Madness is central to understanding the style and the substance of Slavoj Zizek’s work. There is, to begin with, something ‘mad’ about the feverish energy of his writing itself, the characteristic blend of the complex and the colloquial, pop culture and philosophy, the jokes, his sheer prolificity. This is the madness of the ‘theoretical sublime’, the attempt to represent the unrepresentable totality of the postmodern condition while simultaneously answering all the questions posed by the key thinkers in the Western tradition. Not surprisingly, critics have responded to this sense of brilliant excess with excessive rapture: Robert Miklitsch expresses Humbert Humbert-like wonder at ‘the sheer strangeness of the name: all those little y’s and z’s!’ (Miklitsch, 1998, p.475), Jean-Jacques Lecercle claims that, ‘if Zizek is out of touch with contemporary philosophy, I am the bishop of Ulan Bator’.\(^1\) Theoretically, Miklitsch says, Zizek is ‘a divided subject’ whose work celebrates postmodern ‘pulp’ even as it critiques postmodernism (Miklitsch, 1998, pp.479-80). But we can put it more clinically than that. Zizek seems to veer between the critical equivalent of the obsessional and hysterical positions in neurosis. On the one hand, there is his tendency to build up an argument to the point of devastating conclusion, only to hand over to Lacan at the last instant - a move which resembles the obsessional neurotic’s determination to let the other act out his desire for him. On the other hand, the fact that Zizek continually occupies a number of critical positions, sometimes simultaneously (postmodernist, post-Marxist, Idealist, materialist, etc.) suggests an unwillingness to be labelled, reminiscent of the hysterical position.

Both qualities might support the criticism, voiced by Denise Gigante, that Zizek’s function in contemporary theory is no more than that of a “‘vanishing mediator”, mediating
between different theoretical points of view’, never really possessing one of his own (Gigante, 1998, p.153). But his elusiveness is in fact underscored by a clear consistency in his work, a particular kernel of critical jouissance, as he might put it himself - namely, his aim to celebrate a kind of madness at the heart of the subject. This is clear from the recent publication of The Ticklish Subject (1999) and his preface to The Zizek Reader (1999), texts which confirm that his work has gradually become more and more like a ‘project’ (albeit an anti-totalizing, ‘postmodern’ one). In the former he offers his most direct, though typically enigmatic, declaration of his critical ‘position’ to date: ‘If I were asked to provide a one-line description of where I stand, I would probably choose the paradoxical self-designation of a Paulian materialist’ (Zizek, 1999a, p.ix). One-liners are common in Zizek’s distinctive brand of stand-up theory, of course, but this one is particularly significant. It can be decoded by relating it to an observation he makes in an earlier essay: ‘Saint Paul centred the whole Christian edifice precisely on the point which up to now appeared, to the disciples of Christ like a horrifying trauma, “impossible”, non-symbolizable, non-integrable in their field of signification: his shameful death on the cross between two bandits’ (Zizek, 1990, p.92). Zizek’s role is to play St. Paul to the edifice of contemporary theory by forcing it to focus on ‘the truly traumatic core of the modern subject’ (Zizek, 1999a, p.xi).

In practice, this amounts to an audacious aim to expose as simplistic and flawed ‘the Spectre of Cartesian subjectivity’ which all the major forms of twentieth-century thought have been trying to exorcise, and to offer instead a properly theorized (through Lacan via Kant and Hegel) ‘philosophical manifesto of Cartesian subjectivity itself’ (Zizek, 1999c, p.2). The use of Lacan as his principle point of reference is justified by the fact that, for all his contempt towards the ‘transcendental’ subject, Lacan never thought we should ditch the cogito, as it posited the existence of what he saw as the exact equivalent of the subject of psychoanalytic theory. The key point about Lacan’s reading of Descartes is that we distinguish between ‘ego’ and ‘subject’. The ‘thinking’ entity in ‘I think therefore I am’ is, for Lacan, the Freudian ego, the function of which is of course to preserve a false sense of
wholeness through misrecognition. The subject, on the other hand, is located elsewhere, in
the unconscious: it thinks (ca pencer), therefore I (the subject) exist, or, as Lacan’s famous
alternative cogito goes, ‘I think where I am not, therefore I am where I do not think’ (Lacan,
1993, pp.165-6). This is the starting-point for Zizek’s own reconceptualization of the
 Cartesian subject. Lacan

    enables us to unearth in Cartesian subjectivity its inherent tension between the
    moment of excess (“diabolical Evil” in Kant, the “night of the world” in Hegel ...) and
    the subsequent attempt to gentrify-domesticate-normalize this excess. Again and
    again, post-Cartesian philosophers are compelled, by the inherent logic of their
    philosophical project, to articulate a certain excessive moment of “madness” inherent
    to cogito, which they then immediately endeavour to “renormalize” (Zizek, 1999c,
p.62).

His point is that both those, like Kant and Hegel, who affirm the transcendental subject and
those, like Althusser and Foucault, who seek to dissolve it, fail to deal adequately with what
precedes subjectivity and what remains the motivating element at its very core. Zizek’s
notion of the subject presents a radical alternative to the theory of ‘decentred’ subjectivity
familiar to us from poststructuralist thought - the cornerstone, that is, of what has long stood
as the ‘orthodoxy’ of contemporary theory. That he should label the moment of excess
inherent to the cogito as madness is typical, for pathological structures, invoked implicitly
and explicitly, are integral to his account of what it means to be a subject. The element of
‘trauma’ or ‘madness’ accounts for the value of his approach: what Zizek effectively does
with the cogito is pathologize it.

A signifier short of a closed system

Zizek’s big thing is Lacan, but to call him a ‘Lacanian’ does not tell the full story. He begins
Looking Awry, the work which stands as the most clear statement of his reading of Lacan, by
directing us to the last years of Lacan’s teaching. In this period the ‘classical’ concern with how the unconscious is structured like a language and how the imaginary is governed by the symbolic has given way to a continued interest in ‘the barrier separating the real from (symbolically structured) reality’ (Zizek, 1991b, p. viii). Consequently, in Zizek, the passage through the Oedipus and the function of the imaginary in supporting the consistency of the subject are invoked chiefly through a more flexible pair of terms, the symbolic and the real. Zizek uses the term ‘symbolic’ in its conventional, i.e. Saussurian, sense as the arbitrary system of meanings into which we divide our world, an entity which pre-exists us, and into which we are born, learning and abiding by its rules: in short, our ‘everyday reality’. Zizek’s post-Marxist sensibility, however, means he portrays the symbolic less as an abstract entity (like language) than as a dynamic force which shapes our lives, constructing and maintaining our status as subject (in conjunction with the imaginary). Everyday reality, that is – and here Zizek’s Althusserian background is apparent – is always ideological, continually trapping the subject in the process of interpellation. Set against this everyday world is ‘another world’, or at least another kind of thing altogether, the real. Zizek’s use of this term, like Lacan’s own, is more slippery. While generally the Zizekian real conforms to its conventional psychoanalytic definition as that which is unsymbolized and unsymbolizable, two particular senses of the term recur in Zizek, and it is these I wish to concentrate on in what follows. The real figures in his work as a particular ‘entity’ (though of course it cannot be quantified or delimited) existing ‘before’ the symbolic is imposed and prevailing all the while ‘behind’ it, at times emerging into it. More than just unsymbolizable, this conception of the real is best understood as the anti-symbolic, what doesn’t make sense. The real is the opposite of the symbolic order - precisely how ‘reality’ would ‘look’ had the symbolic not been imposed upon it, that is, a mass of inchoate matter, not divided up by signs. Zizek gives many examples from novels and films of how the real figures as a disturbing nothingness upsetting the stable (symbolic) universe of the characters and viewers or readers: the ‘grey and formless mist’ pulsing through the rolled-down car window in Robert Heinlein’s The
Unpleasant Profession of Jonathan Hoag (Zizek, 1991b, p.14) or the ‘loathsome, excremental, paste-like lump’ which stands in for food in the restaurant in Terry Gilliam’s Brazil (Zizek, 1999c, p.155). But the real also exists ‘within’ us, as it were, in the form of (the real of) our desire or our repressed experiences of trauma. In Looking Awry Zizek paraphrases one of his favourite parables, of Zuang-Zhi and the butterfly, by asking us to imagine a gentle bourgeois professor waking up disturbed after dreaming he was a murderer. What is truly disturbing about this, he says, is not that this is a gentle bourgeois professor dreaming he was a murderer, but a murderer dreaming he is a gentle bourgeois professor.

As soon as we take into account that it is precisely and only in dreams that we encounter the real of our desire, the whole accent radically shifts: our common everyday reality, the reality of the social universe in which we assume our usual roles of kind-hearted, decent people, turns out to be an illusion that rests on a certain “repression”, on overlooking the real of our desire. This social reality is then nothing but a fragile symbolic cobweb that can at any moment be torn aside by an intrusion of the real’ (Zizek, 1991b, pp.16-17).

Both main senses of the Zizekian real, then, portray it as a force which is constantly ready to pull against or puncture the logic of the symbolic. As a way of visualizing this relation, we can do no better than to think of the motionless, endlessly-suspended, two-dimensional world of Magritte’s paintings, where large ‘floating’ rocks and vapid clouds hang motionless on the landscape, and what we see through open windows is “blackness” and not the “colour black”.

Magritte’s work reminds us of the flimsy nature of all we have in the world, making us feel that everything could collapse and fold in on itself in a second, revealing the terrifying nothingness beneath. This is not a gratuitous reference, for Zizek’s reading of Lacan brings out what we might call its inherent surrealism. Lacan played a small part in the surrealist movement, of course; Zizek’s reading of his work (partly motivated, no doubt, by Zizek’s own eastern European sense of the absurd) suggests he never quite gave it up. In particular, much of the energy of Zizek’s work is derived from a fundamental surrealist
reversal which he never tires of pointing out: the real is unreal, and the unreal is real. The symbolic gets its name precisely because it is made up of things which stand in for real things. It is an arbitrary, contingent network built on thin air, but which nevertheless provides us with our destiny, our history, our very social reality, and regulates our desires. And, as Zizek continually points out, it is this illusory realm that we must experience as everyday reality. The impulse behind this observation is the same as the recent wave of Hollywood films like The Truman Show, Pleasantville and The Matrix which are about nothing less than the conspiracy of the symbolic itself. The hero of each film comes to realize that the world he inhabits, like our own late-Capitalist hyperreal one, is a false construction he has been duped into thinking is real. As the resistance fighter Morpheus puts it in The Matrix, ‘The Matrix is everywhere, it’s all around us, here even in this room. You can see it out your window, or your television. You feel it when you go to work, or go to church, or pay your taxes. It is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth.’ The real - or the ‘desert of the real’ as Morpheus calls it, quoting Baudrillard, the philosophical inspiration behind the film - gets its name because it is the opposite of this world of appearance. It is how things ‘really’ are, before the imposition of a network of arbitrary signs.

There is indeed something mad about this (not to mention madly Platonic), this existence in a world that is entirely illusory. But however absurd it is, as Zizek’s reference to repression indicates, entry into the symbolic and adherence to its rules is essential to normal subjectivity. The alternative is psychosis. For the normal Lacanian subject, language functions as a mediating force, brought on by the lesson in differentiation (between objects, between self and other) which is the Oedipal prohibition. As a result subjectivity is a matter of walking a precarious tightrope: not too close to the real, nor too closely identified with the signifier. The subject must recognise that s/he is neither the thing nor the name, but something in-between. In effect, a pact is agreed with the symbolic order: the subject promises to maintain faith in it as determiner of value and giver of meaning all the while recognising that the symbolic is symbolic - a word is never the thing it refers to. The
symbolic order, in other words, is a kind of conspiracy: exactly who is behind it is never clear, but there is a mass of people who collude in it to keep it going.

The psychotic is disturbed by the cover-up. S/he lacks the shared faith in the symbolic which others have: the agreement that certain things mean what we take them to mean simply because we’ve all entered into the pact. Language becomes dominated by the rule of foreclosure rather than the rule of repression, and in order to repair the subsequent damage caused by the lack of a key signifier from the symbolic structure, to fill the hole in the Other, the paranoiac ‘creates’ a delusion. Thus the psychotic never fully complies with the principle of symbolization: s/he mistakes the symbolic image for the real thing, s/he fails to subscribe to the Oedipal prohibition. The paranoid delusion is thus not a symptom of madness, but an attempt at a cure. It involves trying to rebuild the barrier between the real and reality by constructing a belief that the Other itself has an Other - a hidden figure pulling its strings, providing it with hidden meanings. In paranoia, the symbolic network of meanings is no longer arbitrary or contingent. This is why The Truman Show and The Matrix are variations on the classic conspiracy-film. Both feature an Other in the Other, whose existence represents for their heroes the ultimate paranoid nightmare and fantasy rolled into one - each hero is persecuted at the hands of a malign ‘other’, but also reassured by the hidden Other that existence is not contingent and arbitrary but necessary, plotted, and, what’s more, constructed entirely for his benefit.

Not that accepting the ‘normal’ principle of prohibition/mediation/repression is as simple as signing a contract. Zizek insists that the process of entering the symbolic involves the creation of a disturbing ‘leftover’, a surplus, a little ‘excremental’ piece of the real: object petit a, the cause of desire. Subjectivity provides us with an identity, but one which suits us like ill-fitting clothes. To paraphrase Lacan, there is always ‘in us, something more than us’ (Lacan, 1986, p.268). Our subject position can never be more than a symbolic ‘stand-in’, never completely inhabitable. This explains Lacan’s comment, often echoed by Zizek, that ‘a madman who believes himself to be a king is no more mad than a king who believes himself
to be a king - who, that is, identifies immediately with the mandate “king”’ (Zizek, 1989, p.25; Zizek, 1999c, p.274). Here Zizek’s acute sense of the absurd symbolic swindle again makes itself felt. He repeatedly characterizes the symbolic as a sclerotic, dead entity. As such it cannot recognise the element of the real, it can’t ‘see’ it; it ‘sees’ object a as merely a signifier among other signifiers, and cannot account for the subjective investment of libidinal energy in this surplus signifier. The real - in the form of the object of desire - is what prevents the subject being rendered immobile in the system like a fly caught in a spider’s web. To become a subject is to be confronted by a question continually posed by the Other, the question set out in Lacan’s graph of desire as the question ‘Che vuoi?’: ‘what does the Other want from me? What [as an object] am I for the Other, for his desire?’ And the crucial point is that the Other does not know the answer because it is also ‘structured around an impossible/traumatic kernel, around a central lack’:

Without this lack in the Other, the Other would be a closed structure and the only possibility open to the subject would be his radical alienation in the Other. So it is precisely this lack in the Other which enables the subject to achieve a kind of “de-alienation” called by Lacan separation: not in the sense that the subject experiences that now he is separated for ever from the object by the barrier of language, but that the object is separated from the Other itself, that the Other “hasn’t got it”, hasn’t got the final answer - that is to say, is in itself blocked, desiring; that there is also a desire of the Other. This lack in the Other gives the subject - so to speak - a breathing space, it enables him to avoid the total alienation in the signifier not by filling out his lack but by allowing him to identify himself, his own lack, with the lack in the Other’ (Zizek, 1989, p.122).

Subjectivity, then, according to Zizek, is founded upon a kind of ‘equivalence of lack’, a correspondence which allows the ‘normal’ subject to live. Zizek uses the late-Lacanian term sinthome to describe the kernel of each subject’s particular jouissance. Where the symptom is a coded message that can be deciphered, the sinthome is how we enjoy our unconscious by
investing an element of the symbolic with libidinal energy which changes it from something which makes sense in a discursive network into something meaningless, but which speaks of private jouissance: as Zizek puts it (exhibiting a characteristic anal expressiveness) it ‘turns the precious gift into a piece of shit’, i.e. transforms the symbolic into a piece of the real. Thus, for Zizek, the sinthome is what ‘functions as the ultimate support of the subject’s consistency, the point of “thou art that”, the point marking the dimension of “what is in the subject more than himself”’ (Zizek, 1991b, p.132). The sinthome ‘allows us to live’ because it animates aspects of the dead symbolic. It exerts a fascination in the subject precisely because of its status as foreign body at the heart of the symbolic network, its ‘utter stupidity [as] a meaningless fragment of the real’ (Zizek, 1991b, p.129).

This lack and the necessary madness it engenders is where Zizek’s version of the subject differs radically from poststructuralism. The key here is his understanding of the process Althusser calls ‘subjectivation’, the process by which the individual takes his or her place as a subject in the symbolic order. For poststructuralism, the subject is nothing in itself, its substance ‘determined by an exterior signifying network offering him the points of symbolic identification, conferring on him certain symbolic mandates’. Zizek, by contrast, argues that not only is the subject that which fills in the void or gap before subjectivation, but that gap itself (Zizek, 1999c, pp.158-9). This explains the value for Zizek of a Lacanian reading of the German Idealists. Kant, Hegel and Schelling were all preoccupied with ‘pre-ontology’, the movement from ‘not-Self’ to ‘Self’ which Zizek relates to the Lacanian ‘narrative’ of subjectivity. Becoming a self involves passing through a state of negativity, a ‘violent gesture of contraction that negates every being outside itself’ (Zizek, 1999c, p.34), before the mind imposes categories of reason and organizes the senses. This passage is what Hegel called the ‘Night of the World’ and Schelling called the ‘night of the Self’ or the ‘infinite lack of being’, but for Zizek it is nothing less than the Lacanian real, ‘the phantasmagorical, pre-symbolic domain’ (Zizek, 1999c, p.35), ‘the chaotic-psychotic universe of wild drives’ (Zizek, 1996, p.13). It is precisely at this point, he says, that we come
to ‘madness as a philosophical notion inherent to the very concept of subjectivity’ (Zizek, 1999c, p.34). Both Hegel and Schelling conceive of this passage through the real as madness, but one which is ‘ontologically necessary’:

Consequently, there is no subjectivity without this gesture of withdrawal; that is why Hegel is fully justified in inverting the standard question of how the fall-regression into madness is possible: the real question is, rather, how the subject is able to climb out of madness and reach “normality”. That is to say: the withdrawal-into-self, the cutting-off of the links to the environs, is followed by the construction of a symbolic universe which the subject projects on to reality as a kind of substitute-formation, destined to recompense us for the loss of the immediate, pre-symbolic Real. (Zizek, 1999c, pp.34-5)

In Hegel, in other words, Zizek finds a similar ‘reversal’ to his own. It is not possible to move from the real to the symbolic without the “mad” gesture of radical withdrawal from reality which opens up the space for its symbolic (re)constitution’ (Zizek, 1999c, p.35). And, as Zizek suggests (echoing Derrida’s reading of the ‘passage through radical madness’ in the cogito), it is precisely this withdrawal-into-self which occurs as part of the thought-process, through doubt to certainty, which led Decartes to the cogito.8

In Zizek’s account of subjectivation, then, the choice is really between two kinds of madness. The conspiracy of the symbolic is a justified conspiracy: we may be mad to believe in it, but we have to embrace this madness or a more constricting madness (psychosis) will result. Both kinds of madness are essentially two varieties of the same thing, for the normal subject’s projection of a symbolic universe onto reality to compensate for the loss of the real is the precise equivalent of the paranoid ‘healing’ process, whereby the disintegrated world is replaced by an alternative one:

If, therefore, in this precise sense - as Lacan put it - normality itself is a mode, a subspecies of psychosis - that is, if the difference between “normality” and madness is inherent to madness - of what, then, does this difference between the “mad”
(paranoiac) construction and the “normal” (social) construction of reality consist? Is “normality” ultimately merely a more “mediated” form of madness? (Zizek, 1999c, p.35).

The answer Zizek’s own work proffers is a firm yes. As Dali once said, ‘the only difference between me and a madman is that I’m not mad’. Where the psychotic has the paranoid delusion, the normal ‘mediated’ subject has the sinthome. The sinthome operates within us as a productive form of madness born of our necessary repression of the real. What is repressed prevails as an energy within us which pushes towards the nonsensical, the anti-symbolic, the void.

Conspiracy Theory: Poststructuralism, Ideology, Paranoia

We can see, then, what Zizek means when he declares that poststructuralism demonstrates ‘an unreadiness to come to terms with the truly traumatic core of the modern subject’ (Zizek, 1999a, p.xi) and why he himself celebrates it. By failing to take account of the unsymbolizable substance at its core poststructuralism bars itself and its version of the subject from the sinthome, or that necessary madness which sets in motion the whole process of desire. This accounts for the feeling of claustrophobic determinism surrounding poststructuralist subjectivity, its conviction that the subject is merely the effect of ‘language’, ‘power’, ‘desire’, ‘ideology’, whatever. The subject is incapable of freeing itself from the tyranny of the discursive network.

This constriction, this inability to look ‘beyond the signifier’ like Zizek’s Lacan, is something we can see perhaps most clearly if we consider the case of Althusser. Althusser’s famous definition of ideology as the imaginary ways we represent to ourselves our real conditions of existence is of course ‘Lacanian’ (and explicitly so) in that it assumes subjectivity is determined by the ideological ‘outside’ world in which we live and sustained by the ‘internal’ process of identification, whereby we misrecognise ourselves in external
images. But this only conforms to two of the familiar Lacanian ‘orders of existence’, the symbolic and the imaginary. A properly Lacanian definition would read: ‘the imaginary ways we represent to ourselves our symbolic conditions of existence’. What of the real? Without it, Althusser never moves beyond two forms of illusory construction - the imaginary and the symbolic. This gives him the advantage of being able to argue that ideology is material even though it is also imaginary, because it is embodied in symbolic state apparatuses. But without the real Althusser can give no sense of anything outside the imaginary transmutation of symbolic phenomena. And this absence of an outside space accounts for the strong sense of the paranoid about Althusser’s work. His innovation was to offer a theory of ideology which had ‘no history’ - quite an extraordinary move for a Marxist. Though he thought ideologies plural (like the church, the law, politics) were worth studying historically, he was more interested in a general theory of ideology, in which the phenomenon operates in a more mysterious way. Ideology is everywhere yet nowhere, it ‘has no outside’, he says, but at the same time ‘it is nothing but outside’ (Althusser, 1984, p.49). By perceiving ideology as an a-historical, all-pervasive force, one which is located in institutions but which we cannot see or grasp, it functions as a ‘hidden’ force pulling the strings of the symbolic. It is not surprising that such a theory should generate such a beautifully paranoid fiction as the famous scenario of interpellation, where a person on the street suddenly hears a voice calling him and no-one else - ‘a strange phenomenon ... which cannot be explained solely by “guilt feelings”, despite the large numbers who “have something on their consciousnesses”’ (Althusser, 1984, p.48 ). But what can explain it? Zizek points, as others have, to a central contradiction here, that if the process worked the way Althusser says it does the individual would have to already be a subject. How else could he, in the very act of recognising himself as a subject, simultaneously identify himself with a particular (guilty) subject position? Althusser is haunted by the ‘uncanny subject’, the one who exists before identification and subjectivation, and is the subject of a lack. By using the Lacanian imaginary to account for interpellation, his theory depends on precisely what Lacan saw as the paranoid organism par excellence, the
ego, the job of which is to swallow up threatening aspects of external reality and regurgitate
them as mirrors-images of oneself. Like Descartes, Althusser places the ego where the
subject should be, and overlooks its traumatic core. The result is that the Althusserian subject
is too static, too stable: interpellation fixes it in position and empties it of desire.

Now, there is a sense in which the attempt to think ideology is, by definition, a
paranoid exercise. The notion of ideology - indeed Marxism itself - is inextricably bound up
with the opposition between a false set of appearances or principles and the ‘real’ ones
behind. Moreover, the paranoid quality of Althusser’s theory (as opposed to his life, of
course, which is another matter altogether) is a large part of its attraction, for it gives a
convincing explanation, essential to Marxist thought, of how the system of production
replicates precisely the kind of people it needs to feed itself - ‘the interpellation of the
bodysnatchers’, we might say. But Althusser’s theory is severely compromised by its ‘lack of
a lack’. And what is crucial here is that this is not because of any paranoia inherent to his
theory, nor even because of its Marxism: it is because of its poststructuralism. Niall Lucy has
argued that theory itself is essentially ‘paranoid’ because, like paranoia, it is a ‘totalizing
discourse, a discourse with no “outside”’ in which ‘particular sense that might otherwise be
nonsensical outside the discourse seems valid’ and ‘seemingly irrational statements are
rationalized by the legitimacy of certain discourses’ (Lucy, 1997, pp.12-13). While Lucy’s
point could therefore apply to Zizek, whose own work depends upon a highly specialized
discourse, Zizek’s theory reiterates the importance of a place outside discourse. We can see
this from his approach to subjectivity, which illustrates that there is a ‘nothingness’ at the
heart of any ‘something’, an unsymbolizable kernel which cannot be grasped in itself, and is
visible only through its effects. The ambiguity which surrounds Zizek’s portrayal of this
element of the real as sometimes an empty space, a lack, and sometimes a hard kernel (which
implies a presence) serves to emphasize his wish to identify it without rendering it
completely knowable. More importantly, this traumatic element, the unsymbolizable
confrontation with the real, is what short-circuits an otherwise closed, paranoid system. But it is precisely this element which is poststructuralism’s ‘blind spot’, its ‘sublime object’.

Zizek makes this point, typically, by using a joke. A conscript sets out to avoid military service by pretending he is mad. His ‘madness’ takes the form of constantly picking up pieces of paper and exclaiming ‘That is not it!, That is not it!’.

Eventually the army psychiatrist, convinced by this performance, writes the conscript a warrant releasing him from service. On being presented with the warrant the conscript says ‘This is it!’. According to Zizek, this joke exemplifies the fact that the Lacanian object is an object produced by the signifying texture itself. It is a kind of object that came to exist as a result of all the fuss about it. The “mad” conscript pretends to look for something, and through his very search, through its repeated failure (“That is not it!”), he produces what he is looking for. The paradox, then, is that the process of searching itself produces the object which causes it: an exact parallel to Lacanian desire which produces his own object-cause’ (Zizek, 1989, pp.160-1).

Desire is not a matter of desire for a particular object, but because the lack in the symbolic triggers off the desire to find something. This is the traumatic core of the very notion of structure or discourse, in the sense that trauma is that which is unknowable except through its representations. Poststructuralism is so blinded by the dazzling effects of the trauma that it fails to see their source, wrongly attributing them to a transcendent master-signifier. This blind spot is evident in the Derridean statement ‘there is no metalanguage’. This can only make sense, Zizek contends, if it is taken literally: ‘all language is in a way an object-language: there is no language without object. Even when the language is apparently caught in a web of self-referential movement, even when it is apparently speaking only about itself, there is an objective, non-signifying “reference” to this movement’ (Zizek, 1989, p.158). This logic leads Zizek to see the poststructuralist interpretive procedure, as exemplified by deconstructive reading methods (and, we might add, ‘classical’ Lacan’s metonymic chain of desire), whereby meaning is constantly deferred along a chain of signifiers, never reaching an
endpoint, as an equivalent of modernist hermeneutics.\textsuperscript{10} He thus joins a number of critics who point to the relationship between modernism and paranoia.\textsuperscript{11} He suggests that in modernist films and literary texts the ‘object of desire’ (Zizek, 1992a, p.1) is absent, leading the reader into a kind of ‘interpretive delirium’ (Zizek, 1990, p.109). In postmodernist works, by contrast, the object of desire is made present, ensuring that we are confronted by the terrifying materialized emptiness around which the structure revolves, the hole in the Other (Zizek, 1991b, p.145). The clearest example of an appropriately eclectic selection (from Antonioni to Hitchcock and from Proust to Kafka) is perhaps Zizek’s speculation that a ‘postmodernization’ of Waiting for Godot would involve directly showing Godot himself: a ‘dumb guy who makes fun of us, who is, to say, exactly like us, someone who lives a futile life full of boredom and foolish pleasures - with the only difference that, by chance, not knowing it himself, he found himself at the place of the Thing’ (Zizek, 1990, p.107). Here we have the signifier as object a, a signifier otherwise just like all the others in the system, but which is somehow invested with the obscene energy of the real. Like modernism, poststructuralism fails to take account of this empty space beyond the symbolic, the motivating void.

Poststructuralism, then, brings to mind Freud’s comment in Totem and Taboo that a ‘paranoid delusion is a caricature of a philosophical system’ (Freud, 1985, p.130). If the Althusserian approach to ideology resembles paranoia, it is because poststructuralism as a discourse exhibits a ‘lack of a lack’ which, in Lacanian terms, is psychotic. By contrast, Zizek’s theory of ideology - perhaps the field in which he has been most widely influential - places the notion of the lack at its centre. It begins with the fairly Althusserian assumption that we take up our particular subject positions for the straightforward reason that we are ordered to by ‘a certain superego command: a “So be it!”’ issuing from the symbolic (Zizek, 1991b, p.18). But where there is no satisfactory explanation in Althusser for precisely how the Ideological State Apparatus becomes ‘internalized’ by the subject, Zizek offers a detailed account of how the subject colludes in its own subjugation. In short, we do it because we
enjoy it. Ideology, for Zizek, is not simply a ‘screen’ masking our reality, something we falsely experience as natural when in fact it is artificial, but the very support for our sense of reality itself. (He directs us towards ‘the fundamental Lacanian thesis that in the opposition between dream and reality, fantasy is on the side of reality’ [Zizek, 1989, p.44]). The subject takes on board the ideological injunction, but like any discourse emanating from the symbolic, this injunction contains a surplus, an excess of signification, something which means ‘more’ than it says: ‘there is always a residue, a leftover, a stain of traumatic irrationality and senselessness sticking to it’. Rather than preventing interpellation, however, it is precisely this ‘mad’ element – this ‘pathological stain’ (Zizek, 1991a, p.89) – which attracts the subject. Here we come to another of Zizek’s characteristic ‘reversals’: rather than being there to guard against the overflow of mad, transgressive desires, the law is itself mad and transgressive. ‘One does not have on one side a plurality of transgressions, perversions, aggressivities, etc., and on the other side a universal law which regulates, normalizes the cul-de-sac of transgressions and makes possible the pacific co-existence of subjects. The maddest thing is the other side of the appeasing Law itself, the law as a misunderstood, dumb injunction to enjoyment’ (Zizek, 1990, p.93). Interpellation thus provides a space into which the subject inserts his own private jouissance. Once again, in other words, Zizek is emphasizing the correspondence between the lack in the subject and the lack in the symbolic. The excessive aspect of the ideological command is an exact match for excessive element which gives the subject its consistency, the sinthome. Ideology, then, is something that itself yields enjoyment. This is why Zizek echoes Peter Sloterdijk’s work on knowingly false consciousness: even though we know that everyday reality is an ideological illusion, we still we take part as if we do not know (Zizek, 1989, p.32). We adhere to the Law because it appeals to our enjoyment. This is also why enjoyment needs to be taken into account as ‘a political factor’.12

The crucial factor which ties the sinthome to the kernel of jouissance in the symbolic is fantasy, another of Zizek’s key terms. As such fantasy is a kind of ‘double agent’ in the
ideological game, operating both in the pay of the big Other and simultaneously as an agent of resistance. Its function is to conceal ‘the fact that the Other, the symbolic order, is structured around some traumatic impossibility, around something which cannot be symbolized - i.e. the real of jouissance’ (Zizek, 1989, p.123). But it does so precisely because it covers over the traumatic core of the subject. This doubleness is visible in the way fantasy serves to conceal from the subject the true horror of the real - but in just such a way as to paradoxically draw attention to it. As an example Zizek thinks of the familiar safety rituals we are taken through on aeroplanes as they take off, and asks:

Aren’t they sustained by a fantasmatic scenario of how a possible plane-crash will look? After a gentle landing on water (miraculously, it is always supposed to happen on water!), each of the passengers puts on the life-jacket and, as on a beach toboggan, slides into the water and takes a swim, like a nice collective lagoon holiday experience under the guidance of an experienced swimming instructor (Zizek, 1999b, p.91).

In this scenario, the ideological illusion that we will be safe in the event of a plane crash is something we know is an illusion but still do anyway. We subscribe to the illusion because we also take an obscene enjoyment in it: the fantasy expresses the very thing, the horrible reality of a plane crash, which has been repressed, which cannot otherwise be symbolized. Thus fantasy serves to support symbolic (ideological) reality while also allowing the real of the subject’s desire to emerge in the imaginary.

Central to ideological interpellation, then, is the excessive madness in subjectivity, the central kernel which leads the subject to take enjoyment (‘enjoyed’) in what does not make sense. That Zizek refers to this as ‘beyond interpellation’ illustrates his determination to incorporate in his theory of ideology what Althusser’s notoriously lacks, any satisfactory account of how transgression or subversion occurs in the ideological framework. This suggests, of course, what motivates Zizek’s attempt to move beyond the ‘psychotic position’ in theory (one fixated on the signifier, treating the symbolic as a closed system) and why he
chooses to do so in such a paradoxical way, by embracing the ‘madness’ at the heart of the subject and at the heart of the symbolic. Zizek’s work has never let go of its materialist character. Even apparent excursions outside political theory, like the introductions to Lacanian theory or the Lacanian readings of Schelling, demonstrate a strongly post-Marxist slant. It is significant that Zizek should choose to pay homage to The Communist Manifesto in the playful opening to The Ticklish Subject rather than to any of the philosophers more obviously concerned with Cartesian subjectivity. Zizek is always faithful to Lacan, but this should never obscure the fact that he uses Lacan for an end which is more than just explication. Zizek is attracted by a fundamental freedom in the Lacanian conception of the subject, the gap before and in subjectivation, which Schelling called the ‘abyss of freedom’. Another of Zizek’s one-line statements of critical identity reads: ‘In contrast to the proponents of contingency and finitude, and also to the anti-realist misreading of Lacan’s thesis that truth has the structure of a fiction, I continue to adhere to the emancipatory pathos of universal truth’ (Zizek, 1999a, pp.ix-x). In his opposition and occasional hostility to poststructuralist theory and methodology (and those aspects of ‘postmodern’ philosophy, like Butler’s, which affirm the liberating potential of multiple subject positions [Zizek, 1999c, p.3, pp.247-312 passim]) Zizek’s work advances a criticism many of us feel should be directed at theorists who talk a good emancipation of the subject (i.e. by stressing the value of difference and undecideability in the discursive network in which it inhabits) but remain attached to a deterministic poststructuralist view of discourse and social agency. It has perhaps more reason to than most, given that its author’s work emerges against a background of the very real political traumas of recent Slovenian history. This is why Zizek’s reassertion of the romantic Idealist self is more radical than his historical predecessors’. He values the element of the irrational at the heart of the subject as a space beyond the symbolic, beyond interpellation. This is why he celebrates the core of madness in us all, why he - along with the ‘obscene superego’ - exhorts us to ‘enjoy your symptom!’
Terms like ‘trauma’, ‘emptiness’ and ‘madness’, then, are not to be read as negative in Zizek, but emerge from the particular kernel of jouissance which supports his own work. This is clear from his reading of another key pathological structure, hysteria (e.g. in Zizek, 1989, 1991a, 1991b). Trauma in the hysteric is induced by the attempt to deal with the disturbing surplus produced by subjectivation, which normal subjectivity copes with through the fantasy. Where the answer to the ‘Che vuoi?’ is normally arrived at through interpellation, supported by the fantasy, the hysteric turns the question back on the symbolic and asks, ‘why am I what you are saying I am? How can I be that subject?’ Such an eruption of desire is pathological, but has a subversive potential which is clearly attractive to Zizek: as he describes it, hysteria is ‘the subject’s way of resisting the prevailing, historically specified form of interpellation or symbolic indentification’ (Zizek, 1991a, p.101). It is perhaps not surprising that there should be something hysterical about Zizek’s breathless style and his reluctance to volunteer a particular label for his work. Lacan said that closest to the discourse of psychoanalysis was the third of his ‘four discourses’, the discourse of the hysteric; his aim was to hystericize psychoanalysis. Likewise Zizek hystericizes contemporary theory by forcing it to concentrate on the lack in the subject. That he does so by implying a trajectory which starts with psychosis, embraces trauma and celebrates hysteria, all in the name of freedom, is perhaps his funniest joke of all.

1 In a review of The Sublime Object of Ideology in Radical Philosophy, 57, Spring 1991. Zizek himself refers to this comment in a profoundly philosophical discussion of morality and fantasy in The Ticklish Subject, thus refusing to compromise Lecercle’s sense of identity (Zizek, 1999c, p.281 and p.309n44).

2 The fact that Zizek sets about this in a typically playful way, beginning The Ticklish Subject with a careful pastiche of the introduction to The Communist Manifesto, is a good example of his ‘postmodern’ style. It is a strategy reminiscent of the kind of ‘double-coding’ Umberto Eco sees as characteristic of postmodernism, where an extreme awareness of the ‘already-said’ ensures that we have to resort to irony to say what we mean. As Eco makes clear, however, this strategy is more of a necessary negotiation than an empty gesture, and does not mean the speaker cannot also be deadly serious. See Eco, 1985.

3 Zizek rarely cites specific Lacanian texts, but seems to be referring mainly to the seminars of a period beginning around 1964, with Seminar XI, through the important Seminar XX of 1973, Encore. However, in his article ‘The Undergrowth of Enjoyment’ (reproduced in The Zizek Reader pp.13-36), he suggests that a break between ‘standard’ and ‘late’ Lacan occurs as early as 1959-60, with Seminar VII, The Ethics of Psychoanalysis.

4 The quotation is from Magritte’s letter to André Bosmans, 29 Dec 1962 about ‘La lunette d’approche’ (1963), one of the paintings I have in mind. Others are ‘Le monde invisible’ (1954) and ‘Les origines du langage’ (1955).

©\Users\Brian\Dropbox\Portsmouth\PAPERS\WRITTEN\ZIZEK2.DOC
Interestingly enough, my two comparisons are brought together at the end of The Truman Show, when Truman’s boat reaches the limit of the gigantic studio in which his illusory world is created. The point of his yacht punctures the studio wall and his world suddenly looks two-dimensional: what had seemed to be the sea and sky stretching out in front of him is in fact a (strangely familiar) projection of clouds and sky onto the flat studio wall. Strangely familiar, because it’s difficult not to see this image as a kind of homage to Magritte, especially when a door opens at the top of a staircase revealing the familiar ‘blackness’ behind. The film ends as Truman walks into the real.

As Zizek points out, Lacan’s theory of foreclosure remained more or less consistent through the two -classical to late - phases of his teaching, with an important difference. In his early theory of psychosis it is a specific signifier, namely the Name-of-the-Father which is foreclosed; in the later formulation any symbolic structure (e.g. sexuality) ‘is structured around a certain void, it implies the foreclosure of a certain key-signifier’ (Zizek, 1989, p.73). In the psychotic, this foreclosed signifier returns in the real as symptom or sinthome.

For Althusser, subjectivation is always the result of the encounter with ideology. It works because the subject ‘colludes’ with the symbolic by internalizing, through the mechanism of the imaginary, the ideological rhetoric directed towards him or her via interpellation. As subjects, in other words, we are subjected because we subject ourselves, we only feel free and autonomous because we subscribe willingly to the Law. While Zizek is also interested in how we collude in the process of our own ideological subjugation through fantasy, he regards the process of interpellation, just like subjectivation, as much more complex (as we shall see).

It is also, Gigante argues, the equivalent of Zizek’s own withdrawal from his work, necessary for him to assert his critical identity (Gigante, 1998).

Of all critical theories, Marxist critique is the most suspicious (though there are other candidates, like psychoanalysis itself, as Paul Ricoeur has suggested). Like psychoanalysis, the function of Marxism - and post-Marxist traditions like cultural materialism and the New Historicism - is to look behind appearances, not to trust superficial signification. This finds its most paranoid articulation in the work of Pierre Macherey, which is full of resonant statements that wouldn’t look out of place in a 1970s conspiracy-film: ‘The text says what it does not say’, ‘the visible is merely the hidden in disguise’.

‘When we are confronted with any manifestation which someone has permitted us to see, we may ask: what is it meant to conceal?’ (Macherey, 1985, pp.86-7). Where Macherey is the most paranoid-sounding Marxist, Fredric Jameson is the Marxist most conscious of the paranoid logic of his theoretical position. Jameson has long been preoccupied with a peculiar form of the sublime which he calls the ‘world system; and there is a clear parallel between his attempt to pin it down and understand it as a total entity, and what occurs in the conspiracy-films he explores in The Geopolitical Aesthetic. The parallel between the two also leads to his notorious definition of conspiracy theory as the poor person’s cognitive mapping.

Deconstruction is a modernist procedure par excellence; it presents perhaps the most radical version of the logic of “unmasking”, whereby the very unity of the experience of meaning is conceived as the effect of signifying mechanisms, an effect that can take place only in so far as it ignores the textual movement that produced it’ (Zizek, 1991b, p.142). Zizek’s labelling of moves within theory with terms like ‘modernist’ and ‘postmodernist’ need to be approached with caution, as they’re not always consistent. To put it crudely, his work as a whole sets up an opposition between, on the one hand, modernism, structuralism, and poststructuralism, because of the shared emphasis on discourse, and on the other, late Lacan and the kind of postmodernism underscored by a foregrounding of the ‘obscene object’ and exemplified in a somewhat eccentric group of postmodernist authors like Hitchcock, David Lynch, and Kafka rather than postmodern theorists like Baudrillard or Butler.

E.g. Ihab Hassan and Brian McHale. The connection is developed further in Nicol, 1999.

What “holds together” a community most deeply is not so much identification with the Law that regulates the community’s normal everyday circuit, but rather identification with a specific form of transgression of the Law, of the Law’s suspension (in psychoanalytic terms, with a specific form of enjoyment)’ (Zizek, 1994, p.55). Particular groups - political, racial, cultural - are held together by common fantasies which support the particular ideological traps in which they are caught. For detailed expositions of this argument, see, as well as The Metastases of Enjoyment, The Sublime Object of Ideology, and For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor.