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Translation Review Essay: À travers le réel: Entretiens avec Fabien Tarby

(Original review published in French by
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Abstract:

In Volume 5, issue 3 of the International Journal of Žižek Studies, Benoît Guillette's reviewed Fabien Tarby's book of interviews with Slavoj Žižek: "À travers le réel." This is a translation of this book review, from French into English.

This book presents the interviews Fabien Tarby (a specialist in the philosophy of Alain Badiou) had with Slavoj Žižek (a longtime friend of Alain Badiou). Concision and clarity are two of the qualities that distinguish Žižek's answers to Tarby. Žižek has managed, in this book, to provide an excellent synthesis of his thought. The book is divided into ten chapters and, it seems to me, expounds all the themes and theses dear to Žižek. The themes of contingency and negativity are particularly well discussed; both themes reappear in several chapters.

The first two chapters are concerned with psychoanalysis. In the first, Žižek mainly focuses on his ideas on contingency in relation to psychoanalysis. According to Žižek, it is necessary to reject the psychoanalytic approach of CG Jung because Jung does not understand the importance that Freud attributed to contingency. In the second chapter, Žižek clarifies what it is that he rejects and what it is he accepts from the work of Lacan. The Lacan that Žižek rejects is the one for whom the purpose of a psychoanalytic cure is to enable the patient (the analysand) to keep their distance from The Real. One can find that Lacan in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis (L'éthique de la psychanalyse)* and in his teaching of the final six or seven years. The Lacan that Žižek accepts is that found in *L'envers de la psychanalyse*,¹ in *Encore*² and especially in *La Logique du fantasme*.³

The third chapter focuses on Hegel. According to Žižek, Hegel is a thinker of Contingency, since the Hegelian necessity is always retroactive. Žižek even goes so far as to say that Hegel would have found Marx rather too idealistic, for presuming to know the objective tendency of history. Žižek thinks that in order to get an accurate idea of the (dialectical) philosophy of Hegel, we must pay close attention to what he writes concerning three themes: the cunning of reason, negativity and the contingency of necessity.

As regards the cunning of reason, Hegel mentions the assassination of Caesar, in order to show the contingency of necessity. Regarding negativity, Hegel mentions the recurrence of wars to demonstrate that there is a surplus negativity that can never be mastered or resolved (*Aufhebung*) by dialectics. According to Žižek, the negativity that one finds in German idealism can only be understood in light of the death drive, as the compulsion to repeat. Finally, as regards the contingency of necessity, Hegel mentions the essential role of a monarch at the head of a modern rational/non-totalitarian State to show that the dialectical mastery or resolution of

transcendence always supports itself by an empirical residue, a radically contingent surplus.

The fourth chapter is rather long (in comparison to the other chapters of the book) and focuses on the philosophy of Alain Badiou. Žižek mainly focuses on explaining the disagreements he has with his friend Badiou about Hegel, Marx and Lacan. Žižek is sorry that Badiou does not notice the contingency of necessity in Hegel. He is also sorry that if one follows Badiou "You can understand Marx whatever way you like" (p.97), as Badiou ascribes but little importance to the economy. Finally, Žižek regrets that Badiou, by not taking seriously the Lacanian (death) drive, does not see that it is pointless to reduce human beings to the status of mere animals or unsophisticated hedonists, intent on maximizing their pleasures.

The fifth chapter focuses on science and religion. The Žižekian critique of Badiou continues on the terrain of science. According to Žižek, science recognizes (*contra* Badiou) the contingency of all the axioms derived from mathematics. Then Žižek takes the side of Niels Bohr against Werner Heisenberg, asserting that quantum mechanics is not just concerned with uncertainty of an epistemological order, but also, in particular, indeterminacy of an ontological order. Discussing religion, Žižek expounds his thesis that one cannot be an atheist except through the Christian experience. To be an atheist, it is not enough not to believe in God, it is also necessary that there is nothing believes on our behalf, and that our faith is in nothing objectified. In other words, God, the Big Other, must Himself stop believing that He exists. It is only when when Jesus, on the cross, cries out, "My God! Why hast thou forsaken me?" that God loses faith in himself. Before that, in the book of Job, God recognized that He Himself was insane. And already in Judaism, the prohibition of making an image of God points towards the belief that God does not exist outside of the direct relationships we have with others (our neighbor). Christianity pushed this belief further to its logical conclusion, even though the institutions of Christianity have attempted to stifle the subversive force of this insight.

In the sixth chapter (which is relatively short), Žižek speaks of the strengths and weaknesses he sees in the works of Deleuze and Derrida. As regards Deleuze, Žižek values the books he wrote alone, including *Logique du Sens*,⁴ but criticises the books wrote with Félix Guattari. Žižek prefers the Deleuze of the sterility of sense to the Deleuze of the productivity of sense. In relation to Derrida, Žižek is suspicious of the mechanical side of Derrida's analyses, and of his subjective position of a philosopher who is too sure of himself. But Žižek appreciates Derrida's concept of *différance*

because he considers it to be closely related both to Hegelian mastery⁵ and the Freudian death drive.

In the following chapter, Žižek and Tarby talk about politics. Žižek gives three main reasons why he is Eurocentric: 1) The breakaway from the mythical universe achieved by Ancient Greek philosophy; 2) the Christian religion; and 3) the French Revolution. Žižek is concerned to convince us that the task of the Left is to press a certain terror into the service of equality. Only this terror can open up a social space where equality is one of the conceivable choices. And, according Žižek, it is precisely when one takes upon oneself the negativity inherent to the death drive, that one can obtain that equality.

Chapter eight is relatively short; Žižek talks about the recent history of

The region in which lives: the Balkans. After telling us he does not know why he and his Slovenian friends have chosen to focus on⁶ Lacan over all the other theorists who make their mark on them in their youth, he gives a typically Lacanian explanation of the problems in the Balkans: The Balkans have been caught in the Western dream, and when we are caught in the act of desiring the other, we're fucked.

The last two chapters focus on cinema. When it comes to his writings on film, Žižek has the audacity to say that one must only ascribe importance to what he has written on the cinema as an art, and as an art different from other arts. Žižek therefore disparages what has written about cinema for the purposes of illustrating some philosophical arguments, together with what he has written for the purposes of mapping out the ideological coordinates of our time. Žižek appears particularly proud to have shown that cinema, thanks mainly to particular camera moves, is the only art making possible, without regard to the narrative content, the expression of unconscious forms and circulation of libidinal (pre-ontological) objects.

In the last chapter, Žižek explains why there are more films than novels about vampires, why the undead are not vampires, why the double⁷ becomes horrifying with German idealism and why he does not let himself be fooled by werewolves. Finally, he argues that consummate art⁸ is what subjectifies and gives a voice to an impossible Real.

In this book, Žižek has presented his main ideas by comparing them to those of the most influential French philosophers, without humouring them on account of his friendship with them. However, this is not the first time he has been severely critical of his peers. Rather, what specifically distinguishes this book is how Žižek sets out its ideas in a simple and concise manner. And Žižek seems all the more outrageous for

exposing his ideas succinctly. This leads me to conclude that we can find a place "across the Real"⁹ when we dare to express ourselves succinctly; by contrast, interminable discussions themselves place themselves "athwart the Real";¹⁰ that is to say, they can mask or repress this outrageous Real.

T ranslator's Notes

1. "The Other Side of Psychoanalysis," which is Lacan's Seminar XVII.
2. "Encore," which is Lacan's Seminar XX. (The English rendering of the name of this text is identical to the original French name).
3. "The Logic of Phantasy" which is Lacan's Seminar XIV
4. "The Logic of Sense."
5. "Relève."
6. Privilégier .
7. Sosie.
8. L'art suprême.
9. À travers le réel. This and the following "en travers du réel" are a pun on the title of the book under review .
10. En travers du réel. The reader must bear in mind, in order to understand this pun, that "à travers de" and "en travers de" mean both "across" and "obstructing/opposing," while "à travers de" merely means "across," without the connotation of "obstructing/opposing."

References

Žižek (2010), *À travers le réel: Entretiens avec Fabien Ārby*, Nouvelles Éditions Lignes, 221 pages.