversely excreted within contemporary society. Similarly, Žižek's use of and focus upon the joke as a philosophical and critical medium is absent in Baurillard. This is not to state that Žižek is not a serious thinker. On the contrary, Žižek's seriousness is precisely why he engages in the joke as representative of what is hidden and often not directly articulated.

The hegemony of globalization as a distinctly Western capitalist effect is where engagements between the Parallax tracks of Žižek and Baudrillard are possible. This arises obviously from their leftist conduits. Further, however, they both identify globalization also with the post-war influence and later hegemony of America. If Baudrillard's most concentrated critique occurs in his text *America* (1986) [one that always brings to mind the post-exilic critique of Henry Miller's *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare* (1945)], then almost all of Žižek, in its multiplicity of references, is a form of perverse celebratory critique of America and its cultural hegemony.

Both return to and rework Marxist thought. Žižek vehemently and unapologetically returns to Marx's conceptualisations of ideology, party and class as a way of understanding and disrupting those conditions which give traction to hidden and often divisive signifiers which establish social realities (2014, p. 137):

Let us say this signifier is 'solidarity': it will mean a different thing to an unemployed worker, to a conservative farmer, to a starved intellectual, to a soldier or policeman, etc, etc; however, the social pact, the unity, this signifier will impose will nonetheless not be simply illusory...

For Žižek, the tensions, violence and political power yield themselves to an inevitable event, from which transformation takes place. Baudrillard, like Žižek employs traditional Marxist logic when understanding capital and social production, but does so by directly implicating alienation in that the mode of production does not present us with reality – quite the contrary in fact. It merely stages what is absent from appearance, thus falsely magnifying capitalism to a

magical quality from which consumption posits as efficacious. We want and demand more objects because we want and demand the magic it promises. In this way, objects are designed to deny enjoyment and this defines the practice of consumption (1998, p. 34):

The consumer's relation to the real world, to politics, to history, to culture, is not a relation of interest, investment or committed responsibility nor it is one of total indifference: it is a relation of curiosity. On the same pattern, we can say that the dimension of consumption as we have defined it is not one of knowledge of the world, nor is it one of total ignorance; it is the dimension of misrecognition.

For Baudrillard, the consumer is bombarded by the media which clashes with the privacy and clarity the individual desires. Here one finds solidarity in consumer goods and not necessarily through social relations.

Another area of significant tension between Baudrillard and Žižek is that of religion. French Marxism coupled within a legacy of Revolutionary anti-clericalism tends to position 'religion' as first and foremost Catholicism – and therefore, something conservative to be opposed. It is always important to have the constant reminder that for Baudrillard religion is a problem to be opposed. It is perhaps provocative, but not without substance, to state that Baudrillard does not really understand religion and certainly not theology. Žižek on the other hand has increasingly become an important figure in radical religious and theological thought. This is again partly generational but also due to the types of heterodox leftist thought he engaged in. Baurillard is the embodiment of a Left firstly disillusioned with the failures of 1968 and then in despair following 1989. It can be argued that he also lacks the wider historical engagement of Žižek, an engagement Žižek derives from his twin supports in German and Russian philosophy and critique. This is further expressed in what can be termed the post-modern mediatized post-reality of Baudrillard; for Baudrillard's influence was- and still is- most often taken up at an introductory level in a mass-media and communications ethos. Žižek's engagement is far more historical; his reality

is very much a deeply political materialism. It is this materialism that allows his theological critique, a materialism that looks to the legacy and influence of the materialist turn he identifies as central to the claim of Christianity.

Materialism, or rather, the new materialism is therefore the most central tension between Baudrillard and Žižek. If Žižek is deeply and thoroughly materialist, there remains a suspicion of gnosticism with and within Baudrillard's dismissive position. This central difference is responsible for their differing politics. It is not entirely unfair to apply Marx's famous dictum (Thesis Eleven) from *Theses on Feuerbach* (1845) regarding philosophy and changing the world to Baudrillard. In fact, not only does Baudrillard describe the techno-mediatised society he inadvertently changed it in an unexpected fashion with his identification and naming of the hyper-real. It is not too much to argue that the naming of the hyper-real allowed its expression as intentional within capitalism and politics. The rise of spin in politics, the world of mass advertorial in a digital environment are both expressions of what Baudrillard named and in its naming made normative. For he offered no resistance, no alternative, only the naming as a strangely depoliticized critique. But then media and technological thought, critique and analysis always carries within it an element of what can be termed – via Erik Davis (1998) – a tech-gnosis. The emphasis on language as a form of political resistance is a conduit both Baudrillard and Žižek share. However, Žižek is, in contrast to Baudrillard, deeply political, a politics that is revolutionary in focus and intent. For Žižek we need to reread Lenin and Stalin and then rework, reimagine and reapply them within a democratic communism. This is not the hyper-real communism of the bourgeois intellectual but in contrast a deeply materialist communism as project, as revolutionary project – as insurrection.

So why set them up in Parallax? We do so because they offer, at base level, two different forms of leftist thought which offer insights and tensions into contemporary social and political thought: Baudrillard as a form of deep engagement with technological modernity and society, Žižek as a form of highly politicized, revolutionary cultural materialism. In this Parallax occurs the possible meeting of what can be termed the tensions of critique and revolution,

of techno-media and Lacan-derived cultural criticism, of a Post-war socialism of despair and a reformed insurrectionist hope of materialist communism. And in between sit the contributing essays that make up this volume; many of which arise out of a trajectory that saw Baudrillard as the possibility post-1968 and then experienced the post-1989 rise of the Žižekian alternative. Yet if 1968 is almost fifty years ago, we must not forget that 1989 is merely thirty-six years past. Perhaps it is only in a Parallax reading that now, in the 21st century, we can begin to lay down new tracks learning from the success and failure, the hopes and despair, the political options of critique and insurrection that all *have not*, contra Marx, *actually* changed the world. Are new Parallaxes possible that might possibly change the world and not just critique it? For, contra to both Baudrillard and Žižek, is it not actually Capitalism that, in a perverse hyper-reality, is still perceived – and experienced- as the most revolutionary force and ideology? We need to remember that that it was Schumpeter, himself a leftist thinker, who famously labelled the process of Capitalism as that undertaking ‘creative destruction’ – a creative destruction it can seem in bleak moments of even leftist thought itself. Yet perhaps we need the Parallax of the inverse - to rethink, to lay down a track of leftist thought as ‘destructive creation’ to hold herein the revolutionary drive of Žižek’s materialism, but as that which in overcoming creates anew – and continues to do so. In considering this we also need to reconsider the ground on which we stand and make such claims.

Perhaps too often unacknowledged is the ground on which these Parallax tracks are laid, the ground of a triumphant Capitalism that even the global financial crisis of 2007-2009 ongoing could not destroy. The response from the left has been as fragmentary as Capitalism could have hoped. Is there anything we can learn not just from Žižek and Baudrillard but more so out of the magnetic response positive (+) or negative (-) between the two? Are there new Parallax tracks that can be laid down by and within the Left in the 21st Century that occur out of the responses between the tracks of Žižek and Baudrillard? The Church Father Tertullian once asked ‘What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?’ Perhaps we can ask this similarly in a series of discussions and possibilities: ‘What has Paris to do with Ljubljana?’ Of course the answer from the Žižekian track is

Lacan- but what is, what could be the answer from the track of Baudrillard? And then to widen the question, what has Wall Street, the City, Canary Wharf and all other financial capitals to do with the Paris of Baudrillard and Lacan – and the Ljubljana of Žižek? Here arises the final heterodox thought: not only is Capitalism the main trunk line that all other Parallax tracks run alongside, could it not be the case that leftist thought finds itself reduced to being the minor partner in any short-circuit that occurs within Capitalism? Is not Leftist thought itself the hyper-real thought of the late 20th century and into the 21st; the hyper-real critique that is tolerated because it will, it appears, now only critique and never change the world? Therefore, Leftist thought needs to itself change and perhaps only if we undertake magnetic responses, leaving behind the infighting of an internal Leftist dialectic, will change begin to occur.

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