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## *Symptomal Knots and Evental Ruptures: Žižek, Badiou, and Discerning the Indiscernible*

Levi R. Bryant - Professor of Philosophy, Collin College, Texas

*~[C]ontradiction [must] be grasped and enunciated as a law: everything is inherently contradictory, and in [this] sense...this law in contrast to the others expresses rather the truth and the essential nature of things.<sup>1</sup>*

### **1. Introduction**

The careful reader of Badiou, steeped in the work of thinkers such as Marx, Althusser, Lacan, Foucault, Bourdieu, and Butler cannot fail to note the relative lack of attention Badiou devotes to the structure of situations and the manner in which human animals are attached to them.<sup>2</sup> This situation has improved somewhat with the publication of *Logiques des mondes*, where Badiou replaces the word “situations” with that of “worlds” and gives a careful analysis of the structuration of situations in terms of what he calls the “transcendental”. Nonetheless, the focus is still on events and truth-procedures, with little reflection on why human animals so seldom recognize or acknowledge events or take up truth-procedures. *This, in and of itself, is not an argument against Badiou’s account of the event, subjects, and the truth-procedures in which subjects engage.* However, it does raise questions as to whether or not Badiou underestimates the degree to which preparatory work must be done in order to increase the

likelihood of events. Following Žižek's understanding of ideology critique, there are concerns that Badiou's account of truth-procedures too quickly moves beyond what he variously refers to as the "state of the situation", the "encyclopedia", "knowledge", and "opinion". While this does not entail the illegitimacy of Badiou's "phenomenology" of politically engaged subjectivity, it does suggest that Badiou's account of the event and subjects precipitated from the event significantly underestimates the *attachment of individuals* to the situations to which they belong.

Consequently, while Badiou has successfully outlined the *de facto* features of political interpellation, there remains a *quid juris* question of the *conditions under which* an individual is capable of receiving an event as an event, rather than just as random noise and chaos.

Lacan's theory of the subject, suggests that the nature of subjecthood is such as to be resistant to what Badiou refers to as events and truth-procedures. If this is so, then it is because the Lacanian subject<sup>3</sup>, as a lack or hole that never itself appears in the signifying chain, is characterized by a want-to-be that attaches it through symbolic identification to signifying formations within what Badiou calls "the state of the situation" so as to take on some semblance of ontological substantiality or being. The event threatens and undermines this substantiality by revealing the manner in which the Other is lacking. In order to maintain this ontological substantiality, the Lacanian subject thus has little vested interest in even encountering an event as an event.

In the interview "Being by Numbers", Badiou remarks that one of the aims of *Being and Event* was to demonstrate that his theory of the event (of "what is not being *qua* being") is nonetheless consistent with ontology or mathematics.<sup>4</sup> From the foregoing it should be clear that while Badiou may have *formally* demonstrated the consistency of the event, Subjects, and truth-procedures with ontology or mathematics, there nonetheless remains the *empirical* question of the consistency of the event, Subjects, and truth-procedures with the organization of social systems and the Lacanian subject. In other words, what are the conditions under which a subject or individual might be open to an event? It is here that analytic *practice* as exemplified by Slavoj Žižek, becomes relevant as a particular practice of interpretation furthers separation or dis-attachment in such a way as to open a free space within the symbolic order, where a subject might be open to receiving an event.

The significance of this would be that political engagement is not something that emerges following the wake of an event, but that there are a *variety* of ways in which events might be forced prior to their occurrence. As Adrian Johnston so nicely puts it in his article,

“From the Spectacular Act to the Vanish Act: Badiou, Žižek, and the Politics of Lacanian Theory,”

The particular indictment of Badiou that Žižek formulates through reference to Benjamin is no doubt motivated, at least in part, by the far-from-unwarranted concern that the pre-vental darkness in which Badiou leaves asubjective individuals enshrouded, a darkness awaiting its own dispersal through the unpredictable arrival of an event’s illumination, has the potential to be politically discouraging and disempowering-- and this because all that’s left to do is to wait for the coming of the eventual “*il y a*,” a time of indeterminate duration bided by people stuck lingering in historical waiting rooms, stranded loitering around until an event suddenly calls upon them to become its subjects. By explicitly prohibiting the possibility of explaining how events arise from eventual sites, Badiou also risks implicitly prohibiting the drawing of lessons from past events so as to learn a politically valuable art of prophecy, namely, an aptitude for making educated pre-vental guess about the hows, what’s, and whereas of events-to-come. On the basis of such guesses, individuals could choose to engage in another practice of *forçage* (passed over in silence by Badiou on the basis of his philosophical principles): a pre-vental forcing aimed at extracting or precipitating an event out of an eventual site.<sup>5</sup>

Žižek’s practice of interpretation would be one way of engaging in “pre-vental forcings”, as it scrambles the codes governing the encyclopedia, thereby freeing subjects from their attachments. However, through the careful analysis of history and social change, we might discover that there are other practices that also promote the emergence of events as well. In what follows, my focus will not be on Badiou’s theory of the event or subject, nor his ontology, but rather his account of situations and how they come to be organized. Readers of Badiou might find this focus to be odd; however, my contention is that Badiou’s analysis of the dynamics structuring situations are underdetermined, thereby leading him to ignore important features of what leads a subject or human animal to recognize an event at all.

## **2. Knowledge, the Count-As-One, and The Structure of the Situation**

There is a common facile aphorism and conception of history that says the pendulum always swings in the other direction. This aphorism certainly holds true with regard to the thought of Alain Badiou. Where Continental philosophy has, for the last century, tended to

focus on language to the detriment of mathematics, Badiou focuses on mathematics, having little or nothing substantial to say about the nature of language. Where Continental political thought has tended to focus on subjectivization and those mechanisms whereby an individual is conditioned by the social (whether in the form of language, ideology, power, or economics as articulated by Derrida, Althusser, Lyotard, Foucault, Baudrillard, Bourdieu, and Marx), discussion of these mechanisms is almost entirely absent in Badiou's thought.

As Badiou remarks in his Artforum interview with Lauren Sedofsky, The relative discredit of the category of truth today has two sources. For a long time, philosophy suspended the question of truth on the protocol of the question of being, with the Supreme Being as an ultimate guarantor. The death of God, then, as Nietzsche saw, amounts to a checkmate of truth. The second source is the vast contemporary movement to anthropologize philosophy-- the idea that philosophy deals with more or less heterogeneous linguistic or cultural organizations of thought, and is itself the result or production of one such organization. This movement obviously entails a relativism, what could be called 'a pragmatics of exactitude'.<sup>6</sup>

Badiou's thought can be understood as an attempt to break with this anthropologizing tendency within philosophical thought and all of its various avatars. A resurrection of the category of truth will thus necessitate de-suturing of philosophy from the linguistic and anthropological turn in philosophy.

Here Badiou is thoroughly Platonic, for in the *Republic*, Socrates describes games that the prisoners of the cave play with one another, competing to see who could best name the shadows that appear on the cave walls.

...if there had been honors and commendations among them which they bestowed on one another and prizes for the man who is quickest to make out the shadows as they pass and best able to remember their customary precedences, sequences, and coexistences, and so most successful in guessing at what was to come, do you think he would emulate those who were honored by these prisoners and lorded it among them, or that he would feel with Homer and greatly prefer while living on earth to be serf of another, a landless man, and endure anything rather than opine with them and live that life?<sup>7</sup>

For Badiou, the world of language, ideology, power, and custom is little more than the Platonic world of *doxa* or opinion, standing in stark contrast to truth. Although he refers to this domain as the domain of knowledge, knowledge here has little or no value and is to be rigorously distinguished from truth. For Badiou, truth is not knowledge and knowledge is not truth. Rather, they are two entirely separate domains. Thus, in a passage from his *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, we find Badiou discussing knowledge in terms that could have been taken directly from Plato's *Republic* and his various discussions of *doxa*:

Every truth, as we have seen, deposes constituted knowledges, and thus opposes opinions. For what we call *opinions*, are representations without truth, the anarchic debris of circulating knowledge.

Now opinions are the cement of sociality. They are what sustain all human animals, without exception, and we cannot function otherwise: the weather; the latest film; children's diseases; poor salaries; the government's villainy; the performance of the local football team; television; holidays; atrocities far away or close to home; the setbacks suffered by the Republican school system; the latest album by some hard-rock group; the delicate state of one's soul; whether or not there are too many immigrants; neurotic symptoms; institutional success; good little recipes; what you have been reading; shops in which you find what you need at a good price; cars; sex; sunshine...

...Opinions *without an ounce of truth*-- or, indeed, of falsehood. Opinion is beneath the true and the false, precisely because its sole office is to be communicable.<sup>8</sup>

Knowledge, for Badiou, is neither true nor false, but falls beneath the distinction of the true and false. Indeed, in *Being and Event*, Badiou will argue that knowledge is to be evaluated in terms of the veridical and the non-veridical.<sup>9</sup> We get the sense that for Badiou knowledge is a chaotic mass of ever shifting and conflicting *statements*, doomed to pass away, lacking any eternity or fixity. It is composed of conflicting film reviews, the latest advice from "experts" on how to eat well and what diets are effective, and so on. It thus comes as no surprise that knowledge, as described by Badiou, would be of little interest to the philosopher. For as Plato argued, all philosophy is necessarily a break with *doxa*.

Nonetheless, knowledge does play a crucial role within Badiou's ontology. As we have already seen, he claims that human animals cannot function otherwise. Why is this? Badiou's central ontological thesis is that the one is not or that being is pure multiplicity *qua* multiplicity.

“Any multiple is intrinsically multiple of multiples...”<sup>10</sup> “Ultimately, being *qua* being is nothing but the multiple as such. What there is is the multiple. Mathematics is the kind of thought, and consequently the kind of discourse, that apprehends the configurations of multiplicity independently of any characteristic other than their multiplicity.”<sup>11</sup> If the consequences of Badiou’s inaugural thesis are followed through in all their implications, then it follows that any unity, identity, one, or identity-- any thing, entity, or object --must be a *result* or effect, rather than primordially ontological, for the one is not and only the multiple is. “What has to be declared is that the one, which is not, solely exists as *operation*. In other words: there is no one, only the count-as-one. The one being an operation, is never a presentation.”<sup>12</sup> Badiou names these operations of the count-as-one the “structure of the situation”:

I term *situation* any presented multiplicity. Granted the effectiveness of the presentation, a situation is the place of taking-place, whatever the terms of the multiplicity in question. Every situation admits its own particular operator of the count-as-one. This is the most general definition of a *structure*; it is what prescribes, for a presented multiple, the regime of its count-as-one.<sup>13</sup>

We thus have the presented or those ones that are effects of the operations of structure and the unpresented, or being *qua* being as pure multiplicity. Badiou will argue that we are only ever given multiplicities that are *effects* or *results* of structure, and that pure being as pure multiples are only ever “retroactively legible therein as *anterior* to the one” in presented multiplicities.<sup>14</sup> Badiou refers to these pure multiplicities anterior to the one as “inconsistent multiplicities” (presumably because they have not yet been subordinated to the structure of the situation), and those multiplicities that result from the count-as-one or structure as “consistent multiplicities”.

### **3. The Constructivist Orientation of Thought, Language, Sets, and Subsets**

Initially it might appear as if the structure of the situation or the count-as-one are unrelated to what Badiou refers to as knowledge, but, in fact, they are one and the same thing.<sup>15</sup> Elsewhere Badiou gives a more precise account of what he refers to as knowledge. In the essay “Truth: Forcing and the Unnameable”, Badiou writes,

I said that a truth comes into being at the end of its process only as a subset of the situation-set. Yet the situation registers any number of subsets. Indeed, this provides the broadest possible definition of knowledge: to name subsets of the situation. The function of the language of the situation consists in gathering together the elements of the situation according to one or other predicative traits, thereby constituting the extensional correlate for a concept. A subset-- such as those of cats or dogs in a perceptual situation, or of hysterical or obsessive traits and symptoms in an analytical situation --is captured through concepts of the language on the basis of indices of recognition attributable to all the terms or elements that fall under this concept. I call this conceptual and nominal swarming of forms of knowledge, the encyclopedia of the situation. The encyclopedia is what classifies subsets.<sup>16</sup>

Elsewhere, Badiou refers to Foucault as the “philosopher of the encyclopedia”, giving a sense of just what he might have in mind by “knowledge” and the “encyclopedia”.<sup>17</sup> Consequently, when Badiou refers to “knowledge” or the “encyclopedia”, we should think of a properly “anti-humanist” knowledge *vis a vis* Foucault, Lacan’s signifying chains, Levi-Straussian structures, or perhaps contemporary systems theory, rather than an individual knower and mind.

In order to understand what Badiou is here getting at, it is necessary to go into more detail regarding his use of set theory. According to Badiou, those orientations of thought geared towards the encyclopedia are constructivist in character. While there are indeed many different constructivist orientations of thought, according to Badiou the structure common to all constructivists orientations of thought lies in maintaining and demonstrating that “...through the medium of language... inclusion stays *as close as possible* to belonging.”<sup>18</sup> Initially this point is perhaps difficult to grasp, yet what Badiou is getting at becomes clear once we understand the set-theoretical concepts of membership and inclusion. Indeed, it would be no exaggeration to say that the distinction between membership and inclusion is absolutely crucial for all of Badiou’s thought. In set theory, an element is said to belong to a set when it enters into the composition of that set (what Badiou refers to above as “the situation-set”). Thus, to take a perfectly banal example, if we have a set composed of a hat, a cup of coffee, and the moon, each of these elements belongs to the set. By contrast, the concept of inclusion refers to the subsets or parts that compose a set. Returning to the banal example of the set composed of a hat, cup of coffee, and the moon, this set includes as subsets all possible combinations of the

elements of the initial set ( $2^3$ ) or subsets composed of  $\{\{\text{hat}\}, \{\text{coffee}\}, \{\text{moon}\}, \{\text{hat, coffee}\}, \{\text{hat, moon}\}, \{\text{moon, coffee}\}, \{\text{hat, moon, coffee}\}, \text{and } \{0\}\}$ .

Initially the difference between membership and inclusion seems remote from the concerns of the constructivist; however, a bit of reflection indicates just how useful this distinction is for characterizing the problem motivating various constructivist orientations and how the different constructivist orientations approach this problem differently. *What the difference between membership and parts (inclusion) allows us to see is that the parts of a set always outnumber the elements of a set.* That is, the parts of a set are always greater than the original set itself or are  $2^n$ , where the  $n$  = the number of elements belonging to the initial set from which the parts are drawn by the power-set axiom or the axiom of subsets. What we have here is the most schematic possible representation of the problem of interpretation. Given that the subsets of any set are greater than the set itself, or that the possibilities of interpretation are always greater than what is presented in the text, how do we determine those parts that are legally included in the initial set and those parts that were they included would constitute an illegality?

Some examples help to clarify matters here. In his famous essay “The Structural Study of Myth”, Levi-Strauss argues that anthropologists should not look for the one true and original version of a myth, but should understand all myths as variants of the same permutation structure, working to solve a logical problem. In this connection, he points out that the trickster (coyotes, ravens) in American mythology have posed serious difficulties for anthropologists as it’s not precisely clear as to why this figure so often appears in these stories. In this connection, we thus have something that is a member of a particular set (the trickster belonging to the set of American myths) and the question is that of how we are to understand the inclusion of this part. To resolve this problem, Levi-Strauss reminds the reader that, “we need only assume that two opposite terms with no intermediary always tend to be replaced by two equivalent terms which admit of a third one as a mediator” (224).<sup>19</sup> According to Levi-Strauss, the presence of carrion eating animals in these myths mediates between hunting and agriculture in that the coyote is like hunters in that it eats meat, but also like agriculture in that it does not hunt its food but finds it. In short, the common appearance of the trickster in these myths is not random or by chance, but resolves a dialectical deadlock. It cannot appear in any old way, but must, according to Levi-Strauss, necessarily appear in relation to myths depicting agriculture and hunting.

Perhaps a more readily familiar example is to be found in Derrida’s reading of Nietzsche in *Spurs*, where he raises the question of how a random note in his notebooks saying “I have

forgotten my umbrella” is to be included in Nietzsche’s text. Here Derrida is exploring the limits of our ability to determine the rule governing the relationship between membership and inclusion and thus approaches claims Badiou will make about the nature of an event, but is nonetheless preceding on the premise that for anything that appears in a situation or is an element belonging to a situation there must be a constructable rule for how it is included in that situation. In a very different context, early Wittgenstein, advocating logical atomism, might approach Plato’s *Republic* by seeking to determine whether each statement obeys the rules of first order logic. Here logicity becomes the principle of inclusion or of sanctioned and unsanctioned combinations of parts. By contrast, someone who advocates hermeneutics might seek to determine how the names of the characters, the settings in which the dialogues occur, and the various myths refer to Greek language, history, and culture and contribute to the overall meaning of the text, thereby arguing, contrary to the Wittgensteinian, that these parts are included in the text. Similarly, a psychoanalyst might proceed on the premise that there is a rule governing dreams, slips of the tongue, symptoms, and bungled actions, such that they are included in the set composing a person’s life and not just random accidents or misfirings. Of course, here it is a question of the subject’s singular relationship to language and not categorization as in the case of the DSM-IV.

Although the principles governing these various forms of constructivism are very different from one another, the basic problem is the same: what constitutes legal and illegal inclusion, what constitutes a legitimate combination of parts and an illegitimate combination of parts? We can thus see what Badiou has in mind in claiming that the constructivist orientation of thought attempts to establish the maximal proximity between membership and inclusion. The question of constructivism is that of how the excess of parts over elements, or subsets over the initial set can be managed without falling into an uncontrollable chaos; or, as Badiou puts it, “It is this bond, this *proximity* that language builds between presentation (membership/elements) and representation (parts/inclusion), which ground the conviction that the state does not exceed the situation by *too much*, or that it remains commensurable.”<sup>20</sup> From this point of view, the battle cry of the constructivist is that there is no unconstructable part, or that there is no part of a situation that is not named and which does not have a rule governing the manner in which it is included. Badiou refers to this regime of rules that governs the relationship between membership and inclusion variously as language, knowledge, and the encyclopedia, and rigorously distinguishes it from truth. As Badiou describes it, “...the ‘encyclopedia’ [is] the general system of predicative knowledge internal to a situation: i.e., what everyone knows about politics, sexual difference, culture, art, technology, etc.”<sup>21</sup> This function of the

encyclopedia can be seen, perhaps, most clearly when it does not function correctly as in Derrida's reading of Nietzsche where even a random comment demands a rule defining how it is to be included in the body of Nietzsche's texts. In this regard, constructivism ultimately comes to legislate over existence and police language. As Badiou puts it,

What the constructivist vision of being and presentation hunts out is the 'indeterminate', unnameable part, the conceptless link. The ambiguity of its relation to the state is thus quite remarkable. On the one hand, in restricting the statist metastructure's count-as-one to nameable parts, it seems to reduce its power; yet, on the other hand, it specifies its police and increases its authority by the connection that it establishes between mastery of the included one-multiple and mastery of language. What has to be understood here is that for this orientation in thought, a grouping of presented multiples which is indiscernible in terms of an immanent relation *does not exist*. From this point of view, the state legislates on existence. What it loses on the side of excess it gains on the side of the 'right over being'.<sup>22</sup>

By the "state" Badiou is here referring to the subsets that belong to any set. By "metastructure" Badiou is referring to that mechanism or organization presiding over legal and illegal combinations among parts such as kinship structures defining sanctioned and unsanctioned mates.<sup>23</sup> These would consist of the rules governing a language along with the names belonging to a language. If the language of a situation presides here over existence, then this is because it does not recognize any element that is indiscernible to the rules governing that language or the nominations belonging to that language, as can be readily seen in Leibniz's ideal of a complete language. Perhaps the most extreme example of this would be Lacan's example of the two identical doors named "Ladies" and Gentleman" in his article "The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious", where it is not the object that introduces the difference into the language (as the doors are identical), but the signifier that introduces the difference into existence.

#### **4. Structure and Metastructure: Ontological Anxiety**

According to Badiou, situations have a two-fold structure: "...all situations are structured twice. This also means: there is always both presentation and representation."<sup>24</sup> On the one

hand, situations involve a structure of the situation or that dimension of situations that involves the operations of the count-as-one by which *elements* of the situation are produced. On the other hand, every situation possesses what Badiou refers to as a metastructure or “state of the situation”, that is responsible for counting the *parts* of a situation.

*The domain of metastructure is parts*: metastructure guarantees that the one holds for inclusion, just as the initial structure holds for belonging. Put more precisely, given a situation whose structure delivers consistent one-multiples, there is always a metastructure-- the state of the situation --which counts as one *any* composition of these consistent multiplicities.

What is *included* in a situation *belongs* to its state.<sup>25</sup>

Where the structure of a situation forms inconsistent multiplicities into consistent multiplicities, producing identity as an effect-- for instance, the structure counts me as male, educator, American, etc. --the metastructure or state of the situation can be understood to preside over combinations of parts or subsets of situations, defining legal and illegal combinations.

What is interesting in his account of the relationship between the structure of situations and the state of situations is Badiou’s reasons for why every situation must be structured twice. As Badiou puts it,

All multiple-presentation is exposed to the danger of the void: the void is its being. The consistence of the multiple amounts to the following: the void, which is the name of inconsistency in the situation (under the law of the count-as-one), cannot, in itself, be presented or fixed. What Heidegger names the care of being, which is the ecstasy of beings, could also be termed the situational anxiety of the void, or the necessity of warding off the void. The apparent solidity of the world of presentation is merely a result of the action of structure, even if *nothing* is outside such a result. It is necessary to prohibit that catastrophe of presentation which would be its encounter with its own void, the presentational occurrence of inconsistency as such, or the ruin of the One.

Evidently the guarantee of consistence (the ‘there is Oneness’) cannot rely on structure or the count-as-one alone to circumscribe and prohibit the errancy of the void from *fixing* itself, and being, on the basis of this very fact, as presentation of the unrepresentable, the ruin of every donation of being and the figure subjacent to Chaos. The

fundamental reason behind this insufficiency is that *something*, within presentation, escapes the count: this something is nothing other than the count itself. The 'there is Oneness' is a pure operational result, which transparently reveals the very operation from which the result results. It is thus possible that, subtracted from the count, and by consequence a-structured, the structure itself be the point where the void is given. In order for the void to be prohibited from presentation, *it is necessary that structure be structured*, that the 'there is Oneness' be valid for the count-as-one. The consistence of presentation thus requires that all structure be *doubled* by a metastructure which secures the former against any fixation of the void.<sup>26</sup>

Badiou goes on to say that "what it amounts to, in the end, is something that each and everybody observes, and which is philosophically astonishing: the being of presentation is inconsistent multiplicity, but despite this, it is never chaotic. All I am saying is this: it is on the basis of Chaos not being the form of the donation of being that one is obliged to think that there is a reduplication of the count-as-one."<sup>27</sup> In this connection, he variously refers to a fear of the void and a danger of the void, where the void should be understood as nothing more than pure inconsistent multiplicity, or multiplicity *qua* multiplicity, *sans* any One.

## 5. Between Symptom and Noise

In a very real sense, the structure and state of situations are, for Badiou, defense formations or mechanisms against the void or inconsistent multiplicity. Take the following remarks by Corcoran describing Badiou's account of the event:

In order to maintain this structure of dominance, certain elements must remain uncounted or excluded, elements that inhabit what Badiou calls the edge of the situation's void. The void cannot, of course, be localized or presented in the situation, it is scattered throughout it (the capitalist situation, for example, is structurally incapable of recognizing the capacity for proletarian innovation which inhabits everyone). But those on the *edge* of the void, those with 'nothing to lose but their chains', *are* situated in it, but as a sort of negative magnitude, the living lack of positive qualities that define the way the situation is re-presented. In Badiou's terms they are presented in, and hence belong to, the situation, but are not represented in it.<sup>28</sup> So long as the elements do not radically deviate from their

assigned places, or lack thereof, this gap will normally not show. To the always total structure of knowledge, which knows neither void nor excess, this element will simply appear as a non-essential or contingent disturbance to the situation, not as a symptom or structural 'lie' of the situation itself. From the standpoint of the state of the situation, this inconsistent multiplicity simply appears as nothing, as non-being.<sup>29</sup>

Situations on the "edge of the void" are indicators that something escapes the structure and state of a situation. For this reason they mark the inconsistency or being *qua* being out of which the void is woven. Or rather, they mark the excess of inclusion over membership, the manner in which being always is in excess of consistent multiplicities. When faced with elements that are presented in a situation without being represented in a situation, these elements are seen as deviant, random, contingent, or arbitrary. For instance, the figure of the illegal immigrant is always seen as too little [an American], or as an excess, marking a threat to American jobs and culture. There is no category that captures illegal immigrants themselves.

The state and structure of situations is organized in such a way as to quickly dispose of these "negative magnitudes". The situation here is thus analogous to that of the relationship between the ego and the unconscious in Freudian psychoanalysis. When confronted with slips of the tongue, bungled actions, dreams, etc., the ego treats these phenomena not as traces of unconscious desire signifying the subject's betrayal of its desire, but rather as arbitrary and contingent chaos or noise that has nothing to do with the identity of the ego. *The whole question, however, is how we pass from viewing these singular elements as "non-essential or contingent disturbances to a situation", to being "symptoms of the structural lie of the situation itself."* What is it that accounts for this "parallax shift", this shift in perspective, that allows the contingent to suddenly be seen as a symptom?

Corcoran seems to suggest that this is the privilege of those who occupy the position of being at the edge of the void, of being excluded and marginalized, but all too often these groups understand themselves according to the protocols of the state and structure of situations, either striving to live up to the categories of the encyclopedia while sadly failing, or as belonging to other predicative categories. It is indiscernible to these categories. "...[A] truth is not a simple regime of opposition to knowledge; as a generic subset, it's really a gap or break in the encyclopedic organization of knowledge. It constitutes the void specific to this encyclopedia." Consequently, an "...event [is] totally chance, incalculable, disconnected supplement to the

situation. It will be recorded in its very disappearance only in the form of a linguistic trace, which I call the 'name' of the event, and will supplement the situation with next to nothing."<sup>30</sup>

Describing Badiou's theory of the event, Corcoran goes on to remark that, Then, every so often, in a completely unpredictable fashion, a Truth-Event<sup>31</sup> comes to pierce a hold in the totalizing, static structure of knowledge. An event for Badiou is properly contingent and unaccountable occurrence, exceeding everything that can be known in the situation-- its identity conflicts, ideological struggles, fluxes of people and money, etc. An event cannot, Badiou argues, be generated nor deduced from the situation; but that it exceeds the terms of the situation does not mean that it arrives from some beyond or outside. There is no transcendence here; the Event attaches itself precisely to the void of the situation, revealing its inherent inconsistency.<sup>32</sup>

Badiou repeatedly emphasizes that it is necessary for an *encounter* to take place in order for a Subject to emerge. "The event itself is the encounter. The encounter does not constitute the situation, it supplements it: there is what there was before, and then there's the encounter."<sup>33</sup> This encounter can be understood as the "condition for the possibility" of the emergence of a Subject.

We must suppose, then, that whatever convokes someone to the composition of a subject is something extra, something that happens in situations as something that they can the usual way of behaving in them cannot account for. Let us say that a *subject*, which goes beyond the animal... needs something to have happened, something that cannot be reduced to its ordinary inscription in 'what there is'. Let us call this *supplement an event*, and let us distinguish multiple-being, where it is not a matter of truth (but only of opinions), from the event, which compels us to decide a *new* way of being.<sup>34</sup>

Something literally jars the individual out of its immersion in the situation, summoning forth a Subject as a response.

However, while we can readily agree that an event is a condition for the possibility of a Subject in the precise sense described by Badiou, the question remains of whether this condition is a *sufficient* condition. Badiou draws a strong distinction between the individual or human animal and the Subject. Prior to being seized by an event, the individual is immersed in

means-end rationality, pursuing its own self-interest and satisfaction. “The ordinary behaviour of the human animal is a matter of what Spinoza calls ‘perseverance in being’, which is nothing other than the pursuit of interest, or conservation of self.”<sup>35</sup> This stance might be described as “ontological”, for insofar as the human animal recognizes nothing outside of the encyclopedic categories of its situation, its pursuit of interest is defined by these categories. Through the encounter with an event something else is introduced into the human animal’s world, allowing for a motive other than interest. For instance, in the case of love-- which Badiou names as one of the four domains where events can occur and truth-procedures can follow --the lover no longer determines his or her action on the basis of interest and often acts in ways that, from the outside, look positively contrary to interest.

## **6. The Lacanian Subject and the Question of Receptivity to the Event**

In a Hegelian twist, we can ask whether something must already be split from the situation in order to be susceptible to an encounter. Just as the beginning must already be incomplete, imperfect, or insufficient in order for us to depart from the beginning-- as in the case of Hegel’s first moment of being in the *Science of Logic* --must not the human animal already be divided from itself as animal in order to be open to encountering an event? It is precisely here that the Lacanian subject becomes relevant, for what Lacan’s account of split subjectivity allows us to conceptualize is an account of the subject whose relationship to the situation and being is fraught and forever characterized by tension. As Žižek describes it,

...with Lacan, we have quite another notion of the subject. To put it simply: if we make an abstraction, if we subtract all the richness of the different modes of subjectivization, all the fullness of experience present in the way the individuals are ‘living’ their subject-positions, what remains is an empty place which was filled out with this richness; this original void, this lack of symbolic structure, *is* the subject, the subject of the signifier. The *subject* is therefore to be strictly opposed to the effect of *subjectivization*: what the subjectivization masks is not a pre- or trans- subjective process of writing but a lack in the structure, a lack which is the subject.<sup>36</sup>

The Lacanian subject is at odds with all substantial identity, but is instead the very lack in structure, or the failure inherent in structure and metastructure. “Lacan’s starting point is, of

course, that symbolic representation always distorts the subject, that it is always a displacement, a failure-- that the subject cannot find a signifier which would be 'his own', that he is always saying too little or too much: in short, *something other* than what he wanted or intended to say." And as Žižek goes on to say, "The subject of the signifier is precisely this lack, this impossibility of finding a signifier which would be 'its own': *the failure of representation is its positive condition*. The subject tries to articulate itself in a signifying representation; the representation fails; instead of a richness we have a lack, and this void opened by the failure *is* the subject of the signifier."<sup>37</sup> From the moment the infant falls under the signifier, from the moment that it is alienated in the signifier, it is subject to this endless displacement that forever renders all identity tenuous, fraught, and precarious.

The reason for this precarious status of identity has to do with constitutive features of the signifier itself. Lacan uses a variety of aphorisms to express the nature of the signifier. From Hegel he draws the aphorism that "the word kills the thing." From the moment that the signifier appears it becomes possible to refer to the thing in the absence of that thing. Thus the signifier imbues the thing with absence, with its own death, with the possibility of its own non-being. As Žižek puts it elsewhere,

This paradox is founded in the differential character of the signifier's set: as soon as one is dealing with a differential set, one has to comprise in the network of difference the difference between an element and its own absence. In other words, *one has to consider as a part of the signifier its own absence*-- one has to posit the existence of a signifier which positivizes, 'represents', 'gives body to' the very lack of the signifier-- that is to say, coincides with the place of inscription of the signifier. This difference is in a way 'self-reflective': the paradoxical, 'impossible' yet necessary point at which the signifier differs not only from another (positive) signifier but *from itself as signifier*.<sup>38</sup>

To be named within the symbolic order is thus to become subject to the difference between the empty place of inscription and that which gives body to or fills out this empty place of inscription. Thus the name of the subject is always haunted by the absence of the subject. Or rather, the subject always fails to coincide with its nomination.

Lacan also claims that the "signifier represents the subject for another signifier" and that "the signifier cannot signify itself."<sup>39</sup> It is this third formulation that is crucial for understanding why the Lacanian subject is an absence or void within the signifying chain. Insofar as the

signifier cannot signify itself, it perpetually requires another signifier to signify it. We always require one signifier more. This is what underlies Lacan's matheme for the upper portion of the master discourse:  $S_1 \square S_2$ . For this reason, it follows that any nomination of the subject, any attempt to say what the subject is, will always end in failure as yet another signifier will be required to signify this final signifier.

For Lacan, the logic of the signifier very rigorously follows Russell's paradox and the set-theoretical prohibition against self-membership. Signifiers are sets that prohibit membership to themselves. As a result, any identity a "human animal" has within the state and structure of a situation will always be precarious or incomplete, as there is no signifier that the situation could provide that would give the human animal an adequate and stable identity. Were the human animal not split in this way it would be entirely absorbed in and through its conditioning by the state and structure of the situation, foreclosing any possibility of receiving an event. Consequently, the Lacanian subject is a necessary condition for the possibility of Badiou's Subject of truth. However, this should come as no surprise, for Badiou requires that his thought be consistent with Lacanian psychoanalysis. "Until now, my interest in Lacan and psychoanalysis has been confined to showing that what I was saying in philosophy was compatible with Lacanian thought."<sup>40</sup> While we cannot say that Badiou's subject is identical to the Lacanian subject, we can say that there is no Badiouian subject without the Lacanian subject.

## **7. The Subject and Resistance to the Event**

Nonetheless, the Lacanian subject and psychoanalysis does pose certain challenges to just how we conceive the reception of events. Lacan shows that while the subject of the signifier as a lack in signifying structure is the undoing of any fixed and stable identity in the symbolic, this lack is also the motor, the impetus, that leads the subject to identify with signifiers in the symbolic, so as to take on some modicum of identity. Because the subject of the signifier is characterized by lack, it is pervaded by a "want-to-be" that drives it to identify. Here, then, we perhaps find the origins of the "ontological anxiety" Badiou describes with respect to the structure and metastructure of situations, whereby the void of the situation represents a danger and provokes anxiety.

The Lacanian subject is, as it were, predisposed to the vigorous denial of events, as the incompleteness of the symbolic or big Other that events indicate are a threat to the very being of the subject. As Žižek so nicely puts it in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*,

Today, it is a commonplace that the Lacanian subject is divided, crossed-out, identical to a lack in a signifying chain. However, the most radical dimension of Lacanian theory lies not in recognizing this fact but in realizing that the big Other, the symbolic order itself, is also *barre*, crossed-out, by a fundamental impossibility, structured around an impossible/traumatic kernel, around a central lack. Without this lack in the Other, the Other would be a closed structure and the only possibility open to the subject would be his radical alienation in the Other. So it is precisely this lack in the Other which enables the subject to achieve a kind of 'de-alienation' called by Lacan *separation*: not in the sense that the subject experiences that now he is separated for ever from the object by the barrier of language, but that *the object is separated from the Other itself*, that the Other itself 'hasn't got it', hasn't got the final answer-- that is to say, is in itself blocked, desiring; that there is also a desire of the Other.<sup>41</sup>

The non-existence of the big Other is what allows the subject to escape total alienation in the symbolic insofar as it provides the subject with a space in which the subject might begin to formulate its *own* desire. Badiou himself draws powerfully on variants of the Lacanian theme that "the big Other does not exist", "that there is no Other of the Other", and that "there is no metalanguage" in his rigorous demonstrations that the One is not and that there is no whole.<sup>42</sup> It is for this very reason that a Badiouian Subject is possible. However, given the positive connotations of separation, we must give some sort of account as to why the subject fills this lack in the Other with fantasy, or why this lack in the Other is experienced as traumatic.

If the Lacanian subject is prone to a denial of events in much the same way that the ego is led to ignore the various formations of the unconscious in Freudian psychoanalysis, then this is because events reveal the non-existence of the big Other in which the subject must believe in hoping to find a signifier that would finally signify its being. Consequently, there is a tendency within the subject to attribute substantiality and completeness to the Other-- even when faced with vast bodies of evidence to the contrary --as an article of faith that a final signifier does exist. Perhaps the best example of this in the history of philosophy would be Descartes' proof for the existence of God. Lacan draws heavily on Descartes' thought between Seminars 11 and 14. It

can be argued that Descartes' conception of God is a distorted fantasy of subjectivity, embodying a wished for Other that would be complete and have knowledge. Descartes appeals to God as a guarantor of truth or the certainty of clear and distinct ideas. Indeed, Descartes goes one step further and argues that the very existence of the *cogito* could not be sustained without the constant intervention of God to hold maintain its existence in time, thereby echoing the Lacanian thesis that the subject is constituted in the field of the Other.

We need not accept Descartes' proof for the existence of God, nor his theory of clear and distinct ideas, to interpret Descartes' discussion of God as mirroring a basic psychoanalytic structure of subjectivity with regard to the Other. Similarly, in analysis, the analysand inevitably has an understanding of what others want, of what the Other wants, of how things work, and so on. When faced with evidence to the contrary, the analysand does not revise or discard these beliefs, but instead holds all the more vigorously to his beliefs. In this connection, Žižek, for instance, often gives the example of the anti-semitic, who, when it is pointed out that his neighbor, with whom he is on very good terms, is a Jew, uses the manner in which this Jew violates all his racist stereotypes about Jews as actual evidence that there is a Jewish conspiracy: "See how sneaky and deceitful they are!" Similarly, Descartes can be led astray in all sorts of ways by the world, his experiments can perpetually fail, but he nonetheless believes that God has created the world in an orderly and law-governed fashion and that this order is, in principle, discoverable. This belief in the Other, in what the Other desires and wants, is what Lacan refers to as "fantasy." Traversing the fantasy consists in overcoming this belief in the Other or discovering that the Other itself is split, desiring, does not have "it". This phenomenon is directly relevant to Badiou's theory of the encounter, for it suggests that an encounter is not sufficient for registering or recognizing an event as an event. The manner in which the subject is imbricated in fantasy with respect to the Other entails that the event is likely to be passed over as an aberrant contingency.

The Lacanian analyst Paul Verhaeghe clearly and elegantly explains why the non-existence of the Other, the fact that the Other is itself split, desiring, without "it", is experienced as traumatic:

The infant quite probably experiences the original internal drive as something peripheral; in any case, *it can only disappear through the presence of the Other*. The Other's absence will be regarded as the cause of the continuation of the inner tension. But even when this Other is present and responds with words and actions, this response will never

be enough either. For the Other must continually interpret the child's crying, and there is never a perfect fit between the interpretation and the tension. At this point, we come up against a central element of identity formation: *lack*, the impossibility of ever answering the tension of the drive in full... The demand through which the child expresses its needs leaves a remainder in the sense that the Other's interpretation of the demand will never coincide with the original need. It seems that the Other's inadequacy will always be the first thing to be blamed for what goes wrong internally.<sup>43</sup>

As an infant, drive provokes anxiety and is experienced as an intolerable build-up of tension from which the infant cannot escape due to the pre-maturity of birth. The infant relies on the Other for relief from the drives, but even in that instance, drive pressures remain that can never entirely be dissipated. Attachment to the existence of the big Other remains throughout adulthood as a mechanism serving two aims: On the one hand, it holds out the promise of a response or solution to the perpetual problem of *dissatisfaction*. The Other is that agency that is seen as capable of delivering absent *jouissance*. This comes out clearly in ideological movements where the movement is understood to be that means by which we will be delivered from dissatisfaction. On the other hand, the Other is paradoxically understood as *also* being the reason that *jouissance* is absent. That is, rather than encounter dissatisfaction as constitutive--a product of drives, as Verhaeghe says --belief in the big Other allows the subject's drives to be projected outwards and seen as something contingent and surmountable. "...[T]he Other's inadequacy will always be the first thing to be blamed for what goes wrong internally." Fantasy will thus always have a two-fold structure: It will provide a picture of what full *jouissance* would be and an account of why *jouissance* does not exist.

## **8. The Practice of Interpretation: Recoding the Social**

None of this is fatal to Badiou position, but it does suggest that considerations specific to the situation and the subject's attachment to the situation ought to be taken into account in increasing the likelihood that events will be registered. The defender of Badiou will object that the event cannot be deduced from the situation and that encounters cannot be produced. Yet the claim here is not that events are being produced nor deduced from the situation, but rather is that of a strategic engagement with the elements of the situation, weakening the hold of the

symbolic on the subject. In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek presents an ethics that aims at just such a loosening of the symbolic.

In contrast to this Althusserian ethics of *alienation* in the symbolic 'process without subject', we may denote the ethics implied by Lacanian psychoanalysis as that of *separation*. The famous Lacanian motto not to give way on one's desire-- is aimed at the fact that we must not obliterate the distance separating the Real from its symbolization: it is this surplus of the Real over every symbolization that functions as the object-cause of desire. To come to terms with this surplus (or, more precisely, leftover) means to acknowledge a fundamental deadlock ('antagonism'), a kernel resisting symbolic integration-dissolution.<sup>44</sup>

It is not difficult to detect a close proximity between what Žižek refers to here as the Real or a fundamental deadlock or antagonism, and what Badiou refers to as the void and what is on the edge of the void. What is thus to be resisted is the suture of that which is on the edge of the void to the symbolic or structure and state of a situation that would cover over and hide this antagonism.

But how is this hold of the symbolic over the real loosened or opened? Elsewhere, in his article "Mao Tse-Tung, the Marxist Lord of Misrule", Žižek writes,

There are, roughly speaking, two philosophical approaches to an antagonistic constellation of either/or: either one opts for one pole against the other (Good against Evil, freedom against oppression, morality against hedonism, etc.), or one adopts a 'deeper' attitude of emphasizing the complicity of the opposites, and of advocating a proper measure of their unity. Although Hegel's dialectic seems a version of the second approach (the 'synthesis' of opposites), he opts for the unheard-of *third* version: the way to resolve the deadlock is to engage oneself neither in fighting for the 'good' side against the 'bad' one, nor in trying to bring them together in a balanced 'synthesis', but in opting for the *bad* side of the initial either/or. Of course, this 'choice of the worst' fails, but in this failure it undermines the entire field of alternatives and thus enables to overcome its terms.<sup>45</sup>

The aim of choosing the bad choice is not to promote the bad-- Žižek admits that such a choice necessarily fails --but rather to undermine the field of alternatives governing a situation. What such a choice necessarily does is weaken the link between the subject and the structure and the state of the situation, increasing the likelihood that the real might appear or that an encounter might take place with what lies on the edge of the void of the situation.<sup>46</sup>

Rather than looking to Žižek's various texts for a theory of practice or what we should do, we should instead read these texts themselves as a form of practice. That is, we should not ask whether Žižek's interpretations are true or false, but should instead ask what these interpretations *do*. In this regard, Žižek's approach to interpretation is analytic in the strict Lacanian sense of the word. A proper analytic interpretation affects the very fabric of the signifying system of the analysand's unconscious, precipitating a reorganization of that signifying system and assisting the analysand in moving beyond a set of deadlocks characterizing their desire. Similarly, Žižek's interpretations are analytic interventions in the sense that they are not designed simply to illuminate whatever they happen to be discussing, but instead aim to effect the very fabric of the symbolic or the state and structure of the situations into which they intervene. The effect is to scramble the codes of the situation, assisting the subject in separating from the structure of the situation, perhaps allowing for an encounter with an event.

When Žižek is read carefully, these "bad choices" and short-circuits can be discerned everywhere in his work. Much of Žižek's thought can be understood as an engagement with the situation that might be named "theory" or "Continental Political Theory". Within the context of this situation, the choice of Lacan himself is a "bad" choice as Lacan is branded a phallogocentric thinker that remains tied to the tradition of onto-theology. Yet Žižek's relationship to Lacan is even more audacious, in that he turns Lacan into a Hegelian when Lacan consistently saw himself as anti-Hegelian. In choosing Lacan with Hegel, or, more properly, Lacan as Hegel, an entirely different Lacan emerges, just as a very different Hegel emerges. Similarly, in choosing Hegel, Žižek, in effect, chooses the one thinker prohibited by Theory. Hegel is seen as the thinker of totalities, of totalitarian wholes, and the apologist for the state. Yet in being read through the lens of Lacan, Hegel becomes the precise opposite of these things and the true thinker of difference. Everywhere today, whether we are speaking of Anglo-American philosophy, or Continental philosophy, it has become fashionable to reject the Cartesian subject as one of the gravest errors in Western philosophical tradition. Yet Žižek sides with the Cartesian subject-- read through a Lacano-Hegelian lens --showing how new age rejections of

the Cartesian subject revert back to metaphysical systems of belief that enshrine the very gender inequities they denounce. Perhaps the most surprising short-circuit Žižek conjures is his engagement with Saint Paul and Chesterton-- the former famously condemned as among those responsible for Western nihilism through Nietzsche --such that Žižek attempts to show that Paul, far from being the thinker of death, nihilism, and the denunciation of life, instead reveals the nature of life. Similarly, Chesterton, an arch-conservative, is argued to lay the groundwork for a radical form of leftist political engagement. Similar gestures and maneuvers can be found throughout Žižek's various interpretations of both past and present political events. One of the more glaring and startling examples would be his recent defense of Robespierre in *Slavoj Žižek Presents Robespierre Virtue and Terror*.

Perhaps the clearest example of Žižek's strategy of reading as intervention is to be found in his various engagements with Saint Paul and Christianity. Beginning with *The Ticklish Subject*, and continuing through *The Fragile Absolute* and *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, Žižek came to focus heavily on Christianity and, in particular, the figure of Saint Paul. Coming from a Marxist thinker committed to psychoanalysis, this cannot but come as a surprise, as both of these traditions are strongly critical of religion and Christianity. It is clear, of course, that Žižek is deeply influenced by Badiou's *Saint Paul: The Spirit of Universalism*, where Badiou shows how Paul provides us with a model of truth-procedures unfolded in the name of a universalism that evades all the ethnic and religious categories of his time. Žižek adopts many elements of Badiou's analysis in his own writings on Paul and Christianity. Nonetheless, we can ask "why Paul and Christianity?" Is it not possible to find other models for truth-procedures, *secular models*, free of much of the religious baggage that the figure of Saint Paul carries?

In order to understand Žižek's engagement with Paul it is not enough to simply attend to the content of Žižek's written texts, *but rather we must examine the organization of the situation in which these interventions are made*. When Žižek's interpretations of Paul and Christianity are interpreted in terms of the organization of the situation, the socio-symbolic network, it becomes clear that his choice of the "bad choice" is designed to "short-circuit" a series of alternatives allowing the possibility for something new to emerge. Vastly oversimplifying matters, we have on the one hand a situation in the world of theory where Paul as seen as one of the sources of Western nihilism, following from Nietzsche's analysis of Paul and Christianity throughout his work. On the other hand, one of the dominant oppositions of contemporary politics is the opposition between emancipatory leftist politics and religious fundamentalism, where religious fundamentalism is understood to be that which produces antagonism within the social space.

For Žižek, of course, an ideological critic's ears should always prick up when encountering explanations of antagonism such as this. Drawing on Levi-Strauss' discussion of the South American villagers who draw two entirely different maps of their village in "Do Dual Organizations Exist?", Žižek writes,

The central point of Levi-Strauss is that this example should in no way entice us into cultural relativism according to which the perception of social space depends on the observer's group-belonging: the very splitting into the two 'relative' perceptions implies the hidden reference to a constant-- not the objective, 'actual' disposition of buildings but a traumatic kernel, a fundamental antagonism the inhabitants of the village were not able to symbolize, to account for, to 'internalize', to come to terms with, an imbalance in social relations that prevented the community from stabilizing itself into a harmonious whole. The two perceptions of the ground-plan are simply the two mutually exclusive endeavours to cope with this traumatic antagonism, to heal its wound via the imposition of a balanced symbolic structure... And in order to dispel the illusion that our 'developed' universe is not dominated by the same logic, suffice it to recall the splitting of our political space into Left and Right: a Leftist and a Rightest behave exactly like members of the opposite sub-groups of the Levi-Straussian village. They not only occupy different places within the political space; each of them perceives differently the very disposition of the political space-- a Leftist as the field that is inherently split by some fundamental antagonism, a Rightest as the organic unity of a community disturbed by foreign intruders.<sup>47</sup>

For Žižek, antagonism is *real*, which is to say that it is that which always returns to its place. The characterizations of the fundamentalist by the leftist can be seen as an attempts to symbolize and gentrify the real, just as the characterizations of the leftist by the fundamentalist can be seen as attempts to gentrify this traumatic real of antagonism.

It is in this connection that we ought to understand Žižek's engagement with Paul and Christianity. Lacan liked to say, "interpretation hits the real." This does not entail that interpretation causes the real to disappear, for the real, among other things, is that which always returns to its place. However, interpretation can displace the real and reorganize the network of symbolic relations. In *Difference and Repetition*, Gilles Deleuze writes,

It seems to us that the history of philosophy should play a role roughly analogous to that of *collage* in painting. The history of philosophy is the reproduction of philosophy itself. In the history of philosophy, a commentary should act as a veritable double and bear the maximal modification appropriate to a double. (One imagines a *philosophically* bearded Hegel, a *philosophically* clean-shaven Marx, in the same way as a moustached Mona Lisa.) It should be possible to recount a real book of past philosophy as if it were an imaginary and feigned book.<sup>48</sup>

It is in very much this spirit that Žižek paints his picture of Saint Paul. Where the standard picture of Paul depicts him as a misogynistic, repressive, denier of life, and apologist for the status *quo* of state oppression, Žižek paints Paul as a Lacanian analyst and militant Marxist revolutionary. Under this reading, the leftwing activist content to work through the procedures of procedural liberal democracy (Habermas, Critchly, etc), becomes the reactionary defender of the state and the denier of life (through his belief that death is the worst that can happen to a person),<sup>49</sup> and the fundamentalist paradoxically becomes the true militant revolutionary.

*However*, we should not believe that the fundamentalist Christian is left unscathed in this “dada-esque” reading. In adopting the mantel of the Lacanian analyst through a close reading of Paul’s discussion of the law and desire in *Romans*,<sup>50</sup> the fundamentalist’s fetishistic obsession with Old Testament law and sexuality is cast in an entirely different light as a way of betraying desire. Similarly, in being painted with the beard of Marx, Christianity is no longer to be conceived as an otherworldly discourse, where one resigns oneself to the oppression of the state while awaiting salvation in the afterlife, but rather becomes a mode of practice militantly engaged in transforming this world. Indeed, Žižek even goes so far as to argue that Christianity is the only true atheistic discourse.

On the one hand, Žižek’s intervention with regard to Paul and Christianity invites a displacement of the real, of the opposition between leftwing politics and religious fundamentalism, both inverting the meaning of what truly emancipatory political engagement is and seeking to undermine the antagonism *between* the two groups. Here a sort of “traversing the fantasy” is invited, where antagonism is not to be located in one or the other group, but as a constitutive feature of the social itself. But on the other hand, Žižek’s intervention strategically targets visions of leftist politics that have progressively come to conceive the political in terms of procedural liberal democracy (Habermas, Rawls, Critchley, Rorty, and so on), offering an alternative vision of political engagement. Whether or not Žižek is ultimately successful in this

“recoding of the social” is beside the point. At the very least, Žižek’s choice of the “bad option”, his short-circuiting of levels that ordinarily are kept apart, at least renders available publicly a set of possibilities that were not before present in the situation, that other elements of the situation now must respond to. In this respect, he opens a possibility of undermining the field of reigning alternatives.

The point here is not that Žižek single-handedly transforms the ideological field or the state and structure of the situation. Such a claim would be absurdly over-inflated. Rather, the point is that Žižek presents us with a form of textual practice that loosens the field of alternatives belonging to the state and structure of a situation, that weakens identifications covering over the subject’s lack or “want-to-be”, and that thereby increase the likelihood of being open to an event. That is, this practice of interpretation carves out a space where an event might come to be or appear. The experience of reading Žižek is often such that one is left feeling as if they no longer know where they stand with regard to this or that thinker, this or that particular issue, or this or that work of art. This is precisely a sort of dissolution of identifications and attachments to various categories given in the encyclopedia. Here, then, is *one* form of engagement *prior* to an event that shifts perspective from seeing those scraps that are presented in the situation but not represented in the situation as contingent and random elements of disorder, to systematic symptoms revealing the truth of the situation.

- <sup>1</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press International, Inc., 1969, pg. 489.
- <sup>2</sup> Badiou draws a distinction between “human animals” and subjects, where the latter refers to individuals that have been seized by events and are engaged in truth-procedures tracing the consequences of these events.
- <sup>3</sup> In order to avoid confusion, I have opted to capitalize the term “subject” when referring to Badiou’s conception of the subject, and use lower-case when referring to Lacan’s conception of the subject. Badiou distinguishes between individuals and subjects. For Badiou, a subject is that individual that declares fidelity to an event and reevaluates the elements of a situation from the standpoint of the event. For Lacan, by contrast, all individuals subordinated to language are subjects. Badiou has often argued that his philosophy is consistent with Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. Consequently, we can say that all Badiouian Subjects are Lacanian subjects, but not all Lacanian subjects are Badiouian Subjects. One point I hope to establish in what follows is that the Lacanian subject is a condition for the possibility of the Badiouian subject.
- <sup>4</sup> Lauren Sedofsky, “Being by Numbers-- Interview with Artist and Philosopher Alain Badiou”, ArtForum: October, 1994, [http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m0268/is\\_n2\\_v33/ai\\_16315394](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0268/is_n2_v33/ai_16315394).
- <sup>5</sup> Adrian Johnston, “From the Spectacular Act to the Vanishing Act: Badiou, Žižek, and the Politics of Lacanian Theory,” *Did Somebody Say Ideology?: Slavoj Žižek in a Post-Ideological Universe* [ed. Fabio Vighi and Heiko Feldner], Basingstroke: Palgrave-Macmillan, forthcoming.
- <sup>6</sup> Lauren Sedofsky, “Being by Numbers”.
- <sup>7</sup> Plato, *Collected Dialogues* (Hamilton and Cairns, eds.), Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989, In 516c7- d6.
- <sup>8</sup> Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, London: Verso, 2001, pgs. 50-51.
- <sup>9</sup> Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, London: Continuum, 2005, pgs. 331-334.
- <sup>10</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, pg. 45.
- <sup>11</sup> Lauren Sedofsky, “Being by Numbers”.
- <sup>12</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, pg. 24.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>15</sup> cf. *Being and Event*, Meditation 28, and Lauren Sedofsky, “Being by Numbers”: “I also posit that every situation is accompanied by a language, a capacity to name that situation’s elements, their relations, their qualities, their properties. And in every situation there is also what I call ‘the state of the situation’-- the order of its subsets. The situation’s language aims at showing how an element belongs to such and such a subset. The situation is what presents the elements that constitute it; the state of the situation is what presents, not the situation’s elements, but its subsets. From this point of view the situation is a form of presentation, the state of the situation a form of representation. And knowledge, being the way we organize the situation’s elements linguistically, is always a certain relation between presentation and representation. Knowledge is most simply defined as the linguistic determination of the general system of connections between presentation and representation. The set of a situation’s various bodies of knowledge I call ‘the encyclopedia’ of the situation. Insofar as it refers only to itself, however, the situation is organically without truth.”
- <sup>16</sup> Alain Badiou, *Theoretical Writings*, London: Continuum, 2004, pg. 123.
- <sup>17</sup> “Foucault is a theoretician of encyclopedias. He was never really interested in the question of knowing, whether, within situations, anything existed that might deserve to be called ‘truth’”, Lauren Sedofsky, “Being by Numbers”.
- <sup>18</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, pg. 288.
- <sup>19</sup> Claude Levi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1963, pg. 144.
- <sup>20</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, pg. 288.
- <sup>21</sup> Badiou, *Theoretical Writings*, pg. 146.
- <sup>22</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, pg. 288.
- <sup>23</sup> cf. *Being and Event*, Meditation 8.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 94.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 97.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pgs. 93-94.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 94.
- <sup>28</sup> Badiou distinguishes three relationships between presentation and representation (between structure and metastructure), or three different types of situation. There are situations where elements are both presented and represented, which he refers to as “normal”. There are situations where elements are represented without being presented, which he refers to as “excrement”. An example of such a situation would be a bureaucracy, where the bureaucracy is not itself an element of the situation. Finally, there are situations that are presented without being represented, which Badiou refers to as “singular”. These situations are potential evental sites. Cf. Badiou, *Being and Event*, pgs. 99-103.
- <sup>29</sup> Steve Corcoran, “Translator’s Introduction”, in Alain Badiou, *Polemics*, London: Verso, 2006, pg. xii.
- <sup>30</sup> Lauren Sedofsky, “Being by Numbers”.
- <sup>31</sup> The term “Truth-Event” nowhere appears in Badiou’s own work, but was coined by Žižek in *The Ticklish Subject*. This term is misleading as it suggests that the event itself is what Badiou refers to as truth. A careful reading of Badiou’s own discussions of the event and truth suggests that the event itself is only of marginal interest or

importance. Rather, the event functions as a sort of catalyst that then marks the *possibility* of a Subject emerging through bearing fidelity to the event. Truth is what *follows* from the event, and is the *practice* of the Subject re-evaluating the elements belonging to a situation in terms of the event that fits none of the categories inhabiting the encyclopedia of the situation, progressively forming a subset of the situation that is entirely new and evades classification within the regime of knowledge.

<sup>32</sup> Steve Corcoran, "Translator's Introduction", pg. xiii.

<sup>33</sup> Lauren Sedofsky, "Being by Numbers".

<sup>34</sup> Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, pg. 43.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 46.

<sup>36</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, London: Verso, 1989, pg. 175.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor*, London: Verso, 2002, pg. 43.

<sup>39</sup> Jacques Lacan, *La logique du fantasme* (1966-1967), Unpublished, Seminar of 16 November 1966.

<sup>40</sup> Lauren Sedofsky, "Being by Numbers".

<sup>41</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, London: Verso, 1989, pg. 122. Hereafter "Sublime".

<sup>42</sup> Alain Badiou, *Theoretical Writings*, pgs. 189-191.

<sup>43</sup> Paul Verhaeghe, *On Being Normal and Other Disorders: A Manual for Clinical Psychodiagnostics*, New York, Other Press, pg. 158. My italics.

<sup>44</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, pg. 3.

<sup>45</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Slavoj Žižek Presents Mao On Practice and Contradiction*, London: Verso, 2007, pg. 12.

<sup>46</sup> Žižek makes a very similar point elsewhere in the forward to *The Parallax View*: "A short circuit occurs when there is a faulty connection in the network-- faulty, of course, from the standpoint of the network's smooth functioning. Is not the shock of short-circuiting, therefore, one of the best metaphors for critical reading? Is not one of the most effective critical procedures to cross wires that do not usually touch: to take a major classic (text, author, notion), and read it in a short-circuiting way, through the lens of a "minor" author, text, or conceptual apparatus ("minor" should be understood here in Deleuze's sense: not "of lesser quality," but marginalized, disavowed by the hegemonic ideology, or dealing with a "lower," less dignified topic)? If the minor reference is well chosen, such a procedure can lead to insights which completely shatter and undermine our common perceptions. This is what Marx, among others, did with philosophy and religion (short-circuiting philosophical speculation through the lens of political economy, that is to say, economic speculation); this is what Freud and Nietzsche did with morality (short-circuiting the highest ethical notions through the lens of the unconscious libidinal economy). What such a reading achieves is not a simple "desublimation," a reduction of the higher intellectual content to its lower economic or libidinal cause; the aim of such an approach is, rather, the inherent decentering of the interpreted text, which brings to light its "unthought," its disavowed presuppositions and consequences." Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View*, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2006, pg. ix.

<sup>47</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Interrogating the Real*, London: Continuum, 2005, pg. 264.

<sup>48</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, pgs. xxi-xxii.

<sup>49</sup> For a discussion of nihilism and human rights cf. Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, pgs. 30-39.

<sup>50</sup> Lacan himself argues that Saint Paul's *Epistle to the Romans* is indispensable for understanding desire. Cf. Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1992, pgs. 169-178.