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Towards a Copernican Revolution: “Žižek!” as Symptom, Žižek as Symptom, Žižek’s Symptom

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Abstract

In the updated preface to the 2008 edition of his seminal work *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Slavoj Žižek writes that “when a discipline is in crisis, attempts are made to change or supplement its theses within the terms of its basic framework – a procedure one might call ‘Ptolemization’”. The alternative, he claims, is a “true ‘Copernican’ revolution” which takes place “when, instead of just adding complications and changing minor premises, the basic framework itself undergoes a transformation” (Žižek 2008: vii). In light of these remarks, the central question posed in this paper is as follows: how might Žižek’s distinction between a Ptolemization and Copernican revolution be applied to the field of Žižek Studies today? I will attempt to answer this question by making three central claims. First, that the current status of Žižek within the field of Žižek Studies – the perception of Žižek as “Žižek!” – demonstrates Žižek’s own notion of the “symptom” in its purest form, such that the current reception of his work functions as a formal materialization of his radical notion of ideology. Second, in order to address this issue one must apply Žižek’s method of ideology critique to the figure of “Žižek!,” a move which necessitates a direct engagement with the revolutionary and properly symptomatic nature of Žižek’s thought. Finally, I will advocate the need to turn Žižek’s own method *against Žižek himself*, by arguing that the distorted picture of Žižek as “Žižek!” has its source in an inherent limitation in the foundations of Žižek’s theoretical apparatus. Taken together, these three arguments attempt to redefine what is at stake in adopting the Žižekian position. In doing so, the paper present itself as an effort to re-actualize the emancipatory potential of Žižek’s project by exploring the implications of his thought for the field of interdisciplinary scholarship.

1. “Žižek!” as symptom

In the updated preface to the 2008 edition of his seminal work *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Slavoj Žižek writes that “when a discipline is in crisis, attempts are made to change or supplement its theses within the terms of its basic framework – a procedure one might call ‘Ptolemization’”. The alternative, he claims, is a “true ‘Copernican’ revolution” which takes place “when, instead of just adding complications and changing minor premises, the basic framework itself undergoes a transformation” (Žižek 2008: vii). In light of these remarks, the central question posed in this paper is as follows: how might Žižek’s distinction between a Ptolemization and Copernican revolution be applied to the field of Žižek Studies today? How, in other words, might we seek to re-evaluate Žižek’s work in a way that includes the mechanisms of evaluation as part of the observed phenomena? The working hypothesis is that, as Žižekians, we must reassert the fundamental rule of psychoanalysis as articulated by Žižek himself: one must remember to include as part of the content of the message communicated, the act of communication itself (Žižek 2008: 21). In short, when it comes to the reception of Žižek’s thought we should remember Žižek’s basic point that “the question to ask is always: is this truly a Copernican revolution, or merely a Ptolemization of the old paradigm?” (Žižek 2008: vii).

As a departure point, let us consider the paradoxical nature of Žižek’s status within today’s academic discourse. At present, it is fair to say that a contradictory image of Žižek is currently being constructed, one which is rooted in an opposition between two poles of scholarship. On one side of the divide, there would appear to be a general reluctance on the part of more traditional scholars to engage with Žižek’s work. In disciplines such as Philosophy he is often dismissed as a somewhat clownish figure who should not to be taken seriously. This attitude is in stark contrast to Žižek’s reception within more pluralist, interdisciplinary fields, where there is an almost excessive celebration of his work. For scholars of Cultural Studies and Film Theory, for example, he is venerated as the ‘Elvis of Cultural Theory’ and the ‘Philosopher of the Left’. How, then, might we hope to reconcile these two competing views of Žižek?

In a recent online interview, *Žižek urges renewed resistance* (2012)ⁱ, Žižek himself offered his own assessment of the “Žižek!” phenomenon when he declared that “this false celebration of me as a Rock Star [...] or disgusting persona is a refined and very effective way of getting rid of Žižek – he is amusing but don’t take him too seriously”. He believes that a new “formula” is emerging which takes the form of the following injunction: “he may appear to be just a clown, a stand-up comedian but be careful, beneath this appearance there is a deadly, dangerous violent message.” When seeking to make sense of Žižek’s oblique assessment of his work’s reception, it is often wise to follow the advice he himself offers. In this case, it is helpful to repeat Žižek’s interpretation, at the beginning of *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, of Lacan’s curious declaration that “Marx invented the symptom”. What such a move involves is a firm resistance of the temptation to reject Žižek’s reference to “Žižek!” as yet another offhand remark. Instead, we should repeat the more radical question he poses with regard to Lacan: do Žižek’s comments contain any “pertinent theoretical foundations” (2008: 3)?

The first point worth noting is that Žižek is clearly suggesting that the choice being presented by the academic community – between “Žižek as Rock Star” and “Žižek as Clown” – is a false one. This might lead us to conclude that, in the distorted image of “Žižek”, we encounter what in the praxis of psychoanalysis is known as a symptom: an impossible choice between two diametrically opposing terms, “the confrontation of two closely linked

perspectives between which no neutral common ground is possible” (2006b: 9). Žižek explains that, when faced with such a debilitating deadlock, the best option is to choose neither side; or, in more theoretical terms, one should approach the perceived problem as a “parallax”: rather than attempting to overcome what appears to be an “irreducible obstacle” (Žižek 2009: 4) – through a reconciliation of the opposing terms or an emphasis on the insurmountable nature of the deadlock – one should instead attempt to reach below the dualism, to the inherent antagonism which precedes the opposition itself, the *gap within* which precedes *the gap between*. As Žižek writes, we should: “take a step further and reach beneath the dualism itself, into a ‘minimal difference’ [...] that generates it [...] The first critical move is to replace this topic of the polarity of opposites with the concept of the inherent ‘tension,’ gap, the non-coincidence of the One with itself” (Žižek 2009: 10-11/7).

What becomes visible through such a “parallax” view is a traumatic truth: at work in the reception (consumption) of Žižek, *is the very ideological operation articulated by Žižek*. In other words, it is not difficult to recognize how the distorted image of “Žižek!” is directly homologous to Žižek’s own analysis of the figure of the Jew in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*: as both Rock Star and Clown “Žižek!” is a fetishistic element which provokes both fascination and repulsion in equal measure. Within the inter-disciplinary field of Žižek Studies, “Žižek!” is the venerated object around which a plurality of particular perspectives converge in fascination. Conversely, it is the disavowed fetishism operative in this elevation which is openly staged in the dismissal: the rejection of “Žižek!” as a disgusting persona marks the point where an excessive enjoyment erupts into the domain of traditional scholarship. The basic point not to be missed is that, in both cases, we witness “ideological *jouissance*” penetrating the surface of the field (Žižek 2008: 142).

On a strictly symbolic level, it becomes apparent that, behind the “the dazzling splendour” exerted by the figure of “Žižek!”, *the name “Žižek”* functions as the element holding the consistency of the field of scholarship together: “Žižek” functions as the empty, tautological ‘*point de capiton*’ in relation to which a plurality of disciplines reflexively mark their positions, the performative, self-reflexive element which legitimizes the activity of those within the field. In short, the name “Žižek” functions as a master signifier *par excellence*: its “role is purely structural” and its “nature is purely performative” but it is misrecognized as “a point of supreme density of meaning [...] a stable and fixed point of reference” (Žižek 2008: 109).

The argument being made here is that the mechanism of reception through which Žižek’s work is interpreted functions according to what he himself terms the last support of all ideological edifices: it displays the logic of an objective belief which both gives rise to and is obscured by a traumatic kernel of enjoyment. That is to say, the activity of those who choose to either integrate or reject Žižek thought is ultimately guided by a “fetishistic disavowal” (2008: 12) and governed by a “complementary blindness” (2008: 14). At work here, of course, is Žižek’s basic point concerning ideology, most succinctly encapsulated by the following formula: we are “fetishists in practice, not in theory” (2008: 28). In what I believe to be one of Žižek’s most powerful yet simple concepts, ideology is seen to operate not at the level of knowledge – what subjects think they are doing – but in the social effectivity of their activity – what they are actually doing. “Ideology,” he writes, “is not a false consciousness of a social being but this being insofar as his/her activity is supported by false consciousness” (2009: 15). Thus, given the structural role played by “Žižek!,” can it not be argued that the reception of Žižek’s work offers itself as the most concrete evidence of Žižek’s theory?

It is in this way, I argue, that the field of Žižek Studies can be said to operate along the lines of a Ptomelization. A full engagement with Žižek’s thought involves fully applying his theory of ideology; that is, to the level of one’s own activity. This, in turn, leads to an awareness of how the field of scholarship functions as an ideological edifice. The problem, as Žižek himself has noted, is that in accounting for this disavowed truth one runs the risk of

dissolving the consistency of the field in which the activity (and identity) of the agent (the Žižekian scholar) acquires legitimacy. Thus, in response to such a crisis – the traumatic emergence of a hysterical question, the threat to the basic foundations of the field – the ideological edifice retains its foundational structure by keeping the revolutionary kernel of Žižek’s thought at a safe distance: through a change in the basic premises within the terms of the established framework, Žižek’s theory is selectively integrated but never fully applied. Following the precise logic of ideology described by Žižek in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, the inherent antagonism within the field which disrupts the smooth functioning of the field – the direct encounter with the emancipatory potential of Žižek’s thought through a full engagement with his conceptual apparatus – is displaced onto the particular figure of “Žižek!”

It is in this way that the antagonism within the field – the “internal negativity” or “immanent blockage” which prevents the field “from achieving its full identity as a closed, homogeneous totality” (2008: 143) – is displaced as an antagonism between the field and a particular element, which henceforth functions as an “outward positive cause” (2006a 144) of the antagonism in question. This is most obvious when we consider how the open rejection of “Žižek as Clown!” serves to position Žižek as “an intruder who introduces from outside disorder, decomposition and corruption” into the smooth texture of traditional disciplines. Through such a displacement, his thought is kept at a safe distance so that the “order, stability and identity” of the discipline is restored (2008: 143-4). This, according to Žižek, is precisely how ideology functions: it recognizes in advance and takes into account its own inherent impossibility by including it as part of its edifice (2008: 142).

The crucial point to be repeated is that the rejection (“Žižek as Clown!”) is structurally homologous to the elevation (“Žižek as Rock Star!”). By exerting a fascinating aura, “Žižek!” functions as a “positive presence” which gives body to the “immanent limit” (2006a 142) within the inter-disciplinary field; in short, “Žižek!” can be seen to function as “the embodiment of a certain blockage” in scholarship (Žižek 2008: 143). What conceals this operation is the “effect of retroversion proper to fetishism”: as scholars, we perceive our relationship with “Žižek!” in inverse form when, through a “fetishistic misrecognition” (2008: 20), we give Žižek “royal treatment”: we come to treat Žižek in a particular way (“Clown!”, “Rockstar!”) because we already think that, in himself, this is what he actually is.ⁱⁱ

The proper revolutionary dimension of Žižek’s work thus presents itself when we – as Žižekians – confront the impossible choice posed by his work. To ignore the symptomatic status of “Žižek!” amounts to a failure to fully explore the implications of Žižek’s thought for the field of academic scholarship – how in reading his work we are not just using or applying his theories but performing the very process this apparatus describes. In this instance, those of us within the established field of study are Žižekians in name but not in action; rather, we become the enemy we seek to combat: ideological subjects of cynical reason, displaying the characteristics of an “enlightened false consciousness” (2008: 26). Although we claim to be engaging with Žižek’s radical re-reading of ideology, in what we are actually doing – in our real, everyday activity – we “still find reason to retain the mask” (Žižek 2008: 26). What is left unchecked in this process ofptomelization are the (ideological) foundations of the field of Žižek Studies itself, the basic framework governing and guiding our activity. The paradox, as has been noted, is that to become Žižekians in name and action involves an act of scholarly ‘suicide’, in the Lacanian sense of the term (*‘passage-à-l’acte’*): to acknowledge the unconscious dimension of our activity we must dissolve the edifice in which this activity becomes meaningful. The paradox thus reaches its limit as an impossible choice presenting itself as a fundamental tautology: by engaging in Žižek Studies we are no longer Žižekians; as Žižekians we are no longer engaging in Žižek Studies.

It is in this anxiety-provoking deadlock that the possibility of a Copernician revolution reveals itself. But to recognize this fact one must perceive the problem at hand as a solution in itself, by approaching the debilitating deadlock of the impossible choice as an emancipatory moment. This proper Žižekian step is taken when we acknowledge that the

only way out of the problem is to accept the “dimension of radical negativity” which it contains (2008: xxvii). As Žižekians, one must accept that:

[...] there is no solution, no escape from it; the thing to do is not to ‘overcome’, to ‘abolish’ it, but to come to terms with it, to learn to recognize it in its terrifying dimension and then, on the basis of this fundamental recognition, to try to articulate a *modus vivendi* with it (Žižek 2008: xxvii-iii).

What this brings about, I propose, is a shift towards what might be called “*Real Žižek Studies*”: a field of scholarship in which the concept of the “Real” (in its fundamental Lacanian sense) is adopted not just at the level of theory but as the *injunction governing activity*, a traumatic truth to be directly confronted, acknowledged and harnessed for its creative force.

2. Žižek as Symptom

Thus far, it has been argued that a Copernician revolution can only be achieved if we engage fully with Žižek’s thought. Hence, the next step is to submit the unconscious dimension of Žižek Studies – the ideological edifice of our field of scholarship – to Žižek’s revised method of ideology critique. In short, one must apply Žižek’s method to “Žižek!” as symptom; one must interpret “Žižek” using Žižek. The first move is to subtract all fascination with the figure of “Žižek!” – to extract the “kernel of enjoyment” which the symptom sustains (2008: 120) – and engage in the interpretative procedure. As Žižek himself notes, it is not sufficient to simply identify the symptom co-ordinating our desire; in order to “penetrate its fascinating force” one must also explain, through the hermeneutic process, how exactly the figure of “Žižek!” “captures our desire”, how it enters “the framework of fantasy structuring our enjoyment” as scholars (Žižek 2008: 141).

To perform this operation let us examine closely the process of Ptomelization under discussion by considering a recent contribution to the field of Žižek Studies entitled *Žižek and Media Studies* (2014). The work attempts to bring the field of Media, Film and Communication Studies together with the traditional discipline of Psychoanalysis by considering Žižek’s engagement with pop culture as a new development in “psychoanalytic film theory”. The broader aim is thus to repair a particular “deficiency” in the field by “developing a distinctly Žižekian approach to media scholarship”. This is achieved when Žižek’s work is seen as advancing a new approach to Lacan which allows scholars to focus on more specific psychoanalytic concepts such as sexual difference, the ‘objet petit a’ (the object-cause of desire), fantasy, the Real, enjoyment, and the drive.

The problem with this initiative, however, is that it does not fully acknowledge the extent to which Žižek’s specific “political-philosophical re-interpretation of Lacan” represents “a marked difference from an early Lacanian approach.” While film and media scholars use Lacanian psychoanalytic theory to “discern processes of subjectivization, representation, and ideological interpellation” they do not apply these specific concepts to level where, according to Žižek, they operate in their purest form: in the effectivity of our real, everyday activity. In short, the fundamental point of Žižek’s re-reading of Lacan is not fully accounted for: how a proper analysis of questions concerning ideology, sexual difference, and enjoyment must always consider how such questions relate to the analysis itself. Thus, the fact remains that an important threshold has yet to be crossed: one has yet to acknowledge how the act of using Lacanian theory to discern psychoanalytical processes is itself an instantiation of these processes, such that, in the very development of a Žižekian approach to media, one is engaging in the very processes one interrogates.ⁱⁱⁱ

To qualify this claim, it is necessary to reconsider how Žižek’s engagement with pop culture and media might be said to represent a new development in psychoanalytic theory.

Žižek himself makes it clear that his efforts at exemplifying complex theoretical points through references to popular culture in general and films in particular should not be simplified as a psychoanalytic theorization of media. On the contrary, the “delirious race” from contemporary films, to science fiction and detective novels, to “sentimental kitsch” (Žižek 1992: vii) is, he explains, an important final stage in his methodology, what he calls his ‘short-circuiting’ approach. In the foreword to *The Puppet and the Dwarf* he describes how, rather than simply reducing “higher intellectual content to its lower economic or libidinal cause,” he is in fact attempting to cross “wires that do not usually touch” in order to create a “surprising link” between high theoretical notions and the lowest level of culture (Žižek 2003: i-ii). The result is “an impossible short-circuit of levels which, for structural reasons, cannot ever meet” (Žižek 2006b: 9), a type of constructed symptom or slip of the tongue, a gap between enunciated content and act of enunciation which forces the reader to acknowledge a disavowed truth.^{iv}

One should therefore insist on the fact that Žižek’s ‘short-circuit’ approach, rather than diverging from Lacanian theory, directly follows in Lacan’s footsteps: Žižek is simply repeating Lacan’s own attempt to use psychoanalysis as “a method for reading texts” (2006: 5) which elucidates “a precise clinical problem” (2006: 5). The important point to be repeated is that such a reading should not be confused with a basic application of psychoanalytical concepts to the observed phenomenon. On the contrary, for Žižek, each reference to pop culture has a specific methodological aim: to expose for us, the readers, the very ubiquity of “what goes on in psychoanalytic treatment”, the co-ordinates of the clinic as they appear in their fundamental social form.^v What is therefore at issue in Žižek’s writing is the form of the activity itself, the fact that the very creation of a short-circuit performs a precise clinical role. Given that Žižek’s approach is based on a dialectical application of the Freudian method, the short-circuit is a means for him to reach the end of analysis, the point at which he achieves the “psychoanalytic cure.”^{vi} That is to say, by staging an impossible deadlock between two sides, he assumes the role of the analyst who presents the analysand with the fundamental fantasy to be traversed. The self-proclaimed indulgence in an “idiotic enjoyment of popular culture” thus mirrors the final moments of the analytic process when the analyst comes to occupy “the role of an object”, by taking the “place of *objet a*” (Žižek 2006b: 57). Ultimately, Žižek’s critical approach confronts his reader with an excess of *jouissance* which appears as a deadlock, gap or distortion disrupting the framework of his/her engagement with the text.^{vii}

It is for this reason that, when considering what is at stake Žižek’s engagement with pop culture and media, it is imperative that one adopt the symptomatic procedure; rather than insisting on an opposition between media and psychoanalytic theory in Žižek’s work one should view the relation as Žižek intends it to be received: as a debilitating deadlock between two opposing categories, an impossible relation between two structural levels, which have no “shared space”. Such a relation, he repeatedly reminds us, “can only be grasped by a kind of parallax view” in which the reader is “constantly shifting perspective between two points” (Žižek 2006b: 9). This is the crucial step, I claim, which has not yet been achieved by Žižek scholars. To view Žižek’s approach as a new development in “psychoanalytic film theory” is to preserve the two incompatible levels being short-circuited, thereby obscuring the symptomatic effect produced. What is therefore required is a parallax operation: a collective effort to reach below the dualism to the inherent tension that generates it. In other words, one must conceive of the relation between media studies and psychoanalysis not as two externally opposed fields but as two sides of a single surface, which for structural reasons can never meet. But what, in practical terms, does this mean?

Before going any further it is important to take note of Žižek’s major contribution to critical theory: how he develops the fundamental insight of Lacan’s “return to Freud” by insisting on the fact that the psychoanalytic clinic finds its central place in the social sphere. For this reason, Žižek’s work should ultimately be viewed in line with Freud’s belief that “in the conditions in which it would finally be possible, psychoanalysis would no longer be

needed”^{viii}: that is, as an attempt to bring about a Copernician revolution in the field of psychoanalysis. Instead of developing psychoanalytic theory through the addition of minor premises, Žižek (like Lacan before him) is striving to bring about a fundamental transformation in the basic structure of the psychoanalytic field. This is where his assessment of the inter-disciplinary exchange between the field of cultural studies and psychoanalysis becomes highly significant:

The first fact to note here is that what is missing in cultural studies is precisely psychoanalysis as a social link, structured around the desire of the analyst. Today, one often mentions how the reference to psychoanalysis in cultural studies and the psychoanalytic clinic supplement each other: cultural studies lack the real of clinical experience, while the clinic lacks the broader critico-historical perspective (say, of the historic specificity of the categories of psychoanalysis, Oedipal complex, castration, or paternal authority). The answer to this should be that each of the approaches should work on its limitation from within its horizon-not by relying on the other to fill up its lack (2006c 107 – 108).

The aim of an inter-disciplinary crossover, according to Žižek, should not be the resolution of the “deficiency” in each position; rather, it should involve an effort to work within the limitation of each discipline, through a direct engagement with the the inherent tension which precedes the relation. In other words, one must see the partial nature of each particular perspective not as an inability to grasp some elusive content but as an inherent distortion which calls attention to the fundamental framework structuring the activity. It is in this way that the opposition between two fields or disciplines is viewed – in parallax terms – as an inherent antagonism within a single framework of disciplinary scholarship. Thus, the crucial step to be taken, following Žižek, is to replace the inter-disciplinary polarity of opposites with the concept of the inherent ‘tension,’ gap, the non-coincidence of the One disciplinary structure with itself (Žižek 2009: 10-11/7).^{ix}

It is here that that the true emancipatory potential of Žižek’s thought begins to materialize. What the *methodological* short-circuit at the end of his approach ultimately draws our attention to is the *theoretical* short-circuit in the foundations of his position. This, in turn, opens the way for a new understanding of disciplinary exchange. Clarification of this point comes when we note how, in the opening pages of *The Sublime Object*, Žižek’s insistence that a disciplinary crisis is always followed by either a Ptomelization or Copernician procedure is itself followed by a statement outlining his own response to the crisis in psychoanalysis:

The question is: how do things stand with psychoanalysis today? [...] *The Sublime Object of Ideology* tries to answer this question by way of re-habilitating psychoanalysis in its philosophical core – as a theory indebted to Hegel’s dialectics and readable only against this background. This cannot but appear, perhaps, as the worst possible move to make: trying to save psychoanalysis, a discredited theory (and practice), by reference to an even more discredited theory, the worst kind of speculative philosophy rendered irrelevant by the progress of modern science. However, as Lacan taught us, when we are confronted with an apparently clear choice, sometimes the correct thing to do is chose the worst option (2008 viii).

For Žižek, the apparent crisis in psychoanalysis contains an emancipatory potential which can only be realized if the correct choice is taken, if the perceived problem is viewed as its own solution. He then goes on to outline the precise conditions of the Copernician step he is proposing:

Thus my wager was (and is) that, through their interaction (reading Hegel through Lacan and vice versa), psychoanalysis and Hegelian dialectics may simultaneously

redeem themselves, shedding their old skins and emerging in a new unexpected shape (2008 viii).

Instead of advocating for a change within the terms of the established framework of psychoanalysis or Hegelian philosophy, Žižek is calling for a revolutionary transformation in the disciplinary foundations of each field. By saving Lacan through Hegel and vice versa – as with his reading of Hitchcock through Lacan – he engages in a radically new disciplinary ‘short-circuit’ which moves beyond the basic Ptomelizing (ideological) tendencies of the inter-disciplinary approach. It is at this point that we arrive at a full understanding of the Ptomelization at work in the reception of Žižek’s thought. A limited, partial reading of Žižekian theory amounts to a change in the minor premises of the disciplines of Media Studies and Psychoanalysis respectively; however, what is ultimately retained in this exchange is the disciplinary edifice itself, the basic framework structuring the activity of those within the field. Thus, a full engagement with Žižek’s thought is only possible if we acknowledge the new form of disciplinary exchange which his theory proposes.^x To make such a move one must concern oneself not with the separate fields of Media Studies and Psychoanalysis but with the way these fields come together to “sheds their old skins” and emerge in a “new, unexpected shape”. Which leads us to ask the important question: what, precisely, is this “shape”?

Part III: Žižek’s symptom

The argument thus far can be summarized as follows: it is in the reception of Žižek’s work – the very fact that his engagement with popular culture and media has “spawned a whole new wave of film, media, and cultural theory” – that we witness the process of ideological Ptomelization in action: a change in minor premises within the terms of the established disciplinary framework which reduces Žižek’s radical ‘short-circuiting’ methodology to a “specifically Žižekian approach to studies of cinema and media.” What is ultimately obscured through this procedure is the Copernician dimension of Žižek’s thought: namely, the immanent limit or impossibility which threatens the ideological edifice of the inter-disciplinary field by calling its basic foundations into question.

At this juncture, a final reflexive twist should be taken with regard to the way this argument has been framed. What is clear is that, by insisting – as I do above – on an opposition between Žižek’s work and the academic discourse which appropriates it, one runs the risk of falling into the very trap one seeks to avoid; that is to say, by positioning the mechanism of reception as an external enemy which disrupts and distorts the “sound” texture of Žižek’s conceptual apparatus are we not simply inverting the ideological operation we claim to critique? As with the figure of the Jew, the academic machine is positioned as an external “intruder” who distorts and corrupts the edifice of Žižek’s system of thought; the assumption is that only by eliminating the forces of reception can we hope “to restore order, stability and identity” of Žižek’s emancipatory project (Žižek 2008: 143-4).

The point, then, is that, by adopting such an approach to the problem at hand, one effectively neglects to adopt the Žižekian position. The correct move, once again, is to take heed of Žižek’s advice, his insistence that one should always seek to problematize the terms in which the problem is framed: “The first step in thinking is to ask these sorts of questions: ‘Is this really a problem?’ ‘Is this the right way to formulate the problem?’” (Žižek 2013: 53). In other words, one should seek to avoid reducing the problematic reception of Žižek’s work to an antagonism *between* two competing poles – whereby Žižek’s epistemology is presented as “a closed, homogeneous totality” (Žižek 2008: 143) and the field of scholarship as an “outward positive cause” (2008: 144) of the antagonism. Instead, it is necessary to perform yet another perspectival shift, this time with regard to the process of Ptomelization itself.

At issue here is the act of turning Žižek's parallax operation around and using it *against Žižek*. Instead of viewing a struggle between two competing forces (Žižek versus the academic Žižek machine) one should view the opposition as an external embodiment of an 'internal negativity'. Following Žižek's approach to ideology, we invert "the linking of causality" through which the mechanism of reception is misperceived as the "positive cause" of the problem. With this inversion the opposition is understood as "the embodiment of a certain blockage" *within Žižek's interpretative framework* (Žižek 2008: 143). Ultimately, through a radical parallax view we come to recognize that the fundamental factors contributing to the misappropriation of Žižek's work by Žižek scholars ultimately *reside within Žižek's own position*; that is to say, the root cause of the problem has as much to do with the limitation in Žižek's own approach as it does in those who adopt it. In short, the reason that Žižek's insights have been so quickly re-packaged as a particular mode of film and cultural theory is because they present themselves as such.^{xi}

What this clarification of the problem brings us back to is a reconsideration of what is at stake in Žižek's relationship to the media. In an interview with Rex Butler, Žižek offers his view on the rapid expansion of new media by describing "the rise of the 'postindustrial' digital culture" as a positive shift towards political emancipation through the emergence of alternative democratic communities "grafted onto the latest state of technology" (Butler 2005 148). This statement raises an important question: why does Žižek, in extolling the importance of the digital field, not seek to critically engage with it? In other words, why does he leave the emerging realm of digital culture untouched by his critique of ideology? This is most unusual given the fact, as argued by Jodie Dean, that in his early writings Žižek consistently engaged in a focused psychoanalytic exploration of what was then termed "cyberspace". To build on Dean's analysis would be to explore the possibility that, in the every-expanding engagement with digital media, we witness the ultimate clarification of Žižek's basic thesis: how the insistence on the fact "that we live in a post-ideological condition is an illusion" (Žižek 2008: xxxi) since, at the level of our activity, we remain naïve, ideological subjects. In other words, is the increasing mediation of the social sphere by digital imagery – where the smart device functions as both a universal, nonsensical authority and a fetishized element sustaining a kernel of enjoyment – not clear proof that ideology is "already at work in the social reality itself", at the level of our everyday activity? At the level of knowledge, individuals recognize the effective conditions of their engagement with new media; they are cynically aware that the online, virtual world is a distorted representation of the 'real world'; they take into account 'the distance between the ideological mask and the reality'. The problem is that, in their real social activity, they "still find reason to retain the mask" (Žižek 2008: 26): at the level of what we are doing, in our actual engagement with technology, we are all victims of ideology – we are guided by a 'fetishistic' attachment which is supported by an 'as if' fiction. The smart device can thus be described as the last support of the ideological edifice structuring the social reality of late capitalism; it is the external element which exerts a fascinating hold over individuals and the point of non-knowledge to which individuals reflexively refer.^{xii}

These conclusions force us to ask the obvious question: why does Žižek not identify this explicit qualification of his central thesis? Why has he failed to recognize the emergence of social media and the ever-increasing engagement with smart devices as the purest example of what he terms ideological fantasy and objective belief? In *Living in the End Times*, Žižek defines the "fourth spirit" of capitalism – what he terms "cultural capitalism" (2010: 349) – as an ideological field in which our activity is over-determined by the experience "of being part of a larger collective movement" (2010 356).^{xiii} But he does not explore the precise structural link between "cultural capitalism" and what he describes elsewhere in the publication as the "digitalization of our lives" (2010 344); that is, the obvious fact that, cultural capitalism perfectly describes the ideological mechanism which governs today's digital constellation, the fact that our everyday lives are increasingly guided by the

use of digital technology and overseen by an imaginary, virtual gaze. Furthermore, this gap in Žižek's analysis provokes a series of more specific questions: why does he not identify the smart-device as a symptom, a fetishized element? Why is it that our constant and ever-increasing attachment to screens does not strike him as evidence of the eruption of *jouissance* onto the surface of the social space? Why does he not see how, in the emergence of the social media site Facebook, the Lacanian clinic essentially finds its central place?^{xiv} Why is it that the phenomenon of the 'selfie' does not alert him to the instantiation of Lacan's fundamental topology of fantasy?^{xv}

The curious fact is that, since the publication of his first seminal work, the rapid development of the visually mediated technology has failed to provoke a full theoretical engagement on the part of Žižek with this important social-ideological phenomenon. This is all the more unusual given that, since *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek's references to visual media – be it advertising, film, painting – have become a more and more regular occurrence. The paradox reaches its apex in Žižek's most recent writings, where an increasingly sporadic reference to visual culture merely serves to underline his reluctance to interrogate the *phenomenon of visual culture*: the emergence of social media and the increasing digitalization of contemporary society.

How then are we to account for this inconsistency in Žižek's position, the fact that his constant reference to new media is undermined by a complete reluctance to theoretically engage with the phenomena, this lack of theoretical engagement filled in by an excessive over-engagement? The first point worth noting is how the lacuna in Žižek's approach renders visible the precise co-ordinates of his interpretative model: the fact that, through his constant appeal to popular culture and new media, the majority of Žižek's chosen examples are shown to be highly visual in nature.^{xvi} In other words, visually mediated popular culture is a ever-present point of reference in his discourse, a phenomenon to which he repeatedly returns. The "delirious race" from example to example is repeatedly punctured by reference to an image. It is at such points, I claim, that an excessive attachment reveals itself: Žižek suddenly gets stuck on something and becomes caught in a circle.

This over-investment is most obvious when we consider how Žižek's analysis of images diverges so radically from that of Lacan. Unlike Lacan, Žižek never focuses on the fundamental "anamorphic" properties of visual representation – the precise way in which the form of the medium itself functions as a fantasy framework; instead, he more often than not engages directly in the realm of representational content thereby falling into the very trap he himself warns against: he "shoots too fast" (2006 xxx) and neglects to subtract his fascination with the image's kernel of signification. In doing so, he makes what he himself terms the "fundamental theoretical error" regarding the Freudian method: he overlooks the fact that the "essential constitution of the dream" is located not in the "latent content" but in the form itself (Žižek 2008: 5).^{xvii}

What this excessive dimension of Žižek's activity draws our attention to is a disavowed surplus-enjoyment of which Žižek himself is not conscious; that is to say, the image marks the eruption of traumatic *jouissance* onto the surface of Žižek's own discourse. In short, the image functions as *Žižek's symptom*: it is the fetishistic element guiding his activity, the sublime object whose fascinating aura continues to exert a powerful hold, thus positioning Žižek in the "last support" of an "ideological affect" of which he remains unaware. It is for this reason that Žižek falls so easily into the very cynical trap he seeks to avoid: although he claims to achieve a distance between particular contingent object and pathological desires, in the effectivity of his activity he still finds reasons to retain the mask; his activity remains governed by a disavowed fetishism, structured by a fundamental fantasy, rooted in a circuit of desire.

As a consequence of this unacknowledged eruption of *jouissance*, Žižek's use of examples can no longer be said to function as a purely formal activity, that is, as a conscious effort to assume the position of analyst and stage the Real. Thus, in the face of the element

which captures his desire, the revolutionary dimension of his approach ultimately dissolves: the shock of the short-circuit is displaced and the method is transformed into that which Žižek claims it is not: a conceptual apparatus reduced to the level of an example. Due to the symptomatic nature of his discussion of images, Žižek's radical approach undoes itself: his attempt to read the psychoanalytic clinic through the prism of the cinematic medium becomes a simple application of psychoanalytic theory to the cinematic medium. In other words, his work presents itself as yet another development in the long history of psychoanalytic film theory and is thus received as such.

This is what gives legitimate cause to the "spawning" of publications such as *Žižek and Media Studies*. It is not that scholars have overlooked the radical dimension of the short-circuit but that Žižek himself has willingly re-configured his thought into a readymade model for consumption. It is not that the revolutionary dimension of his thought has been absorbed by the academic market mechanism but that the system of Žižek's thought itself has already integrated the surplus which would subvert its smooth functioning.

Here, more than ever, one should insist on what Žižek terms "the capitalist logic of integrating the surplus into the functioning of the system is the fundamental fact". Through an autonomous, structural logic – the fact, as Žižek himself knows only too well, that every thought contains its own inherent distortion – the limitation in Žižek's position functions as the source of its own "spawning": with the transformation of Žižek into "Žižek!" the internal obstacle which subverts the system is turned into the system's driving force. The opposition between the revolutionary kernel of Žižek's thought and the academic machine which apparently neutralizes its subversive quality is, in short, a false one. The reality is that the reception of Žižek's work ("Žižek as Rock Star!" "Žižek as Clown!") is an external embodiment of an inherent deadlock within the Žižekian position, an internal antagonism or self-blockage in Žižek's thought which, when externalized as a fetishistic attachment to the image, contributes to the process ofptomelization it seeks to battle.

The final question to be asked then is, in many ways, the most significant: what precisely is the limitation or self-blockage in Žižek's thought? In answering such a question one is inevitably picking up Butler's point that in order to go beyond Žižek we must transfer any perceived flaws in his argument onto Žižek himself, onto his system of thought. Rather than seeking to point out the inconsistencies in his position we must use these inconsistencies to adopt his position more fully. One possible departure point is to repeat Žižek's assessment of the limitation in Hegel's thought: just as Hegel, in his analysis of capitalism, was unable to see the fundamental dialectical dimension of the commodity-form, so Žižek, in his analysis of new media, is unable to recognize *the very Žižekian aspect of the phenomenon*; he misses what he should have been able to see if he approached the phenomena through his own methodology. Thus, engaging with the emancipatory kernel of Žižek's thought necessitates the full application of Žižek's method to Žižek himself. This involves interpreting Žižek's symptom using the psychoanalytic approach: placing Žižek on the couch we must trace the process through which the paradoxical form in question – his excessive attachment to images – has emerged. By adopting the work of the analysand one seeks to identify, in the foundations of Žižek's position, a constitutive blindness which has not yet been acknowledged, neither by Žižekians nor by Žižek himself. Žižek's symptom is, in this way, viewed as the return of a repressed event in the past, an imaginary fixation sustained by a point of 'non-knowledge' in his theoretical framework which is too traumatic to be directly confronted. In this way, the interpretation of Žižek's work functions as an attempt to 'save' Žižek by re-actualizing his revolutionary core of his thought. Ultimately, this can only take place through the dissolution of Žižek's symptom; that is, through the act of constructing the symbolic framework in which his references to images becomes meaningful in a new way.^{xviii}

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ⁱ Žižek in interview, *Žižek urges renewed resistance*, 2012; see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lieJmimGRNY>).

ⁱⁱ I would argue that this Ptomelization of Žižek’s thought is taking place right before our very eyes. Witness, for example, a recent (and highly significant) round table discussion between Žižek, the former Greek finance minister Yanis Varoufakis and Wikileaks founder Julian Assange. It now appears to be commonplace that Žižek is first *elevated onto the stage* – when introduced as the much celebrated “Philosopher of the Left” – before then being *dismissed from the stage* – when, as the discussion develops, his contribution is reduced to no more than a comic intervention. By the end of the aforementioned talk it is clear that “Elvis” has well and truly left the building. Indeed, one might even go as far as to argue that, of late, much of Žižek’s critical zeal is becoming overly focused on combatting this ideological suturing. Take his most recent contribution to the *International Journal of Žižek Studies* in which he responds to what he sees as yet another “totally wrong rendering of my position”: the “nasty business” of “elevating my exclamation” into an individual accusation. While Žižek’s response would suggest that he is well aware of how his work is being distorted through its appropriation the worrying issue, to be addressed in the second half of this paper, is that he himself may be contributing to this very process of distortion.

ⁱⁱⁱ While Matthew Flisfeder and Louis-Paul Willis rightly point out that labels such as ‘The Elvis of cultural theory’ operate as a way of obfuscating Žižek’s “true impact upon critical thought,” I would argue that they do not go far enough in their analysis: they do not consider how their own labelling of Žižek’s thought as a new mode of “psychoanalytical film theory” also contributes to this very obfuscation.

^{iv} Rex Butler was one of the first to note how “Žižek goes further than simply finding examples for philosophical concepts, or even reducing those concepts to the level of examples” (Butler 2006b 3-4). For Butler, much of the misunderstanding surrounding Žižek’s work is rooted in external opposition between example and truth: that is, “the assumption of some external Truth of which these would be examples”. The real point of Žižek’s writings –

often overlooked by both critics and supporters – is “that no philosophical Truth can ever exist apart from its exemplification, that is, its enunciation”. This is why “his work is not to be divided into its concepts and examples”; rather, “the crucial point is not simply that concepts can only be grasped through their examples, but that the only proper philosophical concepts are those that take into account their own conditions of transmissibility” (Butler 2006b 3-4). In other words, a reading of Lacan through the lens of Hitchcock (and vice versa) is a way for Žižek to include “in the content of an act of communication the act itself, since the meaning of each act of communication is also to reflexively assert that it is an act of communication” (Žižek 2006 21). His approach is structurally homologous to the paradoxical statement ‘I am lying’: if the statement is true it is a lie; if it is a lie then it is true. What this deadlock ultimately exposes – through a parallax view – is the form of the statement itself.

^v He writes: “Precisely because the clinical is everywhere, one can short-circuit the process and concentrate instead on its effects, on the way it colours everything that appears non-clinical – this is the true test of its central place” (2006: 5).

^{vi} He explains: “The idiot for whom I endeavour to formulate a theoretical point as clearly as possible is myself [...] an example from pop culture has for me the same fundamental role as the procedure of *passee* – the passage of analysand into the analyst” (2006b 56).

^{vii} Žižek claims that, by reading “a major classic (text, author, notion) [...] through the lens of a “minor” author, text, or conceptual apparatus” (Žižek 2003; foreword i) he is attempting to make explicit “a faulty connection in the network [...] from the standpoint of the network’s smooth functioning”. This “decentering” of the interpreted text has the effect of bringing to light its “disavowed truth”: “as well as learning something new at the level of content, on a formal level the reader also becomes aware ‘of another – disturbing – side of something he or she knew all the time’” (Žižek 2003; foreword ii).

^{viii} See Žižek, ‘Jacques Lacan’s Four Discourses’, *Lacanian Ink*, (<http://www.lacan.com/zizfour.htm>).

^{ix} See Slavoj Žižek, ‘Objet a in Social Links’ in *Jacques Lacan and the Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, Duke University Press, 2006, p. 107 – 108.

^x The paradox, once again, concerns the impossible choice which Žižek’s work presents to us: within the pluralist, inter-disciplinary field of media studies, where a multitude of particular perspectives converge on the study of media and no single viewpoint dominates the conversation, Žižek’s perspective must be legitimately included as part of the dialogue; but, the full inclusion of his perspective functions as a type of Trojan horse: it immediately leads to a transformation in the structure of the field itself. In this way, Žižek’s point regarding the revolutionary nature of psychoanalysis applies to his own position: Žižekian ‘essentialism’ is paradoxical in so far as it is precisely Žižek’s reading of Lacanian psychoanalysis “which presents the real break with essentialist logic”. Through Žižek, “Lacanian psychoanalysis goes a decisive step further than the usual ‘post-Marxist’ anti-essentialism affirming the irreducible plurality of particular struggles [...] it enables us to grasp this plurality itself as a multitude of responses to the same impossible-real kernel” (Žižek 2006 xxvii). It is ultimately this effect which the Ptomelization seeks to avoid in its reception of Žižek: the excessive inclusion/exclusion through elevation/dismissal (“Žižek as Rock Star!” “Žižek as Clown!”) neutralizes the threat to the disciplinary foundations by keeping the kernel of his thought at a safe distance.

^{xi} This is the crux of Žižek’s own reading of the false appropriation of Derrida’s thought by ‘post-structuralist’ theorists. For Žižek, the paradox of a method (‘deconstruction’) which aims to subvert and challenge homogenizing, theoretical discourses becoming transformed into the very enemy it seeks to combat (‘deconstructionism’) should not be seen as purely a failure of interpretation – or as Derrida sees it, as evidence of the absolute validity of his own position, the fundamental necessity of continuing to engage in deconstruction; rather, it is an inherent limitation in Derrida’s position – the fact, as Žižek puts it, that his own discourse remains unaffected – which is the cause of the distortion of his message, the gap between his intention and realization: simply put, Derrida’s approach is re-appropriated as a clearly defined theoretical apparatus because it offers itself as such.

^{xii} This is the conclusion to be drawn from an elaboration of Jodie Dean’s analysis. I know very well that the internet is a virtual world separate from real life and yet, in my activity, I remain caught in a repetitive loop of searching, googling, ‘youtubing’; I recognize that Facebook profile pages are no more than online masks worn by others and yet, in my activity, I remain fascinated by the images posted on these pages; I am reflexively aware that my smartphone is simply a device which provides functional needs and yet, in my activity, I treat it as a *sublime object*, as if it were invested with some immutable essence. This enjoyment is governed by an objective belief supporting the activity: I know very well that Facebook is a fiction, a virtually constructed network, and yet, in my engagement, I act as *if* it is a social community; I am aware that my profile page is no more than an online mask and yet, in my engagement, I act as *if* my posts are being perceived by the collective gaze of my friends. The crucial point is that the excessive fascination through which the image holds us is supported by the belief operative in the engagement. The more I engage (believe), the more attached I become (enjoyment); the more attached I become, the more I need to engage.

^{xiii} ‘Cultural capitalism’, Žižek argues, is a “new stage of commodification” in which “enjoyment is tolerated, solicited even, but on the condition that it is healthy” and a product is consumed because it represents a certain lifestyle: “what we are witnessing today is the direct commodification of our experiences themselves.” In other words, we are no longer buying products (material objects we want to own) but *life experiences*; we are no longer interested in commodities “on account of their utility nor as status symbols” but because of “the experience provided by them”: the fact that, through consumption, we take part in a “large collective project”. See Žižek, ‘Fat free chocolate and absolutely no smoking: why our guilt about consumption is all consuming’, *The Guardian*, May 21st, 2014. (<http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/may/21/prix-pictet-photography-prize-consumption-slavoj-zizek>).

^{xiv} Although, in his discussion of cultural capitalism, Žižek makes reference to the “virtualization of our daily lives” – the way in which “I buy a public persona” – he ultimately does not recognize the fact that this phenomenon is precisely what occurs on Facebook. What Žižek describes is not the shift from the material status of the commodity to its value as an experience but the way that, more and more, one’s life is over-determined by the reflexive act of “taking into account what one is doing” (Žižek 2009 65), of registering, re-marking one’s private experiences. It is not that the online generalizes or stages the offline: on the contrary, the “cultural” dimension of capitalism – of acquiring “a place where you yourself can participate in communal life” – simply repeats the process of actualizing one’s involvement in the symbolic fabric of an online “community”. For a full elaboration of this thesis see [Author], “Facebook: The Central Place of the Lacanian Clinic.” *Lacunae. APPI International Journal for Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, Vol. 3, Issue 11, 2015, pp. 1–22.

^{xv} Is it not in the phenomenon of the ‘selfie’ that the fundamental ideological co-ordinates of the digital field become visible? The activity of taking a ‘selfie’ is governed by a fascination with one’s self-image (while pressing the button, one literally gazes at one’s own image); at the same time, the activity is supported by a performative operation (in pressing the button one presupposes the existence of an imaginary online gaze). And is it not Lacan who defines the virtual gaze governing our activity precisely as “not a seen gaze but a gaze imagined by me in the field of the Other” (Lacan 1981: 84), “a gaze is outside, I am looked at, that is to say, I am a picture [...] I am photo-graphed” (1981: 106)? For a full elaboration of how this point see [Author], *Marcel Duchamp: Resolving the Word-Image Problematic, afterthought*, unpublished doctoral thesis, 2014. For an examination of how this particular aspect of Lacanian theory relates to the work of Edouard Manet and Charles Baudelaire see [Author], “Manet’s Selfie and the Baudelairean Parallax,” Sinéad Furlong-Clancy (ed.), *The DS Project: Image, Text, Space/Place, 1830-2015*, 2015. <http://thedsproject.com/>

^{xvi} For a full analysis of the range of Žižek’s engagement with ‘everyday media content’ see Paul A. Taylor, *Žižek and the Media* (Cambridge: Polity Press 2011).

^{xvii} In the majority of Žižek's references to pop culture are, in fact, references to media then it is also important to note how each of these references consistently bypasses the formal properties of the image in order to elucidate the 'deeper', underlying message or content this image is said to represent. This, I claim, is a general tendency in Žižek's writing: going against his own symptomatic analysis he overlooks the purely formal co-ordinates of the observed phenomena thereby contradicting the fundamentals of his approach. It is thus significant that, in his own contribution to *Žižek and Media Studies*, he appears to be attempting to counter such a criticism by reasserting a formalist approach rooted in Freud's method of dream analysis. However, I would argue, that the aesthetic attitude adopted Žižek continues to adopt – which becomes evident through certain slips of the tongue – ensures that he inadvertently preserves the transcendental frame he claims to escape. For a full elaboration of this point see Kilroy, *Marcel Duchamp: Resolving the Word-Image Problematic, afterthought*.

^{xviii} While the scope of this argument is beyond the limitations of this paper, I will briefly summarize it here. The starting point of this process involves the localization of Žižek's symptom in its purest form: the fact that Žižek's fetishistic disavowal is most explicit when he intervenes into the aesthetic field, when he discusses art in general and modern art in particular. It is here that the art-form appears *the sublime object of Žižek's ideology* – the fundamental fantasy yet to be traversed in his work – while the word 'art' is rendered visible as the tatuological element around which Žižek's discourse circulates, Žižek's master signifier. This preliminary session involves identifying the precise point in Žižek's work where his discourse stumbles, where a slip of the tongue marks the eruption of traumatic jouissance. The central thesis is that such a moment arrives in *The Fragile Absolute* when, in his discussion of modern art, Žižek makes a curious statement regarding Marcel Duchamp's readymade. The readymade, at this point, appears as Žižek's symptom: in it, an excessive enjoyment points to the limitation a constitutive blindness. From here, the interpretation of Žižek's symptom takes place through the lens of the readymade, an act of re-tracing the foundations of Žižek's position – his reading of Lacan with Hegel - from the perspective of the Duchampian oeuvre. In other words, by reading Žižek with Duchamp, one attempts to re-actualizes his dialectical reading of psychoanalysis, his psychoanalytic reading of Hegel and Marx, to *an aesthetic-iconological core*. I argue that it is through his reliance on Marx's reading of Hegel that Žižek overlooks the fundamental iconological dimension of Lacanian theory. What emerges is a new form of discourse, an ideological critique turned iconological, whereby Žižek and Duchamp shed their old skins and emerge in a new unexpected shape. It is through this 'crossing of wires' that the revolutionary potential of Žižek's thought is realized and the conditions of Copernician revolution becomes possible: a radical short-circuiting of the traditional disciplines of psychoanalysis, philosophy and art history which, by dissolving the disciplinary foundations of each field, gives rise to a new form of scholarship. This argument could be said to build on a crucial insight by Ed Pluth that Duchamp's work somehow illustrates the distinction between Žižek and Badiou's different understandings of the psychoanalytic act, a divergence which is most explicit in their opposing readings of Duchamp. What comes to light in this divergence, it might be argued, is the possibility that Badiou is aware of the aesthetic trap into which Zizek and others fall and his acknowledgement that it is Duchamp who points the way forward (see Pluth 2009).