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A Theatre of Shadows: Saving, Critiquing, Psychoanalyzing Žižek

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“The new intimacy is stranger and stronger... because the author is aware of our presence in his minds and of our inevitable judgement on him, just as the reader is aware at every moment that he is expecting our judgement [...] I believe that this is a unique and as yet untheorised human relationship: not new certainly, but unnamed, and not subsumed under any of our pronominal categories – not ‘I-you’, or ‘them-us’ or ‘we’, but a peculiar absent presence of an otherness which is neither the big Other nor the crowd of eyes” (Fredric Jameson, 2018).¹

Introduction

In recent years, criticism of Slavoj Žižek has intensified at a frantic pace, to the extent that he has all but been erased from the public sphere. Alongside his exclusion from dominant media-platforms such as *The Guardian* and the *The New York Times*, the denunciation of his work by the academic community has reached an excessive level,

with thinkers such as Noam Chomsky seeking to undermine the empirical validity of his thought in a surprisingly personalized manner. This situation appears all the more perplexing when one considers just how relevant Žižek's ideas actually are to contemporary concerns. It is hard to deny that a number of his more radical predictions now appear strikingly prescient: the warnings of a "strong man" leadership emerging to oversee a type of capitalism with Asian values; the critique of multi-cultural tolerance for producing a xenophobic underbelly as its necessary perverse supplement. One might even argue that the sequential eruption of traumatic events over the past number of years (the election of Donald Trump as US President, the UK Brexit vote, the emergence of ISIS, the refugee crisis) directly demonstrates the central tenants of Žižek's work. In the midst of this so-called "return of ideology," it is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore the basic thesis elaborated in his first book *The Sublime Object of Ideology*: the notion of a "post-ideological condition" is an illusion; in reality, we have never been more entrenched in ideology (Žižek 2008a: xxxi).

By all accounts, Žižek finds himself in a somewhat curious position: his work is coming under intense criticism at the very moment its significance is becoming clear. Never have Žižek's ideas carried more weight, and yet never has he been more discredited. In his keynote address at last year's International Žižek Studies Conference in Athens, Georgia, Žižek went to great lengths to underline what he sees as the three principle factors contributing to this backlash: his response to Donald Trump, the migrant crisis, and the LGBT + movement. For his many detractors, Žižek's analysis of these three phenomena does much to undermine the liberal cause he claims to defend. The obvious question to ask then is: what went wrong with Žižek? There are echoes here of the question Žižek poses at the beginning of *The Sublime Object of Ideology*: 'where do we stand with psychoanalysis today?' In his answer, he presents us with the nexus of his entire project: "to save psychoanalysis, a discredited theory (and practice), through reference to an even more discredited theory, the worst kind of speculative philosophy" (2008a: viii). Has the time not also come to "save" Žižek in a similar manner? Is this not the ideal moment, when Žižek's work has been rejected as the worst kind of transcendental subjectivity, to do what he did for Lacan and Hegel? This is the principal task this paper (and its related book project, *Žižek's Shadow*) sets itself.

Now is the time, I claim, to re-engage with Žižek by repeating his foundational theoretical gesture. Just as he re-reads Lacan with Hegel, Hegel through the prism of Lacan, we must attempt to reinterpret Žižek *with and through Žižek*. The only way to save Žižek, in other words, is to read him against the conceptual apparatus and methodological tools articulated in his early writing. In this sense, the question ‘How do things stand with Žižek today?’ becomes its own answer: as a purely formal statement, it marks a break in Žižek’s work that is homologous to the one he identifies in Lacan. The question ‘what went wrong with Žižek?’ should thus be reformulated as follows: ‘what went wrong with the early Žižek?’ or ‘where is the Žižek of *The Sublime Object of Ideology*?’

Saving Žižek

Every moment of crisis presents the conditions for radical revolutionary change. This is why, when considering Žižek’s supposed limitations, one should remember what he says about negativity in Hegel. Hegel’s weakness, Žižek explains, was his apparent inability to think the dialectical passage from feudalism to capitalism. In effect, Hegel was unable to come to terms with *the very Hegelian aspect of the phenomenon*; a dialectical shift he would have grasped if he had approached the problem in a properly ‘Hegelian’ manner. For Žižek, this is the point where Hegel comes face to face with *his own shadow*: he reaches a limitation in his thought not because he discovered something unthinkable but because he “found himself where, according to his own theory he shouldn’t have found himself.”² Žižek’s basic point is this: at such moments of perceived inability, the inherent antagonism constitutive of thought reveals itself. The correct way to approach the problem, then, is in ‘parallax’ terms: by perceiving the supposed ‘weakness’ not as an obstacle but as a solution, an anamorphic distortion that, once viewed from an alternative perspective, reveals an entirely new picture.

Is this not what Marx achieved when, working on the limitation within Hegel’s work, he short-circuited speculative philosophy through the lens of political economy? I argue that precisely the same interpretative move now needs to be taken with regard to Žižek. Through a fundamental perspectival shift, one must view the weaknesses in his

arguments as moments of radical negativity, points of rupture where the revolutionary, emancipatory potential of his thought becomes visible. Žižek, like Hegel, is today confronted *with his own shadow*. As with Hegel, he finds himself where, according to his own theory he shouldn't find himself. The dimension he is unable to see is the very Žižekian aspect of the phenomenon. This is why it is essential to read Žižek with, against and *through Žižek*. Only by directly applying Žižekian theory to Žižek's own work can we begin to slowly trace the contours of *Žižek's shadow*. The underlying assumption here is as follows: the truth of Žižek, the radical negativity of his thought, manifest itself in the form of a symptom. At this juncture the attempt to save Žižek takes a troubling – but entirely necessary – twist: in reading him against himself, by adhering fully to the Žižekian approach, one sets oneself the task of *psychoanalyzing Žižek*.³ As a tentative first step in this direction, let us return to Žižek's interpretation of Hegel, this time in his recent work *The Courage of Hopelessness*. "As Hegel put it in the Foreword to his Phenomenology of Spirit," he writes, "the standard by which we measure a situation and establish that the situation is problematic is part of the problem." (Žižek 2017: 101). The same can be said of any attempt to assess the importance of Žižek's work today: the prism through which he is viewed as a problematic figure is, in essence, part of the problem and should therefore be included in our analysis.

The aim of this paper is to develop an argument made in a 2016 article for IJZS in which I examined Žižek's reception *using his own conceptual tools*.⁴ The justification for this interpretative move was a paradoxical claim: the polarized response to Žižek demonstrates the essential elements of his theoretical apparatus. Specifically speaking, the category of the symptom can be seen to operate on three distinct levels of Žižek's reception. The first level ("Žižek!" as symptom') concerns Žižek's ambiguous and contradictory position within academia, where his very public image attracts derision and fasciation in equal measure. One does not need to work hard to decipher a certain disavowed fetishism at play here: in both the criticism and celebration of Žižek, we recognize the forces of displacement and condensation outlined in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. The dismissal of Žižek as a "Clown" ("Žižek! Funny, but not to be taken seriously!") and his elevation to the status of "King" ("Žižek! The Elvis of Pop Culture!") clearly follows the logic of ideological fantasy: the construction of a fetishized figure

embodying an inherent antagonism within a given field. The ongoing condemnation of Žižek should be viewed as a development of this phenomenon. At issue is a reconciliation of the polarized reception of Žižek in an even purer form of the symptom.⁵ In the multiple attacks on his work, we can clearly identify an inherent antagonism being projected onto an external enemy. This is why the emergence of Žižek as a divisive figure calls for a psychoanalytic act of interpretation: the application of Žižek's critique of ideology to the phenomenon of "Žižek!".

What is the precise nature of the antagonism that gives energy to the attacks on Žižek? We arrive here at the second modality of the symptom: the properly subversive quality of Žižek's thought ('Žižek as symptom'). My working thesis is as follows: to position Žižek as an external threat is to nullify *the internal threat* he poses to the field of scholarship; that is to say, the capacity of his writing to negate the set of assumptions governing the traditional approach to ideology critique. By radically breaking with the post-structuralist paradigm, Žižek's Hegelian-Lacanian apparatus presents scholars with an impossible choice: not only does it allow for a more rigorous analysis of contemporary ideological phenomena, it also forces us to account for the ideological conditions framing our response to these phenomena. Such a moment of extreme self-reflexivity – the acknowledgement that one's practice is governed by disavowed libidinal forces – carries a very real and impeding threat: the dissolution of firmly-established frameworks of inquiry and identity.

This anxiety-provoking encounter with a certain theoretical Real does much to explain the ongoing resistance to Žižek's work. Beneath this state of denial one can detect a reluctance to engage in the difficult theoretical work of re-interrogating the question of ideology. But before dismissing the backlash against Žižek, it is again worth recalling his words on Hegel, this time in *Less than Nothing*. The "truth" of Hegel, he writes, has nothing to do with the idea of original intention, what Hegel 'really wanted to say'; rather, it is "constituted *afterwards*, through a certain structurally necessary *delay*," that is, when the subsequent readings of Hegel are included as part of the truth of Hegel (Žižek 2008a: 243). Can the same not also be said of Žižek? Efforts to 'save' Žižek, to ignite the emancipatory kernel of his thought, have nothing to do with excavating a hidden message from beneath layers of misinterpretation; on the contrary, the

misreading of Žižek's work must be included in the content of the message communicated. To use his own words, critics of Žižek have hitherto only interpreted Žižek. The point, however, is to change him.⁶

As with Hegel, one must re-read Žižek against the horizon of our own contemporary situation. This means examining the recent reaction to Žižek's work in the context of our current predicament. If we look closely, we can see that the attacks on Žižek are given energy by a renewed sense of ideological awareness, a sharpening of critical perceptions in the face of a rising tide of nationalist populism. From this standpoint, it is worth revisiting the debate that unfolded between Žižek and Noam Chomsky in 2012. For Paul Taylor, the event was significant because it demonstrated the distinctly "oxymoronic" logic underpinning the reception of Žižek: the opposition between an "uncritical fixation" with his celebrity status and a "hypercritical condemnation" of his work. Taylor's error, however, is to define this symptomatic phenomenon as an "active unwillingness" to engage with the substance of what Žižek is saying (Taylor 2014: 18). It is precisely this reading that should be resisted. Instead of dismissing Chomsky's critique as a form of misinterpretation we should take the difficult step of taking Chomsky at his word. In short, we should summon the theoretical courage to take his reading seriously. Adopting a parallax view, the question to ask is this: how do we reach below the two sides of the Chomsky/Žižek debate to the inherent tension that generates it?

In dialectical terms, Chomsky's critique constitutes the truth of Žižek through a certain structurally necessary delay. In essence, his 'misreading' actually foregrounds the fundamental elements of Žižek's thought. This becomes apparent when we re-examine the exchange against the backdrop of the current socio-political situation. In the six years that have passed, what new conclusions might be drawn? Taylor notes that the exchange sheds light on an important philosophical debate surrounding "the status of facts" (Taylor 16). Facts, for Chomsky, are pieces of reality to be verified by scientific testing. Ideology, in turn, is understood as a phenomenon to be observed on the basis of "systematically measurable qualities" (Taylor 16). From this standpoint, Žižek's model of analysis is seen to contain no clear principles that might be empirically tested in line with physical, material reality (Taylor 18). In effect, his work has no basis

in facts, at least at the level of what is conceived as being factual. Taylor cites Chomsky in full:

What you're referring to is what's called "Theory." And when I said I'm not interested in theory, what I mean is, I'm not interested in posturing – using fancy terms like polysyllables and pretending you have a theory when you have no theory whatsoever. So there is no theory in any of this stuff, not in the sense of theory that anyone is familiar with in the sciences or any other serious field. Try to find some principles from which you can deduce conclusions, empirically testable propositions where it all goes beyond the level of something you can explain in five minutes to a twelve-year-old. See if you can find that when the fancy words are decoded. I can't. So I'm not interested in that kind of posturing. Žižek is an extreme example of it. I don't see anything to what he's saying (Chomsky in Taylor 17).

What Chomsky ignores, Taylor notes, is the way Žižek's conceptualization of the facts diverges radically from the empirical position. Žižek's approach is rooted in the tradition of dialectical materialism and framed by the discourse of psychoanalysis where facts appear as moments of concrete universality, points of symptomatic rupture. This dialectical reformulation of the psychoanalytic technique – or psychoanalytic approach to dialectical materialism – lends Žižek's work a high level of material focus. From his perspective, the full range of evidence is only within reach when the (objective) conditions of enunciation are accounted for within the (subjective) position of enunciation, when the act of analysis is included in the scene being analyzed. It is against this theoretical background that one should read Žižek's response to Chomsky (cited by Taylor):

To avoid a misunderstanding, I am not advocating here the 'postmodern' idea that our theories are just stories we are telling each other, stories [that] cannot be grounded in facts, I am also not advocating a purely neutral unbiased view. My point is that the plurality of stories and biases is itself grounded in our real struggles. With regard to Chomsky, I claim that his bias sometimes leads him to selections of facts and conclusions [that] obfuscate the reality he is trying to analyse (Žižek in Taylor: 19).

For Žižek, the facts worth examining are rooted in the material reality of everyday practice, the way the objective reality is tied up in the social effectivity of people's actions. The empirical quality of ideology thus resides not at the level of what is perceived as factual – what we know to be factual – but in the curious way that people, even when forced to admit the facts, remain entrenched within their ideology.

Of course, this point has obvious resonances in 2019. With terms like “fake news” and “alternative facts” now permeating public discourse, the debate about what constitutes an objective fact has returned with vigor. So too the question of ideology which, in the form of a ‘populist wave’, seems to have re-emerged from the shadows to assume a place at the forefront of public consciousness. In this complex new reality, Žižek's work stands to offer us *an alternative notion of “alternative facts”*: an emphasis on the points of fissure where one's perception of empirical reality breaks down and becomes distorted by a series of interpretative obstacles: contradictions, gaps, or paradoxes that disrupt our ability to offer a clear reading. As Jameson puts it, a certain ‘paradox-effect’ or ‘perversity’ undoes the interpretation by undermining the commonsense view of events.

These peculiarities can only acquire their full factual weight, however, if a radical materialist position is adopted. In line with the extreme formalism of the Freudian method, one gives up all efforts to excavate meaning so that the *obstacles to interpretation* can be viewed as *facts in need of interpretation*. This disengagement from the realm of signification allows us to perceive a set of co-ordinates that point indexically to a broader (signifying) network, an unconscious (fantasy) framework. The problem with such a highly unorthodox hermeneutic procedure is that it carries a traumatic injunction: it forces the subject to fundamentally question the conditions governing his practice. It is inevitable, then, that the most important facts are often ignored. In order to arrive at a swift explanation, all blockages disrupting a smooth reading are overcome by way of minor changes in the tools and models of analysis.⁷

It is in this precise sense that Chomsky's critique of Žižek opens up a new picture of our current ideological constellation. The question to ask is: against the horizon of the so-called “post-truth” paradigm how accurate is Chomsky's critique of Žižek? How, in the light of Chomsky's comments, does Žižek's analysis stand up against the weight of

empirical evidence we have before us? Putting Žižek's alternative theory of alternative facts to the test, it is possible to find "some principles from which you can deduce conclusions, empirically testable propositions?" My wager is that a series of precise conceptual categories can indeed be identified, eleven essential principles all of which are clearly articulated in Žižek's seminal text, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. As Jameson points out, there is often confusion surrounding Žižek as to which major ideas should be retained. Thirty years after his breakthrough work, is it now time for Žižek's central concepts to fully emerge?

1. One of the central "postmodern traps" is "the illusion that we live in a 'post-ideological age'" (Žižek 2008a: xxxi).

The insidious spread of nationalist, neo-fascist tendencies across the geo-political spectrum makes it clear that ideology is, in fact, alive and kicking in today's societies. If this fact lends weight to Žižek's long-held claim that the notion of a post-ideological society is a myth, it also buttresses the "elementary definition of ideology" that Žižek sets out to challenge:

The most elementary definition of ideology [...] implies a kind of basic, constitutive *naïveté*: the misrecognition of its own presuppositions, of its own effective conditions, a distance, a divergence between so-called social reality and our distorted representation, or false consciousness of it. That is why a 'naïve consciousness' can be submitted to a critical-ideological procedure. The aim of this procedure is to lead the naïve ideological consciousness to a point at which it can recognize its own effective conditions, the social reality that it is distorting, and through this very act dissolve it (2008a 24).

Few would deny the validity of this concept in an era of Trump and Brexit. Both phenomena appear to follow the classical formula whereby an ideological "false consciousness" is produced on the basis of a constitutive naïveté: a nationalist idea of a homogenous society ('Make America Great') supporting a false representation of the facts ('Take our Country Back) that underpins the myth of a return to lost age of unity and power (in the case of America, pre-war economic strength; for the UK, imperial might). In response, we are witnessing a renewed commitment to the ideal of a post-ideological age and the 'classical critical-ideological procedure': the 'enlightened' seek

to liberate the 'naïve' – in this case, the Trump or Brexit supporter – by stripping back the ideological mask, “throwing away the veils which are supposed to hide the naked reality (2008a: 25).

2. The “classic concept of ideology as ‘false consciousness’” no longer applies to today’s world (2008a: 25).

Valid as this reaction first appears, one must tread carefully. What this “classic” model obfuscates is the series of curious features unearthed by a formalist (symptomatic) analysis, the peculiar details that are essential to a full understanding of events. One should not discount the series of obstacles that continue to undermine our ability to make sense of Brexit and Trump, those distortions that, viewed from a new perspective, present an alternative picture of the facts.

The first interpretative dilemma concerns the theoretical paradox inherent in the notion of a “return” to ideology. With Trump and Brexit, the myth of a post-ideological age has been thoroughly debunked; the claim that we had somehow succeeded in escaping ideology has been exposed as a postmodern trap. It stands to reason, then, that the theoretical principles supporting this claim be called into question. This means that the continued application of the classic model is epistemologically questionable. What we are witnessing, in reality, is not the return of ideology but the fact that ideology, as Žižek has repeatedly told us, never went away.

Refusal to acknowledge this truth only further underlines the limitations in our understanding of how ideology actually operates. To understand the extent to which the standard set of tools has been exposed as inadequate, one need only recall the shock and bewilderment that accompanied the Trump and Brexit votes. What most disturbed commentators was not the unpredictability of these events but their sheer imperviousness to analysis. Those unable to anticipate the eventual outcome found themselves ill-equipped, in the aftermath, to offer any kind of meaningful explanation. The standard (“elementary”) models of analysis collapsed under the weight of the cold hard facts, a number of interpretative obstacles that distorted one’s empiricist, commonsense perception of reality.

3. In ideology “the illusion is not on the side of knowledge, it is already on the side of reality itself, of what the people are doing” (2008a: 29-30).

The first of these peculiar features is the strange phenomenon of fake news. Why do voters remain convinced by obvious untruths, even after the facts have been presented? At first glance, the pervasive influence of disinformation strategies lends weight to the elementary notion that “ideological illusion lies in the ‘knowing’”:

It is a matter of discordance between what people are effectively doing and what they think they are doing – ideology consists in the very fact the people ‘do not know what they are really doing’, that they have a false representation of the social reality to which they belong (2008a: 27).

The basic assumption supporting this reading is that ideology functions primarily at the level of ideas, in the realm of signified-content. With fake news, however, this fundamental premise is radically repudiated. It is not that individuals naively believe a falsehood is true; the problem, rather, is that they continue to believe this falsehood, *even when they know it is untrue*. One should insist here on the primary meaning of the term “post-truth”: at issue is not the illusion of truth but an *indifference to truth*, the practice of continuing to engage in what one knows to be a lie.

As a piece of material evidence, fake news thus underlines the veracity of Žižek’s central claim: that the place of ideological illusion is not in the ‘knowing’ but in the ‘doing’: it is “already at work in the social reality itself, at the level of what the individuals are doing and not only what they *think* or *know* they are doing” (2008a: 28). If the truth has little impact on one’s engagement – if, in the face of the facts, individuals continue to believe just as fervently – then ideology cannot be reduced to a simple question of content (the ideas and stories we tell each other).

4. “Cynical reason is no longer naïve, but is a paradox of an enlightened false consciousness” (2008a: 26).

The phenomenon of fake news also gives concrete meaning to Žižek’s concept of the “enlightened false consciousness”: “one knows the falsehood very well, one is well aware of a particular interest hidden behind an ideological universality, but still one does

not renounce it” (2008a: 26). His point here is that cynicism has become the mode through which ideology embeds itself in our everyday practices, in the ‘social effectivity’ of our actions. Consequently, the classical procedure of de-masking becomes redundant since, by focusing solely on the ‘knowing’ (facts, truth, etc.), it leaves intact the illusion at work in the ‘doing’:

Cynicism is the answer of the ruling culture [...] it recognizes, it takes into account, the particular interest behind the ideological universality, the distance between the ideological mask and the reality, but it still finds reasons to retain the mask [...] It is clear, therefore, that confronted with such cynical reason, the traditional critique of ideology no longer works [...] Cynical reason, with all its ironic detachment, leaves untouched the fundamental level of ideological fantasy, the level on which ideology structures the social reality itself (2008a: 26).

5. In the act of commodity-exchange, we are “fetishists in practice, not in theory” (2008a: 28).

It is in this precise sense – and not because of a “return” to ideology – that the notion of a post-ideological society is flawed. “And at this level,” Žižek writes, “we are of course far from being in a post-ideological society. Cynical distance is just one way – one of many ways – to blind ourselves to the structuring power of ideological fantasy: even if we do not take things seriously, even if we keep an ironical distance, *we are still doing them.*” (2008a: 30). There is, of course, an obvious counter-argument to be made here: the fact that voters were heavily influenced by an anti-establishment discourse shows how ideology mobilizes individuals at the level of knowledge, that is, through the communication of a clear political message. But, again, the issue is more complex than it first appears. One should note, for a start, how this critique of the political elite makes full use of the classical-critical ideological procedure. The message is: ‘don’t be fooled by the biased “fake news media” (e.g. The New York Times), the experts and the corrupt politicians! Liberate yourself! Throw off the veils that mask the truth!’ Žižek’s argument in the *Sublime Object* must here be developed: it is no longer a simple question of the classical approach being rendered impotent in the face of cynical reason; we are now at a point where the act of demasking is actually fueling the ideological engagement; in short, the message is sustaining the illusion at work in the practice. It is important to note that on both sides of the political spectrum, the same form of activity is at work. The liberal commentator who dismisses the naivety of a Trump

voter makes use of the same formula: 'don't be fooled by the biased "fake news media" (e.g. Fox News). Liberate yourself! Throw off the veils that mask the truth!'. What we encounter here is a false opposition between two sides engaging in the same fundamental practice: two modes of an enlightened false consciousness. In this circular loop, Marx's formula for Capital becomes frighteningly real: not only does the form of the activity (the ideological illusion) drive its content (application of the classic-critical ideological procedure), the content (gesture of de-masking) also sustains the form (continued ideological engagement). The cynical exchange between Trump voter and liberal critique follows a type of incessant development where the fundamental structure of ideology revolutionizes its own conditions of existence. Through a circular critique all moments of imbalance and contradiction are subsumed into the workings of the system.

This is why the only way to break out of this cycle is to adopt a parallax view and ask the question: what is the fundamental fantasy sustaining this illusory polarization? Within what framework do the Trump voter and liberal critique become visible as two sides of the same subjective position? The answer, of course, is capitalism, the 'zero-level' ideological fantasy structuring our social reality. Now more than ever we should insist on Žižek's essential point with regard to Marx:

On an everyday level, the individuals know very well that there are relations between people behind the relations between things. The problem is that in their social activity itself, in what they are *doing*, they are acting as if money, in its material reality, is the immediate embodiment of wealth as such. They are fetishists in practice, not in theory. What they 'do not know', what they misrecognize, is the fact that in their social reality itself, in their social activity – in the act of commodity exchange – they are guided by a fetishistic illusion (2008a: 28).

It is ultimately in the social-effectivity of our actions in the market that we inscribe ourselves as ideological subjects. Outside the parameters of commodity exchange, the permanent self-development of capitalism erodes all stable points of identification that might allow an individual to locate meaning. It is in the existential and ethical void – what Badiou terms the "worldless" universe of late capitalism – that new modes of "cognitive mapping" (Jameson) are emerging. This is why the spectral return of the ghosts that haunted the 20th century does nothing but render visible a pre-existing

reality. The problem is not the ghosts themselves but the very real, concrete reality of the capitalist graveyard.⁸

6. “What is really at stake in ideology is its form [...] The real goal is the consistency of the ideological attitude itself” (2008a: 92).

Another peculiar detail worth interrogating is the strange, persistent appeal of Donald Trump. Without falling prey to theoretically redundant (postmodern) claims of ideological naivety, how do we explain the blind loyalty of Trump’s supporters, their refusal to be swayed by a mounting pile of factual evidence exposing the truth behind the lies? It is, of course, worth noting here that the term ‘fake news’ was first coined by Trump: as a signifying element, it played a key role in displacing an inherent limitation – the falsehoods and disinformation associated with his campaign – onto the so-called ‘enemy of the people’, the liberal news media. But before it was employed as an ideological tool, the structural logic of “fake news” was already at work in the crystallization of Trump’s support base. Even today, as fact-checkers continue to expose the ‘Make America Great Again’ narrative as fiction, Trump’s base remain steadfastly committed to the cause. Not only does the effort to unmask the truth have no effect; it actually seems to increase their level of ideological engagement.

Why is this so? Like fake news, the ‘Trump illusion’ has little to do with content (what he says) and everything to do with form (what he actually *does*). The specific policies currently being enforced by his administration should not obscure the fundamental truth of his election campaign: his supporters were not mobilized by ideas because Trump never communicated a coherent message. Instead of communicating a political program his campaign statements were devoid of all substance; they were (and still are) full of inconsistencies that foreground the fundamentally performative dimension of his discourse, the purely formal fact of the statement itself. This is why, when it comes to Trump, the basic rule of psychoanalysis must be applied: “one should not forget to include in the content of each act of communication the act itself” (Žižek 2006: 21). As with fake news, the excessive focus on the content of Trump’s utterances, on the constitutive naivety of his supporters, is itself an interpretative ‘lure’ structurally homologous to the phenomenon under analysis. To fully understand the complexities of

the Trump phenomenon we need to employ the Freudian approach to dream analysis laid out by Žižek at the beginning of the *Sublime Object*. To understand how this would work one need only replace the word 'dream' in the below passage with 'Trump':

First, we must break the appearance according to which a dream [Trump] is nothing but a simple and meaningless confusion, a disorder caused by physiological processes and as such having nothing to do with signification. In other words, we must accomplish a crucial step towards a hermeneutical approach and conceive the dream [Trump] as a meaningful phenomenon which has to be discovered by an interpretative procedure. Then we must get rid of the fascination in this kernel of signification, in the 'hidden meaning' of the dream [Trump] – that is to say, in the content concealed behind the form of a dream – and center our attention on this form itself (2008a: 7).

Like a dream, what has yet to be explained with regard to the Trump phenomenon is *its form*. To take this interpretative step, one must first disengage from the fascination with the realm of signification in order to focus on the essential constitution of the Trump effect: its "literal phenomenality" (2008a: 5), what happens on the surface, the mechanisms of displacement and condensation at work in what he is actually doing. In short, one must grasp how the sheer emptiness of Trump's actions and words – their fundamentally performative quality – is the very source of his power.

7. The "objectivity of belief": "belief is always materialized in our effective social activity: belief supports the fantasy which regulates the social reality" (2008a: 33).

The basic Žižekian point is that any ideological engagement with the idea of 'Making America Great Again' must be preceded by a purely formal fascination with the figure of Trump himself. This insight alone sheds light on another perplexing issue: the unexpected success of his unconventional campaign strategy. It is during Trump's highly unorthodox, rock-star style rallies that the lack of a clear political agenda is most obvious. It is also at such moments, when his discourse is at its most incoherent, that specific ideological mechanisms become visible. We are here in the domain of what Žižek terms "the objective status of belief", belief as it operates in the performative dimension of collective practices.

This seems to be a basic Lacanian proposition, contrary to the usual thesis that a belief is something interior and knowledge something exterior [...] Rather, it is belief which is radically exterior, embodied in the practical, effective procedure of people (2008a: 31).

Trump's rallies serve to reinforce the objective belief supporting the fantasmatic social reality he has created for his voters. Such events provide an opportunity – and this is why Trump the president remains very much 'in campaign mode' – for supporters to enact ritualistic, repetitive gestures that have no meaning in and of themselves. The point is that this very meaninglessness produces the ideological effect: the non-sensical nature of the act instigates and guarantees a fundamental leap of faith. Before his supporters are engaged the level of content (through an imaginary experience of meaning, the supposition of some essential idea of "America"), they are first subordinated at the level of form (the purely objective dimension their actions). Their participation in these rallies is an act of obedience to a command that is "incomprehensible", not understood" (Žižek 2008a: 35) such that the authority sustaining the command is fundamentally irrational: a stupid, inconsistent (or clownish) figure whose power resides in his 'senseless' character – the fact that Trump is an "authority without truth" (34).

8. "Symbolic identification is always identification *on behalf of a certain gaze in the Other* [...] The question to ask is: *for whom* is the subject enacting this role? Which gaze is considered when the subject identifies himself with a certain image?" (2008a: 117-118).

One can here apply Lacan's analysis of the proletariat who achieves identity by taking part in a manifestation to the Trump supporter: even if he sees himself, in his imaginary self-experience, as a Trump supporter, it is not until he attends a rally (and wears the MAGA red hat) that he actively and performatively realizes this identity. This is where Žižek's distinction between imaginary and symbolic identification is crucial:

Imaginary identification is identification with the image in which we appear likeable to ourselves, with the image representing 'what we would like to be', and symbolic identification, identification with the very place *from where* we are being observed, *from where* we look at ourselves so that we appear likeable to ourselves, worthy of love (2008a: 116).

Trump's rallies facilitate a process of symbolic identification for a disenfranchised subject lost in the 'worldless' universe of late capitalism. The continuation of Trump's 'live' performances is therefore crucial to maintaining his support base: such visual

displays allow him to mark his position as Master, the irrational point of reference to which his voters can reflexively refer; the personified gaze from where they can see themselves as likeable to themselves. It is only when subjects 'act as if' Trump the irrational authority incarnates some essential Truth about 'America', that the 'classical' dynamics of ideology come into play. At this level, identity politics relies on the power of what Lacan called the Ego-Ideal: the personification of an empty formal element ("Trump!") as a stable point of identification, an idealized personality with whom voters can identify.

9. "The multitude of 'floating signifiers', of proto-ideological elements, is structured into a unified field through the intervention of a certain 'nodal point' (the Lacanian *point de capiton*) which 'quilts' them, stops them sliding and fixes their meaning" (2008a: 95).

Trump's own performative behavior thus serves an important critical function. It inscribes the terrain of a non-sensical figure-head, an empty formal element which provokes the act of objective belief that 'interpellates' individuals as ideological subjects. This is why, when considering the mobilizing impact of chants like "Lock Her Up!" and "Drain the Swamp!" one should ask the obvious question: did Trump's supporters genuinely want Washington to be cleaned of corruption and Hillary Clinton to be imprisoned? The answer, of course, is no. The true power of these chants resides not in their signification but in their declarative dimension: such speech-acts facilitate the collective participation of the crowd: they allow the subject to reflexively inscribe his identity in a structured network of meaning, a symbolic framework governed by the figure of "Trump".

The essential point here is that Trump's status as a clown – reinforced daily by liberal commentators – was (and still is) the source of his power. But it is important to also note that this ideological effect less to do with Trump the man than it does with "Trump" the empty name, "Trump!" the registered trademark. "Trump", in this sense, is a pure signifier or *point de capiton* par excellence; his words and actions are all part of a 'quilting' process whereby he totalizes the field of his support base by embodying it, effectuating its identity. Trump assumes this crucial 'determining' role not by

representing the idea of ‘Making America Great Again’) but, rather, by retaining his non-sensical, empty, performative status:

This then is the fundamental paradox of the *point de capiton*: the ‘rigid designator’, which totalizes an ideology by bringing to a halt the metonymic sliding of its signified, is not a point of supreme density of Meaning, a kind of Guarantee which, by being itself excepted from the differential interplay of elements, would serve as a stable and fixed point of reference. On the contrary, it is the element which represents the agency of the signifier within the field of the signified. In itself it is nothing but a ‘pure difference’: its role is purely structural, its nature is purely performative – its signification coincides with its own act of enunciation; in short, it is a ‘signifier without the signified’. The crucial step in the analysis of an ideological edifice is thus to detect, behind the dazzling splendor of the element which holds it together (‘God’, ‘Country’, ‘Party’ ‘Class’...) this self-referential, tautological, performative operation (2008a: 109).

The power of the Trump brand has nothing to do with *what it represents* (the range of Trump products, from property to universities to meat); on the contrary, its success is rooted to its purely self-referential quality, the fact that *it can represent anything* (the way the range of products foregrounds the emptiness of the brand itself). This is why the only way to properly explain the Trump phenomena is to declare, quiet simply, that “Trump is Trump”. Only such a tautological statement can expose his status as a pure signifier, as ‘rigid designator’, the point which ‘sews’ each individual supporter to a signifier while at the same time addressing them with the call to ‘Make America Great Again’.

10. “The last support of the ideological effect (of the way an ideological network of signifiers ‘holds’ us) is the non-sensical, pre-ideological kernel of enjoyment” (2008a: 140).

These performative practices have another important function: they produce a surplus of enjoyment that gives Trump his fascinating aura. At issue here is the fact that the signifying representative or point de capiton produces a surplus-X, the object-cause of desire, that ‘unattainable something’ which is ‘in Trump more than Trump. This surplus is produced through the “inversion proper to fetishism” described by Žižek: Trump’s appeal is an effect of the network of relations established between him and his support

base; through an act of fetishistic misrecognition, the relationship appears to his voters in inverse form (2008a: 20). This was most obvious during the election when Trump began to receive “royal treatment” because he ‘looked presidential’: as if he was, already in himself, a president; as if the property of being president was something he naturally possessed.

11. “The Social is always an inconsistent field structured around a constitute impossibility, traversed by a central ‘antagonism’ [...] the function of ideological fantasy is to mask this inconsistency” (2008a: 142).

It is the surplus of enjoyment produced by the pure signifier “Trump” that is then put to use in the construction of an ideological fantasy. Here, one should note how Trump’s rallies also serve to consolidate the subject’s engagement in opposition to a common enemy; namely, the political establishment, the ‘rigged’ system, which, during the election, assumed the human face of Hillary Clinton. The same operation was, of course, also evident in the Brexit vote, when Britain’s economic woes were blamed on the EU, a blind technocratic machine which found physical embodiment in the constant flow of refugees. It is worth pausing for a moment to consider the precise function of this anti-immigrant strategy, now being adopted by different political parties across Europe. One cannot deny that the appeal of populism is rooted in a clear political message (content): a xenophobic nationalism that champions the rights of “natives” over those of “alien others” – immigrants, Muslims and refugees. But neither can one overlook the significance of the structural edifice molding this message. The fact is that fear and hatred of the migrant Other cannot be provoked until a structural opposition is first established between an idealized, harmonious society and an external intruder threatening the cohesion of the whole. As Žižek writes:

Fantasy is basically a scenario filling out the empty space of a fundamental impossibility, a screen masking a void [...] this impossibility is filled out by the fascinating fantasy-scenario[...] The stake of social-ideological fantasy is to construct a vision of society which *does* exist, a society which is not split by an antagonistic division, a society in which the relation between its parts is organic, complementary [...] The notion of social fantasy is therefore a necessary counterpart to the concept of antagonism: fantasy is precisely the way the antagonistic fissure is

masked. In other words, *fantasy is a means for an ideology to take its own failure into account in advance* (2008a: 141-2).

An anti-immigrant message can only be articulated if a fantasy framework structuring enjoyment is in place. The effect of the message – its signified-content – takes energy from a purely formal operation: the construction a spectral figure representing “the positive cause of social antagonism” (2008a: 143). This is how ideology takes into account its own impossibility: it projects an internal blockage onto “an external intruder, a foreign body introducing corruption into the sound-social fabric”. The immigrant is thus a ‘fetish’ which simultaneously “denies and embodies the structural impossibility” by giving it a “positive, palpable presence” (2008a: 142). It is the point where a surplus of enjoyment erupts into the field of the populist ideology, where the fundamental framework sustaining this field becomes visible. How else can we explain the fact that, before the Brexit vote, anti-immigrant sentiment was highest in areas with the lowest direct contact with immigrants? These voters were clearly unconcerned with specific policy, since it would have had no direct bearing on their everyday lives. Their irrational fear of the Other is purely structural: it is produced when real, social deadlocks are projected onto a geographically distant source.

Here we can understand another crucial function of Trump’s rallies: in totalizing a set of signifying relation they effectuate a crucial process of ideological displacement: the projection of an inherent antagonism onto an outward positive cause. Through a fetishistic inversion, the migrant, once caught up in a network of signifying associations (migrant-muslim-terrorist), appears to incarnate a series of social antagonisms. Within this fantasy framework, the surplus-X produced by the Trump effect comes to regulate the libidinal dynamics of the collective.

Critiquing Žižek

Brexit and Trump give palpable presence to Žižek’s notion of the social symptom: a strange event that, by repeating itself, indicates a deeper, structural problem at work. The truth of such events is obscured, however, when they are considered in isolation: the most important facts are lost in a haze of hasty interpretations; the uncomfortable reality is repressed in favor of a simplistic explanation. It is in this context that the

classical approach to ideology is beginning to reassert a false legitimacy. But it is also at this point that, through a dialectical twist, the interpretation becomes part of the picture. In effect, the classical approach to ideology critique demonstrates the process of ideological displacement Žižek describes: an inherent theoretical inconsistency is obscured when the problem is projected onto an external cause. All the talk of a “return” to ideology has the actual effect of producing a fetishized enemy: the spectral image of a rising ‘populist wave’, the fantasmatic notion that the ‘ghosts’ of fascism are haunting the 21st century.

At issue here is the entrenchment of principles that have been undermined by the harsh factual reality of our current predicament. Such theoretical recalcitrance seems to breathe new life into a failed post-modern project by giving a veneer of efficacy to critical capacities that have been blunted to the point of impotence. The reality, however, resembles a shift from tragedy to comedy: the inherent limitations of postmodernism are now, through a second mode of appearance, assuming centre stage. In a peculiar twist to what Lacan said about including one’s intervention as part of the scene, the act of interpretation effectively mirrors the forces it refuses to acknowledge. In doing so it sustains the enemy it claims to oppose.

These are the broader issues at stake in the struggle over the status of facts and the ongoing attacks on Žižek. To understand why an approach to ideology might function, paradoxically, *as an ideological operation*, it is worth recalling Žižek’s critique of Derrida for implicitly asserting the ‘undeconstructible status of deconstruction’. In his later work, Derrida set out to address the problematic mis-appropriation of his method as a theoretical model – ‘deconstructionism’ – by arguing that such a phenomenon simply proves his basic point: that all ‘destabilizing’ forces are subdued by ‘stabilizing’ systems (Derrida 1990: 76). To quote Derrida in full:

It [deconstruction] resists theorization first because it functions in a place which the jetties questions, and destabilizes the conditions of the possibility of objectivity, the relationship to the object, everything that constitutes and institutes the assurance of subjectivity in the indubitable presence of the cogito, the certainty of self-consciousness, the original project, the relation to the other determined as egological intersubjectivity, the principle of reason and the system of

representation associated with it, and hence everything that supports a modern concept of theory as objectivity. Deconstruction resists theory then because it demonstrates the impossibility of closure, of the closure of an ensemble or totality on an organized network of theorems, laws, rules, methods (1990: 87).

What is strange about Derrida's response is the way it diverges, paradoxically, from a properly Derridean position. If Derrida were adhering to his own method, should he not have at least shown a willingness to *deconstruct* 'deconstructionism', that is, by identifying a rupture in his own discourse? The inconsistency in question, according to Žižek, is an unacknowledged tendency to adopt a barely concealed theoretical position that can be articulated in a clear metalanguage terms:

Derrida repeatedly reproaches Lacan for the paradoxical gesture of reducing lack through its affirmation of itself. Lack is localized in a point of exception which guarantees the consistency of all the other elements [...] Even at such a naïve 'immediate' reading, it is difficult to avoid the feeling that in this post-structuralist position something is amiss – or, more precisely, that this criticism of Lacan *runs a little too smoothly*. The post-structuralist position constantly repeats that no text could be totally non-metaphysical. On the one hand, it is not possible to get rid of the metaphysical tradition by a simple gesture of taking distance, of placing outside it because the language we are obliged to use is penetrated by metaphysics. On the other hand, however, every text, however metaphysical, always produces gaps which announces breaches in the metaphysical circle: the points at which the textual process subverts what its 'author' intended to say. Is such a position not just a little too convenient? To put it more bluntly, the position from which the deconstructivist can always make sure of the fact that 'there is no metalanguage', that no utterance can say precisely what is it intended to say, that the process of enunciation always subverts the utterance, is *the position of metalanguage* in its purest, most radical form (2008: 172-173)

Deconstruction is appropriated as a theoretical system – a metalanguage position – by virtue of the simple fact that, at the root of what Derrida is saying there is "a clearly defined theoretical position which can be articulated without difficulty in a pure and simple metalanguage" (174). Instead of interrogating this inherent limitation, Derrida reasserts the absolute legitimacy of his analytical model: if deconstructionism testifies to the persistent presence of totalizing forces, he claims, then it also underlines the

necessity of keeping the practice of deconstruction alive. Does this line of argument not display the same systemizing tendency it seeks to combat, given that embedded Derrida's response are the very forces of strategic foreclosure his practice is supposed to target?⁹ As with the classical critique of ideology, an internal contradiction is projected onto an external cause: a blind, automatic apparatus misappropriating the 'truth' of Derrida. Such an act of displacement ultimately serves to keep the edifice of deconstruction in place, homogenizing all differences and closing all ruptures that might disrupt its smooth functioning.¹⁰

Here one should ask the essential question: does this survival strategy not demonstrate the fundamental topology of capitalism? In both we witness a self-revolutionizing edifice constantly reaffirming its own hegemonic conditions by repeatedly subsuming a series of internal obstacles. In this sense, deconstruction, to use Žižek words, is capable of "transforming its limit, its very impotence, in the source of its power" (2008a: 53). Like all ideologies, *it takes its own failure into account in advance*. And it is within these cogs that Žižek now finds himself trapped: the imminent threat posed by his thought is in the process of being deflected not by individual actors but by the libidinal dynamics of a blind, automatic system incessantly re-inscribing its own foundations. This is why, in attempting to "save Žižek", every theoretical step must be taken with trepidation. The danger, once again, is that we find ourselves positing the 'truth' of Žižek in opposition to an imaginary enemy, a faceless interpretative mechanism neutralizing the revolutionary potential of his work. Such a move runs the risk of purifying his thought of all antagonism, transforming the Žižekian position into a harmonious (ideological) field contaminated by external forces.

For these reasons it is imperative that, as Žižekians, we remain steadfastly committed to the fundamental premises of the Žižekian method. To pursue a Žižekian analysis one must, paradoxically, avoid the standard Žižekian response. At all turns, the temptation to automatically dismiss criticism of Žižek as a distorted reading should be resisted; instead, one should have the theoretical courage to focus on the distortion directly. Again, Žižek's words on Hegel must be repeated: "even when I criticize Hegel," he writes, "I remain Hegelian".¹¹ This statement needs to be reapplied and inverted: only by criticizing Žižek do we remain Žižekians and the only way to remain Žižekians is by

criticizing Žižek. To read Žižek with and through Žižek is to subject his work to a Žižekian reading. In parallax terms, the task is to reach below the opposition between Žižek and the mechanism of reception to the noncoincidence of Žižek's work with itself.¹²

In what sense does the swelling of antipathy towards Žižek give body to an *antagonism within* his work? We arrive, here, at the third modality of the symptom: the symptomatic nature of Žižek's own activity. To put the question more bluntly: to what extent are the attacks on Žižek warranted? As he himself points out, this critical backlash was provoked by a supposed 'anti-liberal' response to Trump, the refugee crisis and the LGBT+ movement. Of course, this reading can immediately be dismissed for failing to acknowledge the complexity of what Žižek is trying to achieve. Take, for example, his analysis of the migrant crisis in *Against the Double Blackmail*. His ultimate aim is to expose the fantasmatic logic underpinning the humanitarian response to refugees by engaging in a complex critique of ideology. Žižek's argument is as follows: the purification of some migrants as being "just like us" (well-educated, middle class, can speak English. etc...) relies on an operation of disavowal that obscures the traumatic reality of the situation (that some migrants do, in fact, steal, harass woman, etc). This, he claims, is an ideological operation *par excellence*: the elevation of the migrant to a more dignified – fetishized – position serves to obfuscate the very real (internal) threats to the European project (the antagonisms immanent to global capitalism). In an effort to subvert this mechanism, Žižek sets about undoing the primary processes of displacement and condensation supporting the Western view of the migrant by emphasizing their real, vulgar, violent qualities. In response to the distinction made between 'civilized' (middle-class) and 'barbarian' (lower-classes) migrants that he writes: "instead of dismissing all this as racist propaganda, one should gather the courage to discern the moment of truth in it" (Žižek 2016: 191).

Taken out of context, this remark can easily be viewed as reflecting an anti-immigrant stance. The obvious response is that such a reading completely ignores the fundamental theoretical components of his analysis. At this point, however, a commitment to cold, hard analysis should be maintained; as counter-intuitive as it may seem, one should avoid rejecting this 'simplistic' reading too quickly. Following Žižek,

one should instead attempt to *discern the moment of truth in it*. What all too often goes unacknowledged by those who defend Žižek's more provocative remarks is the way the conceptual apparatus justifying such statements is itself undermined. At the level of knowledge (what Žižek *knows* he is doing), the above argument appears theoretically sound; and yet, there is no denying the reality of the practice (what Žižek is *actually doing*). No amount of contextualization can get us away from the explicit parallels to be drawn between Žižek's description of the migrant in *Against the Double Blackmail* and his analysis of the Jew in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. In the latter, he describes how the figure of the Jew is constructed as an ideological symptom when, through different signifying associations, he is positioned as the externalized source of exploitation and class antagonism. "This displacement," Žižek writes, "is, of course, supported by condensation: the figure of the Jew condenses opposing features, features associated with the lower and upper classes: Jews are supposed to be dirty *and* intellectual..." (2008a: 141). Here, it is worth considering Žižek's analysis of the migrant in full:

Our media usually contrasts 'civilized' middle-class refugees with 'barbarian' lower-class refugees who steal, harass our citizens, behave violently towards women, defecate in public (or so we are told). Instead of dismissing all this as racist propaganda, one should gather the courage to discern the moment of truth in it (2016: 191).

In the above statement, the practice Žižek submits to analysis in the Sublime Object appears to be operative *in Žižek's own analysis*. There is, of course, an easy conclusion to be drawn: that such a contradiction brings to light the hidden truth of Žižek's work, the dangerous ('anti-liberal') message concealed just below the surface of what he is saying. But, again, this reading 'shoots too fast'. If there is a kernel of truth to be deciphered in Žižek's words, it has nothing to do with the nature of Žižek's intentions; what should concern us, rather, are the purely formal features of the statement: not what Žižek is saying (the content of the enunciation) but the fact of the statement itself (the act of enunciation). The fundamental point is this: the contradiction in Žižek's reading shows us how *he neglects to follow his own methodology*. Specifically speaking, the discordance between his analysis of the migrant and that of the Jew

indicates a failure to adhere to the “two complimentary procedures” outlined in *The Sublime Object*: first, the discursive analysis of an ideological text which brings about “the ‘deconstruction’ of the spontaneous experience of its meaning”; second, the effort to extract a “kernel of enjoyment” and articulate how it is implied and manipulated (20018a: 140). In *Against the Double Blackmail*, there appears to be no effort to deconstruct his own spontaneous experience of the migrant and extract the kernel of enjoyment supporting this experience; he does not approach the figure of the migrant as he does the Jew, that is as a symptom “in the sense of a coded message, a cypher, a disfigured representation of social antagonism” (2008a: 141).

Žižek therefore appears to miss what he should have identified if he had approached the problem using the tools employed in his earlier work. Ultimately, he forgoes the basic formalist premises of the Freudian method outlined in the opening pages of *The Sublime Object*: “the point is to avoid the properly fetishistic fascination of the ‘content’ supposedly hidden behind the form: the ‘secret’ to be unveiled through analysis is not the content hidden by the form...but, on the contrary, *the ‘secret’ of this form itself*” (2008a: 3). This is the fundamental theoretical principle that Žižek breaks. The limit in his approach is that, like the classical bourgeois political economy, “it is not able to disengage itself from this fascination” in the secret hidden behind the form. Žižek appears to be interested in the contents concealed behind the form and not “the secret of this form itself” (2008a: 8). Instead of focusing on the purely formal features of the problem and becomes over-invested in the realm of signified-content.

We can see this clearly in his analysis of Trump. Rather than engage in a symptomatic reading (which I attempted in the first half of this paper) he appears fascinated with signification, with “the content hidden behind the form”. Consider the following passage from his recent work *The Courage of Hopelessness*:

Trump as a media phenomenon is an answer to this predicament: it is simply an attempt to keep together the two heterogeneous components of the Republican Party – big business and populism [...] If one looks closely at his program, it is the standard Republican list: deregulation and low taxes in the economy, anti-abortion Christianity, etc. if anything his program is even relatively moderate [...] The function of his

'refreshing' provocations and vulgar outbursts is precisely to mask this ordinariness of his program (2017: 234).

Note how Žižek locates the ideological effect in the content of Trump's message: the ordinary political program hidden behind his public statements. In 'looking closely' at this program, Žižek appears unable to "get rid of this fascination with the kernel of signification" (2008a: 7), with the secret hidden behind Trump's appearance: "There is a *mystery in his words*," he writes elsewhere, "however, these vulgarities should not deceive us: whatever Trump is, he is not a dangerous outsider. His true secret is that, not that he has won, but that nothing will really change" (2016: 236; my emphasis). Žižek here entirely contradicts his own fundamental Žižekian point: the true secret of Trump's success is not the secret behind the form but "the secret of this form itself", the empty, performative quality of his public statements. He does not see any significance in Trump's clownish qualities but, rather, focuses on what this irrational form conceals: "The problem is not that Trump is a clown. The problem is that there is a program behind his provocations, a method in his madness" (2018: 486).

By contradicting the basic propositions laid out in his early writings, Žižek ultimately adopts the classical critique of ideology he claims to avoid. The above statements implicitly assert the standard gesture of de-masking, of stripping back the veil of Trump's appearance to reveal the naked reality of his political program. Žižek's own analysis can thus be said to strengthen the very mechanism that sustains the attacks on his work. Again, the only way out of this problem is to read Žižek with Žižek: that is, by perceiving this apparent weakness not in terms of inability but, rather, as a *moment of radical negativity*, the point where the inherent antagonism constitutive of Žižek's thought – the truth of Žižek – becomes visible. As with Hegel, Žižek reaches this limitation not because he discovered something unthinkable but because he "found himself where, according to his own theory he shouldn't have found himself". What he is unable to come to terms with in Trump and the migrant crisis is *the very Žižekian aspect of the phenomenon*, something he should have been able to think if he approached these phenomena using his own methodology.

Psychoanalyzing Žižek

At this point, our effort to read Žižek against himself, to change Žižek by criticizing him, becomes an exercise in *tracing the projection of Žižek's shadow*. Absolute commitment to a Žižekian reading thus leads to the following unavoidable truth: the only way to save Žižek is to submit his work to a psychoanalytic reading. The assumption here is that the truth of Žižek manifests itself in the form of a symptom. In other words, the perceived failure to apply his own tools, the fetishistic fascination with the realm of content, is the form of appearance of a fundamental limitation in the foundations of his position. The task then is to isolate this symptomatic tendency by locating a certain coincidence of lack and excess, of limit and surplus, a moment where his discourse stumbles and a slip of the tongue marks the eruption of traumatic jouissance.

To take this step we must examine the precise formal make up of Žižek's statements. If we look closely at his comments on the refugee crisis, Trump and the LGBT+ movement we immediately notice is a common feature: his over-investment in signified-content is accompanied by a seemingly off-hand reference to visual media. The analysis of the migrant is effectively a commentary on its media representation: "Our media usually contrasts 'civilized' middle-class refugees with 'barbarian' lower-class refugees who steal, harass our citizens". Similarly, his reading of Trump is, in essence, an analysis of "Trump as a media phenomenon" (2017: 234). The same reference to media also frames his comments on LGBT. While discussing the ideological impasses of transgender, he makes a passing, seemingly unconnected comment on social media and the tech industry: "On 29 March 2016, a group of eighty predominantly Silicon Valley-based business executives, headed by Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg and Apple CEO Tim Cook..." (2017: 211). What is the significance of these remarks? As Žižek asks of Lacan's reference to Marx, do these "vague analogies" possess a more pertinent theoretical foundation? (2008a: 3).

On a formal level, such systematic references indicate a certain play of surplus and lack in Žižek's discourse. On the one hand, we witness an excessive analysis of ideological phenomena that is supplemented by a fleeting reference to media; on the other, we note a distinct lack of critical focus on the role of media in shaping these phenomena. Matthew Flisfeder and Louis-Paul Willis have described this issue as the

central ambiguity in Žižek's relationship to the media. His work, they argue, is littered with media reference that are never given any degree of sustained theoretical focus (Flisfeder & Willis 2014: 3). Fabio Vighi identifies the source of this problem in the subversive power of the symptom, whereby "the potential for a radical break with a given 'fantasy' overlaps with elements that decrees its (ideological) excess" (Vighi 2014: 133-4). Žižek is led into a state of contradiction, he argues, because a theoretical "knot" causes him to inadvertently reinforce the phenomenon he attempts to critique. One sees this most vividly, Vighi claims, in Žižek's analysis of cinema, where a "'fictional' closure" of meaning collides with "the potentially explosive negativity that structures signification."

Vighi shows real theoretical courage in acknowledging a central deadlock in Žižek's work; however, in externalizing the cause of problem, his analysis runs the risk of suturing an inherent antagonism: the possibility that Žižek's approach to media is more a *demonstration* than a manifestation of a theoretical knot. At stake, in other words, is not about the paradoxical relationship between symptom and fantasy but, rather, the *limitation in Žižek's theorization of this relationship*. From this standpoint, Žižek's ambiguous relationship to media begins to assume a symptomatic logic. His media references mark a rupture in his discourse, the form of appearance of a fundamental theoretical impotence.¹³ We begin to notice that Žižek falls into an excessive fascination with the realm of signification and contradicts his own theoretical principles at specific moments when his interpretative gaze encounters an image. This raises the obvious (and troubling) question: could there be something about the media landscape that Žižek is unable to think, something not yet accounted for in his conceptual apparatus?

The challenge, here, is to bring about *the dissolution of Žižek's symptom*, to construct a new theoretical framework in which his engagement with media acquires meaning, *retroactively*. This is what it means to psychoanalyze Žižek, to *save Žižek by changing Žižek*. At issue, I claim, is the disavowed aesthetic dimension of Lacanian theory, a set of precise co-ordinates that have yet to be fully elaborated. Just as Hegel is unable to fully grasp the dialectical logic of capitalism, Žižek has not come to terms with the fundamental *iconological* topology of fantasy, as articulated by Lacan.

Following his own 'short-circuiting' reading of Lacan and Hegel, the aim is to strengthen Žižek's conceptual apparatus by crossing wires that do not normally meet. In interpreting Žižek's symptom one attempts to re-habilitate the psychoanalytical foundations of his position in their iconological-aesthetic core. Where, then, does the interpretative process begin?

In clinical terms, we have thus far achieved what Bruce Fink terms a 'preliminary diagnosis': an overall global view of the patient's clinical structure (Fink 1997: 13), a general context in which the media image can be understood as a particular 'psychosomatic' problem open to psychoanalytic interpretation. In order to proceed, this localization of a "vague sense of uneasiness" on the part of the patient must lead to a more focused identification of "an isolable symptom" (Fink 1997: 13). Following this method, we should look again at Žižek's statements on refugees, Trump, and LGBT+. What comes to light is another peculiar feature: each media reference is immediately followed by a strange description of public defecation. First, Žižek's comments on refugees: "Our media usually contrasts 'civilized' middle-class refugees with 'barbarian' lower-class refugees who... *defecate in public* (or so we are told)." Next, his assertion that "Trump is a media phenomenon" is directly followed by this statement: "In mid-December 2015 Trump mocked Hillary Clinton for returning late to a debate following a commercial break because she'd been using the bathroom... A while ago, Donald Trump was unflatteringly compared to a man who noisily *defecates in the corner of a room*" (2017: 236). Finally, the oblique reference to social media in his discussion of LGBT is accompanied by an analysis of urinary segregation and the issue of public "toilet doors". What are we to make of this strange compulsion to connect fleeting remarks on media to a repeated commentary on the act of public defecation?

Here, once again, we encounter a surplus-enjoyment filling a fundamental lack. This is why it is essential that these remarks are considered alongside Žižek's silence when the issue of public defecation became central to the phenomenon under analysis: when, in early 2018, Trump requested to borrow a painting by Vincent Van Gogh from the Guggenheim Museum only to be offered a fully functioning toilet made from 18 carat gold, a work of contemporary art by Maurizio Cattelan entitled *America*. If the challenge is to maintain the critical thrust of Žižek's symptomatic approach then this event is of

central importance. First and foremost, it places Trump's election firmly in the context of capitalism, by foregrounding the logic of commodity-fetishism: an everyday object (of base use) acquires elevated status (as a work of art) because of its commercial value, the fact that it is made from pure gold. But it also sheds light on another (often imperceptible) feature of capitalism. Note that the subversive effect of the golden toilet is only possible *because it is a work of art*. In short, it cannot be viewed as a fetishized commodity-form without first being perceived as an aestheticized art form. To put it simply, if it were not a work of contemporary art, it would cease to have a critical function: it would simply be a toilet made from gold.

The crucial point here is not the well-trodden notion that, underpinning the aesthetic field there resides a deeper set of capitalist dynamics at play. The question which confronts us, rather, is more radical: it concerns the fundamental aesthetic conditions of capitalism itself. This question is worth exploring further because it leads, I claim, to a supplementary theoretical proposition not developed in Žižek's conceptual model, a new way of understanding capitalism and ideology in light of our contemporary situation.¹⁴ The 2018 Cambridge Analytica scandal was significant precisely because it revealed the fundamental framework supporting the Trump and Brexit fantasy. The truth is that these events were not political; they were *social media phenomena which took a political form*. As social symptoms, Trump and Brexit (and ISIS) draw our attention to the dialectical shift we are now experiencing: the emergence, outside the domain of political economy, of a new 'spirit' of capitalism; the full and direct inscription of the fundamental capitalist framework into the foundations of the social bond. In a repetition-reversal of the moment identified by Marx, the fetishized relations between things is returning to a fetishized relation between people. The difference today, however, is that this shift is mediated not by the commodity-form but by an ever-expanding, all-encompassing digital space. We have entered a society in which a new form of fetishism reigns, one which, unlike the shift from feudalism to capitalism, is not completely incompatible with commodity-fetishism. The latter has simply become a particular moment in a new (universal) reality. To paraphrase Žižek, the predominant and determining form of inter-relations is no longer the de-fetishized (social) encounter between people who are equal in the eyes of the law but a renewed (digital) relation of

domination and servitude between people *wholly fetishized in the eyes of each other*. As image, the other person becomes re-invested with a mystical aura and is mediated as a site of abysmal Otherness, a space where we can desire and enjoy the Other's desire directly.

Social media, in this context, is viewed as the return of a pre-capitalist Master discourse within the reconfigured space of capitalist relations, a symbolic texture with which the 'worldless' subject can map its bearings. In this new reality the dynamics of human desire and identity are fundamentally transformed, leading to the emergence of what I call the digital subject: an agent ("user") who perceives and achieves consciousness solely in digital terms.¹⁵ In short, we are witnessing the emergence of a new form of subjectivity, a fundamentally digitalized-aestheticized consciousness, the effects of which are playing themselves out before our eyes: the dissolution of the social bond through the erosion of the political and ethical fabric of human relations; the increasing socialization of the digital domain as a politicized, ethical space; and, finally, the coming together of these two inter-locking fields as phenomena that remain impenetrable to Žižek's gaze.

Conclusion

It is in the direction of these blind spots that the interpretation of Žižek's symptom will lead us.¹⁶ According to Bruce Fink, this process can only begin when the analysand becomes 'engaged' in analysis: when he gives up all pathological investment in signification and accepts his symptom as a manifestation of 'something else'. As Žižek knows very well, this can only take place when a crucial "inversion apropos the fantasy object" (Žižek 2008a 222) opens up the "space of desire" (Fink 1997 25) and allows the patient to enter "the dialectical process of analysis" (Fink 1997 26). It was with this hypothesis in mind that I listened intently to Žižek's keynote address at last year's International Žižek Studies Conference in Athens, Georgia. After overtly directing the audience's attention to the three principal reasons for the recent attacks on his work (the symptomatic ruptures I have examined in this paper) he went on to elucidate an argument that displayed an acute awareness of what is at stake in the current impasse. What we are witnessing, Žižek declared, is a new mode of existence, a new form of

'post-human' subjectivity that follows the logic of 'enforced subjectivization'. It was notable, however, that Žižek chose to address the effects of this shift rather than explore the possible causes. This lack of engagement was, again, accompanied by a number of off-hand references to digital media: a tangential discussion of video games and pornography; spontaneous reference to Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg; an unprovoked declaration that he did not possess a social media account; the unsolicited admission that he hates to watch himself on screens (In one notably performative gesture he even stopped to take a call – on his flip phone no less). From a psychoanalytic standpoint, there was something of the 'hysterical question' in these statements, something which rose above the utterance: a refusal on the part of Žižek to identify with the symbolic title "Žižek!", a gap between the way he seemed to see himself and the way his media image portrayed him. To address this gap, I prepared a question for Žižek which, due to the performative nature of academic conferences, I didn't get the chance to ask. The hope is that this missed encounter has become a delayed encounter, that Žižek, by letting go of "Žižek!" allows his name, emptied of all substantial content, to become not what it always was but what it will have already been (*qui aura lieu*): a creative spark in an as yet unrealized legacy, an anamorphic stain on a not yet perceptible picture.

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¹ Jameson, F (2018). "Itemised." Review of *My Struggle: Book 6. The End* by Karl Ove Knausgaard, translated by Martin Aitken and Don Bartlett. London Review of Books. Vol. 40, no. 21, Nov. 8. 2018.

² See Žižek, "Negativity in Hegel and Freud": <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aKrH5O2ZB7E>

³ Although beyond the limits of the present paper, my basic claim is that this procedure involves reading Žižek through the work of another unlikely bedfellow: the artist Marcel Duchamp. At first glance, this would seem to be the worst possible option to take: reading a discredited philosopher with an artist who, now fully consecrated in the primers of art history as the "Father of Conceptual Art," has been rendered all but irrelevant to contemporary concerns. The central claim is that, in Duchamp's work, Žižek's symptom appears in its purest form. Through Duchamp, Žižek comes face to face with his own shadow. In this sense, one reads Žižek with Žižek by reading Žižek through Duchamp. Like his efforts with Hegel and Lacan, this 'short-circuit' aims to save Žižek by rehabilitating his theoretical foundations to their aesthetic-iconological core.

⁴ See Kilroy (2016).

⁵ Žižek anticipated this in 2014, when he identified the emergence of a "new formula" governing his public image: the insidious shift from "Žižek as Clown/King" to "Žižek as Threat". See Kilroy (2016).

⁶ As Žižek writes of Hegel: "Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted Hegel; but the point is also to change him." (Žižek 2008b: 122).

⁷ One begins to understand why, as Žižek often notes, Freud was such an avid reader of Artur Conan Doyle's detective novels. Indeed, it is the detective's approach to material reality which best demonstrates this Žižekian notion of 'alternative facts'. For both the detective and the psychoanalyst, the curious features that don't quite make

sense provide the key clues to unlocking the case. The peculiar details that prevent us from arriving at an immediate appraisal of the evidence are, through a crucial shift in our relationship to meaning and truth, the pieces of evidence that reveal the true story of what really happened. Chomsky's position of analysis is thus akin to that adopted by Sherlock Holmes's sidekick Watson: in his objective bias he 'shoots too fast' and, by selecting the most immediately observable data, he draws the most obvious conclusions. The complex reality of the scene being analysed is thus obfuscated when the important clues are dismissed as insignificant. But just as Holmes use Watson's reaction to identify the 'lure', Chomsky's critique of Žižek allows us to re-appropriate the notion of 'alternative facts' for the purpose of interrogating today's ideological crime scene.

⁸ In his 2011 work *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously*, Žižek argued that the London riots marked the symptomatic outburst of this "worldless" subject against the meaningless universe of late capitalism. Alienated within an ideological constellation that offers no co-ordinates for identification, the protesters engaged in a true gesture of revolt. It was perhaps inevitable, one might argue, that the "disenfranchised" subject would eventually seek certainty in an alternative Master, be it in the form of Brexit, Trump or ISIS.

⁹ For a full elaboration of this point, see my re-reading of Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy's critique of Lacan. Kilroy (2017).

¹⁰ Deconstruction thus persist outside the postmodern paradigm as a pure critical impulse turned against postmodernism itself, an idea that is implicit in Žižek's discussion of a "new barbarism in today's intellectual life". See Žižek. S. 'A Plea for a Return to Différence (with a Minor Pro Domo Sua)'. *Critical Inquiry*. Vol. 32. No. 2 (Winter 2006), pp. 226 – 249.

¹¹ Slavoj Žižek & Glyn Daly, *Conversations with Žižek* (Cambridge & Malden: Polity, 2004), p. 63.

¹² This point is examined in full in my previous IJZS article (Kilroy 2016a). The question to ask is this: what if Žižek creates the conditions for his own misappropriation? One begins by noting that his absorption into the academic discourse obscures the subtleties of his psychoanalytic method: how, through references to pop culture, he attempts to achieve subjective destitution, the end of analytic process. What remains is a reduced (neutralized) version of his theory that fits easily into fields like Media studies. But what if Žižek's "short-circuiting" approach is misappropriated because it is not fully achieved? In attempting to bring about a certain traversal of the fantasy does Žižek remain unknowingly locked within a fundamental framework? To repeat what he says of Kant, in his delirious race from example to example, does he remain a prisoner of the field of representation?

¹³ This argument is fully developed in Kilroy (2016). My wager is that to trace the dynamic of lack/excess in Žižek's writing on images is to recognize a decidedly symptomatic dimension of his writing. Since the publication of *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, the rapid expansion of visually mediated technology has failed to provoke a rigorous response on his part. This is all the more perplexing given that, during this period, references to visual media appear with increasing regularity in his work. The essential co-ordinates of Žižek's interpretative model suddenly come into stark focus: we begin to see how, in his constant references to popular culture and new media, the majority of his chosen examples are highly visual in nature.

¹⁴ The basic argument here is that the essential co-ordinates of ideology are essentially iconological, such that the process of commodification relies on an operation of aestheticization. If the aim of all hegemonic ideology is to maintain the consistency of its edifice then the aesthetic field plays a crucial role in engineering the formal structure of this edifice. To understand this point, one need only consider the role played by social media in mapping the topology of our current ideological constellation. If fake news exerts an ideological hold, we now know that the mechanism producing this effect has a name: Facebook. The problem with the ongoing (classic) critique of Facebook, however, is that it entirely misses its target. What is lost amid the excessive focus on content (data, privacy, etc) is the fundamental *importance of form*: the fact that the real source of the network's power resides in the structure of the platform.

¹⁵ Following the logic of symbolic identification, the subject has undergone a critical moment of fetishistic misrecognition whereby his imaginary (ego) relation to a fantasy object has become re-calibrated, re-coordinated. Now, he misrecognizes content that is externally produced in algorithmic network as the inherent essence of his being. Consequently, the framework producing this content – the network itself – becomes a crucial mode of symbolic identification: under the (personalized-politicized) gaze of one's virtual friends, we inscribe our position in relation to a personalized, fetishized, fantasy object (this virtual gaze as *objet a*). Such a shift has profound implications for the consistency of the socio-symbolic space: the result is a self-perpetuating circular movement from an increasingly traumatic social encounter to the self-revolutionizing realm of a digitally fetishized Other.

¹⁶ Although beyond the limits of this paper, it is worth outlining the next steps to be taken in this project. One pursues the analysis further by noting how the Guggenheim/Trump exchange marked the 100th anniversary of Marcel Duchamp's Fountain, an upturned urinal that was declared a work of art in 1917. It is not without

significance that this object is often the final point of reference when Žižek enters into a discussion of images and art. This is why, in his statement on the work, Žižek's discourse begins to tighten around a theoretical knot. In front of *Fountain*, his analysis stumbles and an excessive eruption of traumatic jouissance becomes palpable. In short, his symptom appears in its purest form; *it is in Duchamp that Žižek comes face to face with his own shadow*. What he ultimately fails to see is the Žižekian aspect of the phenomenon, how Duchamp's oeuvre embodies the fundamental tenants of Žižek's own theoretical framework and draws out the precise 'aesthetic' dimension of Lacan's thought. This is why to read Žižek with Žižek is to read *Žižek through Duchamp*. My wager is that, through this short-circuit, the Duchampian matrix becomes a central element in Žižek's critique of capitalism, a key iconological tool allowing us to fully grasp contemporary ideological phenomena without falling prey to any 'postmodern' traps. For a development of this argument see Kilroy, R. (2016b). "Duchamp with Lacan through Žižek."