

BRAN NICOL

As If: Traversing the Fantasy in Žižek

Paragraph (Special Issue on Žižek), 24:2, 2001. pp.140-55.

One of the distinguishing features of Žižek's work is its capacity to be both predictable and original at the same time. It reads into culture and philosophy the same Lacanian structures, drawing the same conclusions. Yet it is precisely this overdetermination that allows him to see his examples as no one else has. Reading his books has been compared to using a CD ROM - 'click here, go there, use this fragment, that story or scene'(1) - an analogy which suggests that despite the enormous wealth of material Žižek explores throughout his work, the explorations are conducted in the name of an overall project which remains consistent in its theoretical basis and aims. There is also a standard interpretative procedure in his work: typically Žižek will introduce an object of attention (a philosophical idea, a social event, a film), tell us how it is usually interpreted, then bring it all into focus with an expert adjustment of the lens until suddenly we are 'looking awry' at the object. Then he explains that in fact this is nothing other than a precise exemplification of this or that process in Lacan.

Take his reading of The Silence of the Lambs, for example.(2) The film was a success worldwide due to its shocking depiction of the serial killer Hannibal (the 'Cannibal') Lecter, a supremely intelligent former psychiatrist who is also capable of extreme depravity, eating the entrails of those he murders. But for Žižek the horrific events depicted in the film are there only as a pretext for what lies at its core, which is nothing other than an accurate portrayal of a Lacanian analytic session. Clarice Starling comes to Lecter so that he might help her catch another serial killer currently on the loose, Buffalo Bill, who has just abducted another victim. Lecter agrees to help, on one condition - that she tell him about herself. Immediately she is reconstituted as psychoanalytic patient, Lecter her therapist. He swiftly

gets her to speak of the key event in her personal history, when her father's murder made her an orphan at the age of 10. In the next short session (he is a Lacanian analyst, after all) he extracts from her a primal scene as beautifully nightmarish and resonant as any in Freud. Forced to live with relatives on a sheep and horse ranch, the newly orphaned Clarice wakes up one night hearing a terrifying noise: the screaming of lambs as they are slaughtered. She rescues one and runs away, only to be caught soon after, her lamb killed with the rest. Lecter's diagnosis is devastating: 'You still wake up sometimes, don't you? You hear the screaming of the lambs, and you think that if you could save poor Catherine [Buffalo Bill's victim] you could make them stop, don't you? You think if Catherine lives, you won't wake up in the dark ever again, to that awful screaming of the lambs'. Clarice murmurs, unconvincingly, that she doesn't know. Lecter does. His diagnosis has propelled him to a state of epistemophilic bliss: 'Thank you, Clarice. Thank you'.

Our fascination with Lecter, Zizek argues, lies in his combination of unimaginable horror and boundless reason. As such he is the product of our simultaneous deep longing for a Lacanian analyst and inability to apprehend the powerful way Lacanian analysis will tear into our flimsy sense of individuality. Lecter's real cannibalism is his devouring of the very stuff of Clarice's being. Her primal scene is the 'fundamental fantasy', that which holds subjectivity together, covering up the real; her desire to stop the lambs from crying supports her symbolic identity, determining the course of her life, driving her on in her ambition to transcend her humble origins and become an FBI agent. Lecter's exposure of this fact, says Zizek, is in keeping with the ultimate function of Lacanian analysis: to enable the subject to 'traverse the fantasy' by disclosing the objet a, revealing what is in the subject more than the subject. There is one crucial difference, though: Lecter is not cruel enough to be a Lacanian analyst. He helps her track down Buffalo Bill, but 'in psychoanalysis, we must pay the analyst so that he or she will allow us to offer him or her our Dasein on a plate' (Zizek, 1994, 53).

This brilliant reading illustrates the fact that Zizek's project amounts to a strikingly original exercise in cultural studies. It conforms to the standard psychoanalytic approach to

cultural analysis, in that it suggests how unconscious processes challenge and motivate the surface meanings of culture. Yet where cultural studies tends to use the insights of theory to support its readings of contemporary culture (much more reductively than Zizek in fact), Zizek audaciously turns this relationship around, so that philosophy, psychoanalysis and political theory are interrogated by examples from art and culture (e.g. Richard II 'proves beyond any doubt that Shakespeare had read Lacan' [Zizek, 1991a, 9], everything you always wanted to know about Lacan can be asked of Hitchcock, and the inversion of Kant's categorical imperative is anticipated by the makers of German fat-free salami [Zizek, 1999a, 5]).(3) More importantly, though, behind his analysis of the film lies what is Zizek's fundamental aim: to present an accurate version of the complex constitution of the modern subject. The point of departure for his project is his conviction that we are witnessing, in postmodernity, a shift in the notion of subjectivity. This is most visible in cinema, which he has described as his equivalent of Freud's 'royal road' to the unconscious, for in 'ordinary commercial films [like The Silence of the Lambs] ...you can detect what goes on at the profoundest, most radical level of our symbolic identities and how we experience ourselves' (Lovink, 1995). But it is also central to postmodernist and poststructuralist theory (representatives of which, for Zizek, are Derrida, Butler, Deleuze and Foucault, among others). Postmodern practice and theory both assume a decline in the function of a monolithic paternal authority which dictates fixed subject positions and social practices. The result is that subjectivity is now envisaged as a liberating process of 'performativity', of continually reshaping and choosing alternative subject positions.(4) For Zizek this is too simplistic theoretically, for it fails to recognise - unlike Lacan, or the German Idealists whom he sees as anticipating Lacan - the extent to which the subject is formed and continues to be motivated by an powerful extradiscursive force, which he calls 'the truly traumatic core of the modern subject' (Zizek, 1999b, 9).(5) The perceived decline of the big Other figures, in other words, as postmodern theory's 'fundamental fantasy'. Throughout his work Zizek effectively plays Hannibal Lecter to postmodernism's Clarice Starling, taking it 'through the fantasy' by

reminding it that its version of the liberated subject is an illusion - one which, moreover, effectively plays into the hands of global capitalism and its rhetoric about our freedom to choose different identities and ways of life through consumption. Zizek aims to achieve this through a continuous exposition of the Lacanian conception of the subject which is married to a Marxist critique of political economy. Ultimately, his willingness to blend Marxism with Lacan means that Zizek is as generous as Hannibal Lecter, too, offering in return for exposing the postmodern fantasy of subjectivity an idea of how his alternative Lacanian version of the subject might service a Marxist commitment to emancipation.

At the end of the 1950s Lacan began to move away from the relation between the symbolic and the imaginary in favour of a sustained interrogation of the interplay between the symbolic and the real.⁽⁶⁾ This Lacan is Zizek's Lacan - the 'real' Lacan, we might say - and he expounds his ideas faithfully and imaginatively. But Zizek's own individual slant means that there are subtle but telling shifts of emphasis in his reading.⁽⁷⁾ His starting-point is the powerful narrative of loss and trauma that is the Lacanian account of subjectivization. The child passes from a period of satisfying, nourishing bodily contact with the mother's body, experienced as a state of excess and plenitude, to a position as speaking subject in the symbolic order. Zizek's understanding of the symbolic order is true to its Lacanian (which is to say its Saussurean) 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. The symbolic is, in short, our 'everyday reality' or culture. More than Lacan, though, Zizek emphasizes how it feels to live within this conceptual framework. The symbolic figures in his work (not surprisingly, perhaps, given his experiences of totalitarianism in Yugoslavia) as a kind of faceless bureaucratic system made up of inexplicable rules and regulations which we have no option but to follow.⁽⁸⁾ Its anonymity and vaguely sinister air is conveyed by its name, the Other, or 'the big Other'. One of Zizek's favourite points of reference is Kafka, and his work similarly conveys the sheer absurdity of our relationship with the symbolic order. It reminds us that the symbolic gets its name 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 regulates our desires and provides us with our destiny, our history, our very sense of reality. Everyday reality, in other words, is always ideological - the subject is forever trapped in the process of interpellation, coaxed by the various apparatuses of the state into taking their places in the social order (and if they won't be coaxed, it forces them). Althusser's theory was heavily influenced by Lacan's conception of the imaginary, the realm in which we falsely experience ourselves as whole beings through a process of misrecognising ourselves in external images and in others. We misrecognise ourselves in ideology so that we believe our subject position is natural or perfectly suited to who we take ourselves to be. And like both theorists Zizek holds that our symbolic identity is supported and sustained by the imaginary (though he prefers to focus on just one imaginary mechanism, fantasy). Being a subject is an absurd, though quite necessary, experience of being held in place by two kinds of illusory force: the big Other and the distorting, falsifying framework of the imaginary.

Set against the everyday world made up of symbolic and imaginary, however, is 'another world', or at least another kind of thing altogether, the real, that which is unsymbolized and unsymbolizable. We can think of the Lacanian real by pointing to its operation in two main spheres, the 'physical' and the 'psychic', which are not separate but two different aspects of the same phenomenon (not unlike Spinoza's two modes of substance, 'Extension' and 'Thought'). To begin with, the real functions in the external world, as it were. The symbolic order is drawn from Saussure's idea of the way sign-systems divide up the world into distinct entities. Physical experience is always mediated through a conceptual framework: we have direct access to the phenomenal world through our bodies (we come into physical contact with the objects that surround us) but can only make sense of things through language. In its simplest sense Lacan's real is the material world we are cut off from after entering the symbolic, but which is all the time there, 'beneath' the symbolic. In a more complex and more crucial sense, the real also signifies the bodily drives which are regulated by the symbolic. The second sphere in which the real functions is in internal psychic space.

This incorporates the pre-imaginary period of blissful plenitude in the relationship with the mother - an aspect of the real which is continually referred to by the imaginary and by desire, but which can be reproduced by neither. This real also includes the experience of trauma, which also refers to the pre-imaginary state by returning us to the helpless, speechless state of earliest childhood, and to death, the final triumph of the real which puts an end to meaning and the subject. Both uses of the real are relevant to Zizek. But most important to him are the implications of each sense of the term. More than simply that which is 'covered' by the symbolic, 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 matter all merged into one total block, not divided up by signs, like the 'grey and formless mist, pulsing slowly as if with inchoate life' outside the car window in Robert Heinlein's sci-fi novel The Unpleasant Profession of Jonathan Hoag (Zizek, 1991a, 14). This reminds us why the real gets its name. It is the opposite of the symbolic world of appearance, how things 'really' are, before the imposition of an artificial network of arbitrary signs. This is something that the subject has an instinctive awareness of. We sense that the symbolic is artificial and we sense that the real is constantly there, ready to stretch the logic of the symbolic to breaking-point or puncture its flimsy structure. Even though the symbolic is a sham, this is not necessarily cause to rejoice, for we cannot pursue an authentic independent identity without it. Nevertheless our apprehension of an anarchic other place where meaning breaks down is the powerful motivating force beyond all others in our lives. It is also the key to popular culture, which draws its energies from the same tension.

At the heart of Zizek's work, then, is the idea that both our identity and culture are failed attempts to organize an essentially archaic core into a system. Both are founded upon and motivated by a central void, or lack. It is this element which Zizek believes is central to the philosophical tradition that begins with Descartes and continues through the work of German Idealism from Kant to Hegel, where subjectivity is founded upon an element of excess - Hegel's 'Night of the World' - which is then immediately 'renormalized'. The

symbolic order gives an individual identity by providing him or her with a subject position, a linguistic 'point of reference'. But it never accounts for who we really are. The symbolic coordinates which give us our social identity can only circulate around, never represent the lack at the centre. It is this which Zizek calls the 'truly traumatic core of the modern subject' (Zizek, 1999b, xi) and which is overlooked, he thinks, by the poststructuralist or postmodernist conviction that the subject is always merely the effect of language, power, desire, ideology, whatever. Similarly the cultural world in which we inhabit is a symbolic frame which only roughly equates to the real, in the way that a map relates to geographical reality without quite covering it. And the crucial point for Zizek is that the void at the heart of the subject is correlative of the void at the heart of the symbolic. The link is manifested principally in moments of jouissance, the Lacanian term Zizek translates as 'enjoyment' (thereby investing the term with a more of a connotation of power). Enjoyment is a kind of excessive pleasure - so excessive in fact that, paradoxically, it becomes painful - which transgresses the prohibitions of the symbolic. It features in several different ways in the life of the subject: through the neurotic symptom, which the subject 'enjoys' because it provides a certain satisfaction (as well as suffering), in the unsymbolizable moment of sexual orgasm, a physical space beyond language, and in the ultimate enjoyment forbidden by the Oedipus complex, incest with the mother. Zizek's use of the term is more general, referring to those moments when intense pleasure is taken in the collapse of the symbolic, those points when meaning breaks down. He often describes this with a pun: 'enjoy-meant'.

Enjoyment is crucial to understanding the symbiotic relationship between the subject and culture. Because both are motivated by the 'hard kernel of the real' (one of Zizek's favourite phrases, perhaps because it recalls Lenin's description of the 'rational kernel' of Hegelian dialectic) at their core, the subject seeks out aspects of his world which exposes the gaps in the otherwise 'closed system' of the symbolic order. More specifically this involves taking particular objects and investing them with a personalized libidinal energy. In the 'eyes' of the symbolic, 'stupid' and sclerotic, all objects are of equal value, in the Saussurean sense

of language having 'no positive terms'. Yet our quest for enjoyment means that we refuse to see some things - and what these are varies from subject to subject - as equal to others. They become elements of the real, evidence of the void in both the subject and culture. Zizek calls the object which we invest with private enjoyment in this way objet petit a, Lacan's term for the way our unconscious bestows on particular objects, other people, certain kinds of voice and gaze, the psychic significance of the ultimate lost object (lost, that is, in the real), the mother's body. As an example Zizek uses Patricia Highsmith's story, 'The Black House', in which an old delapidated house unaccountably becomes the source of the fears of a group of people in the town. This, he suggests, demonstrates how 'a quite ordinary, everyday object... starts to function as a kind of screen, an empty space on which the subject projects the fantasies that support his desire, a surplus of the real that propels us to narrate again and again our first traumatic encounters with jouissance' (Zizek, 1991a, 133).

This reading of objet a, the object which motivates our desire and which cannot be accounted for by the symbolic, explains the title of Zizek's The Sublime Object of Ideology.⁽⁹⁾ Published in 1989 this book was Zizek's breakthrough work, his first to reach a wide European and Anglo-American readership. His intervention in the theory of ideology is, arguably, the aspect of his work which remains the most influential across the widest range of academic disciplines. Ideology was famously defined by Althusser as 'the imaginary ways we represent to ourselves our real conditions of existence'.⁽¹⁰⁾ While Zizek's apprehension of the illusory nature of everyday reality is strongly reminiscent of Althusser he differs by insisting that the illusions of the cultural world are motivated by what it cannot represent or account for, the real. Another way of putting this is to say that Zizek's work on ideology shows that Althusser's definition of ideology depends on only two of Lacan's three orders of existence: those imaginary ways we relate to symbolic reality. What of the real? Without it, Althusser never moves beyond two forms of illusory construction - the imaginary and the symbolic. Zizek's revision of Althusser (though he never puts it like this) might read: 'Ideology is the

imaginary ways we represent to ourselves our symbolic conditions of existence thereby covering up the disturbing nature of the real'.

For Žižek ideology is nothing less than the way we cope with the truth that subjectivity and social reality are each constructed around a traumatic void. Ideology is thus much more complex than Marxist critique has hitherto realized. When we take into account the real, Žižek says, 'it is no longer sufficient to denounce the "artificial" character of the ideological experience, to demonstrate the way the object experienced by ideology as "natural" and "given" is effectively a discursive construction, a result of a network of symbolic overdetermination' (Žižek, 1991a, 129). Žižek thus complicates two key tenets of ideology critique, the notion that ideology is a particular kind of discourse, and the idea that there is an alternative 'reality' behind the false one maintained by ideology. Ideology does preserve a false version of reality, but behind it is the real, a realm beyond signification, not another symbolic order. The key to Žižek's argument is the Lacanian conception of fantasy, defined by Lacan as 'the relation of the barred subject to the objet a'. The function of fantasy is to fill the void created by the real. It creates a space, a kind of blank screen on which the subject's desires can be projected. In this way, fantasy realizes desire - not in the sense of satisfying it, but by bringing it out in the open, giving it a shape. And this is precisely what ideology does. One of the most striking aspects of Žižek's theory of ideology is his insistence that, though it might seem otherwise, fantasy serves to support ideology rather than challenge it. It is natural to think of fantasy as an escape into a realm of wish-fulfillment, divorced from reality, but Žižek emphasizes that reality actually depends upon subscribing to the fantasy. This accounts for another revision of Althusser's theory. Many readers of his work have pointed out that Althusser does not satisfactorily explain why the subject is so willing to be interpellated. Žižek suggests that it is because there is something fundamentally attractive about ideology which goes beyond its content. We sense the symbolic order is a purely bureaucratic mechanism designed to keep us in our subject positions. We also intuitively apprehend the real is beneath it all the while. Fantasy is what enables us to cover up this

knowledge and continue to function as normal subjects, to continue to make life 'meaningful' in the symbolic.

Zizek demonstrates that there is a characteristic doubleness about ideology. The ideological fantasy manages to cover up the real and persuade us to accept the logic of the symbolic, but by doing so draws attention to the fact that the real is what the symbolic order is built upon and is continually ready to shatter it. One of his best examples concerns the familiar safety rituals we are taken through on aeroplanes as they take off. He 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, 1999c, 91).(11)

In this scenario, the fantasy enables us to imagine that we will be safe in the event of a plane crash, even though we know perfectly well this is unlikely to be the case. Thus, the fantasy simultaneously covers up the real and draws attention to it. It expresses the very thing, the horrible reality of a plane crash, which has been repressed, which cannot otherwise be symbolized. The mechanism works on a more explicitly political level, too. In Looking Awry Zizek gives a reading of two films which portray persecutory totalitarian worlds, Terry Gilliam's Brazil and Rainer Fassbinder's Lili Marleen. Each film is named after the popular song which resounds throughout, and which functions in two contradictory ways: as a support for the prevailing totalitarian order, a kind of signature-tune for the dominant ideology, making it all seem unified and attractive, but also as a 'fragment of the signifier permeated with idiotic enjoyment'. Each song is 'on the verge of transforming itself into a subversive element that could burst from the very ideological machine by which it is supported' (Zizek, 1991a, 129). Brazil ends with the apparent defeat of its hero, who has been broken by savage torture, only for him to escape his oppressors by whistling 'Brazil'.

Zizek's theory of the ideological fantasy suggests how complex and powerful our relationship with ideology is. Ideology isn't something that cleverly tricks us, making us believe in something we don't. Rather it is effective precisely because it acknowledges what it cannot explain, and because it appeals to precisely the same sense of 'enjoy-meant' which threatens to blow it apart. Generally speaking, the theory of ideology before Zizek suggested that we conformed because we didn't know what we were really doing. Zizek - influenced here by the work of the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk(12) - argues that ideology is more a matter of knowing what we do is false but still doing it anyway, just as we know that the lagoon scenario acted out by stewardesses is unlikely to save us in a plane crash but still go along with it. Ideology is something that itself yields enjoyment, we adhere to the Law because it appeals to our enjoyment. This is also why Zizek thinks any theory of contemporary politics or society needs to take account of 'enjoyment as a political factor'. In a number of books (For They Know Not What They Do, The Metastases of Enjoyment and The Sublime Object of Ideology) Zizek explores the role played by enjoyment and the fantasy in oppressive elements of our culture, like totalitarian régimes and racist and homophobic groups. Such communities are held together, he suggests, by the fact that the Law promises a kind of enjoyment as much as it prohibits it. This relationship is secured through the fantasies they share (about, say, the figure of the Jew) which serve both sides of the Law: order and transgression. Zizek's writings on culture and ideology demonstrate how late capitalism - always supported by its 'familiar', 'liberal democracy' - sustains its dominant position by ensuring that the subject colludes in his/her own subjugation. The idea of knowing what we're doing but still doing it anyway can explain what Sloterdijk calls the 'cynical reasoning' evident in postmodern culture. Nowadays, we all know that presidents lie, yet we still support them. We know that advertisers exaggerate the value of their products, yet we still buy them. More than previous forms, postmodern ideology continually flaunts its own ideological operations: post-ironic advertising draws attention to the whole sham of advertising and its

own hyperbole, TV generates endless programs based on the out-take, or what goes on behind the scenes.(13)

All this suggests why it is problematic to equate this knowingness with liberation. In 'You May!', an article recently published in the London Review of Books (particularly interesting because it is a more deliberately accessible statement of the aims of his project), Zizek surveys what he sees as evidence of the dominant attitude of 'reflexiveness' in the postmodern permissive society. In the apparent absence of the symbolic order to instruct us in our social behaviour, 'all our impulses, from sexual orientation to ethnic belonging, are more and more experienced as matters of choice' (Zizek, 1999a, 1): one can choose how to be seduced, how to rewrite one's psychological history, how to be racist. Even psychoanalytic symptoms have 'lost their innocence', and are shaped according to the subject's knowledge of psychoanalytic theory (Zizek, 1999a, 2). This means that the law no longer operates via repression and the imposition of a strict social hierarchy, but effectively sponsors our acts of transgression, demanding that we 'Enjoy!'. Zizek's argument is to emphasize, firstly, that although on the face of it something has changed in the nature of our relation to the big Other, beneath the surface things are still the same. The apparent endorsement of our transgressive acts by the Other only creates new guilts and anxieties: 'Our postmodern reflexive society which seems hedonistic and permissive is actually saturated with rules and regulations which are intended to serve our well-being (restrictions on smoking and eating, rules against sexual harassment)' (Zizek, 1999a, 5). With the demise of one kind of adherence to the law comes another in its place. The second aspect of his argument is to wonder: if the law regulates our enjoyment, where is the potential for subversion?

The value of the Cartesian and Idealist subject is that it is, in Lacanian terms, properly hysterical. The outcome of the Lacanian narrative of subjectivization is that the subject is 'hystericized' by the process: aware that he or she is being compelled to act in a certain way because of the desire of an inscrutable Other. Entering the symbolic order is a matter of being conscripted to a continual process of questioning: what does the Other want

me to be? How can I satisfy the desire of the Other? This accounts for what Lacan calls the 'existential value' of the neurotic, its repeated staging of questions that have no answer in the symbolic.(14) In particular, the hysteric throws the Other's question (the Che vuoi?) back at it: why am I what you say I am? Hysterical discourse testifies to the surplus of the process of symbolization, motivated by that within the subject which cannot be symbolized and is therefore disturbingly 'left over', becoming a spectral presence haunting intersubjective relations in the symbolic, thus highlighting the ill-fitting nature of the link between symbolic and real (Zizek, 1991a, 131). By contrast the postmodern conception of subjectivity has the structure of 'perversion', where the subject is aware of precisely what the Other wants and readily turns itself into the required object of desire, offering itself up for the enjoyment of the Other. Perversion means that jouissance is derived from identification with the law rather than challenging the law. Thus Zizek gives a standard Marxist form of social analysis a pathological twist (a move which is reminiscent of the Frankfurt School, in particular the notion of 'repressive desublimation'): 'containment' is reformulated as perversion, 'subversion' is equivalent to hysteria. Zizek has often described hysteria in Marxist terms, pointing out that 'hysteria/history is more than a trivial word game - hysteria is the subject's way of resisting the prevailing, historically specified form of interpellation or symbolic identification' (Zizek, 1991b, 101).(15)

Zizek affirms, in other words, that hysteria is both 'normal' and valuable. Here we return to the question of his repetitiveness. The hysterical nature of subjectivity is something which is implied more often than it is stated in Zizek, as time and again he highlights the same process at work in culture and philosophy which exemplifies the failure of the symbolic to account adequately for the subject and its implications. His discussion of The Silence of the Lambs, for example, is followed by a demonstration that Magritte's paintings are all variations on the same process - moments when the disturbing nothingness of the real intrudes into the otherwise stable symbolic universe: 'reality is never given in its totality; there is always a void gaping in its midst, filled out by monstrous apparitions' (Zizek, 1994,

57). He concludes: 'It would be possible for us to continue ad infinitum with the variations generated by [this] elementary matrix' (Zizek, 1994, 57). No reader familiar with Zizek's work would doubt this statement for a minute. For the exposure of the 'elementary matrix' upon which all culture and thought is founded is the interpretative strategy at the very core of Zizek's work. But the procedure is in fact so ubiquitous that it seems to exceed the uses to which it is put, taking its place in the foreground where the object of study should be, just as when we notice the extraordinary death's head in The Ambassadors (which proves beyond doubt, of course, that Holbein read The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis) we can't look at it in the same way again. The result is that Zizek's interpretative methodology has a rhetoric all of its own. Its value is that it powerfully defamiliarizes our sense of social reality, suggesting that there is something fundamentally absurd and static about our position in society. But it also implies that culture is doomed to repeat the same processes endlessly, because it is founded upon a structure which is transcendent and unalterable. And this has serious implications for Zizek's Marxist critique of political economy, which by definition argues for change.

Zizek occupies a rather paradoxical position for a Marxist. His aim to 're-hystericize' the subject, to return it to its questioning function, has an obvious correlation with his stated commitment to emancipation (in his prefaces to The Zizek Reader and The Ticklish Subject). But where Marxist 'ideology critique' is, as a rule, geared towards demystifying ideology in order to achieve some kind of greater awareness which can contribute to social change, so deeply rooted in the psychic structure is Zizek's idea of the fantasy that there can be no change: we cannot deal in any other way with the void at the heart of ourselves. Ideology, in other words, is not just inevitable, but valuable, because without it we would lapse into neurosis or even psychosis. The implication of his analysis of contemporary culture is that exposing the fantasies which glue our being together might enable us to traverse them. But this is problematic, and not only because it brings us up against the familiar difficulty with psychoanalytic attempts to transpose the personal onto the collective - who would be the

equivalent of the analyst? Zizek's notion of the ideological fantasy does not suggest it is a pathological symptom in the psyche of the subject: it is perfectly normal. Time and again he explains how our experience of social reality depends upon 'a certain as if': 'we act as if we believe in the almightiness of bureaucracy, as if the President incarnates the Will of the People, as if the Party expresses the objective interest of the working class'. But he also reminds us that if we don't act in this way 'the very texture of the social field disintegrates' (Zizek, 1989, 36) - and this is an outcome of a quite different order to political revolution. Perhaps there is a note of anxiety in all the compulsive energy of Zizek's project: he brilliantly unmask the workings of ideology as if we can overthrow them, but is only too aware that this is impossible. Alternatively, this might well be the source of a certain critical jouissance we can detect in his continual affirmation of the unassailable quality of the big Other. In this respect Zizek himself shifts between the hysterical and the perverse positions in his theory: exposing the fragile status of the big Other by questioning it, while also investing in its ultimate status as the Law. Zizek's very method of exposing the ideological mechanism, in other words, reinforces its inevitability. The paradox bears a certain similarity to Baudrillard's critique of Marxism in The Mirror of Production, that it depends upon precisely the same ideology (the idea of self-production) as the late-capitalist political economy it claims to deconstruct.⁽¹⁶⁾ Zizek's ubiquitous interpretative mechanism functions as the mirror of the transcendent processes he identifies at the heart of culture. We might even see its status in Zizek's work as the equivalent of the fundamental fantasy at the core of the individual, supporting his very identity as a theorist. Like Clarice Starling, who thinks she need only rescue one more victim and the lambs will stop crying, it is as if Zizek imagines he need give us just one more example of the traumatic encounter with the real and the dominance of the Big Other will be exposed and overthrown.⁽¹⁷⁾ This, as Hannibal Lecter might say, is no more than a fantasy.