

## Embracing the Paradox: Žižek's Illogical Logic

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In her masterful work on comedy, *The Odd One In*, Alenka Zupancic refers to the Möbius strip to grasp the illogical logic of the joke. As a topological shape, the strip's twist produces the paradox of a single surface with two sides, which offers a parallel to the way a joke short circuits two mutually excluding realities. As she reminds us it was Lacan, following Freud, who realized how the joke can disrupt our orientations in the Symbolic by revealing the gap, the Real at its core. In Seminar X he writes, "In playing with the signifier man brings into question, at any moment, his world, all the way to its very roots. The value of the joke...is its possibility to play on the fundamental non-sense of all usage of sense" (qtd. in Zupancic 142). Moreover, according to Zupancic, a tendentious joke would be a way of uttering an obscene truth about a fundamental ambiguity of our world with the help of different content-related indecencies (144-45).

It is Slavoj Žižek who readily recognizes this power and play of the joke to disturb and in rare contingent moments, call into question our world to its very roots. In response to our predicament today where politically correct language is employed in order to preclude any utterance that might belie an underlying racism, Žižek prefers to take a racist joke (for example about the fantastical myth of black males' endowment),

and use it to form an “obscene solidarity” (in this case with a black man). It is, as he admits, a risky gamble, filled with potential misfires, but, when accomplished successfully, Žižek maintains that the joke in a singular gesture can de-politicize and even a-politicize the issue of racism itself (Rasumussen unpaginated). Thus, whereas we might say that Lacan preferred to play with the ambiguity of the Symbolic through the pun, Žižek enjoys the joke, and especially the obscene or dirty joke. As he sees it, humor can reverse meanings and depoliticize the political in a kind of “dialectical double reversal.” What Žižek refers to here is how the joke functions only because of a constituent ambiguity which plays upon the space between the dualities of truth and appearance, surface and depth; the tendentious joke can short circuit these realms by exposing how they overlap in a suprising way.<sup>1</sup> With this, he can unveil how the language of Political Correctness functions as its opposite, as another form of white liberalism, and simultaneously use this liberalism against itself. He writes: “Blacks confess to me that they secretly despise this kind of white liberalism [of PC language]. What’s the trick? Humor. It’s a kind of dialectical double reversal. And this is when they really admit you. That somehow you can return to the worst starting point, racist jokes, and so on, but they function no longer as racist, but as a kind of obscene solidarity” (Rasumussen unpaginated). It is no surprise then that the tendentious joke is found throughout Žižek’s works, for its use demonstrates the logic of the Moebius strip, and the moment when a Law’s power is really only countered by an act or a joke that goes beyond transgression itself to re-frame political coordinates someplace else.

So, while both Lacan and Žižek are interested in re-configuring the contingent encounter with the Real of our symbolic universe, the former sought experiences in the play and power of words (especially in the writing of James Joyce) and in the puzzling of topologies (the strings, rings and knots), while the latter looks for ways to short circuit the parallax gap of the Real in whatever manifestation it is formulated, from ontology and the unconscious, to humor, and sexuality. In this essay I consider Žižek’s configuration of ontology as construed through a parallax view, which further allows me to posit that his many tendentious examples and humor enact the logic of Hegel’s concrete universality, while making explicit Lacan’s paradox of the subject. The grand reversal of the short circuit requires that one conceive of being not by assuming normality, but by assuming being as a mistake. In Žižek’s words, “...it is not only that what we experience as material reality is the perversion/inversion of the true ideal order; reality emerges in so far as it gets inverted in itself, runs amok” (Copjec 1996:1). The shift from Lacan to

Žižek, then, is one from the identification of the *sinthome* to the short circuiting of the Lacanian subject. If Lacan would have us never give way as to our desire, Žižek maintains that we must fully assume the paradox of our existence: “the uncanny abyss of freedom without any ontological guarantee in the Order of Being” (2006:93).

Žižek’s articulation of ontology, then, begins with a Hegelian commitment to reversing the standard notion of Reason, of detecting the madness that inheres at its core, and he envisions the Real as “the disavowed X on account of which our vision of reality is anamorphically distorted....it has no substantial destiny in itself, it is just a gap between two points of perspective” (2006: 26). It is through a parallax view of phenomena that Žižek aspires to reveal that there is no untainted reality that escapes a kind of enframing; indeed, the two points of perspective mentioned above really unfold as a perspective and what eludes it, and this bears on his notion of ontology. By changing (reframing) the view of an X, one also changes the ontology of that X, or in Žižek’s words, “once introduced, the gap between reality and appearance is thus immediately complicated, reflected-into-itself once we get a glimpse, through the Frame, of the Other Dimension, reality itself turns into appearance. In other words, things do not simply appear, they appear to appear” (2006: 29).

How we, as subjects, orient ourselves in this paradoxical universe is what Žižek’s theoretical work is consumed with, and there are many inherent deadlocks that must be short-circuited along the way. Yet, these short-circuits, as Žižek calls them, do not offer solutions to the paradox of the subject, what they propose to do instead is to expose “the implicit, tacit prohibitions on which these universes rely” (2006: 12-13). Žižek, more than any other thinker today makes use of a paradoxical logic that at every turn reveals its own illogic, and in the process, everything gets reversed (inverted): causality, temporality, reason, and being itself. Ultimately, Žižek follows not only in the tradition of the German Idealist philosophers and Lacanian psychoanalysis, but also the legacy of Kurt Gödel whose Incompleteness Theorems opened the world of mathematical logic into impossible possibles. Through his endless examples and short-circuits, Žižek demonstrates that anything we can think of in terms of locating and defining a universal truth, a universal ethic, complete rationality, etc. must necessarily be accessed by way of particular contingent pathways; the universe of the subject, therefore must necessarily be incomplete.<sup>2</sup>

Much like Žižek’s combination of the concrete (everyday examples) with high theory, Gödel devised an ingenious coding system that collapsed metasyntactical and

mathematical sentences, which allowed him to talk about the formal system of arithmetic *and* make arithmetical statements at the same time. Gödel proved that there are true propositions that are not provable; that a system cannot be both consistent and complete. With his proofs he “co-opted the very structure of self-referential paradoxes...and reshapes that structure to its own ends” (Goldstein 2005:163). Similarly, Žižek’s many examples and analyses are also conveying something about the system (of his logic itself). What concerns Žižek is how the subject is allowed to circumnavigate the inherent and constitutive paradox of itself; how it must necessarily remain not-All and undecidable. The mistake, however, would be to reduce his many examples and analyses to something other than his “proper philosophical stance,” which has as its goal the reframing of our questions about being, ethics, and reality. That is, the examples used to illustrate Lacanian concepts and Hegelian philosophy are not meant merely as formal categories, but rather they are performative; they are meant to reveal how our sometimes horrifying enjoyment is configured in the paradoxical lack/excess of our being. Like Gödel’s coding system, Žižek’s countless examples are his way of “proving” (and our only pathway into) his grander paradoxical logic.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, this essay is meant to counter one of the most serious criticisms leveled against Žižek by Judith Butler and others, which is that the use of examples to explicate the lack/excess of the Real precludes him from saying anything evaluative about particular cases themselves (Butler 2000: 310). Such a criticism is voiced by Richard Stamp in his essay *Our Friend Žižek: On The Fright of Real Tears* (2003), when he accuses Žižek of not being able to offer anything substantive about specific and particular examples themselves. Instead, there is, Stamp claims, an “abstract, empty, non-specific relation between form (example) and content (theory), akin to that of ‘allegory’” (2003: unpaginated). What I hope to convince the reader of here, however, is that Žižek’s examples, if we understand them in their connection to his theory, are meant to change our orientation to the reality we think surrounds us and they open up a space for a critique of universals that emerge out of the particular cases themselves.

First, it is crucial to understand that the reversals Žižek undertakes are not simply reversals between two different and opposing phenomena, but rather reversals of asymmetrical similarities. It is the ability to see, for example, that in the statement  $A = A$ , the same letter appears but in two different locations. Thus, to Žižek, one term serves as the internal limit of the other and a deadlock occurs whereby its solution must also necessarily emerge from within. The death drive, for example becomes both a deadlock

of undead life and its own solution to a finite life; drive becomes “the solution” of (the passage through) endless desire. This logic of configuring reality through a parallax view puts Žižek’s philosophy in between two traditions of thought that deal with paradox, the Platonists who conceive of numbers, for example, as independently existing “out there,” whether we can reveal them or not, and the formalists who see numbers only as constructs of human minds. Instead, Žižek’s logic would have us see that numbers only exist when the subject emerges (along with its constitutive void) to enframe them retroactively as such. It is the temporality of the subject that allows them to take on their properties; subjects cause numbers to come into being retroactively and then they emerge as always having been and as going on into infinity. Lacan was already aware of this when he conceived of the not-whole of feminine ethics. In Seminar XX he writes: “...as we know from the extension of [intuitionist] mathematical logic...to posit a ‘there exists’, one must also be able to construct it, that is, know how to find where that existence is” (1998:103).

Temporality is conceptualized by Žižek through a similar inversion; that is, eternity only emerges from within our temporal experience, or at its most radical, time itself can be conceived as a “resolution of a deadlock of eternity” (2006:30-31). Žižek’s intricate discussions of the “loop of freedom” and “the gap of causality” invert conceptions of linear time and free will (as opposed to determinism); that is, the subject retroactively posits the “causes” of its own existence, and freedom is also posited retroactively, in that the subject does not select from an ontological openness of infinite possibilities, but rather chooses in retrospect the “necessities that will determine itself.” In other words, in the choices the subject makes in her contingent life-world, therein will she designate the necessities that will have determined and caused her being.<sup>4</sup> Contingency, as distinct from accident or fate, “points toward the more radical level of deploying the potentials of the universal dimension itself” (2006: 79).

As Žižek reveals in Astra Taylor’s documentary (*Žižek!* 2004), the name for this going to the end (of the condition of being human) is called love, however, this love is not to be mistaken for a tender passion, but is rather configured as something diabolical, something that torments the subject and derails her at every turn. So, Žižek’s many ethical heroes, from Roark in *The Fountainhead* to Antigone and Medea, have in some way managed to reconfigure the very terms used to define and delimit love as such. Although their acts appear monstrous to the rest of us, they did nothing less than reframe the contours of the subject’s universe anew. However, the key to locating

authentic acts (of love) is to keep in mind that what changes is not something in “reality,” but rather the view of the subject in its parallax shift in terms of the defining parameters of love. I offer Julianne Moore’s character Lauara in Stephan Daldry’s film *The Hours* as the exemplar here, because she is a loving mother who freely and paradoxically chooses to give up her children because she “has no choice.” Instead of finding a way to be a good 1950s housewife, Laura abandoned her two children and husband to live a life alone. Much later in life while attending the funeral of her grown son, she attempts to explain what she did and ends up contradicting herself. She explains that she has no regret because “how can you have regret when there was **no choice?**” Yet in the next utterance she explains also that what she did revealed what she could and “could not bear.” She states: “it [family life] was death; I **chose** life.” Her choice/non-choice reveals that her act was singular and with it she reframed the parallax gap at the point of deadlock. In a contingent moment one does something because the questions of duty, necessity, morality, etc., are not consulted, calculated, or pondered. Žižek reminds us, however, that these subjects assume full responsibility for their Acts, although not for the Act’s consequences; they are responsible in the sense that they can never go back, e.g. they do not enter the realm of regret, but they take the penalty, whatever that might be: self-sacrifice, solitude, sacrifice of loved ones, etc.

If we apply Žižek’s logic in the controversial case of Mary Kay Letourneau, the 34 year-old teacher who fell in love with her 12 year-old student, we can see that with this act Letourneau entered a non-pathological domain which made her behavior very difficult to place. The detractors and medical experts at her trial who labeled her either as a pedophile or as bipolar missed the crucial point that her lover was no longer a child to her; instead, despite his age, he transcended the category itself by becoming her soul-mate and the father of her children. The price she paid for her authentic act was a 7 year prison term, but she remained true to her desire in the Lacanian sense. The love she held for her student was much different than the pedophile whose sexual excitement is aroused **because of** the age of the love object; rather, to Letourneau, age as such was not an issue, and remained outside of her considerations altogether. Letourneau, like Žižek’s depiction of Melville’s Bartleby in *The Parallax View*, was not concerned to fight for her cause (deferring to the experts at her trial who claimed she was mentally ill), and she had no interest in fighting for the right to love pubescent boys or to counter the Law’s punishment of her (similarly to Antigone); instead, her “choice” to transgress the law repeatedly was for the sake of a “pure love,” as she labeled it. Both Laura and

Letourneau's acts, like those of countless others, emerge in the dimension of the impossible and serve to reframe love as a passion that lies in-between what we take to be pathological and "normal," outside the limits of the Law, despite the Law's punishment.

In his many writings on the theme, Žižek puts St. Paul in this category, because he reframes love not as a Duty, but as something that goes beyond the structure of the Law and transgression itself. And in doing so he reconfigures the way "interpellation" both sustains and reframes itself. In *The Puppet and the Dwarf* Žižek writes:

What we find in Paul is a commitment, an engaged position of struggle, an uncanny 'interpellation' beyond ideological interpellation, an interpellation which suspends the performative force of the 'normal' ideological interpellation that compels us to accept our determinate place within the sociosymbolic edifice....  
(112)

St. Paul posits a love outside of not only the Law, but its obscene underside as well, thus reconfiguring what we take to be pathological motivations for loving. This autopoiesis of the subject in a new coordinate is the hallmark of Žižek's ethical hero and conveys the logic of his analysis of one of his favorite films, *The Fountainhead*.<sup>5</sup> In this film, the self-driven architect Howard Roark (Gary Cooper) reframes desire inside of no-desire, an impossible possible. Roark and the aloof Dominique Francon (Patricia Neal) experience a passionate love, which at first appears as just another variation of endless desire, since the obstacles put up to it are the work of the hysteric's (Dominique's) desire to keep desire itself alive; however, the love that appears here is not tormented by endless desire or even a trade-off between vocation and life (as in Kieslowki's films). Rather, Roark's desire/drive to create (for no one's acceptance or approval) does not come before Dominique, and she learns that she must give up the prioritizing itself in order to be with him. Roark tells her that until she does, they may have to live separately for several years, while she enters a loveless marriage with someone else. As time passes, she longs for Roark, but he feels no such void; he does not act so as to pursue her, instead, he is driven to keep working until (if ever) Dominique comes to realize her pathway into the love relation. In the end when they finally do marry, it is a rare moment when drive and desire come to co-exist. Dominique sacrifices all (even the notion of

sacrifice itself), and is thrilled to be Roark's wife, while Roark, who is without lack, literally and figuratively, rises to the top of architectural world.

Žižek's preference for this filmic depiction of Rand's proto-fascist work further offers us a clue as to how he conceives of Lacan's ethics. If time takes on the notion of infinity in retrospect, as a kind of resolution to the deadlock of infinity itself, and causality adheres to no first cause, then ethics as well can only be accessed in the particular openings of contingency. After considering the connection between Kant's ethics and Sade's acts, Žižek concludes: "instead of simply applying a universal category to a particular object or of subsuming this object under an already given universal determination, I as it were invent its universal-necessary-obligatory dimension and thereby elevate this particular-contingent object (act) to the dignity of the ethical Thing" (1998: unpaginated). In carefully tracing Žižek's contribution to the ethical debate of Kant and Sade we find him ending up on neither side (that is, he sees neither the Kantian in Sade nor the Sadean in Kant); what we find instead is Žižek's conclusion that Sade is the symptom of Kant's failure to take his own discovery to its ultimate and paradoxical end. Kant's ethics opened up the notion of the abyss of terrifying freedom, but he disavowed this by clinging to the notion of radical (pathological) evil. Žižek takes us further into the analysis by overcoming a deadlock that Lacan confronted when he considered whether Sade's acts were or were not in accord with the jouissance of transgressing a Law. The dilemma is nicely stated by Lorenzo Chiesa as either: the Jouissance of the Law (Kant) or the Law of Jouissance (Sade); however, what Žižek presents is the realization that the law is already excessive and not itself a universal.<sup>6</sup> With this, he unveils the inherent ambiguity of pure desire and drive, of diabolical evil and its inherent diabolical good. Žižek repeatedly offers religious and other examples, such as our desire that Christ be sacrificed, or God's desire for man to Fall, to choose evil, or Hannibal Lecter's *quid pro quo* with Clarice Starling in *The Silence of the Lambs*, all in order to illustrate this ambiguity of diabolical evil, however, a more persuasive example, I argue, is found in David Fincher's film *Seven*. Here, the serial killer John Doe (Kevin Spacey) includes himself in his diabolical evil; that is, his duty is to kill only those people who commit the seven deadly sins, including himself as the final sinner (of envy). The question of jouissance occurs here and becomes impossible to distinguish from Duty. In the police car on the way to the final murder scene where John Doe has killed and beheaded the wife of Detective Mills (Brad Pitt), Detective Somerset (Morgan Freeman) points out that Doe seemed to enjoy the torture itself, even if he was only



doing what he was “chosen” to do by a higher power. And John Doe replies, “I won’t deny my own personal pleasure, to turn each sin against the sinner,” thus revealing that his own (pathological) *jouissance* was in accord with his duty or ethic of his (non-pathological) evil. While this at first appears to be a case of perversion, for he becomes an instrument of an Other’s enjoyment, his Act in the end mirrors that of Bess’s (Emily Watson) in Lars von Trier’s *Breaking the Waves*, for like John Doe, her “psychotic” self-sacrifice also left ambiguous her role in saving her beloved husband Jan, in her duty (to God) to do good.

Up to this point the paradoxical structure of Žižek’s thought allows us to invert our orientation to conceptions of causality, temporality, freedom, and evil. However, if we take this logic to its limits, it would have to be labeled as the logic of illogic or, inversely, the illogic of logic. Žižek himself is well aware that everything Lacan conceived necessarily revolved around tautologies. In the special interviews section of Astra Taylor’s film, Žižek admits that Lacanian terms are immersed in tautology, yet he continues to engage these many circularities because he holds that it is only by conceiving of them through actual examples (thought experiments, film analyses, cultural critiques, etc.) that we can grasp them, giving them theoretical content again and again; in this way we can reframe the excess, and our orientation to the enjoyment found therein. For example, if we consider how to define and grasp the term “ideology,” Žižek provides countless examples of how this very term is always-already inscribed within illusions of how it exists outside of these very illusions. He refers to the shark in the film *Jaws*, and to the fabrication of the political spectrum of right and left, as well as to the more cynical (appearance) of distance from the capitalist system of many academics who teach their students to critique capitalism while partaking in the business of the academy itself.<sup>7</sup> Any one of these examples allows us to grasp at once that we have gotten to the “essence” of ideology, but also that we’ve avoided doing precisely this. It is in this sense that Žižek is not interested in pinning down what ideology exactly is, but rather in revealing, through example, the way fantasy structures our belief that reality can be pinned down as such.

Embracing any Žižekian paradox, then, would seem to have only one requirement, and that is to accept that: “There is no ‘deeper meaning’ beneath the contingency of events, it is, on the contrary meaning itself which designates the way a finite subject is able to cope with the unbearable contingency of the ‘way of all flesh’” (2001:101). The best (and perhaps only) prescription to come out of this logic is

illustrated in David Cronenberg's 1999 film *eXistenZ*. In answer to the question of the point of playing endless variations of a seemingly endless virtual reality game, Allegra Geller (Jennifer Jason-Leigh) replies with the tautology that the goal of the game is simply "to beat the game," "to get ahead of the game." But since the game is based on the interaction of the players' unconscious, the game-playing becomes a circular and repetitious movement, forever missing its aim, encircling "it" without ultimate fulfillment, conclusion or closure. Yet paradoxically it is in the playing wherein anything, even the redrawing of what's possible, can happen. Paradoxes by their very definition do not offer solutions, and in this regard, Žižek puts them to their ultimate use, which is to aid us in short circuiting two incongruent dimensions, and which in turn allows us in certain contingent moments to reframe our perspective and thus our very reality.

Yet, if a universal is only accessed through a particular contingent act, then one could ask: wouldn't any universal therein conceived also be just another particular? And the reverse could be posed as well; that is, do not all particulars always-already also become so many universals? How do we delimit one from another, or, in other words, how is a contingent act (choice, decision) that launches a retroactive universal ethic and the symbolic dimension itself, recognized as such? This is precisely what Richard Stamp asks in his critique of Žižek's use of Kieslowski's films in the service of theorizing the Real. He claims that in a move of disavowal Žižek's reference to Kieslowski's sentiment regarding "real tears," omits a small but crucial term. He writes:

Given the ontological weight to be carried by this notion of 'real tears', it should be noted that when Žižek cites this passage the word 'those' goes missing. In his rendition, the two key lines from the passage are given as: 'But now I've got glycerine. I'm frightened of real tears.' (72) This elision of a deictic adjective -- '\*those\* real tears' -- is doubtless accidental, but it is nonetheless revealing. For Žižek, everything comes down to 'the Real' in the final analysis, in so far as it names that fundamental lack/surplus that structures the field of the intelligible and the interpretable: i.e. the impossibility of saying everything, or of accounting completely for reality, that is in fact absolutely necessary to knowing something in the first place....the Real is what 'really' names this logic of the lack/surplus, irrespective of context or history. There can be only '\*the\* Real, not 'this' or 'that', so the question of the contingency of '\*those\* real tears' cannot be addressed. (2003: unpaginated)

It would seem that Žižek's concern with the structure of inverting (reversing) the asymmetrical similarity (of reality's masks one from another) comes up upon the limit of addressing any particular contingent act's meaning with the notions that try and label it

as either this (evil, pathological, rational, etc.) or that. I would argue, however, that the disavowal that Stamp locates is not on the side of Žižek, but on Stamp's side of the structuring of logic that attaches itself to Reason only, without recognizing the madness that inheres within. To say something/anything about "those" real tears would be to participate in their political/ideological definitions and offer only one among countless opinions or observations of same. However, to grasp the Real at the core of the symbolic as the site of the inherent lack/surplus is to recognize the not-All that inheres in the totalizing system itself. The examples reveal how the structural paradox frames our orientation to any ideological claim, and as such Stamp misses the crucial importance of what Žižek's theorizing (through examples) unveils for us; like other critics, Stamp fails to understand that Žižek's use of examples is not merely to illustrate abstract terms, but, more literally, to put the examples into practice. "One practices concrete universality by confronting a universality with its 'unbearable' example" (2006:13). Žižek's choice of selecting the most unsettling even shocking examples, including analyses of pornography, Viagra and laxatives alongside lofty Hegelian and Lacanian concepts, enacts this very "concrete universality" itself.<sup>8</sup>

In order to grasp the logic at play here, we need to say more about the inherent paradox of the mutually constitutive yet antagonistic universal and contingent-particular, which emerges directly out of Lacan's discussion of the not-All of feminine ethics in Seminar XX. That is, whereas masculine ethics presents an exception which is a structural component of the (universal) whole, feminine ethics reveals that the structure itself is not-All encompassing. Paradoxically, although the system includes everything, there is something within the system that contains an ambiguous element and that serves to undermine it, something singular that occurs in a performative gesture enacted in a contingent moment of encountering an excess. As Anna Kornbluh reveals in her analysis of Kantian and mathematical (e.g. logical) antinomies, with the mathematical antinomy "both of these formations (universal and particular) are merely different tactics for the same task: the point of fundamental convergence between the universal and the particular occurs in their mutual foreclosure of the abject [singular] true opposite" (McGowan and Kunkle:139). To employ the mathematical antinomy calls forth a double negation of both the universal and particular by way of the singular (third) proposition, where an inversion is completed. This inversion follows the paradox that nothing is outside the system, but nonetheless the system is not All-encompassing, it generates something ambiguous that serves simultaneously to undermine it.

To illustrate this we can use Žižek's commentary on the justification of current uses of torture. One can, Žižek argues, commit a singular act without either deliberation or specifying it as a universal, in order, paradoxically, to retain the universal **and** sustain the act outside of this very universal. This would yield the following, according to mathematical formulations of negation and Žižek's logic:

- Universal: All torture is not acceptable
- Particular: There is a case where torture is acceptable if it saves lives
- Singular: I commit torture in this instance, but remain horrified at my own act, since there is no torture that is outside the universal of being not acceptable.

In this way, as Žižek writes, "I do *not* elevate this desperate choice into a universal principle. In the unavoidable brutal urgency of the moment, I should simply *do it*. But it cannot become an acceptable standard...[for] when torture becomes just another in the list of counterterrorism techniques, all sense of horror is lost" (2007a: unpaginated). What's key here is the sense of what can be included in the notion of a desperate (as opposed to common) act; an act that is not treated as an exclusion that sustains the universal, for it occurs also outside of that universal. This is in stark contrast to the way the Bush administration goes to great and covert lengths to either outsource torture or obtain legal sanctioning of its ambiguous use of terror in certain instances, because in Žižek's logic, the singular act remains ambiguous, impossible to be clearly delineated; it is an abject concretization of a universal rather than a particular case that is either excluded from it or secretly and hypocritically sanctioned by authority.<sup>9</sup>

Still another way of getting at this inherent paradox is to see how any structure/system affords us only a "forced choice"; that is, to express support or opposition, to abide by or transgress, to love or hate, etc. A subject's singular act exposes the choice itself as forced and creates an inherent loophole or dimension where neither resistance nor support, but a third "singular" way out (from inside) can undermine the setup of the "forced choice" itself. Bartleby did this with his "no"; Sethe in *Beloved* did this by killing the thing (her child) she treasured most; Roark in *The Fountainhead* did this by destroying his own creation, St. Paul did this with his configuration of Love beyond the Law (beyond duty, reward or punishment); Lenin did this by forming a non-socialist vanguard party, Israeli reservists did this when they refused to serve in the

Occupied Territories, and so on. In this way, these subjects, entering a domain of subjective destitution, also opened a way to emerge under new coordinates vis-a-vis the inherent paradox of being. A true atheist, according to Žižek (as he refers to Brecht's insight) "does not choose atheism; for him, the question itself becomes irrelevant...."(2006: 97). To designate one's self as an avowed atheist is of interest mainly to the believer; to the atheist the question as such doesn't exist. Likewise, Žižek's ethical heroes act outside the parameters of a forced choice; they act as if their "choice" is not even a choice.

Not all contingent encounters lead to an authentic act of a subject's singularity, although they all arise in the confrontation with an excess. It is how that subject acts in that particular contingent moment that will determine the stakes for what's possible. It is the Lacanian singularity of the subject and the idea that there is indeed a turn in the Möbius strip that becomes crucial here. Thus, Žižek's very theorizing theorizes against such a move that Stamp attempts to laudably make, and instead, posits that a minimal distance (between a something and a nothing), is what allows the subject to emerge only within a distorted (mistaken) universe.

This logic becomes most clear when in *The Parallax View* Žižek discusses the ways we are forced to enjoy the excess, the meaningless remainders of commodities (things without their substance), for example de-cafeinated coffee or sex without bodies. One of the insights he offers is that in our postmodern world the economy of porn replaces that of seduction; and similarly the femme fatale of neo-noir directly reduces her hapless male victim to a sexual commodity, in stark contrast to her classic noir counterpart. Something "drops out" of the scene that once was present, and as such we are oriented to the drives (as a kind of solution to endless desires). In terms of psychoanalysis today, with subjects that are interpassive, who demand rather than desire, and a politics that is caught up in the delimiting and micro-managing of jouissance, there is the dropping out of the unconscious itself (a dimension necessary to contain our fundamental fantasy, as that which we can never fully know). The usual things that mediate us to ourselves are changing, and this includes, as Žižek reveals, the simulacra of illusions of digitalized worlds over the symbolic virtual fictions of traditional media, for example. What we get with these new configurations is not a new subject, but a subject which is subject to new drives, to a kind of superego injunction to enjoy (a long healthy life, for example), wherein there is a conflation of perversion and "the normal," of pain and masochistic pleasure, etc.

In response, Žižek calls for a new social order which would allow for the subject's reframing of duty and the jouissance of the drive; a new "imbalance" between the lack and the excess wherein enjoyment is found. "A sociopolitical transformation that would entail the restructuring of the entire field of the relations between the public Law and its obscene supplement" (2006:308). In that perversion is no longer subversive and the shocking excesses are now part of the system, Žižek considers if a "solution" might be found through a synthesis of two asymmetrical characters, the Lynchean "straight" man (the farmer Alvin Straight in the film *The Straight Story*, who drives a lawnmower across the midwest to see his dying brother), and Patricia Highsmith's psychotic yet rational Tom Ripley. What we have here according to Žižek, is an unexpected opposition between "the weirdness of the thoroughly ethical stance and the monstrous 'normality' of the thoroughly unethical stance" or the "Lynchean 'straight man who pursues his goal with the cunning resourcefulness of Tom Ripley" (2001:148). While this sentiment appears comically disturbing to us, Žižek is seriously proposing that the solution to our predicament might lie in the strangest, seemingly most "evil" of characters, someone who could provide the separation (once again) between the something and the nothing and re-mark, delimit anew, the "normal" from the "weird," and thus create the symbolic dimension anew.<sup>10</sup>

And this is precisely the illogical logic that underpins Žižek's prognosis of and prescription for our time in his latest work, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (2008). Here, especially in his final chapter, Žižek enumerates a list of impossible possibles that may serve as our best chance of surviving all that threatens our complete extinction at the End of History, from ecosystem collapse to ethical upheavals caused by techno-scientific developments, and from the loss of our belief in what we know to be true, to new forms of apartheid that blur the boundaries between the excluded and included in global capitalism. Using figures such as Che Guevara and Martin Heidegger (whose efforts were nothing but failures, but therein lay their paradoxical success as well), Žižek enjoins us to be ruthless about our quest for equality; to combine the opposites of egalitarianism (and trust) with terror in an impossible union; to voluntarily engage in large-scale collective decisions as well as agree to inform on each other when there are violations. If this were to happen, our orientation to the death drive itself would be reconfigured, since jouissance would no longer come from an excess that is generated by the Law. Rather, we would be on the other side of this universe and, according to Žižek's logic, we would get there by assuming that our demise has already happened.

Only after doing this could we engage in large-scale measures to produce a collective will to ensure egalitarian justice, which would include the unthinkable (informants and punishments). This assumption that the worst has already happened collapses the linearity of history and enfolds the future into the present, which reconfigures all possible pasts. As Žižek relates, there is a tipping point of no return, when we cannot go back and save ourselves; and this tipping point can only be seen when it is already too late. What is required is, again, the unthinkable coincidence of two sides of a coin: of Ripley and Alvin Straight, of virtual reality not in opposition to reality, but inherent in it; of the supernatural in the natural; of the inhuman already in the human.

And here, Žižek reverses the seeming opposition between the Law and transgression by recognizing yet again that necessity is itself subject to an act that takes place in a contingent moment. “The very elevation of a necessity into the structuring principle of the contingent field of multiplicity is a contingent act” (2008: 46, fn 40). As such, and since today transgression is more and more inscribed in the Law itself, a true reversal would require a shift whereby we go from a society in which “the Law rules -- in the guise of permanent transgression – to a society in which transgression rules – in the guise of a new Law” (2008: 44). The transformation is accomplished by a shift of internal proportions, and not through the trading of opposites. It is the logic of the reconfiguration of the two-dimensional image of the face and the vase or the turn in the three-dimensional Möbius strip – a reconfiguration of the internal limits that inhere in the dualities of contours and content, of essence and Being, of substance and subject, and especially as elaborated in Žižek’s *In Defense of Lost Causes*, the ontic and ontology.<sup>11</sup>

When we try and take stock of where Žižek’s theorizing has brought us in terms of Lacanian psychoanalysis, we can offer a few tentative observations. First, of course, is the difference between Lacan’s commitment to the clinical field, to the enclosed space and connection between the analyst and the analysand. In contrast, but true to his chosen path, Žižek finds that the psychoanalytical experience can be had by finding it in so many aspects of film in particular. His writings are filled with countless parallels between filmic presentations of an analysis and what happens inside a professional space of same. To name but a few, there is the elaborate explanation of the “fuck-me” scene of Bobby Peru (Willem Dafoe’s) in Lynch’s *Wild at Heart* and his analysis of *Lost Highway*, both of which mirror the traversal of fantasy in psychoanalysis, as well as the comparison of both Christ and Hannibal Lecter to the Lacanian analyst.<sup>12</sup> However, the

more significant contribution of Žižek's occurs in the reversal of our everyday experience of "reality," and the notion that a single paradoxical and contingent, encounter and ethical "choice" can recreate the universe (of the subject) anew. Alexander Leupin is right to recognize that "Lacan's profound originality" was to try and formalize the inconsistencies of the unconscious (2004:34), while those around him, like Bertrand Russell, were trying to formalize consistency instead. As Leupin writes, the "linking of the impossibility of scientific suture and the incompleteness of truth is Lacan's central contribution to epistemology" (2004:54). Žižek is less interested in a rigorous formalization of concepts; he is, rather, committed to embracing the logic of the paradox; to exposing that what we take as consciousness itself emerges, especially in the tradition of German Idealist philosophy, at the moment when something has gone terribly wrong. Thus it is also a moment of autopoiesis, when the subject's most defining act (of freedom) becomes entirely inaccessible to it and is treated as imposed, necessary; in this way, according to Žižek, "Self-consciousness itself is radically Unconscious" (2006: 246).

Lacan was a psychoanalyst who sought the space and interconnection between realms; thus the creation and original labeling of his own analytical fields, such as *topologie*, *linguistique*, and *mathemes*, etc. He did, however, aspire to submit his concepts and theory to the rigors of science, but in a way so as to show the very limits of science itself, to designate his work as a science of the Real. As Andrew Cutrofello offers in his analysis of the ontological status of Lacan's mathematical paradigms, there is an inherent paradox in Lacan's efforts to study something like *Finnegans Wake* by way of scientific and mathematical rigor; "the moral of this story is that if psychoanalysis aspires to the condition of mathematical formalization, we should not expect to be able to say whether the results will more closely resemble mathematics or poetry" (2002:143).<sup>13</sup>

Žižek takes us on a very different pathway from poetic reformulations of mathematical rigor. What he does is something more akin to what Kurt Gödel did for logic with his Incompleteness theorems. As Rebecca Goldstein relates, one of the strange and beautiful things about Gödel's proof was "the way in which paradox itself was incorporated into the very structure of the proof" (2005:164). To condense down the crucial import of Gödel's work, he in essence revealed an impossible possible; that is, he revealed that "it is impossible to formally prove the consistency of a system of arithmetic within that system of arithmetic" (162), or, in other words, he showed that "the syntactic



features of formal systems...can't capture all the truths about the system, including the truth of its own consistency" (164). Something always necessarily remains that eludes capture in a formal system itself. Likewise, what Žižek's humor, countless examples, and thought experiments all do for us is to reveal again and again how the symbolic is at once an impossible (indeterminate) yet necessary dimension, and further, how ethical acts serve to reframe our reality and the experience of the Real at its core. The trade-off of being a Žižekian is that one must necessarily give up attachments to concrete definitions and meanings, and instead focus on the paradoxes themselves, on the impossible inversion, such as: the coincidence of lack and excess, the pure desire (of drive), the notion of the death drive as both deadlock and solution to the finite life of the flesh. We must come to see that madness is not in opposition to Reason, but is Reason run amok; that the opposite of pleasure is not pain, but frustration, and that the subject is never more horrifyingly free than when it is about to disintegrate. To be able to reframe one's orientation, to combine Hegel's lack-in-being with Lacan's structural paradox of the subject is to have access, if only for a destabilizing moment, to something impossible. Žižek's dark vision of the universe, of being, and of the abyss of freedom all come from the tradition of German Idealist philosophy, but he applies this philosophy very uniquely to the present-day conditions of the Lacanian subject.

Whereas Lacan's private *jouissance* (his experience of the death drive), especially at the end of his life, was to enter the speechless world of the paradoxical topology of strings, rings, and knots, Žižek's *jouissance* is derived from endless theorizing wherein he conducts masterful reversals (inversions) and short circuits between perspectives of "reality" including: religion, opera, cognitive science, film, politics, pornography, cyberspace, and much more. As per his engagement with Hegel, Schelling, and Kant, the notion of freedom must come with a certain amount of terror; diabolical evil comes with its inherent good, and feminine ethics can only be seen as monstrous. To think such thoughts and apprehend the universe itself as such a dark and foreboding place, to consider that Reason might be the ultimate madness, would seemingly threaten to catapult one squarely into the dimension of psychosis. Yet, Žižek, like Lacan before him, and like Freud before him, realizes that normality is really just a special form of psychosis.

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<sup>1</sup> In Zupancic's meticulous analysis, she illustrates persuasively this paradoxical structure of the joke. In contrast to tragedy, she writes, "Comedy always materializes and gives a body to what can otherwise appear as an unspeakable, infinite Mystery of the other scene....in comedy we are usually surprised by things and events that we, at least roughly, expect" (2008 210).

<sup>2</sup>

Alexandre Leupin explores the parallels between Godel's theorems and Lacan's epistemology in *Lacan Today*, noting that Lacan demonstrated that the subject of science cannot be conceived of as complete or whole, but rather "is open to an arbitrary decision or divided by the ultimate non-unity of its fields. In other words, the impossibility of completeness underlines the fact that the subject of science cannot be 'sutured'...in an entirely rational fashion..." (53).

<sup>3</sup> In the Preface to *The Žižek Reader* Žižek states this and makes clear his own personal ethic and preferences, for example, his avowed Marxism, and his adherence to the "emancipatory pathos of universal Truth," but he necessarily must refrain from defending these as ultimate truths for he is himself a paradoxical Lacanian subject; the most he can do is to theorize according to his own theory.

<sup>4</sup> For an elaboration on this see Žižek's chapter "The Loop of Freedom" in *The Parallax View*, especially pages 203-205.

<sup>5</sup> For an extensive discussion of this concept as applied to the Lacanian subject see Žižek's Chapter 14 "Of Cells and Selves" in *The Žižek Reader*.

<sup>6</sup> See Žižek's discussion of Chiesa's thesis, "Imaginary, Symbolic and Real Otherness: The Lacanian Subject and His Vicissitudes," (2004), on page 92 of *The Parallax View*.

<sup>7</sup> For the discussion of *Jaws* see Rex Butler's *Slavoj Žižek: Live Theory* (44-47); for the political spectrum comment see Astra Taylor's documentary *Žižek!*; and for the reference to American academicians and their students, see Tony Myers, *Slavoj Žižek* (64).

<sup>8</sup> In the first several pages of *The Parallax View*, Žižek offers an extensive listing of shockingly explicit sexual practices in order to reveal that sexuality is the "domain of 'spurious infinity' whose logic, brought to an extreme, cannot but engender tasteless excesses...." He ends by stating that "for a true philosopher, there are more interesting things in the world than sex" (13). Žižek is well aware what effect this passage has on the reader. But the sobering statement at the end, that elevates philosophical thought, has the same effect that Bobby Peru's move in Lynch's *Wild at Heart* has when it exposes the underlying fantasy of Lula (Laura Dern). That is, Žižek is telling us that what "accounts for the weird...character of this exercise....is the short circuit between two spheres which are usually perceived as incompatible, as moving at ontologically different levels: that of the sublime philosophical speculation and that of the details of sexual practices" (13). Thus, the essence of the "exercise," demonstrates that his short circuits work the same way the unveiling of fantasy does.

<sup>9</sup> In his work *In Defense of Lost Causes*, Žižek discusses in detail the way an "inhuman" ethics short circuits the singularity and universality. He writes: "The most difficult thing for common understanding is to grasp this speculative-dialectical reversal of the singularity of the subject qua Neighbor-Thing into universality, not standard 'general' universality, but universal singularity, the universality grounded in the subjective singularity extracted from all particular properties, a kind of direct short circuit between the singular and the universal, bypassing the particular" (pp. 16-17).

<sup>10</sup> A striking depiction of this dilemma occurs in the Coen Brothers' film *No Country for Old Men* (2007). What the main character Anton (Javier Bardem) presents is the uncertainty, the deadlock of a subject destitute of all enjoyment; he is a character that works unwittingly to force a minimal distance between a something (Duty) and a nothing (unpredictable chance). That is, at first we find in him a radically evil subject driven to kill anyone who comes between him and his money, according to his Duty, his Word, without a trace of jouissance. However, at several unexpected moments, he randomly forces his victims to call the flip of the coin in order to possibly escape their death. He becomes in these moments a passive agent of chance, but far from being an altruistic act, this serves to give meaning to his ethics, his Duty itself, in the same way that Medea's meaningless act of murder became "a signifier-turned-object, a signifier reduced to an inert stain that stands for the collapse of the symbolic order itself" (Žižek, 2006: 365 and 384). It is this very inhuman dimension, according to Žižek, that is the ultimate support for Lacan's feminine ethics; since humankind signals already an excess, emerging itself as a mistake, the way to conceive of ethics itself is to confront in various ways, "the latent monstrosity of being human..." (Žižek 2007b: unpaginated).

<sup>11</sup> This is perhaps the most difficult idea for Žižek to articulate: how do we find passion inside of administration; how do we acknowledge our belief in what we know without undermining the role of the unconscious and its requirement of not-knowing it all? How is masculine ethics always-already enframed by the not-all of feminine ethics? These are some

of the questions that confront the implacable paradox of his illogical logic.

<sup>12</sup> See *The Parallax View* (69-70 and 99) and *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime* (18).

<sup>13</sup> Yet, as Elisabeth Roudinescu writes, Lacan's last years found him (while in the throes of serious illness), in a desperate and "psychotic" attempt to find a "region of mystical ecstasy outside of time..." He sought a "logic freed of the constraints of time and history" (371-72). The Žižekian response to Roudinescu's portrayal of Lacan would be that it is not entirely clear whether his illness (and paranoia of same) was a cause or effect of his conception of the paradoxical dimension of subject and the Real at its core; that is, perhaps his illness was a necessary element of his very discoveries. Further, one could see that Lacan might have shifted from theorizing and teaching to experiencing the "other side" of the signifier as pure jouissance, a non-pathological pure desire.