

(Un)quilting the Quilting Point: Critiquing Žižek on Lacan's Graphs of Desire and Benjamin's "Theses"

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Abstract: Žižek's reading of Lacan's "The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious" is among the central contributions of *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, a reading abounding in importance throughout Žižek's use of Lacan in his theory of ideology. A close reading of Lacan's original paper, though, reveals numerous theoretical divergences. In this essay, I explore Žižek's reading and critique his analysis on various points—including the priority of the cut, the dialectic of synchrony and diachrony, and the relation of $\$ \diamond D$ (the matheme for drive) to $S(\mathcal{A})$ (the matheme for the lack in the Other)—to suggest a foundational reinterpretation of the quilting point. With particularly the completed graph in mind, I contest Žižek's reading of the primacy of fantasy, the definition of the sinthome, and the $\$ \diamond D$ -to- $S(\mathcal{A})$ arrow, all of which are apotheosized in Žižek's exposition on Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History." In Benjamin, despite Žižek's theoretical utilization of him, we find substantial divergence from Žižek: there is indeed a quilting point of the mo(ve)ment that takes the lessons of processuality, the cut, the synchrony/diachrony dialectic, and $\$ \diamond D$ to $S(\mathcal{A})$ seriously—a quilting point that, contra its usual associations with closure, is radically open and revolutionary.

Keywords: Žižek; Lacan; Benjamin; Psychoanalysis, Critical Theory

“What is must be changeable if it is not to be all” – Adorno, Negative Dialectics

Introduction

According to Bruce Fink, Lacan’s “The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious” is “one of the most difficult papers in the *Écrits*,” and, by extension, Lacan’s oeuvre; he is, he admits, “unreadable” (Fink 2004: 106; Lacan 1998: 36). Žižek’s *Sublime Object of Ideology* was among the first—and still, perhaps the greatest—explanation and elaboration of the key tenets of Lacanian theory, notably those deriving from “Subversion of the Subject,” in the service of his broader theory of ideology. It is precisely in Žižek’s reading of the Lacanian graphs of desire, though, where a re-reading and close comparison of Žižek’s interpretation to Lacan’s original enumeration is needed.

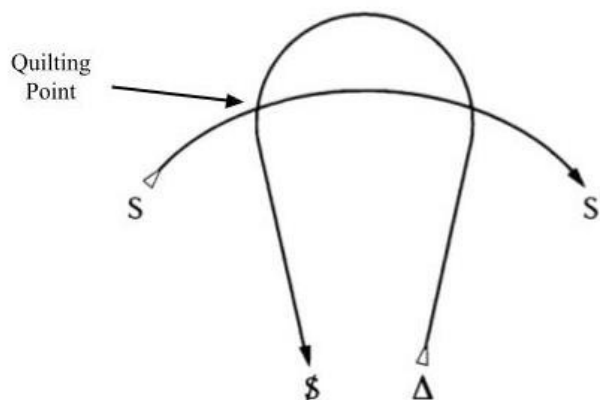
In his critique of Althusser, Žižek gives the first hints of his central theoretical interventions in his reading of the graphs of desire. The famous dream of the burning child—in which the dead child returns to the father in a dream and whispers “Father, don’t you see that I’m burning?”—indicates for Žižek not the Althusserian imaginary (as dream) obscuring the real but rather that it is in the father’s dream where he encounters the real of his desire (2008: 44-45; Althusser 2014: 254-257). Awakening from the dream, then, is to escape from guilt and return to illusion; Žižek writes: “‘reality’ is a fantasy-construction which enables us to mask the Real of our desire” (45). This, Žižek writes, extends the theories developed in Laclau and Mouffe’s *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, where they located the reality-as-illusion masking “some insupportable, real, impossible kernel” as the central antagonism (45). Contra Althusser, Žižek maintains that ideology does not allow an escape from reality, but rather allows the social reality as the escape from the traumatic-real kernel at its center (45). The first notion of quilting Žižek discusses follows directly from this insight from Laclau and Mouffe: the suturing of “floating signifiers” through certain “nodal points” (the *point de capiton*, quilting point, etc.) stops the sliding of signification and totalizes meaning to escape the kernel (95-96). Žižek’s account is indeed largely affirmative here,

even with his addition: he writes, in fact, that Laclau and Mouffe's and his account are "complementary procedures of the 'criticism of ideology'" (140). Žižek's additional procedure, his key move, "aims at extracting the kernel of *enjoyment*" that is "structured in fantasy"—for Žižek, it is only in traversing this fantasy of enjoyment where a proper critique of ideology exists (140). All the central features of Žižek's readings of Lacan are present here: the role of fantasy in ideology, reality that obscures the real, the quilting point as suture, and the primacy of desire and enjoyment. How he employs these concepts, though, is theoretically disputable.

Graphs 1-3

Žižek's reading of the first graph of desire centers almost entirely around the question of the quilting of signification. The essential update to the two re-formed Saussurean planes is, for Žižek, the addition of the quilting point at the second intersection of Δ (the "mythical, pre-symbolic intention") with the signifying chain (112). This quilting, Lacan writes, is the cut that "stops the otherwise indefinite sliding of signification," and—on Žižek's definition—pins a meaning to a signifier at a specific point (Lacan 2006: 681; Žižek 2008: 112). In the "radically contingent process of retroactive production," then, the barred subject as $\$$ is produced by a cut and as a cut: emanating from, as Žižek says, the "real" mythical intention, the subject is now engendered by the void of the signifier that penetrates them (112). Altogether, Žižek's is a strict Lacanian reading of this first graph, but there remain iterations of Lacan's definition of the quilting point that go beyond what Žižek describes.

Graph 1



Žižek's repeated use of the word retroactive—such as in the transferential illusion of presence “from the beginning”—downplays, though, the dialectical relation of diachrony and synchrony in the quilting point that Lacan is at pains to clarify, instead prioritizing the former over the latter (113). Lacan notes, with Žižek, that “the diachronic function of this button tie can be found in a sentence,” implicating his definition of the quilting point in Seminar III: “the point of convergence that enables everything ... to be situated retroactively and prospectively,” like a period on the end of a sentence (2006: 682; 1993: 262-263, 268). The quilting point's diachrony, Lacan writes, is rather obvious; what remains “more hidden,” though, is its synchronic nature (2006: 682). Writing that the structure of the synchrony is essentially metaphor, Lacan implicitly draws on his extension of Freudian condensation to metaphor and then synchrony, as displacement turns to metonymy and then diachrony (682, 677). The child, “disconnecting the [animal] from its cry,” realizes the possibility of separating the ordinary relations of signification and in so doing amalgamates as in condensation, allowing similar eruptions of the unconscious in enunciation; this subject of enunciation is the tie between diachrony and synchrony (682, 707). As Lacan writes, “...man cannot aim at being whole...once the play of displacement and condensation to which he is destined in the exercise of his functions marks his relation, as a subject, to the signifier” (581). The subject in signification and its dual relationship to displacement (diachrony) and condensation (synchrony) thus ties the subject back into the quilting point; it was indeed this quilting point that creates the subject retroactively. The cut of the quiltingpoint, then, is not just a diachronic process—it is as synchronic as it is diachronic, a point that, in Benjamin, will make all the difference.

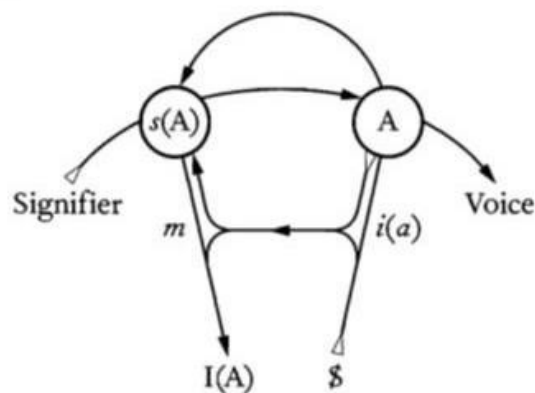
Roughly the same tension between Žižek's reading and Lacan's own enumeration carries into the former's reading of the second graph. Žižek contrasts the “synchronous symbolic code” of the big Other with the “diachronous signifier's chain” such that the quilting point (representing the big Other) submits all preceding elements to a certain “code” of meaning (2008: 114). How to understand Žižek's word choice here, though, determines the extent of his consistency with his first reading. He explicitly says that the quilting point “represents, holds the place of, the big Other,” thus implying a difference that would resist synonymization while simultaneously claiming that the function of the quilting point is, like the big Other, to produce retroactive

meaning of all other signifiers (114-115). The overlap in function allows his parallel, but the failure of *complete* overlap disallows an analogization writ large. It would be incorrect, then, to carry over the synchrony of the big Other *entirely* to the quilting point given the primacy of diachrony to Žižek’s interpretation of it in the first graph. In the impossibility of complete analogization, then, he retains the focus on diachrony. It is, of course, precisely this big Other, itself quilting the preceding elements, that is created retroactively by $s(A)$, the meaning; what announces itself, then, is the possibility of the movement of the quilting point along places on the stream of signification that disallows a retroactive addition of synchrony to Žižek’s diachrony-focused reading (115).

Lacan himself notes the mutual play of diachrony and synchrony in the second graph and its connection to identification, a central topic for Žižek. Lacan writes, for example, that $s(A)$ “may be called the punctuation, in which signification ends as a finished product” and is thus “a moment (a scansion, rather than a duration),” though the end of signification via submission entails the subject’s imaginary circular movement: $s(A) \rightarrow A \rightarrow i(a) \rightarrow m \rightarrow s(A) \rightarrow \dots$ (2006: 682). For Žižek, this movement ends in either imaginary or symbolic identification, though the latter always triumphs over the former. Imaginary identification, $i(a)$, Žižek writes, is “identification with the image in

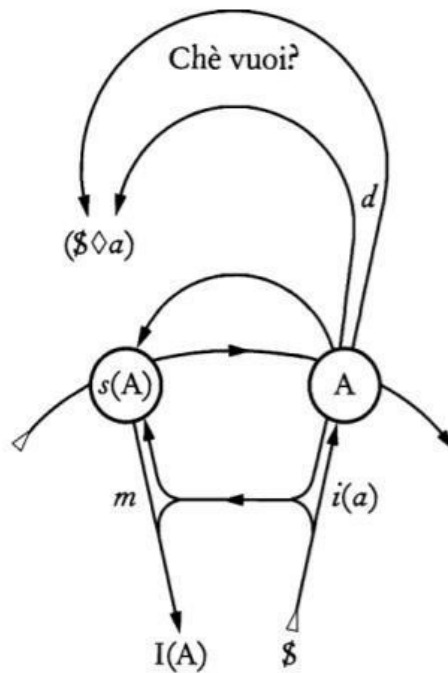
which we appear likable to ourselves,” which is ultimately always subordinate to symbolic identification, $I(A)$ (2008: 116, 120). Lacan ascribes the latter’s triumph to the subject’s constitution of himself (Lacan’s pronoun) in the message he “receives from the Other... [that] he himself sends” back in inverted form, as Lacan explains at length in the letter’s relation to desire in “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter’” (2006: 683). “The point from which we are observed,” Žižek writes, informs the creation of the subject more than mere imaginary identification (2008: 120). The subject’s

Graph 2



attempt to “square the circle” via submission is, however, impossible, “solely because the subject constitutes himself only by subtracting himself from it... such that he must, at one and the same time, count himself here and function only as a lack here” (Lacan 2006: 683). The function of the cut, then, is present not only in both the message that is sent and the message that is reciprocated, both cut by desire, but also in the essential cut of the subject qua subject in the leftover of the subtraction (Žižek 2008: 115). The centrality of this cut, in addition to the cut of the act of sending the message itself, precipitates the connection of the cut in the final iteration of the graph. The message that comes back in inverted form—when it comes back via a question asked to the subject by the Other—is ‘*Che vuoi?*’, the question of the third graph and the essence of Žižek’s reading.

Graph 3



The essential addition of the third graph is the desire that transcends A in the second graph, indicative of the failure of elementary quilting to suture its excesses. As Žižek notes, the question mark—both in the shape of the graph and the punctuation of ‘*Che vuoi?*’—indicates the difference between utterance and enunciation, the latter showing, as Lacan says, the omnipresence of the unconscious in discourse (Žižek 2008: 123; Lacan 2006: 707). It is precisely this unconscious desire that the subject attempts to fulfill in answering the Other’s desire: “you demand something of me, but what do you really want...?” (Žižek 2008: 124). Following the graph, the subject’s movement through the symbolic ($\$ \rightarrow i(a) \rightarrow A \rightarrow d \rightarrow \$ \diamond a$) forms the relation $\$ \diamond a$, the formula of fantasy, wherein the subject attempts to become the object (a) of the Other’s desire to fulfill their own desire (a) to be wanted (Lacan 2006: 691). For Žižek, extending the function of the quilting point explicitly present in the first two graphs, the subject is “fastened [and] pinned” to a signifier via the interpellation of the Other, an interpellation that ultimately fails in the hysterical question (a question we will return to); for now, a deeper reading of Žižek’s reading will clarify his position (Žižek 2008: 125). Given the primacy of the fantasy for Žižek’s theory of ideology, one should not be surprised that Žižek’s chapter on *all of* the graphs of desire is titled “*Che vuoi?*”, a reference to only the third graph—this is the opener of the bottle (and bottling) of ideology (Lacan 2006: 690). The relation of fantasy, Žižek writes, answers ‘*Che vuoi?*’, allows imaginary identification, teaches the subject how to desire, and shields the subject from the Thing (as real), altogether allowing the subject to exist in the symbolic and imaginary without the intrusion of the real (Žižek 2008: 128, 132, 135). This primacy of the functions of fantasy shows Žižek’s privileging of the ‘ $\diamond a$ ’ part of the relationship: this, Lacan explains, “corresponds to the fields **I** and **S**,” imaginary and symbolic, whereas $\$$ refers to the **R** of reality, an early formulation of the real which would be overcome by an interpretation of the real as that which resists symbolization absolutely (Lacan 2006: 487). While for Lacan it is indeed possible to view “fantasy as an imaginary effect,” one “cannot [entirely] reduce fantasy to imagination” because of its relation to the symbolic as, for example, the “phallic standard” which props up “imaginary identification” in a woman’s fantasy (2006: 579, 532, 617). Žižek’s extended elaboration of $I(A)$ and $i(a)$ in his section on the second graph are thus clarified

retroactively: to construct the primacy of $\$ \diamond a$ in the third graph, he needed to construct the predominance of the interplay between the symbolic and imaginary as a defense against the real of the Other's desire.

Prioritizing $\diamond a$ as a heuristic is indeed consonant with Lacan's understanding of the fading of the subject in fantasy and thus of alienation. The entire structure of Lacanian fantasy arises in the *fading of the subject*, since the subject attempts to reduce themselves to the level of the object of the Other's desire; this fantasy, Lacan says, is the "'stuff' of the *I* that is primally repressed, because it can be indicated only in the fading of enunciation" (2006: 691). It was precisely this desire-qua-fantasy where the primal repression or unconscious can be best investigated because the elliptical, unstated, and perpetual nature of the drive eludes the subject's description-as-statement; "he does not even know he is speaking" (691-692). This failure of the subject, the non-speech beneath the signifier, suggests a homology between the third graph (where the fantasy arises as the subject fades) and the function of alienation (where the subject "drops out" of the picture) (Fink 1995: 51). As Fink says, for example, the upper half of the completed graph indicates separation—separation from the attempt to be the full object of the Other's desire—and renders all preceding renditions (graphs 1-3) as alienation (2004: 121). In both, the cut of the unconscious between the subject and Other—the cut which thus binds and separates—commands the "fundamental operations" of the subject's causation, the first of which is alienation (Lacan 2006: 712). In alienation, the subject is brought into being by the signifier and is represented to others signifiers as such, a bringing-into-being which, via the signifier's triumph, is simultaneously a division (712-713). This division, a Žižekian forced choice of the *vel*, is posited only retroactively in recognitions of the unconscious revealed in signification; consequently, the unconscious-as-cut, the cut between the Cartesian subject and the Other, is realized only in the cut of language: that is, in witticisms and the play of signifiers (712, 714). That the "signifier represents a subject to another signifier" implies the unconscious formations that manifest in "dreams, slips of the tongue, and witticisms," first noted by Freud, which themselves derive from the play— and success— of the signifier (712-713). It is therefore only in the *process* of play and of the subject's activity where the cut—as division, as unconscious, and as language—is evinced; it is in

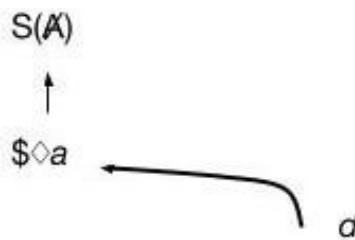
this cut, present already from the first graph, where the upper level finds its similarities.

Žižek's cut nonetheless occurs here in the failure of interpellation via the "object in subject" and the Other's contradictory desire. Despite the fantasy's concealment of the subject from the real of the Other, the unanswerability of '*Che vuoi?*' both literally and figuratively speaks to the contradictoriness of the subject; that is, that the "in the subject more than the subject" is both what opens up the gap of the hysterical question and *is* the hysterical question insofar as the subject recognizes the homology of the Other's contradictoriness with their own (Žižek 2008: 126, 135). The (Lacanian) enunciation of the "terrifying, filthy enjoyment" of the Other's interpellation evinces the Other's split subjectivity, the lack in the Other, itself indicative of the unseen presence of jouissance (2008: 135-136). While the $\diamond a$ as the symbolic and imaginary might predominate, the lozenge—as Lacan says, that which "registers the relations envelopment-development-conjunction-disjunction" and left-right and right-left "desire for"—ties it to the \$ that, in its relation to the real, perpetually returns (Lacan 2006: 542, 653). The leftover of the triumph of the symbolic over the imaginary returns, then, in the leftover of the interpellation of the Other, a cut and stumbling block that brings forth the completed graph.

Complete Graph

The addition of the stream of jouissance in the final graph, extending the subject of knowledge into the subject of feeling or affect, is precisely what brings about the subject's awareness of the lack in the Other or $S(\mathcal{A})$, the principle matheme of the completed graph. Enjoyment, that which "cannot be symbolized," creates the lack of the Other as "the signifier of its inconsistency," a separation that allows the subject to move from alienation and engender oneself (Žižek 2008: 137). For Žižek, the essential function of fantasy is concealing this inconsistency from the subject's view, whereas the central feature of ideology critique is to—quoting Seminar XI—traverse the fantasy of fantasy and recognize its filling of the void of the Other (148). This is same traversal that Hamlet experienced in the failure of interpellation in the third graph of desire; it is at precisely this point in Žižek's elaboration of the graphs—the apotheosis of the third graph—that Žižek reveals the essential addition of the fourth as the lack in the Other,

$S(\mathcal{A})$. The same continuation thus exists here as before: $d \rightarrow \diamond a \rightarrow \$ \rightarrow S(\mathcal{A})$. In this movement, though, Žižek’s analysis misses much of what is central to Lacan’s elaboration of the graph. Taking the cut as the central feature of the graph, numerous Lacanian concepts must be reread against Žižek: the erogenous zones, $S(\mathcal{A})$, $\$ \diamond D$, and the sinthome. The central point, to be made clear shortly, is the absolute primacy of $\$ \diamond D$ as the cut which evinces the cut in the $S(\mathcal{A})$, a fact that Žižek overlooks entirely: to reach this conclusion, though, a detour into the details of the graph is necessary.



Žižek’s first elucidation of the implication of jouissance is the dissection of the body, becoming “castrated, ...dismembered, [and] mortified” at the incisions of jouissance (136). The *complete* dismemberment and evacuation of enjoyment from the body, though, is impossible: “...there are always some leftovers, oases of enjoyment, so-called ‘erogenous zones’” that still exist with their own potential enjoyment (138). For Lacan, these erogenous zones are inextricably tied to the cut in myriad formulations.

Firstly, Lacan connects this cut to marginal and bordering anatomical areas (the lips, the rim of the anus, the eyelids, etc.); the sharp edges of such structures are indeed symbolic of the cut, as is the relation to the Other which is outside and can stimulate them (Lacan 2006: 692). Adding also the “the phoneme, the gaze, [and] the voice,” the central sites of *objet a*, Lacan retroactively names the other erogenous zones as potential places of this same *objet a* (693). The partial nature of these objects (as *objet a*) is indicative of the partial nature of the drive; the drive as a partial object, the leftover of the need that the demand fails to fulfill (represented by $\$ \diamond D$ in the completed graph), creates the partial objects it then seeks (693). As Lacan writes in Seminar XI, the “adjoining, connected zones,” the rims and edges, become “specific sources for the drive” as $\$ \diamond D$ (Žižek 2008: 172). At these edges, Lacan writes, a

glimpse of the unconscious is possible: “the structure of what closes”—the unconscious, the cave—“is called an ‘edge’ in topology” (Lacan 2006: 711). The “irreducibility of the cut” in the edges, the unconscious, and language as such allows an additional *nachträglich* vision of its closing: this, Lacan says, is the quilting point—not the totalization of the signifying field, but rather the quilting qua retroactive understanding of the momentary openness of the unconscious (711). Extending Freud and Lacan, one might say that this retroactive quilting is “the movement outwards and back” that defines the drive (Lacan 1977: 177).

In this quilting point and its connection to $S(\mathcal{A})$, one reaches Lacan’s central quotation in “Subversion of the Subject”:

If we are to expect such an effect [of closing] from unconscious enunciation, it is here in $S(\mathcal{A})$ and read as: signifier of a lack in the Other, a lack inherent in the Other’s very function as the treasure trove of signifiers. And this is so insofar as the Other is called upon (*ché vuoi*) to answer for the value of this treasure, that is, to answer for its place in the lower chain certainly, but with the signifiers constitutive of the upper chain—in other words, in terms of the drive. (Lacan 2006: 693).

In the first sentence, the departure from Žižek is clear: Lacan, defining $S(\mathcal{A})$ as “the point at which every signifying chain takes pride in closing its signification,” makes $S(\mathcal{A})$ itself a quilting point, not just the Žižekian “beyond” of the fantasy. It is, Lacan explains, only because “the Other is called upon to answer for the value of this treasure” by the drive—that which is and seeks out the “treasure trove of signifiers”—that $S(\mathcal{A})$ can function as a quilting point that retroactively evinces the “lack inherent in the Other’s function” (692-693). The call of ‘*Che vuoi?*’, taking the form of the drive in the completed graph, extends now to pass through *jouissance* and evince the cut in the Other; this cut was, of course, already present in the fact that ‘*Che vuoi?*’ was the question which returned from the Other (to be then asked by the subject) in inverted form—in terms now, Lacan says, of the drive (690, 693).

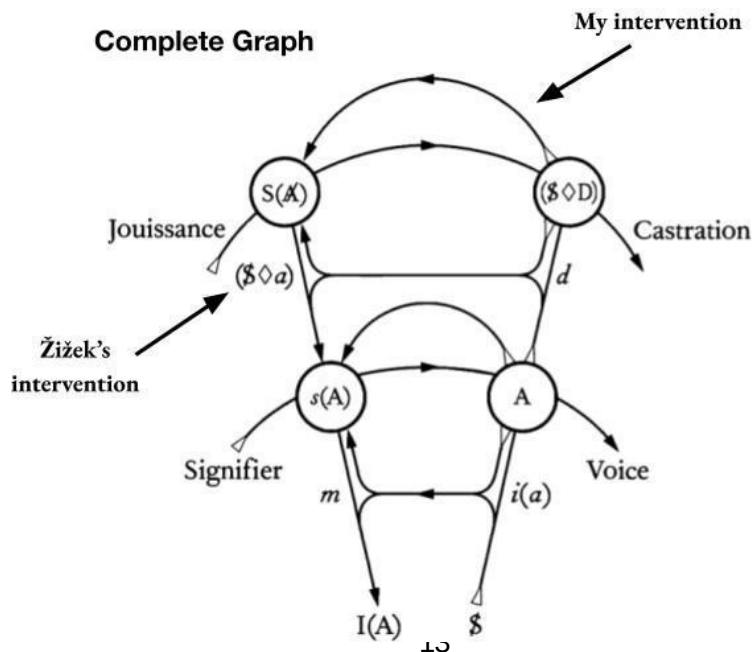
The phrase “treasure trove” and its movement through Lacan’s writings on the final graph places it as a central concept in the function of cut and its relation to the signifier. $S(\mathcal{A})$, Lacan says, is firstly a signifier, that which “represents the subject to

another signifier,” meaning that only the lack in the Other can bring into being the subject that is then seen to be a subject by the master signifier (693-694). The nachträglich function of the subject’s “*was to be* there” is, then, the completion of the “battery of signifiers” first present in A in the second graph (683, 694, 713). This battery of signifiers, extending from A to $\$ \diamond D$, is that “without which there would be no subject in the real,” since this battery-as-locus is where the unconscious exists as cut (707-708). There is, then, a further connection between the two as a foundational cut: in the cut as the lack in the Other and as the cut as the unconscious in the battery of signifiers. In the (jouissance-seeking) relation of the drive “as the treasure trove of signifiers” to “a lack inherent in the Other’s function as the treasure trove of signifiers,” Lacan makes clear the link of the cut to its diachronic retroactivity: the former retroactively illuminates the latter, as shown clearly in the top-most arrow of the graph (693).

The specific signification of $S(\mathcal{A})$ as Φ makes this even clearer. Φ , the signifier of what is lacking in the Other (or, one could say, the cut in the Other), is also known as $S(\mathcal{A})$ since Φ often signifies the phallus (Fink 2004: 125).¹ For Fink, the phallus signifies the “signification process itself; ...the relationship or, better, the nonrelationship between signifier and signified” (135). Fink notes indeed that the many names of $S(\mathcal{A})$ —the Name-of-the-Father, the No-of-the-Father, the prohibition of jouissance—all remain somewhat superfluous: the essential cut of $S(\mathcal{A})$ is the loss of jouissance ($-\Phi$), no matter what $S(\mathcal{A})$ signifies. To Žižek’s point on fantasy, Lacan notes that “fantasy contains ($-\Phi$), the imaginary function of castration, in a hidden form that can switch from one of its terms to the other” (Lacan 2006: 699). The subject’s *objet a*, then, can indeed be interpreted as Φ , as noted by Lacan in his discussion of Socrates (699). However, the drive as $\$ \diamond D$ has a similar relation: the drive, operating at the scopic dimension, has a relation to *objet a* as gaze, the *objet a* itself being a function of lack as $-\Phi$ (Lacan 1977: 103-104, 168). In its processual nature and in its relation to $-\Phi$, drive thus goes beyond fantasy in attributes and establishes a stronger connection between $\$ \diamond D$ and $S(\mathcal{A})$ then $\$ \diamond a$ and $S(\mathcal{A})$.

This is the foundational point that Žižek misses: the link between $\$ \diamond D$ and $S(\mathcal{A})$ noted in the top-most arrow of the completed graph. As Lacan writes, “In French,

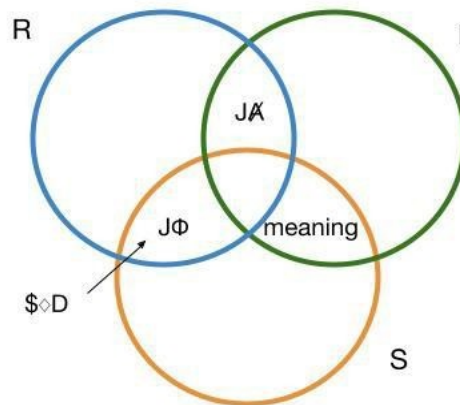
my last resort [for translating Freud's *Trieb*] would be *dérive* [drift], if I were unable to give the bastardized term *pulsion* [drive or urge] its point of impact" (Lacan 2006: 680). This is where Žižek is closest: he rightly notes that "'beyond fantasy' we find only drive [and] its pulsation..." but his sole focus on fantasy disregards the centrality of the drive's connection to $S(\mathcal{A})$ (Žižek 2008: 139). As noted in Seminar XI, though long before the famous quotation of the drive beyond fantasy, the drive is always processual, always moving around the object (Lacan 1977: 168). In $\$ \diamond D$, the cut of the process manifests in demand's breakdown into satisfaction (as separation) and the addressing of the impulse toward the other (Fink 2004: 127). The subject, Fink says, "pursues satisfaction without holding the Other responsible for it and without granting the Other the preeminent status of being the only one who can provide it"; the cut in the subject, then, as shown by the subject's recognition that the Other cannot provide their satisfaction, evinces the always-already present cut in the Other (127). For Lacan, the processual diachrony of $\$ \diamond D$ means that, while the subject vanishes with demand, the cut remains since "the very delimitation of the 'erogenous zones'...is the result of a cut" (Lacan 2006: 692). Despite the dual vanishing, the drive's processual, diachronic, and metonymic nature continues to connect the cut directly to the cut of $S(\mathcal{A})$ (680). The point is, then, that the cut evinces the cut *without* the downward movement into the mediation of fantasy, a fact entirely absent from Žižek's account.



The structure of fantasy is, as we saw, Žižek’s essential addition to ideology critique: it is only in traversing this fantasy of enjoyment that a proper critique of ideology exists (Žižek 2008: 140). Still, for Žižek, because ideological fantasy “take[s] its own failure into account in advance,” it must “mask this inconsistency” and “compensate us for the failed identification” (142). This, then, is *fantasy-as-quilting-point*, such that a traversing of the fantasy also traverses the quilting point which otherwise totalizes and obscures the failure of ideology. For Žižek, the basic procedure of ideology critique to “detect, in a given ideological edifice, the elements which represent within it its own impossibility” as a failure to close—with Lacan, though, the recognition of these elements *must also be* a quilting point (143). There is, then, a quilting point of the intrusions of the real necessary to understand them as such; to extend Žižek, the function of the fantasy’s oppressive quilting is also to quilt the ruptures that this projected-impossibility belies, the inherent connection between $\$ \diamond D$ and $S(\mathcal{A})$ in the cut. Žižek’s injunction that we traverse the fantasy to identify with the sinthome—recognizing the excesses of the projection as the truth of ourselves—stops short of the real conclusion: that this identification *is itself* a form of rupture that must be quilted (139, 144). Žižek is right here that this identification is a failure, but it is in this failure where the quilting emerges: the quilting-cut (fails in) quilting the quilting-cut.

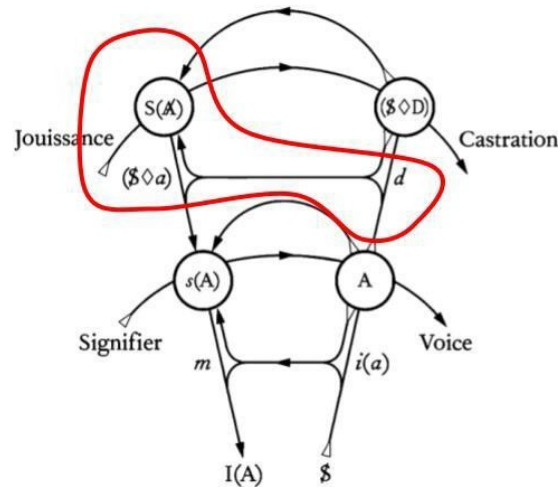
Now, we can analyze Žižek’s central claim that “‘Going-through-the-fantasy’ is therefore strictly correlative to identification with a sinthome” (139). In the graph, $\$ \diamond D$ is at the collision point of the real and jouissance (coming left to right) and the signifiers of desire and the Other (coming from below). Where one finds $\$ \diamond D$ in the Borromean knot, then, is in $J\Phi$, or phallic jouissance, since it resides at “the conjunction between the symbolic and the real” and is, notably, “parasitic” (Lacan 2016: 43-44). In the very next session in Seminar XXIII, Lacan says that the analyst teaches the analysand to “perform a splice between his sinthome and the parasitic real of jouissance”; that is, between his sinthome and his phallic jouissance as the intersection of the real and symbolic (58). The sinthome, indeed, must be beyond all the intersections of the knots (meaning, $J\mathcal{A}$, and $J\Phi$) insofar as it functions as a fourth ring to tie the three registers together in a way that organizes jouissance for the subject. $\$ \diamond D$, then, cannot be the sinthome, which leads to two conclusions.

RSI Diagram and Fields



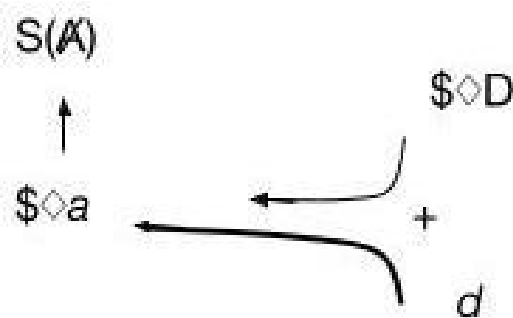
Firstly, Žižek’s movement from graph three to the completed graph *requires* a reading of $\$ \diamond D$ as the sinthome to continue privileging his reading of the quilting point as suture. Changing Žižek’s formula of the sinthome as “a signifying formation...as a bearer of *jouis-sense*, enjoyment-in-sense” to instead “*jouis-sens*”—“sens” being what Lacan uses for “meaning” in Seminar XXIII, rendering it “enjoyment-in-meaning” as manageable jouissance—makes the trajectory much clearer (Žižek 2008: 81). Žižek’s movement from the third graph is essentially an extension of desire up in the question mark, straight left to $\$ \diamond a$, and finally directly up to $S(\mathcal{A})$. This means, reading it through Seminar XXIII, that the relation is one of the S-I (not R) in the Borromean knot; that is, meaning, since “the orientation of the real, on my territory, forecloses *sens* [meaning]” (Lacan 2016: 102). Žižek’s S-I reading of the third graph of desire carries through *Sublime Object* as well, notably in Žižek’s frequent use of “Meaning” that follows directly from this and his definition of the quilting point: Meaning for Žižek is “the point which ‘gives meaning’ to all the others and thus totalizes the field of (ideological) meaning” (Žižek 2008: 110). The function of the quilting point for Žižek is *solely* one of the creation of meaning, the symbolic-imaginary: as he writes, the master-signifier-as-Meaning “retroactively determines [the floating signifiers’] meaning” in its quilting, establishing the tripartite analogization of Meaning, master signifier, and quilting point (113).

Žižek's Movement



The second conclusion to draw is that the presence of the real in $\$ \diamond D$ goes beyond just the sinthome as a *controlled* real—Žižek's movement, then, explicitly intends to avoid the real of $\$ \diamond D$ -as-phallic-jouissance. Žižek's most radical reading of the sinthome is, as he says, an extimate "element clinging on like a kind of parasite and 'spoiling the game,'" paralleling Lacan's vulgar description of Joyce's "little scrap of a dick" as a parasite (Žižek 2005: 85; Lacan 2016: 7). Despite the sinthome's parasitism, though, its perpetuity is imperative for the subject's survival: a loss of the symptom, Žižek says, is "the end of the world" (Žižek 2008: 85, 81). In Žižek's use of the word "parasite" and its disentangling from this empty, terrifying void of the end of the world, the sinthome reveals its profound *disconnect* from the real. For Lacan, the sinthome's role is to cut off—like a protuberance—the parasitism of the "real of jouissance" such that the sinthome's suture is a prospective, being-affirming one; Žižek rightly notes that the sinthome mediates the unmitigated, parasitic relation of the subject to the unconscious in pure phallic jouissance (Lacan 2016: 58, 43-44). The intimacy of the movement from A to $\$ \diamond D$ and then to $S(\bar{A})$ is, as we saw, an expression of the cut that the relation of the real and symbolic—perhaps $R \diamond S$ —transmits. Lacan indeed notes in Seminar VII that The cut of the real is a dangerous (real) emptiness for the subject whose impossibility is in fact a benefit for the subject; it is, then, the place of the sinthome to quilt (in a Žižekian fashion) the dangerousness of the real of $\$ \diamond D$ (Lacan 1992: 73, 129).

While the remainder of the domesticated jouissance in the sutured sinthome still “causes a great deal of trouble,” as Žižek says, its imaginary function allows the suturing of the otherwise catastrophic (Žižek 2008: 85). This imaginary element is precisely why Žižek attempts to unify the sinthome and $\$ \diamond D$, a unification which requires the arbitrary addition of the imaginary to a pure real-symbolic relation. The priority Žižek gives to Meaning as the S-I space cannot help but be inundated with the real given the sinthome’s relation to all three registers: as such, he must add the downward movement of $\$ \diamond D$ (in its real-ness) to the purely S-I/meaning of the flow of desire up from the third into the fourth graph. Given the *priority* of the movement $desire \rightarrow \$ \diamond a \rightarrow S(\mathcal{A})$, though, this downward movement is merely supplementary; always subordinated to the unifying power of the sinthome-as-identification, sinthome-as-quilting-point, the real is thus stripped of the force it otherwise holds. As in Žižek’s discussion of failed interpellation, fantasy’s failure via ‘*Che vuoi?*’ evinces the Other’s contradictory desire, itself the product of original desire. Despite the small addition of the sinthome’s function here, the movement remains the same in his reading of the third graph. Žižek’s attempt to unify $\$ \diamond D$ and the sinthome, then, continues his movement up the graphs to obscure the fundamental connection between $\$ \diamond D$ and $S(\mathcal{A})$, perhaps *the* central feature of the completed graph.



Žižek and Benjamin

The real-traumatic kernel discovered at the heart of the completed graph of desire—or, for Žižek, the third graph—is, Žižek writes, found at the zone between two deaths, the zone of the sublime object, of *das Ding* (150). This place, though around which “the symbolic network is articulated, is itself outside signification: the place of the Thing, then, is retroactively produced by that very process of symbolization, and in this recognizing the possibility of the “global annihilation” of the symbolic network is realized as the possibility of a “second death,” the destruction of the *cycle* of symbolization itself (150-151). For Žižek, there was only one point in the history of Marxist philosophy where this “non-historical ‘ex-timate’ kernel of history” was recognized as such: Walter Benjamin’s *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (151). For Žižek, this second death is synonymous with the Freudian death drive, and in the *Theses* this death drive—and especially the repetition compulsion—was paired with historical reflection “as its zero degree” (151). Here, then, Žižek carries the conclusions reached in his interpretations of the graphs into the overtly historico-political realm, and here our critique follows.

Just as in the first graph, though now influenced by his conclusions from the completed graph, Žižek’s discussion of diachrony and synchrony arises as his central misreading. Benjamin’s genius, Žižek writes, is in recognizing the “moment of discontinuity, of rupture” as a suspension of movement which reveals the “signifier’s synchrony, the synchronization of the past with the present,” the connection to Benjamin’s introduction of theology as the outside-time (151, 157). It is, Žižek writes, the Benjaminian “tiger’s leap into the past” that shows that the revolution indeed “comes from the future [and] was already in itself pregnant with the open dimension of the future” (158). What Žižek does not connect, though, is the quilting point, perhaps the ultimate diachronically synchronic moment. Showing he must have read Lacan, Benjamin writes: “The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again” (1968: 255). For Lacan, using almost identical iconography, it is this play of the signifiers, “the structure of all unconscious formations,” that “lights up with its flash...the subject’s division from himself” (Lacan 2006: 712-713). This flash is always perilously confronted for Benjamin: conformism always threatens to overpower the tradition that flashes in an instant, a

threat that determines the retroactively prospective character of the flash (Benjamin 1968: 255). Lacan writes similarly that “[the unconscious] is an entrance one can only reach just as it closes,” such that understanding the unconscious (and its) ruptures requires us to see it as it seals to understand retroactively what was unsealed, what is not sealed (Lacan 2006: 711). The quilting point, then, is both the process of quilting and the quilting of the recognition of danger—that is, it is evinced in the cut and *is saved* via the quilting, a point antithetical to the ideological quilting ostensibly dominant.

In Benjamin, then, the arrest of the “flow of thoughts” is the irruption of the real, not the conclusion or the breaking-through of the flow (which is indeed impossible); a short divergence into Hegel, a central figure for both Benjamin and Žižek, will clarify this (Benjamin 1968: 262). Žižek, despite his Hegelianism, frequently leaves the processual nature of the real aside and instead repeatedly emphasizes the *success* (even as failure, in the Hegelian fashion) of the traversing of the fantasy which reveals its ephemerality: as he says, those “who have already gone through the fantasy” via the *successful* subtraction of “the illusion [from] the illusion itself” can see that “there is nothing to see behind it” (Žižek 2008: 222). He repeatedly references the state of being—not the *process* of coming to being—of being “behind the phenomenal veil,” “behind the curtain,” and “beyond the phenomenal appearance,” all suggesting a temporal “end” state (219-222).² Despite his recognition of the Lacanian position that the real is found in writing, in the process of forging significations, and in the play of the signifiers, all of which would be consonant with a proper Benjaminian reading, Žižek’s fantasy-focused theory of ideological (success-)failure must drop the top-most arrow of the graph of desire and its inherently processual nature; the process for Žižek is only important insofar as it teleologically projects the traversal as always-already present.

Žižek affirmatively quotes Hegel saying that “behind the so-called curtain which is supposed to conceal the inner world, there is nothing to be seen unless *we* go behind it ourselves” such that, as Žižek says, “there is nothing behind the curtain except the subject who has already gone beyond it” (Hegel 1977: 103; Žižek 2008: 223). What Žižek does not quote from this same paragraph of the *Phenomenology*, though, is that this truth of appearance “is itself only a result of a complex movement whereby the modes of consciousness ‘meaning’, perceiving, and the Understanding, vanish...”

(Žižek 2008: 103). Reading this via the completed Lacanian graph extends Hegel and reaches a more radical conclusion: the vanishing of the three functions mirrors the vanishing (reemergence) of the subject and demand in $\$ \diamond D$, and thus the movement (as the top arrow) is the result-as-movement which reveals the truth, not the result-of-movement as the result; all of this, indeed, is found in Benjamin.

As in our discussion of the third graph, it is in these flashes and cuts—the play of witticisms and of signifiers—where the always-already present cut of the unconscious and of the subject manifest, and thus the quilting point. Benjamin notes an almost identical example: spiritual things, he writes, “manifest themselves in the struggle as courage, humor, cunning, and fortitude. They have the retroactive force and will constantly call in question every victory, past and present, of the rulers” (Benjamin 1968: 254-255). They are a cut, like the Freudian joke and the Lacanian play of signifiers, which reveals the structure of the unconscious that exists supratemporally; in this, then, the past is quilted in its meaning and can be retroactively rewritten in the light of the cut. If we agree with Žižek that, for Benjamin, theology “designates here the agency of the signifier,” then we can recognize the Benjaminian cut in the Lacanian play of signifiers that holds within it the Messianic redemptive moment, the revolutionary moment (Žižek 2008: 152; Benjamin 1968: 263). The cut that reveals the cut of the subject, then, contains the capacity for a revolutionary recognition of the cut in the Other, the $S(\mathcal{A})$; the “retroactive force,” as Benjamin says, “will constantly call in question” the unity of the Other and its omnipotence (Benjamin 1968: 255). The rupture of the diachronic is thus the unity of the diachronic in the “full” synchronic, retroactively prospective rupture of the real; in the dialectical unity of movement and moment, the rupture of the revolutionary vision as quilting point, the quilting point as process emerges. It is in this synchronic quilting mo(ve)ment where the subject reemerges—for Benjamin, the authentically historical subject. For the Lacanian subject, “his cause is the signifier” of diachronic synchronicity, “without which there would be no *subject in the real*” (italics mine); the signifier-as-cause lifts the subject into the supratemporality of theology that allows such prospective retroaction (Lacan 2006: 708). The signifier of synchrony in the Benjaminian sense thus unites the subject in the real in the irruption of the real. In making “history explode” in this movement, as Benjamin says in Thesis XV,

a retroactive and prospective quilting occurs which is itself radically open, a radical (un)quilting to oppose the oppressive quilting of homogenous, empty time—or, Žižek’s quilting (Benjamin 1968: 261).³ Despite Žižek’s repeated emphasis on the tiger’s leap, a failure to recognize the specifically Benjaminian usages of the cut, synchrony/diachrony, and the process condemn his quilting point to a perpetually oppressive existence.

Perhaps the most famous of the *Theses*, Thesis XV, occurs directly after the thesis on the tiger’s leap that Žižek so emphasizes, yet it receives no mention in *Sublime Object*—precisely, one could say, because of the revolutionary quilting point it evinces. Benjamin writes that the revolutionary classes during “the moment of their action” were aware that they were “about to make the continuum of history explode” in a revolution that, crucially, was to introduce a new calendar (Benjamin 1968: 261). The clocks in Paris in the July Revolution, Benjamin describes, were shot at to “stop the day,” to arrest the sliding of signification via a quilting point, and to simultaneously introduce a new time (262). In their stead a new calendar was created, “a historical timelapse camera,” wherein the same day “keeps recurring in the guise of holidays, which are days of remembrance” (261). In this creation, then, a determinate negation, is simultaneously the retroaction of memory: the perfect unity of the retroactive and prospective in the quilting point. The calendar registers a type of time unknown to the formalization and domination of clock-time; it is, instead, a filled-out now time of the “moments of a historical consciousness” (262). While the historicist repressively equalizes all time, like a clock, the historical materialist defines the present as when “time stands still and has come to a stop” in its full presence (262). This stop is indeed constructed as much as it is organic: “Thinking,” Benjamin says, when done correctly by the historical materialist, “involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well” (262). This arrest, like the arrest of the day via the destruction of the clocks, involves a dual shock: the shock of the arrest and the shock that the arrest confers upon the configuration abruptly stopped (261-262). In this dual shock, Benjamin says, a monad crystallizes, a structure wherein the historical materialist “recognizes a sign of a Messianic cessation, or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past” (263). The dual shock of the monad, *a quilting of rupture and a rupture of quilting*, now extends into the ability of the historical materialist to use the shock to

“blast” time out of the “homogenous course of history,” and, in doing, so, rescue it at the moment of greatest danger (263). In this, Benjamin writes, the piece of history is sublated into the “entire course of history,” a whole which at the same time contains all the filled-out moments of the particulars in “an enormous abridgement” (262-263).

Benjamin thus goes far beyond what Žižek claims he does; the connection to death drive apotheosizes the departure and indeed the unity of Lacan and Benjamin contra Žižek. For Žižek, quite rightly, the Benjaminian redemption is a repetition and unfolding into the symbolic, not a mere return of the repressed; this is the connection Žižek draws between the death drive and Benjamin (2008: 154).⁴ The tiger’s leap, Žižek writes, “announces the compulsion to repeat” in this filled-out time insofar as, for Freud, the unconscious is outside time (156). The point, though, as is obvious in Benjamin’s own words, is deeper than what Žižek allows. For Lacan, the repetition compulsion of the death drive indeed exists in all drives (or *the* drive): drive itself, Lacan writes, “is profoundly a death drive” (Lacan 1977: 205). The drive, then, pursues its own end (as extinction) in the object, and it goes beyond the otherwise defined boundaries of the pleasure principle to the excess of *jouissance*. In this compulsion to repeat that perpetually circles and goes beyond, the real of *jouissance* is then evinced insofar as the drive itself is an expression of it; this, after all, is the very same connection drawn between $\$ \diamond D$ and $S(\mathcal{A})$ much earlier. Insofar as this repetition—and, by extension, connection from $\$ \diamond D$ and $S(\mathcal{A})$ —is outside time (as Žižek himself notes), it takes the same form of the quilting point: the repetition is itself the mo(ve)ment of quilting that creates and evinces the always-already present cut. The departure from Žižek’s quilting point, then, could not be more radical; in saving the quilting point, we also save the redemptive mo(ve)ment.

Conclusion

Benjamin’s quilting point, then, is the radical quilting point of the top-most arrow of the graph of desire. In failing to extend the cut far enough, downplaying the dialectic of synchrony and diachrony, focusing only on the role of fantasy in the upper graph, and mistakenly identifying $\$ \diamond D$ with the *sinthome*, Žižek’s quilting point is condemned to the oppressive closing that his critique of ideology ostensibly has as its

principle foe. What Žižek gains in explanatory power in his reading is indeed lost by the oversimplification of the completed graph that creates numerous downstream problems in his reading of Benjamin (and his reading of the graphs writ large). Though, as Lacan says, the matheme $\$ \diamond a$ is “designed to allow for a hundred and one different readings,” the one Žižek offers disallows a rescuing of the ruptural power of the quilting point at the Benjaminian “moment of danger” when its potential to become yet another tool of closing is at its highest (Lacan 2006: 691; Benjamin 1968: 255). This, we could say, is what falls (out) from Žižek’s reading; in proper Žižekian fashion, we then end with a joke:

At an art exhibition in Moscow, there is a picture showing Nadezhda Krupskaya, Lenin’s wife, in bed with a young member of the Komsomol. The title of the picture is ‘Lenin in Warsaw.’ A bewildered visitor asks a guide: ‘But where is Lenin?’ The guide replies quietly and with dignity: ‘Lenin is in Warsaw.’ (Žižek 2008: 178).

Notes

1. Fink notes that Lacan complicates this homology in Seminar XX, but Žižek himself writes that there is a “deep affinity” between Φ and $S(\bar{A})$ —in the former’s relation to evincing the lack in the latter—insofar as (barred) Woman, Lacan writes, has a relation with both (Fink 2004: 125; Lacan 1998: 81; Žižek 1995). The famous Seminar XX triangle, then, does not endanger the endorsement of the three rings and their intersections; the difference between the triangle as *direction* and the rings as *intersection* creates the altered depictions of their in- between (e.g., *objet a* for $J\Phi$) (1998: 91, 95). Žižek’s relation to “meaning” and the sinthome means one cannot read *Sublime Object* through Seminar XX or the triangle.
2. Žižek has said that he does not distinguish enough between Jacques-Alain Miller’s “appearance” and “phenomenon”: the “appearance of something” that can be looked behind and an appearance “behind which there is nothing,” respectively (2012). The problem of the Žižekian nothing-beyond, though, remains.
3. Benjamin famously contrasts homogenous, empty time and filled-out, now time, a term meaning “present” but also “nunc stans,” the divine’s eternal time (Benjamin 1968: 261). While empty time oppressively crushes the nonidentical, now time is radically open to the past and its mo(ve)ments. To leave the past “as it is” is to taint it, while to “brush history against its grain” in a historical materialist reinscription leaves it radically open and entirely filled; this is, after all, the Benjaminian tiger’s leap that

derives from Marx's springing of the lion (Benjamin 1968: 255, 261; Marx 1843).

4. For Žižek, Lacan's first period (thus Seminar 1) emphasized analysis as a process of symbolizing the "non-symbolized imaginary elements of the history of the subject" (Žižek 2008: 147). The end of analysis, then, was "when the subject is able to narrate to the Other his own history in continuity," a purely retroactive suturing of the previously unsymbolized (147). Benjamin's position transcends this quilting point; reducing it to suturing misses his point entirely.

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