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## Who Needs Yalom When We Have Žižek?

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### Introduction

The great popularity of Slavoj Žižek's work for most of his readers undeniably falls into one of two arenas. There are those who enjoy Žižek's take on popular culture: films, books, music and the obscene joke, as well as the more 'serious' works of literature, plays and opera. This audience of Žižek's, however, is not as critical of him as those who take issue with his politics. While some who are interested in the political aspect of Žižekian thought paint him in a positive light (e.g., Dean), it is far more common for commentators on Žižek's politics and social theory to be highly critical of his effort: the collection of essays in *The Truth of Žižek* (Bowman et. al.) being only the most recent example. It is to this negative reception to Žižekian social, political and historical thought that this paper is addressed.

In direct contrast to the view that there is 'no theoretical system as such in Žižek's work' (Parker, 115), this paper seeks to show that beneath the sheer enjoyment of reading Žižek's writing on Western culture and his seemingly incongruent take on social, political and ideological questions, there lies a consistent, logical framework. Any incongruence one perceives in Žižek's writing is the result of a deficient understanding of that logic and thus the key to understanding Žižek's thought in these areas must be first undertaken at the theoretical level, but not exclusively so, since it is only through the example that the theory itself is properly articulated. We thus propose to show Žižek's logical consistency and coherency of thought through a discussion and

exposition of some of his major notions, while attempting to apply them to a 'real world' example of a social formation, that of group psychotherapy.<sup>1</sup>

In this way, we also aim to show that it is through the use of homology that Žižek is ultimately able to move from a psychoanalytic logic that 'properly' pertains to individual life experience to the social and political realm, and we attempt to do this via the application of this logic to the 'controlled' environment of the psychotherapeutic group which could be conceived of as a rudimentary approximation of society at large. This controlled environment, being much smaller and well-defined<sup>2</sup>, lends itself to the isolation and clarification of logical, constitutive moments more readily than if society as a whole were examined.<sup>3</sup> The theoretical core of the Žižekian project lies in a Lacanian reading of Hegelian dialectical methodology, which Žižek ultimately uses as the basis for a critique of ideology, contributing to the Marxist tradition of thought. We find a sustained discussion of this theoretical core in his earliest works, specifically in the final chapter of *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, entitled 'Not Only as *Substance*, but Also as *Subject*,' and that book's sequel, *For They Know Not What They Do*, the latter of which 'is a book of theoretical work' (*For They*, xi, italics in original). It is to these two works we now turn and to which will form the framework of our discussion throughout.

## **The Kantian Sublime**

The Kantian Thing-in-itself (*Ding an sich*) is transcendent, trans-phenomenal and strictly ontic. It is that part of the ontic – of 'inner-worldly' entities – that must fall out from the ontological horizon if that ontological horizon is to constitute itself. That is, the Thing-in-itself must fail to appear if the ontological difference is to occur. (*For They*, 219) In simpler terms, there is an insurmountable gap between inner-worldly, empirical, sensuous objects and the Thing-in-itself, and no empirical object or representation thereof can adequately represent the Thing. But for Kant, the sublime is an object in which we can experience this insurmountable gap, this very impossibility, this permanent failure of any object to represent the Thing. With such an object, we thus have at least a 'negative' representation of the Thing, one that gives a presentiment of it and delimits it as such. (*Sublime*, 203) This object provides us with a thought of 'Yes, It *is* out there!' So while it is not possible to represent the Thing within the domain of phenomena, what we can do is represent this very impossibility. The conversion is thus one from 'the impossibility of presentation into the presentation of impossibility.' (*For They*, 144)

A sublime object thus simultaneously evokes in us a feeling of pleasure and displeasure since it is pleasurable to realize that even though this object fails in its adequacy to the Thing (thus evoking displeasure), it does, at least, indicate the greatness of the Thing, surpassing every possible, empirical experience. In other words, our very judgment of the inadequacy of the sublime object evokes in us pleasure, an enthusiasm and this enthusiasm is a purely negative

representation. (*Sublime*, 204) For Kant, the insurmountable gap between phenomena and the Thing-in-itself is abolished in a negative way, since the phenomenon's failure to represent the Thing in an adequate manner is inscribed in the phenomenon itself. Hegel's criticism of Kant in no way provides a direct, positive representation of the Thing-in-itself. Rather, he retains in its entirety Kant's notion of the experience of the sublime, while simply removing its 'transcendent presupposition – the presupposition that this experience indicates, in a negative way, some transcendent Thing-in-itself persisting in its positivity beyond it.' (*Sublime*, 206) What Hegel reproaches Kant with is determining the Thing on the basis of a representation. That is, in Hegelian terms, Kant remains in an 'external reflection' of the Thing, as we shall see below.

Hegel's Thing-in-itself is nothing but this displeasurable experience of the radical inadequacy of all phenomena to the Thing-in-itself. For Hegel, there is nothing beyond the representational field, beyond phenomenality. The 'negative experience of the Thing' (which for both Kant and Hegel indicates the Thing in a negative way) converts into the 'experience of the Thing-in-itself as radical negativity' (for Hegel alone). (*Sublime*, 206) For Žižek, Hegel thus would have us limiting our understanding of the experience of the sublime to what is strictly immanent to this experience, to the negative self-relationship of the representation. This means that Kant's transcendent Thing-in-itself as a positive entity is non-existent, that the 'sublime is an object whose positive body is just an embodiment of Nothing...an object which, by its very inadequacy, "gives body" to the absolute negativity of the Idea.' (*Sublime*, 206)

How can we apply Žižek's understanding of Hegel and Kant's notion of the sublime to the social setting of a psychotherapeutic group? We can consider the group members a subject, who, once in the group, collectively can be seen to be asking themselves questions such as 'What are we doing here? What are we here to accomplish? What is this all about, anyway?' – in short, 'What is the Thing of the Group?' Any answer to this question put forward will usually fail to satisfy all the members, or at the very least, fail in the sense of raising still more questions about the nature of the group. And it is precisely this failure that gives the members a negative representation of what the group truly is and how it works – frustrating and ultimately ungraspable as it may be, at least the members can take a satisfaction in trusting that the answers are 'actually out there.' This (Kantian external) reflection of the group on its own questions is nicely demonstrated from Yalom himself, our theorist of the group process, in the very first line of his book, in which he asks himself whether group therapy helps clients. He answers an emphatic 'Indeed it does' (1) and goes on to delineate exactly how it does for much of the remainder of the book, although confessing a few pages later that '[s]till, I do not consider these conclusions definitive, rather I offer them as provisional guidelines... [f]or my part, I am satisfied... that they constitute the basis of an effective approach to therapy.' (4) The very failure of arriving at a completely adequate approach provides the negative proof of the Group-Thing's existence.

Hegel, of course, would accept all this, with the proviso that the presupposition of the Group-Thing existing in its positivity in some Beyond is removed. His gesture would have the group

members 'stop' on the negative, frustrating experience of reaching for the Group-Thing and have them experience the Group-Thing as precisely this pure negativity, this negative self-relationship of the representation. That is, the sublime object of the group is an object which, by its very inadequacy, embodies the absolute negativity of the Group-Thing-Idea so that the 'it' in the 'Indeed it does' is nothing but a positive form of the ultimate failure in approaching it, an object which occupies the place, filling out the empty place of the Thing as the Void, as the pure Nothing of absolute negativity. And this is precisely what must be grasped by the group. In short, Hegel would urge the group and its members to accomplish the passage from external reflection to 'determinate reflection' and it is to Hegel's logic of reflection we now turn.

### **Hegel's Logic of Reflection**

It was said above that Kant's (and our group's) thinking remains stuck in an external reflection. What this means more precisely is that 'essence' (what can be thought of as homologous to Lacanian subjectivity or alternatively, to the group's effort/activity) presupposes itself as its own other; that is, essence presupposes itself in the form of an immediacy as something objectively given in advance, in the form of an externality. This is why the reflection is 'external.' essence presupposes itself in the inverse-alienated form of some transcendent entity, excluded from the movement of reflection. (*Sublime*, 225, 227) From this point, how does one move to a determinate reflection?

Before answering this question, we must ask a logically prior question: how does one ever get to an external reflection? After all, the premise of positing reflection (the first in the triad of positing-external-determinate) is that 'every given positive content can be "mediated," reduced to something "posited," recuperated by reflective activity.' (*Indivisible*, 51) Reflection at this level designates the simple relation between appearance and essence, where the former 'reflects' the latter. So that essence, as the power of absolute negativity and opposed to appearance, mediates-sublates-posites every positive immediacy, making it 'mere appearance.' (*Sublime*, 227) So, with regard to its presuppositions, there is nothing that is not previously posited by the activity of positing reflection. Again, how does the reflecting subject come to believe that some substantial content (the Thing) is lost for him when there was no such content to be lost previous to this experience of loss? Žižek answers that '[i]n order to "forget" (or to "lose") something, one must first forget that there is nothing to forget: this oblivion makes possible the illusion that there *is* something to forget in the first place.' (*For They*, 60, italics in original) Another way of saying this is that the very form of activity of 'positing the presuppositions' (i.e., positing reflection) *is* that very 'nothing' that is not previously posited by its activity; in other words, the 'positing of presuppositions' finds its limitation in the feminine, non-all Lacanian logic<sup>4</sup> and this 'nothing' is precisely what Lacan calls the Real. (*Tarrying*, 128)

To reiterate, what eludes the power of positing reflection is itself, its own act and once

reflection is aware of this inherent limitation to its activity, it reverts to immediacy – its own act is misperceived necessarily in a ‘reified form, as the In-itself of an external presupposition.’

(*Indivisible*, 51) And Hegel accomplishes the move to determinate reflection by simply assuming the identity of the reflective activity with its immediate In-itself. In *The Parallax View* (46), Žižek quotes from Hegel’s *Science of Logic*:

“[essence] presupposes itself and the sublating of this presupposition is essence itself; conversely, this sublating of its presupposition is the presupposition itself. Reflection therefore finds *before it* an immediate which it transcends and from which it is the return. But this return is only the presupposing of what reflection finds before it. What is thus found only *comes to be* through being *left behind*; its immediacy is sublating immediacy... For the presupposition of the return-into-self – that from which essence *comes, and is* only as this return – is only in the return itself.” (italics in original)

For Žižek, this is Hegel’s crucial insight and it is critical to understand if we want to grasp Žižek’s logical framework: the very initial immediacy that positing reflection overlooks (and, in some sense, *is*) and that which external reflection presupposes as a substantial entity prior to and external to its activity, ‘is always-already “posited” retroactively, so that its emergence *coincides with its loss.*’ (*For They*, 167, italics in original)

The Kantian (externally reflective) subject who attempts to grasp the suprasensible Idea-Thing (when viewing, say, the spectacular vista of the Grand Canyon), does not experience how his very reflective activity entails the loss of the object’s immediate, full presence; how the object is mortified, lost ‘as such,’ dissected by means of reflective categories so that what he retains is just a dead abstraction. Once he does experience how the sublime object in its immediate, pre-reflective given ‘only comes to be through being left behind,’ he moves into a determinate reflection, which realizes not the reappropriation of the lost object in its full presence that would annul the insurmountable gap between the sensuous world and the Thing, but rather how that gap was always-already there. That is to say, the subject now experiences how he never had what he believed he lost; he experiences that loss in a way precedes what is being lost. This is Hegelian ‘loss of the loss,’ (*For They*, 168) logically homologous to the concept which is one of the Lacanian definitions of anxiety. (Harari, xxxi) The externally reflecting subject engages in his activity of attempting to grasp the ungraspable in an effort to avoid the anxiety-provoking experience of how ‘the very act of reflection as failed constitutes retroactively that which eludes it.’ (*For They*, 86)

The interpersonal psychotherapeutic group can likewise be seen as a positing entity, engaged in a pursuit of the Group-Thing, overlooking how its very failing activity of delineating its contours is retroactively constitutive. Yalom himself seems to have an impression of this, yet still clearly holds onto an externally reflective understanding of matters: ‘It has been my impression that whether a group jells is only partly related to the competence or efforts of the therapist or to the number of “good” members in the group. To a degree, the critical variable is some as yet unclear blending of the members.’ (Yalom, 270) His perhaps optimistic belief, at some future date, of being able to provide a definition of a positive representation of the Group-Thing aside, we can ask what

the logic of reflection has to say regarding the structural role of the therapist. In a word: the therapist is treated as if he is the Thing, or more accurately, he is the sublime object of and for the group. This will become clearer when we discuss Lacan's logic of the signifier and the Hegelian conception of the Monarch. For now, we can make the common sense observation that if the therapist does not arrive for the group meeting, there is no group. This is not true for any other group member, for the group with missing members can function satisfactorily for its allotted time that week provided there is present a group member with the title 'therapist' that starts and ends the session at the appropriate times.

Following Žižek (and Hegel), we could term the therapist the 'reflective determination' of the group, since the therapist is that unique group member who embodies again - gives positive form to - the very movement of sublation of all positivity (the activity/effort of the group as a whole). (*Sublime*, 215) That is to say, determinate reflection involves a redoubling movement in which a reflection-into-itself occurs of the simple, positing reflection.<sup>5</sup> In this way, the group becomes a consistent field totalized by the therapist's exceptional position, and this exceptional position is critical: ' "Everything can be mediated," sublated in its immediacy and posited as an ideal moment of rational totality – on condition that this very power of absolute mediation is embodied anew in the form of its opposite; of an inert, non-rational residue of natural immediacy.' (*For They*, 85) The group could not form itself as the positing, therapeutic group entity that it is were it not for the therapist's role as that inert immediacy – a role that is 'non-rational' in the sense that one therapist is as good as another. So it is not surprising that Yalom only deals with the six-month therapist turnover rate that is common practice in groups in only two short paragraphs. (Yalom, 388) Although he does underline the group members' concern over such transitions of leadership, devoting less than one-tenth of one percent of his book to this issue is telling: it is the occupation of the *structural* position of the therapist that is the crucial factor for the cohesiveness of the group.

In these terms, what would it entail for the group to achieve determinate reflection? Žižek is critical of the Feuerbachian gesture of recognizing God (the Thing) as an alien essence - as being nothing but the alienated image of man's creative potential. For it does not take into account the necessity of the redoubled reflection, 'for this reflexive relationship between God and man to reflect itself *into God himself*.'<sup>6</sup> This means that while it is 'important that the group begin to assume responsibility for its own functioning' (129), which Yalom argues is accomplished through the individual members taking a personal responsibility in their interactions amongst themselves (129, 229), this is far from enough. Rather, the group must recognize that the substantial Thing it attempts to grasp has already effectively split and engendered the group activity, embodied in the form of the therapist. The group members can 'assume responsibility for its own functioning,' can recognize itself as its own work, only by reflecting free subjectivity into the very group at the point of the therapist, for the therapist is precisely that point at which a group of contingent individuals are effectively changed into a group. In precise language, the group effectively posits its presuppositions by presupposing/reflecting itself in them as positing. (*Sublime*, 229) The condition

of the group's positing, of its subjective freedom, is that it must be reflected in advance into the substantial group itself, as its own reflective determination. (*Sublime*, 230) Once the group experiences this, it has reached determinate reflection and has fully assumed responsibility for itself.

### Lacan's Logic of the Signifier

With both the Kantian notion of the sublime and the Hegelian external reflection, we 'start out' from a position of Being, of something to be attained, and end up experiencing how this Being is 'a nothing in the form of something' when reaching a determinate reflection of this Being (*For They*, 53) Hegelian dialectics is thus not an ultimate insight into the existence of some all-encompassing Unity, of a One which contains, mediates and sublates all differences, nor an absolute relativity that would be consistent with a belief in some Great Multitude. Rather, Hegel endeavors to think the split of One into Two, of a cleaving of the One from within, not into two parts. The split is not between two halves, somehow existing together on the same plane, but between Something and Nothing, between the One and the Void of its place. (*For They*, xxvi) So the existence of the One of the Thing, of Being, is not simply 'false,' to be opposed to its ontological companion, Nothingness. The One is self-identical with the void, of nothingness as its very kernel. To grasp the Hegelian dialectical process properly, we have to shift our perspective of dialectics from an ontological one (which takes place within the 'thing itself') to an epistemological one (which reveals the logic of our cognition of reality). (*For They*, xcvi) By doing so, it becomes apparent that this void – the Lacanian subject – is that gap/vanishing mediator that not only initially sets the dialectical process in motion, but also acts as the very space within which that process takes place. It is through the logic of the signifier that the subject is most clearly defined.

What exactly is a signifier? Lacan gives us a simple enough definition: 'the signifier represents the subject for another signifier.' (*For They*, 171-2) Yet in a first reading, it seems rather tautological and does not seem to tell us much. Yet here lies the precise point: differentiability does not involve two distinct species held apart on the same plane, defined by their common genus. Rather, the presence of one term, of a signifier, is the same as saying its opposite is absent. Žižek writes that 'the opposite of one term, of its *presence*, is not immediately the other term but the *absence* of the first term, the *void* at the place of its inscription (the void which *coincides* with its place of inscription) and the presence of the other, opposite, term *fills out* this void of the first term's absence.' (*For They*, 22, italics in original) A signifier is that which appears against the background of its possible absence, representing or embodying its possible absence, and assuming positive existence in the presence of its opposite. So in Lacan's definition of the signifier, the two signifiers are differentially related via a third term, the void of their possible absence. The differentiability of the signifier expresses its Lacanian non-all logic: 'there is no signifier which does not represent the subject' does not mean that all signifiers can represent the subject (completely, without remainder),

as would be the case in some universal judgment. Rather, it means that the subject is split, forever preventing us from conceiving the subject as a Whole, as one would do in ego-psychology.

However, just as with the 'positing of presuppositions,' this process is potentially never ending: if for some signifier, another signifier represents for this first signifier the void of its possible absence, its lack or the subject, what represents the subject for this second signifier? Still another signifier. Every signifier entertains a particular series of relationships with other signifiers and the process soon begins to spiral into what Hegel might call a 'bad infinity.' In order to achieve an understanding of the Master-Signifier, Žižek has us examine Marx's development of his conception of value in *Capital*. (*For They*, 23) The Simple form of value is equivalent to the Lacanian definition of the signifier: for commodity A, commodity B appears as its expression of value. The second form is a simple expansion of the first, where, like the signifier, equivalences are multiplied: for commodity A, the series of commodities B, C, D, and E appear as its expression of value. What is important to note is that there is a radical contradiction between use-value and (exchange-)value (as there is between a signifier and its void-place of inscription), so that the first term of each must be posited as a dyad. Just as a commodity can express its (exchange-)value only in the use-value of another commodity, a signifier's void-place of inscription – the subject – can only be represented in the presence of another signifier. In the Expanded form, the subject 'is simultaneously represented and not represented since at this level, something remains concealed in the relationship to this same signifier.' (Lacan, quoted in *For They*, 24) We should immediately recognize this oscillation between representation and non-representation, the ultimate failure of the subject's signifying representation, as being homologous to the failure we discussed above in regards to the representation of the Thing. The Kantian subject that is engaged in an external reflection of the Thing and the group (or group theorist) that searches for an adequate representation of the Group-Thing-Idea both fail, for the Substance they engage with ultimately reveals itself to be Subject. This should become more clear below.

To achieve the General form of the value/signifier, an inversion or movement of double reflection of the Expanded form must be accomplished so that we obtain the following: 'commodity A gives expression to the value of all other commodities' and likewise, 'a signifier represents the subject for all the other signifiers.' This Master-Signifier is not on the same level as all the other signifiers and is thus not the finally found, proper representative/signifier of the subject. It is a 'reflective' signifier in the sense that the very impossibility of finding a properly signifying representation of the subject is reflected into this representation itself. Homologous to Kant's inversion of the lack of representation (of the Thing) into the representation of that lack, we have here the reflective inversion of a lack of a signifier (of the subject) into the signifier of the lack. This logic makes a totality out of a contingent group:

'[A]ll signifiers represent the subject for the signifier which in advance represents for them their own failure and is precisely as such – as the representation of the failure of representation – "closer" to the subject than all the others (since the Lacanian "subject of the

signifier” is not a positive, substantial entity persisting outside the series of its representation: it coincides with its own impossibility; it “is” nothing but the void opened up by the failure of its representations).’ (*For They*, 25)

What this implies is that the General form itself can be inverted into: ‘one signifier for which all the other signifiers represent the subject,’ so that we have not only ‘one for all the others’ but ‘all the others for the one’ as well. (*For They*, 26)

The logic of how the Master-Signifier comes to totalize ‘any of the others’ into ‘all the others’ is illustrated through the process of how a contingent multitude of individuals come to identify themselves as a cohesive group. ‘Group’ or ‘interpersonal existential psychotherapy’ or ‘the thing we do here between 5 and 7 pm each Thursday’ can be thought of as a Master-Signifier. It is that signifier that ‘quilts’ all the other signifiers into a unified whole, and the paradox is that it does so by representing the very failure of the group’s multiple attempts at signifying itself. It is not a signifier that is given in advance and that everyone has agreed to work with (this would be the understanding of external reflection, that there is some immediate, substantial entity prior to the very activity of reflection). Rather, the group’s very failing effort to signify itself, to define what it is and what it is there to accomplish – whether that accomplishment is conceived of as being on a collective or individual level – sustains the notion of ‘group,’ transforming the set of contingent relations between individuals into a ‘group.’<sup>7</sup> That is, the group exists only insofar as its members take themselves to be members of this ‘group’ and act accordingly. Similarly, the Kantian subject, attempting to reunite with some primordial Thing that was somehow lost to him, only finds such a Thing to reunite with in the first place because of the very Thing-sustaining activity of his search: ‘that to which the process of return is returning is produced by the very process of returning.’ (*Parallax*, 46)

If any member is foolish enough to attempt to define what ‘group’ is for the others, they should eventually experience the impossibility of doing so, as it will always fail in some fashion with other members, since what the Master-Signifier attempts to speak of is that very difference – that gap or void in the signifying order. A signifier is, after all, only the bundle of its differences from other signifiers and since this is true for every signifier, this is ‘resolved’ by way of excluding from the series a Master-Signifier which thereby remarks the void of their very space of inscription. (*For They*, 48) So ‘group’ as a Master-Signifier is an attempt to displace the others, to speak of that difference and thus it occupies a place of exclusion. This exceptional position is precisely what transforms contingent relations between individuals into a coherent grouping, a logic expressed in the Lacanian ‘masculine’ logic of sexuation which implies an exception to the universal function. In short, the Master-Signifier is never prior to the various attempts to speak of it, but is only the result of the failure to do so, remarking the series of these failures.

Another way to conceive of the group along these lines is through the very struggle of the various notions of ‘group,’ notions that attempt to orient and legitimize themselves to this Master-Signifier. These differing signifiers can be conceived as struggling for ascendancy, striving to be

known as the signifier which 'speaks' for the excluded difference that constitutes the group as a Whole. The members who are producing them, however, overlook how all of these vying signifiers 'are in search of the subject for a signifier which has already found it for them.' (*For They*, 25) That is, the 'all' represents for the Master-Signifier the Subject while the Master-Signifier represents the very impossibility of providing such a representation. The group is, in a sense, a failure and in its realization of this, it finds 'success.' It is precisely in this sense, when what once appeared to be defeat is suddenly now a victory, that the Master-Signifier acts as the Lacanian *point de capiton* (the 'quilting point'). (*For They*, 78)

What is quilted is meaning. The Master-Signifier stops the incessant sliding of the 'signifieds' beneath the signifiers by knotting them together, so to speak. This is the theoretical content behind Lacan's advocacy for the use of punctuation in analysis, the 'need for an internal interruption in the course of a session.' (Roudinesco 272) If we extend this notion of analysis to group therapy, Yalom's repeated emphasis that the therapist's technique should be consistent and positive and his basic posture one of 'concern, acceptance, genuineness, empathy,' (117) shows itself to be the exact opposite of what a Lacanian therapist's technique might be: one of creating an atmosphere of frustration through not meeting the group's demands to supply them with meaning. A Lacanian therapist would do this through punctuating the session, creating verbal 'cuts' of sorts and by equivocal utterances, all with an aim to directly open up a void in which the group members would then be obliged to fill in with their own meaningful content. The treatment would thus effectively be complete when the group members catch on to the fact that it is they themselves who are supplying the very meaning that they are looking for through their direct questioning of the therapist. As Žižek writes, '[t]herein resides the paradoxical achievement of symbolization: the vain quest for the "true meaning" (the ultimate signified) is supplanted by a unique signifying gesture. One can see... how this gesture [is] meant to be rejected.' (*Interrogating*, 301)

The group could also be conceived of as a signifying chain which - because of a 'primordially repressed' missing signifier, the Lacanian 'binary signifier' - runs in a vicious circle, attempting to close the constitutive lack. As it turns, the group produces Master-Signifier after Master-Signifier, each of 'which endeavor to close the circle by retroactively providing it with foundation.' (*For They*, 216) The 'repressed' must remain so, since the very symbolic order is defined by this void; if it were to become known, filled out or exposed, the order would lose its consistency and collapse.<sup>8</sup> Yalom provides us with a fitting clinical example. One group member was late for a session and as he walked down the corridor, the adjoining observation room door was just then opened to allow a student to enter and at this precise moment the group member saw and heard the observing students giggling at some private joke. Although the member, like all group members, knew of the existence of the observers behind the mirrored, observing glass (as this is standard practice), it nevertheless stunned him. When he spoke of it in the last moments of the meeting, it equally shocked the entire group. The next session found him absent and the group engaged in what Yalom calls a 'flight mode,' for the 'event was a catastrophe of major proportions

for the entire group.<sup>9</sup>

This vignette offers us an excellent image of the void that must be excluded if the group is to retain its consistency, for the inside of the observation room (its Beyond, in a sense) is not normally to be viewed by the group members themselves. For the length of the treatment, it is 'known,' but only in its 'ex-sistence,' to use the Lacanian term: it operates precisely as a void, an absence and if it becomes 'filled out' – especially in such an irreverent and disquieting manner as it was for this unfortunate group – group cohesiveness begins to dissolve. This is strictly homologous to the logic of the Master-Signifier: all the signifiers (the group) represent the subject (void) for the One (Master-Signifier) and when this void becomes filled out with another signifier (say, 'observing students laughing behind the mirror'), the group necessarily must break down from what it once was.<sup>10</sup>

In providing such examples, one always runs the risk of 'reifying' terms such as 'void,' 'lack,' and 'subject.' In the above example we can certainly use Lacanian algebra to name the group an  $S_2$  (Being) and the stand-in for its place, an  $S_1$  (Master-Signifier, Nothing) and it would be correct, yet what is thereby lost is the minimal gap – that 'almost nothing' between the element ( $S_2$ ) and the stand-in for its void-place of inscription ( $S_1$ ). (*For They*, xxvi) This 'almost nothing' between the ordinary and the empty signifier is the Lacanian subject,  $\$$ . Lacan endeavors to get us to think of the Whole, the One of the symbolic order which has no externality (void or otherwise) but only insofar as there is a certain constitutive 'outside' to it through the use of his difficult *objet petit a*. We will introduce and apply this paradoxical object through Žižek's discussion of Hegel's Monarch, which closely resembles the logic of the signifier. We will argue that the therapist can be seen in light of this object and is to the group what the Monarch is to the state.

## Hegel's Monarch

As pointed out above, the signifying chain or symbolic order (Žižek's 'big Other') is organized around a constitutive lack due to a primordially repressed signifier. What is meant by 'constitutive' is that the very failure of symbolization (symbolization being the goal of the symbolic order, to symbolize 'reality' completely, to leave no stone unturned) opens up the void within which the process of symbolization takes place. In other words, the traumatic Thing which makes the big Other non-all is a hole, a gap, a void around which symbolization turns, the cause of its failure, but *at the same time* it is the very space of symbolization, its condition of possibility. This is critical to understand: 'every symbolic structure is decentered, organized around a void, which it itself occupies in surplus' (*Contingency*, 125) and the 'it itself' *qua* surplus is precisely the *objet a*. So the conditions of impossibility (of a complete symbolization) are the conditions of possibility of symbolization itself. Thus the group, in attempting to symbolize it all, to 'say it all' about itself is doomed because of the void of the Thing, the missing binary signifier which would complete the system and allow everything to be said. And this void is simultaneously the very framework of the

group process.

This may become clearer if we think of what Hegel means by a 'notion.' Žižek writes that 'Notion is the *form of thought*, form in the strict dialectical sense of the "formal aspect" *qua* truth of the content: the "unthought" of a thought is not some transcendent content eluding its grasp, but its form itself.' (*For They*, 164) In simple terms, I can think about everything and all, except for the very form that my thinking takes when I do so – there is always the very form of my thought that is excluded from my thinking, but at the same time that form is constitutive of my ability to think. And in the course of the dialectical process, those 'thinkable' thoughts come to be seen as that paradoxical object which materializes its impossible form. Likewise, the void around which the group process turns and within which it does its turning is embodied as well in its own paradoxical object, without which there would be no void, although strictly speaking the void is logically *a priori* to any entity that gives it body.<sup>11</sup>

Žižek aids us in comprehending this in his reading of Hegel's Monarch. The proper determinate reflection of subjects of the state involves reflecting or presupposing their subjective freedom in advance into the substantial Other of the state, as its own reflective determination. (*Sublime*, 230) The condition of our freedom, of our existence as persons not only subject to political rule but as freely positing agents instigating our own activity, is to presuppose that the substantial State is already itself a subject who takes the form of the head of that State, the Monarch. The Monarch is the One, the individual who takes upon himself the empty gesture of subjectivization, adding to the substantial content the form of subjectivity. (*Sublime*, 229) In a word, without his gesture, the condition of our subjective freedom could not be met. As was noted above, the therapist's gesture of beginning and being present throughout the length of the session is the condition of the group being a self-positing group. That is, the group could not freely do what it does without his bodily presence, even though it most certainly is not experienced in that way by the members. Yalom cites many examples of group members who view the therapist not as a condition of their freedom within the group but rather as the very obstacle that prevents their freedom. (e.g., Yalom, 316) In the language of psychoanalysis, what such 'neurotic' group members ('normal,' sexually repressed subjects) overlook is the key role played by the therapist *qua* cause of their own and the group's desire. They just see him as a secondary obstacle that prevents their direct access to the Thing.<sup>12</sup>

However, such neurotic group members are more in tune with the truth of the group, in that they are at least focused on the exceptional seat occupied by the therapist, than a group member such as the one Yalom cites as saying: 'It's as though the group is sitting on my shoulder, watching me. I'm forever asking, "what would the group say about this or that?"' (Yalom, 57) This is a more common attitude toward the group, one that views it in surplus over the individual subject, as expressed by another member, quoted by Yalom: 'this group works well, but I'm not part of it.' (55) What such subjects perceive, however, in their perception of the group as a substantial entity (the big Other) in excess to the individual subject, is their very perception of their

'own egotistic, self-centered attitude towards this same reality in an "objectivized," "reified" form.' (*Indivisible*, 68) In other words, 'the *surplus* of Society over the individual (Society as unattainable, mysterious Thing-in-itself) is nothing but the inverted form of appearance of its *lack*, of the fact that Society itself does not yet correspond to its notion, but remains an external "mechanical" network linking individuals.' (*For They*, 107, italics in original) This would be a Žižekian criticism of Yalom's approach: the more the group members are encouraged to entertain their own egoistic, self-centered agendas and the more they are urged to pursue their own self-posed goals in the group, the more the group will oppose and disrupt their individual projects and appear to them as a hostile, alienating force.<sup>13</sup>

If the group is 'naturally' or at least, at first, perceived in excess, over and above the individual subject and the therapist is that member whose seat is unique to every group in the same manner, is there a way to think these two concepts together? Yes, and that is precisely what Hegel's speculative judgment is all about. Žižek provides us with a generalized form of Hegel's 'Spirit is a bone' and 'State is Monarch' in a Lacanian 'A is a.' (*Indivisible*, 143) 'A' stands for the big Other (l'Autre) and 'a' is the *objet a* and their equation is an attempt to render visible their 'speculative identity' via the juxtaposition of two terms which seem at first incompatible. But if we keep in mind that 'A' is inherently barred, turning around the void of a central impossibility and at the same time this falling short of its notion is its very condition of possibility, this makes sense. We must already find ourselves in a symbolic order, for only at this point can an object coincide with its empty place. That is, to conceive of the void, you must have already abstracted it from its place and *objet a* is precisely the paradoxical object which embodies or materializes this impossibility. (*Indivisible*, 143)

To realize this speculative identity, the big Other must be conceived as Subject and no longer simply as Substance. (*For They* 105) The Monarch, as was said, accomplishes this. How he does this is by functioning as a pure signifier, one without a signified. His authority over the State – and that of the therapist over the group – 'consists in his Name and it is precisely for this reason that his physical reality is wholly arbitrary and could be left to the biological contingency of lineage.' (*For They*, 82) One therapist is as good as another for the purposes of subjectivizing the group and transforming a contingent multitude of individuals into an All-set formed on a rational basis. As far as the group is concerned, the therapist is the One, the Exception<sup>14</sup> - not just a symbol, but the member who occupies the performative point of pure authority of the signifier and is nature's last positive remainder of contingency. That is, he is the immediate actuality of his own notion while all other subjects never fully correspond to their notion but must struggle to achieve it as non-therapist members of the group. (*For They*, 84) This means that as soon as a group begins, subjects are at once split in their own (group) notion of themselves. In practical terms, they are subjects whose notion is perhaps 'Those with interpersonal skill deficiencies' and who must therefore struggle to create themselves more fully; that is presumably why they joined the group in the first place. The therapist, however, is One with his notion, perhaps 'The One who is

interpersonally skilful,' and thus does not have need to self-create. He is what he is. The crucial point here is that the universal Notion for the group members 'arrives at its being-for-itself, it is posited as Notion, only when, in the very domain of particularity, it reflects itself in the form of its opposite (in some element which negates the very fundamental feature of its notional universality).' (*For They*, 124)

This is Hegel's 'negative self-relationship of the Notion' that Žižek speaks of, and should sound familiar after our discussion above of the dialectical logic of reflection and of the signifier. The notion of what it means to be a group member for the subjects in the group only comes to be as such when it is embodied in the therapist in the form of its opposite, opposite not only in the sense of the opposite notion ('deficient' versus 'expert' interpersonal skills) but opposite in the sense that the *universal* notion of the group (say, a 'workshop for subjects with interpersonal deficiencies') only comes to be when reflected into the *particularity* of just one group member, the therapist. Hence, we see again the elementary dialectical inversion, which consists 'precisely in... a reversal of transcendence into immanence' (*For They*, 107) for what was once a transcendent Notion of what the group is, with all its accompanying mystery & frustration, now reveals itself to be immanent to the particularity of the group itself. In short, the group does not struggle to achieve some correspondence to an external ideal; the truth is achieved when there is accordance of the group with its own notion. Thus, in this sense, no group can ever be 'true,' no group can ever bridge the gap between itself and its own notion. This is so because the 'discord is a positive condition of the object's ontological consistency... because Notion itself partakes of the dialectical movement.' (*For They*, 68)

If the therapist/monarch not only lends his name or title so that the group/state becomes Subject and not only Substance, but is also 'the object... as a pure excrement, a remainder appended to the Name,' (*For They*, 84) so that he is that group member/individual who appears as the embodiment of Group-Member/Man in general, how exactly should he act? Against the common sense notion that leaders should be wise and experienced, Hegel dispels the fascinating charismatic power of the leader by carrying out a separation between his two 'functions,' that of  $S_1$  (his Name) and  $a$ , his body. (*For They*, 84) That is, to effectively maintain his authority and the coherency of the group, the therapist would do best by minding not to stray too far from his mandate, by remaining as firmly in his seat as possible. An example of a therapist not doing so would be if he, at the beginning of the session, spoke as another group member might speak, requesting 'time' that night because of some issues he would like to work out with the other group members. The results would be disastrous, as could well be imagined, even if the therapist prefaced his request by saying he was doing so to 'lead by example'; perhaps even more so then. Yalom provides an example of two neophyte therapists who were overzealous with their dedication to what he calls 'transparency,' openly expressing their self-doubts and personal anxieties to the group they led. The result was that 'the majority of the members dropped out of the group within the first six sessions.' (Yalom 227) In such an 'excessive transparency' case, the therapist's seat

would be revealed as vacant, the performative nature of that seat would cease to function and the group as such would effectively break up.

Apropos to this logic, Žižek points out the example of Ronald Reagan's presidency: the more he reigned in a king-like fashion, making empty gestures and not quite grasping what was going on, his popularity was assured. (*For They*, 94) And this is exactly Žižek's point, that it is more desirous to effectively have an idiot in power than one with visible ambitions for the betterment of his charge. As far as the therapist functions as a psychoanalyst, perhaps Roudinesco, a biographer of Lacan, can provide a guideline for group leadership behavior: 'If a man speaks because symbols have made him a man, the analyst is only a "supposed master," acting as an amanuensis.' (Roudinesco, 217) The job of the therapist should at most be one of punctuation of group activity rather than providing technical and demonstrative expertise in the ways of interpersonal relations.

To sum up this discussion, the group operates essentially as any self-organized system (and everything that has been said of the group is only sensible within the logic of this group as just such a system) which generates that very otherness to which it self-referentially refers and disturbs, so that it ultimately only ever speaks of itself. The therapist *qua objet a* is that material left-over of this self-referential motion of signifier activity. The therapist's body embodies that motion, so that ultimately the group *is* the therapist (that is, A is *a*). Another way of saying the same thing is that the therapist *qua object a* is the point of overlap or intersection between the group as Other and the group as Subject. (*Metastases*, 178) This strikes at the Hegelian conception of tautology as the highest contradiction, where a tautology (such as 'Group is Group') 'gives form to the radical antagonism between the two appearances of the same term.' (*Indivisible*, 101) The group's identity is sustained by that foreign body in its very midst, its condition of impossibility, that void which destabilizes and splits the One, the Whole from within. So by saying 'Group is Group,' we are providing the positive universal genus of 'Group is...' with a negative species '...Group' which excludes all predicates, so that what we end up with is some initial moment which comes across its own absence. (*For They*, 36) What Kant fails to realize is that the Thing ultimately reveals itself to be a phantasm which fills out the empty shell of his transcendental object (that is, in Lacanian terms, *objet petit a*) since all that exists is the field of phenomena and its limitation. (*Tarrying*, 37) Likewise, any substantial images we subjects have of the big Other or of the Other of the Other are an external reflection which reveal themselves to be phantasms as well.

The elementary matrix is thus: any universal notion ('Group') immediately redoubles itself into both encompassing and exclusive categories as soon as it is confronted with its particular content (all of those particular expressions of 'Group'), at which point it retroactively reorders itself as pure, self-relating negativity. (*For They*, 42) Here is the potentially liberating aspect of Žižek's project, for once the Group is revealed to be a social order whose very positivity gives body to radical negativity – and by realizing that the therapist functions as the ultimate guarantee of the stability of the Group by acting as the place-holder of that negativity which lies at the base of the

group's activity (and which threatens to erupt and engulf the group at any time) – that Group is no longer alienating and the necessity of the Group as such vanishes, revealing its radical contingency.<sup>15</sup>

### **Lacanian *Jouissance* and the fantasy object**

As mentioned in our discussion of the Kantian experience of the Thing, we receive a distinct 'pleasure' from our very judgment of the displeasure we feel in failing to adequately represent the Thing. This surplus 'pleasure' procured by a frustrating encounter with the Thing is precisely the Lacanian definition of *jouissance*, usually translated as 'enjoyment' to distinguish it from pleasure proper, indicating its location 'beyond the pleasure principle.' (*Tarrying*, 280) The usual reading of *jouissance* is that it forms a substantial Real that supposedly grounds the Symbolic which fails in symbolizing this Real completely, so that what we are left with are these objects of surplus-*jouissance*, these *objets petit a*. So although the Real as the substance of *jouissance* is always lost In-itself, existing in an external relation to our reflective consciousness, we at least have as compensation the *objet petit a* acting as an 'In-itself which is for us.'<sup>16</sup> This thinking is behind the common (mis)understanding of Lacan's idea of the Oedipal phase as a transition from nature to culture: the symbolic agency of the paternal prohibition – the 'Name-of-the-Father' – is the conceptual framework behind the father as the incarnation of the (Master-)signifier, since he is the one who deprives the child of his mother by giving the child his name. (Roudinesco, 284)

After being named, the child has an ambivalent relationship with his father, having been thus torn away from his natural state of unity or wholeness with the Mother-Thing; yet he is compensated with surplus-*jouissance* in the form of cultural products such as education and career. Likewise, this reading would have us view the group process as one in which the members must come to terms with a positive, natural state that once really existed prior to or still does exist just beyond the group's artificial-cultural aspect, but which now is lost or out of reach forever. Furthermore, the therapist would be seen as holding out promises or gifts of, perhaps, new knowledge of Self and Other, if only the group members would completely sacrifice their castration of this irreparably lost or out of reach Group-Thing-*jouissance*. Contrary to this view, Žižek would point to the fact that this group *qua* cultural-symbolic agency 'gives body to the impossibility which is co-substantial with the very fact of the symbolic order – "*jouissance* is forbidden to him who speaks as such" ' (*Interrogating*, 207) That is, the 'natural' state the group members believe exists prior to or beyond its transformation into a socio-cultural group is a retroactive product of the formation of that group and did not exist prior to its loss, just as the child/adult must come to terms with 'nature' being always-already lost.

For Žižek and (his reading of) Hegel, we have seen that there is no beyond in which some Thing-*jouissance* exists as a positive, substantial entity. This In-itself is similar to what one deals

with in a positing reflection, the first in the triad of the dialectical process: it is 'not-yet' fully itself, failing to achieve its self-identity. It becomes a 'For-itself' as we have seen through an external reflection, through the supplementary remark which brings a coherency, accomplishing a self-identity and is thus 'no longer' just itself. Žižek criticizes the usual reading of *jouissance* for remaining caught in this reflective illusion, since all that is accomplished at this point is a simple remarking of a pre-existing In-itself. What needs to occur is a determinate reflection in which the In-itself is experienced as retroactively posited; this 'In-and-For-itself' experience is precisely the experience of the loss as constitutive, in which the loss that occurs in the reflective process is what constitutes the lost object. (*Indivisible*, 48)

So the paradox is that the surplus-enjoyment (modeled by Lacan on Marx's surplus-value) retroactively invokes the substance of *jouissance*. The latter is not the underlying substratum of our symbolic world, but an illusion brought on by a 'deceitful' *objet a*. (*Tarrying*, 36) It deceives not by fooling us into believing it is It (the group members do not mistakenly take the therapist as the Thing) but it deceives by feigning to deceive, by giving us a fantastic impression of some substantial Thing behind it.<sup>17</sup> So although they know the therapist is not the Thing, they are obligated to act as if he were. In the group, the members suppose the therapist knows something of their individual and collective symptoms and holds the key to their lost enjoyments in life. We have already mentioned the blame therapists face in the group when they are perceived as stumbling blocks in the members' pursuit of their goals. We can now try to further specify this logic utilizing the concept of *jouissance*.

The experience of *jouissance* is part and parcel of the group experience. Examples include simultaneous conflicting feelings of rivalry and support, or wishing to progress so as to leave the group and stagnating so as to remain behind, or wishing for both the improvement and detriment of others – all of which Yalom calls 'Common Group Tensions.' He finds these not only a necessary component to the group process (28) but admonishes: 'Do not forget these tensions. They are omnipresent, always fueling the hidden motors of group interaction.' (Yalom, 169) This always-everywhere state of tension is thus not a measure of failure, as is often thought by the group, nor is it something to be 'worked through' in the sense of harnessing the energy for facilitating a 'corrective emotional experience' as Yalom would put it. (27) Rather, a change in consciousness is in order – a move to a determinate reflection – in which the group's experience of *jouissance* is itself experienced as a fantasy object which masks the inconsistency of the big Other. The entire group experience and its attendant feelings of tension act as a fantasy screen of sorts, allowing the group members, the therapist and the group theorists to overlook how their very activity is constitutive of that very 'reality' they are engaged in. And Žižek's point would be that the only way to conceive of this fantasy as an object within the structural logic of the group is to realize that it is precisely embodied in that particular group member, the therapist, who occupies that special chair in the group circle. And as long as he remains seated in that chair, he will continue to guarantee the stability of the group and act as the place-holder of that tension which always threatens to

fatally rupture forth and dissolve the group.

Žižek writes that ‘fantasy...implies the choice of thought at the expense of being: in fantasy, I find myself reduced to the evanescent point of a thought contemplating the course of events during my absence, my non-being.’ He goes on to say that ‘it is as if we are observing “the primordial scene” from behind our own eyes, as if we are not immediately identified with our look but stand somewhere “behind it.”’ (*Tarrying*, 64) Is this not exactly what occurs in the group process? The contentious points, issues and tensions raised during that process act as a fantasy frame which structures the experience for each member and the point from which they gaze onto this experience is a positivization of this frame, a collapse of sorts, into the object *qua* gaze. The critical step to make for each member is to experience how his external gaze through which he perceives the substantial group from the ‘outside’ as some transcendent mystery is simultaneously the gaze by means of which this group perceives itself as its own mystery. In terms of reflective logic, we must ‘experience how the subject, by means of his very failure to grasp the secret of the Other,’ caught as he is in his own fantasy framework, ‘is already inscribed in the Other’s “accountancy,” reflected in the Other: the experience of how his external relationship of the Other is already a “reflective determination” of the Other itself.’ (*For They*, 90) Following Žižek’s lead, we could say that the reflective determinate object is not an object different for each group member (*Sublime*, 229); rather, surplus-*jouissance* is embodied for the group as a whole in the therapist who stands in for the embodiment of the fantasy object for the group, retroactively filling out the void of the Group-Thing-*jouissance*, ‘healing’ the wound in the big Other. The ‘original’ trauma for the group is the non-existence of its Thing-*jouissance*, of its void and the fantasy (object) makes this livable.<sup>18</sup>

The paradox is that while this void the group encircles is logically prior to any fantasy object that fills it out, it is only the intervention of the (Master) signifier that brings about the space within which the group can be seen as encircling this void-space. And in as much as this void–space-lack is coextensive with the Lacanian notion of *desire*, we can see that with the therapist *qua* object-cause of the group’s desire, we have an object which is originally ‘lost’ and overlooked by the group, an object which coincides with its own loss and emerges as lost; while the tension-laden activity of the group can be seen as an attempt to enact that void itself directly – what could be called the psychoanalytic *drive* of the group. (*Parallax*, 62) The drive of the group ‘is quite literally the very “drive” to break the All of continuity in which [it is] embedded, to introduce a radical imbalance into it,’ and this is what Lacan means by the ‘satisfaction of drives:’ the group generates *jouissance* in the very repetition of failure to reach its goal. This endless circulation around the ‘object-loss of drive’ generates a satisfaction of its own, so the true aim of the group in its drive is not to reach its stated goal but to circle endlessly around it. (*Parallax*, 63) From a Žižekian perspective, once the therapeutic group members gain knowledge of the drive and experience this truth, they are no longer in need of the group, for they have effectively ‘traversed the fundamental fantasy,’ which is one of the Lacanian definitions of the end of psychoanalytic therapy. (Fink 1995,

## Conclusion

Many commentators and reviewers of Žižek's work have noted that the exemplification of Žižek's theoretical framework seems wanting, lacking in some way.<sup>19</sup> However, a defense against this view can be given utilizing Žižek's conceptual edifice itself. In Hegelian terms, the very 'failure' of application is, in a way, a 'success' in demonstrating the self-relating negativity of the notion. As Žižek notes,

'...in a Hegelian context, the way to overcome an idea is to exemplify it, but an example never simply exemplifies a notion; it usually tells you what is wrong with this notion. This is what Hegel does again and again in *Phenomenology of Spirit*. He takes a certain existential stance like aestheticism or stoicism. Then how does he criticize it? By simply stating it as a certain life practice, by showing how the very staging actualization of this attitude produces something more which undermines it. In this way, the example always minimally undermines what it is an example of.' (*Conversations*, 44)

This is precisely why Žižek's writing is self-described as 'an obsessional ritual.' The ultimate secret to his phenomenal publication pace since *The Sublime Object of Ideology* is that he 'simply can't stop' and that he feels at the completion of a book: 'I didn't really succeed in telling what I wanted to tell, that I need a new project – it's an absolute nightmare.' (*Conversations*, 42)

This paper hopefully conveys this rationale as a legitimate response to Žižek's critics. It is obvious that much of the recent criticism perhaps focuses more on the results of the application of his theoretical framework rather than on the logic that underlines it.<sup>20</sup> So the first response to these critics would be that without a solid grounding in Žižek's basic theoretical matrix, Žižekian-type results such as 'The psychotherapeutic group *is* the therapist' would surely sound nonsensical and would invite attack. But a more Žižekian response would be to state that a 'theory' is in some sense only graspable with its 'application.' Thus, our psychotherapeutic group example should be treated as an instantiation of Žižek's formal, structural logic; it is not just an illustration of this logic, but rather the logic itself, its proper articulation.

The effort at working through a difficult philosopher is not always seen worth it to some. Even Levi-Strauss and Merleau-Ponty both initially concluded they 'didn't have the time' to understand Lacan's writings. (Roudinesco, 211) Be that as it may, it is hoped that this paper has shown that Žižek has developed a remarkably rich, powerful and logically consistent theoretical system which, once understood, proves itself to be wonderfully flexible, insightful and ultimately rewarding when put to work in the interpretation of social, political and historical phenomena.

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## Endnotes:

- <sup>1</sup> The rationale for the use of this example is not arbitrary. The author of these lines participated as a member in a psychotherapeutic group for three years, modeled on the ‘existentialist’ approach of Irvin Yalom. In discussing the structural framework of the therapeutic group using Žižekian categories, I draw not only on Yalom’s *The Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy*, but on my personal experience as well. However, it is stated from the onset that the primary concern of this paper is to show the logical compatibility and even homology across Žižek’s major sets of core theoretical concepts and secondarily to demonstrate the suitability of applying his dialectical thinking on social experience by using group psychotherapy as an illustrative example. Thus I do not seek to draw any specific conclusions regarding the efficacy of group psychotherapy as such, nor to Yalom’s approach specifically.
- <sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this paper, we can physically define ‘The Group’ along the ideal norms as given by Yalom (Chapter 10): seven or eight members seated in a circle facing one another, with a therapist-leader (or pair, either student interns or established professionals) meeting weekly in a room that allows for privacy, freedom from distractions and allowing for outside observation, ideally through a one-way mirror.
- <sup>3</sup> It is also stated upfront that the Lacanian approach of Žižek’s understanding of social phenomena and Yalom’s approach to group therapy could not be more at odds. A perusal of Yalom’s 600+ page book shows that only a fraction of the work is devoted to what he calls ‘groupness’ (55). For instance, less than twenty-five pages are devoted to ‘Group Cohesiveness’ (53-76) while just seven pages are devoted to the ‘Group-as-a-Whole process’ (192-9) And even then the discussion in these sections is couched in the same terms as the remainder of the book: how the individual subject (distortedly) conceives of and responds to an external, foreign environment, with the task of group therapy being one of ego-adjustment in an attempt to achieve congruency with one’s social experience. This is, of course, consistent with the approach of ego-psychology which denies Lacanian split subjectivity and ignores the lesson of German Idealist philosophy which holds that our very ‘objective’ experience is always-already subjectively constituted.
- <sup>4</sup> For Žižek’s discussions of the Lacanian ‘formulae of sexuation,’ see, for instance, (*For They*, 121-6), (*Tarrying*, 53-8), (*Metastases* 153-61) and Lacan’s *Seminar XX*. An excellent paper by Žižek will also be found in *lacanian ink* 10 – 1995, entitled ‘Woman is one of the Names-of-the-Father, or how Not to misread Lacan’s formulas of Sexuation.’
- <sup>5</sup> Again, positing reflection is a simple reflection whereby some appearance merely ‘reflects’ the essence. Determinate reflection is a redoubling of this reflection, or in Žižek’s formula: ‘ “Reflection-into-itself” of the reflection of the value of A into B.’ (*For They* 27)
- In determinate reflection, essence is revealed to be ‘nothing but the appearance of essence, the appearance that there is something behind which is the Essence.’ (*Universal* 122) Any individual or group subject that attempts to reach for some positive entity believed to exist beyond the negative movement of the appearance’s self-sublation is under the illusion of what Hegel calls Understanding, as opposed to Reason. (*For They* 157, 214) Žižek quotes Hegel’s ‘essence is appearance *qua* appearance’ in many of his works to illustrate that essence reflects itself in appearance since it is nothing but the reflection-into-itself of the appearance: ‘appearance is never “merely” appearance, but is, precisely as appearance, essential.’ (*Universal* 120) The therapist is never merely another group member but is one who is essential to its consistency and its very constitution; he is an entity whose very appearance coincides with the group’s (dis)integration.
- <sup>6</sup> (*Sublime* 228, italics in original) If the very reflective relationship between the subject and the substance did not reflect itself in the substance, if the essence did not redouble and reflect itself into itself, there would be no space opened up within which the hidden essence-Thing could reflect itself. This means that in order to attain the truth (of determinate reflection), one must first err (be fooled by an external reflection of the Thing). Thus, when a group becomes bogged down with questions of itself, with what it is attempting to accomplish, etc, this pursuit of the Group-Thing is not to be viewed as an ultimate failure: if it were not for this erring, the very positing activity of the group would not be possible. Lacan condenses this logic in his aphoristic phrase *les non-dupes errant*, similar to Hegel’s ‘the fear of error is... the error itself.’ (quoted in *Sublime*, 190)
- <sup>7</sup> This self-relating aspect of the Notion is what Yalom can be seen struggling with when attempting to give a scientific meaning to what he calls the ‘groupness’ or ‘we-ness’ or ‘esprit de corp’ of the group: ‘Nonetheless it is difficult to formulate a precise definition. A recent comprehensive and thoughtful review concluded that cohesiveness “is like dignity: everyone can recognize it but apparently no one can describe it, much less measure it.” ‘ (55) Any definition given will ultimately reveal itself to be nothing but a kind of ‘positivization’ of the (failed) efforts to adequately arrive at it.
- <sup>8</sup> This logic is behind the fundamental Žižekian anti-ideological gesture. As he writes in the *Sublime Object of Ideology*, the ‘crucial step in the analysis of an ideological edifice is thus to detect...this self-referential, tautological, performative operation.’ (99) So to dissolve an ideological structure, one need only to expose that ‘*point de capiton*: the “rigid designator,” which totalizes an ideology by bringing to a halt the metonymic sliding of its signified’ as being nothing but that ‘element which only holds the place of a certain lack, which is in its bodily presence nothing but an embodiment of a certain lack.’ (99)
- <sup>9</sup> (Yalom, 195) One form this ‘catastrophe’ took, Yalom tells us, was in a new questioning of the therapist’s trustworthiness, which also raised concerns that the formerly ‘deeply human encounter’ of the group was in truth a ‘sterile, contrived, laboratory specimen.’ This potential, group-fatal energy the therapist is seen here embodying goes beyond the situational. It is structural in nature and is found across all such groups, as we shall see in the next

section.

<sup>10</sup> This also illustrates one of Žižek's running themes regarding the ideological 'big Other.' Even if group members believe the big Other does not exist, in this age of cynicism towards institutions, they usually do so for the wrong reasons. That is, they engage in a false distance toward the social substance by their belief in an 'Other of the Other.' If the Other can be defined as the symbolic order, members of psychotherapeutic groups can certainly exercise a cynical attitude toward it and not feel in the least anxious, as long as they, say, entertain the existence of some beneficent Other of the Other behind the mirror pulling the strings of the group process they themselves lack faith in. (Or alternatively they can be cynical about the group process in an 'outward' gesture, while 'inwardly' supposing that at least someone in the group believes it works: the therapist). This positing of a big Other that actually exists in the Real ceased once the group members in our example learned of the laughing observers and they thereby became traumatized through their confrontation with the fact that there is 'no Other of the Other.' This 'no Other of the Other' is another Lacanian definition of anxiety. For a reading of the logic of 'the Other of the Other,' see for example, Žižek, *The Big Other Doesn't Exist.*

<sup>11</sup> In other words, the void is to be conceived as ontological (as it is for Hegel) rather than as purely epistemological (as it is for Kant). (*Tarrying*, 246)

<sup>12</sup> (*Fragile*, 20-1) This could be contrasted to the fetishist, for whom the cause of desire is directly made into the object of desire. A group member with such a tendency may presumably care nothing for the group other than the therapist.

<sup>13</sup> This would still be the case even if, in the course of therapy, one's personal agenda in the group is revealed to him as being a primordial 'need for belonging' which is 'innate in us all' as Yalom would have it. (56) Perhaps more so, for the self-deception would be even greater in this case through its very appearance of being 'less self-centered' and 'closer to the external reality' of the group. Žižek's point would be, of course, that a group that is just out there waiting for its members to recognize that they are a part of it is a reification of the member's own perception of their very relationship to that group (whether that perception is hostile or loving, opposing or accepting...).

<sup>14</sup> This logic is exactly the 'masculine' logic of sexuation: 'All members are submitted to the function of the group' would imply the existence 'of at least one member who is exempted' from that function.

<sup>15</sup> Yalom here unexpectedly becomes Žižekian, provided that we read him more literally than he probably intends. Speaking of the therapist's arrival at the start of a session as often silencing the animated pre-group conversation, he writes that '[s]omeone once said that the group therapy meeting officially begins when suddenly nothing happens!' (206) The Group is precisely a form of that 'nothing.'

<sup>16</sup> (*Tarrying*, 245) This is, for instance, Bruce Fink's understanding of *objet petit a* and he has accordingly named it 'a kind of "rem(a)inder" of that lost *jouissance*.' (Fink 1997, 66)

<sup>17</sup> This, as is well known, is Lacan's definition of sublimation, given in his seminar, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*: 'it raises an object... to the dignity of the Thing.' (112)

<sup>18</sup> 'This is why Lacan designates the spectre of the Father-Enjoyment as the neurotic's fantasy-construction; as his attempt to fill out the impasse of his relationship towards the symbolic father.' (*For They*, 140) The presence of the therapist, as the remainder of the group, provides the group members the illusion of full enjoyment to be had were it not for the therapist himself who has appropriated it all to himself, homologous to Freud's myth of the primordial father to whom uninhibited enjoyment was accessible. (*Tarrying*, 245)

Another 'solution' to the debilitating deadlock of desire, its inherent impossibility (and one that can ease the resentment that can build toward the therapist), is to create an explicit prohibition, such as 'Group members shall not interact together outside of group sessions.' The writer of this paper was a member of a group with such a prohibition. The obvious contradiction – that of a group, which is purportedly formed to foster socialization between its members, coming face to face with the overt prohibition *against* forming such friendships amongst themselves outside of sessions – is exactly what disgruntled group members can point to as the cause of all their troubles when they are faced with the Void of Lacan's 'il n'y a pas de rapport sexuel.' The paradox (and even very function) of prohibition is that as soon as the real-impossible is prohibited, it changes into something 'possible.' (*Tarrying*, 116)

<sup>19</sup> Particularly critical is Richard Stamp's '“Another Exemplary Case”: Žižek's Logic of Examples' in the aforementioned *The Truth of Žižek*. (161-76)

<sup>20</sup> With notable exceptions, of course, of thinkers such as Laclau and Butler. See their collaboration with Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, for instance. Here, we find an engaged and sustained *philosophical* debate.