Conversations with
Žižek

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Introduction: Risking the Impossible

Glyn Daly

An anecdote by Lacan recounts a chance remark made by Freud to Jung. Following an invitation from Clark University, the two psychoanalysts travelled to the United States and upon arrival in New York harbour Freud gestured towards the Statue of Liberty and said, 'They don't realize that we're bringing them the plague'. In today's world we might say something similar about Žižek. That is to say, in the context of the platitudes and triteness of a predominantly postmodern culture Žižek represents the philosophical equivalent of a virulent plague or perhaps, to update the metaphor, a computer virus whose purpose is to disrupt the comfortable appearances of what might be called the matrix of globalliberal-capitalism. Continuing in a certain Cartesian tradition, what Žižek infects us with is a fundamental doubt about the very presuppositions of our social reality. But this is merely the starting point of a much wider ethico-political engagement with a radical emancipatory universalism; one that is capable of taking on the increasingly prohibitive nature of contemporary capitalism and its corresponding forms of political correctness and 'multiculturalism'.[1]

Žižek's work has been at the forefront of philosophical, political and cultural debate for more than a decade. From the theory of ideology to the critique of subjectivity, ethics,

globalization, cyberspace, film studies, cognitivism, theology, music and opera, Žižek's influence extends far and wide and his interventions continue to provoke controversy and to transform the way we think about these and other topics. To pick up a text by Žižek is to be confronted with a heady mix of elements: bold propositions, bravura of style and an intellectual audaciousness that does not flinch from moving between the heights of conceptual abstractions and the seemingly base and voluptuary aspects of popular and sensuous life. The latter however is not simply an exercise in cerebral pyrotechnics but aims at something more precise. Indeed, we might characterize Žižek's discourse as an ongoing demonstration of the inextricable connection between what might be called the levels of the divine, or eternal, and our immediate lived realities. From Kant to cunnilingus Žižek seeks to remind us that, in the Hegelian sense, the spirit is always a bone and that we cannot separate the most intimate of physical experiences from their transcendental dimensions.

It would be futile to try and summarize the work of someone who is without doubt one of the most prolific and prodigious thinkers of our age. In this brief introduction I will instead focus on certain fundamental themes that run throughout Žižek's thought and elaborate these in the context of his more recent, and ongoing, interventions in philosophico-cultural and political life.

The constitutive madness of being

The Žižekian paradigm – if we can speak of it in those terms – draws its vitality from two main philosophical sources: German idealism and psychoanalysis. In both cases, Žižek's central concern is with a certain failure/excess in the order of being. In German idealism this aspect is made increasingly explicit through reference to what can be called an unaccountable 'madness' that is inherent to, and

constitutive of, *cogito* and subjectivity as such. For Kant this is the dimension of 'diabolical Evil' while for Schelling and Hegel it is the 'night of the self' and the 'night of the world' respectively. The point is that, in each of these cases, there is an increasing emphasis on negativity as the fundamental (and ineradicable) background to all being.

As Žižek makes clear in *The Ticklish Subject,* what German idealism accomplishes is a displacement of the usual opposition between the idea of the savage 'pre-human' self and the symbolic universe of 'civiliZed' human subjectivity (where in the Enlightenment tradition the latter is identified with the Light of Reason and as something which affects an ultimate mastery, or pacification, over the former). Instead, what is affirmed is a view of subjectivity that can only come into being as a passage through madness; as an ongoing attempt to impose a symbolic integrity against the everpresent threat of disintegration and negativity (Žižek, 1999: 34–41).

In psychoanalysis this thematic aspect of dislocated subjectivity is developed further in respect of the Freudian notion of death drive. Death drive emerges precisely as a result of this gap in the order of being – a gap that simultaneously designates the radical autonomy of the subject – and is something that constantly threatens to sabotage or overwhelm the symbolic framework of subjectivity. In Freud the category of death is not simply a cancellation but refers rather to the (immortal) dimension in subjectivity that persists beyond mere existence or biological life. As Žižek puts it: 'Human life is never "just life," it is always sustained by an excess of life' (Žižek, 2001: 104). This excess of life is death drive. And it is in the context of the latter that both Freud and (especially) Lacan identify the peculiarly human motivation in regard to *jouissance:* that is, a basic compulsion to enjoy; to achieve

consummate satisfaction and thereby heal the gap, or 'wound', in the order of being.

The human condition is marked by an eternal and impossible attempt to bring about some sort of resolution to this drive; a paradoxical drive to resolve drive as such. In this way, drive becomes attached to certain 'objects of excess' (the ideal experience, lifestyle, possession etc.) – Lacan's *objets petit a* – that hold the promise of, at least partial, fulfilment but which can never fully deliver it in a once-and-for-all way. The *objets petit a* exist in a permanent state of displacement and are always elsewhere.[2]

It is in these terms that Žižek insists on a Lacanian reading of the subject. In certain post-structuralist and deconstructivist circles – where the emphasis is on a notion of multiple-being that is always provisionally configured within sliding planes of *différance* – the idea of the subject has become rather unfashionable as it allegedly conjures up the image of a unified Cartesian identity or some kind of centre to subjectivity. But as Žižek has consistently stressed, the subject is neither a substantial entity nor a specific locus. Rather, the subject exists as an eternal dimension of resistance-excess towards all forms of subjectivation (or what Althusser would call interpellation). The subject is a basic constitutive void that drives subjectivation but which cannot ultimately be filled out by it (Žižek, 1990: 254). It is simultaneously the lack and the leftover in all forms of subjectivation. This is why the Lacanian mark for the subject is $ (the 'barred', empty subject). The subject cannot find its 'name' in the symbolic order or achieve full ontological identity. Using Lacan's expression, the subject always remains as a 'bone stuck in the throat of the signifier'. And insofar as the subject is linked with the radical negativity of the death drive it also reflects the same kind of tension identified in German idealism. Thus the subject is both the movement away from subjectivation – the excess that

engulfs symbolic coherence in an entropic night of the world – and the very drive towards subjectivation as a way of escaping such a condition (Žižek, 1999: 159). In this sense identification is always structured in terms of a certain being-towards-madness.

A scene from Scott's *Bladerunner* provides a useful example. Using the 'voigt-kampff' machine, Deckard (Harrison Ford) interrogates Rachel (Sean Young) at the Tyrell Corporation in order to test her empathic responses and thereby to establish whether she is truly human or a manufactured 'replicant'. Rachel's answers are slick and sure-fire and indicate well-rounded subjectivation. The final question, however, leaves Rachel floundering in a state of confusion as she cannot find a point of positive identification (in the symbolic order) and the machine registers a chilling wipe-out – the void of $. What is compelling about the scene is that, far from separating Rachel (and the other replicants) from 'us', it serves to underscore her human condition as a being whose subjectivation is prone to failure and negative distortion. It is precisely this malfunctioning element (the bone stuck in the symbolic order) that confers human status. Thus what is masked in this projection of failure on to Rachel is the traumatic knowledge that it is 'us' who cannot resolve the question of 'who am I?' in an ultimate sense or completely fill out the void of $.

At the same time, it is through this very resistance-excess towards subjectivation – and the consequent drive to resolve impossible questions concerning identity, destiny, divinity and so on – that human beings are essentially open to the possibility of developing new forms of subjectivation. In this way, the subject is both the transcendental condition of possibility and impossibility for all forms of contingent subjectivation.

And it is interesting to see how the subject persists even more obstinately in the context of today's attempts to either

eradicate or supersede it. Two examples are informative here. In deconstructionist philosophy, Derrida has tended to reject the idea of the subject in favour of a conception of subjectivity that is based on a kind of ephemeral decisionism (the multiform processes of becoming/unbecoming) that cannot find an ultimate edge. In support of this, Derrida refers to Kierkegaard and his famous assertion that 'the moment of the decision is the moment of madness'. From a Lacanian perspective, however, it is precisely this moment of madness that marks the constitutive dimension of the subject.

In biogenetics, by contrast, there is now the capability of determining the human genome and our basic DNA coordinates. Yet it is precisely at this point of total disclosure that the mystery deepens and we are drawn more and more into confrontation with the very incapacity to represent or resolve the gap between subjectivation and that which constantly overflows it: death drive and its characteristic forms of animus, impulsion, desire and so on. Far from capturing the essence of the human being, a paradoxical result of biogenetics is that it brings us into increasing proximity with the very 'inhuman' excesses that are constitutive of humanity as such – the Lacanian 'in us more than us' – and which testify to the ineradicable nature of the subject.

Dimensions of the Real

Through a widening analysis of death drive and the various aspects of negativity that are inherent to being, the later Lacan advanced his crucial generic formulation of the Real. Under the leadership of J.-A. Miller, the concept of the Real has been at the centre of the Paris-based 'new school of psychoanalysis' in which Žižek has played a key role.

Lacan identifies the Real in relation to two other basic dimensions – the symbolic and the imaginary – and together

these constitute the triadic (Borromean) structure of all being. For Lacan, what we call 'reality' is articulated through signification (the symbolic) and the characteristic patterning of images (the imaginary). Strictly speaking both the symbolic and the imaginary function within the order of signification. As with Einstein's 'general' and 'special' theory of relativity, the imaginary may be regarded as a special case of signification. What differentiates them is that while the symbolic is in principle open-ended, the imaginary seeks to domesticate this open-endedness through the imposition of a fantasmatic landscape that is peculiar to each individual. In other words, the imaginary arrests the symbolic around certain fundamental fantasies. As an illustration of this, Žižek (1993:48–9) takes the relationship between Hannibal Lecter (Anthony Hopkins) and Clarice Starling (Jodie Foster) at the centre of Demme's film, *The Silence of the Lambs.* In a close approximation to a Lacanian psychoanalyst, what Lecter seeks to discover is the specific way in which the symbolic universe of Starling is structured (in tendential terms at least) around a fundamental fantasy – the crying of the lambs and the failed attempt to rescue one of them. The point is that Starling makes sense of her world (she is able to narrate symbolically 'who she is' for the Other) precisely through a certain arresting fantasy at the level of the imaginary. In this way, the fantasy-imaginary dimension is drawn into focus at those (nodal) points where we expect to be taken most seriously in respect of the mythical narration of who we *really* are ('it was in that moment that I knew I wanted to be …').

The Real, by contrast, does not belong to the (symbolic-imaginary) order of signification but is precisely that which negates the latter; that which cannot be incorporated within such an order. The Real persists as an eternal dimension of lack and every symbolic-imaginary construction exists as a certain historical answer to that basic lack. The Real always

functions in such a way that it imposes limits of negation on any signifying (discursive) order and yet – through the very imposition of such limits – it serves simultaneously to constitute such an order. The Real in this sense is strictly inherent to signification: it is both the unsurpassable horizon of negativity for any system of signification and its very condition of possibility.

While the Real, by definition, cannot be directly represented, it can nonetheless be alluded to in certain figurative embodiments of horror-excess. In Žižek's famous example, it is alluded to in the monster from Scott's film, *Alien,* whose blood literally dissolves the fabric of reality (Žižek, 1989: 78–9). And just as the unity of the protagonists in this film is constituted against the threat of the Alien, so reality itself is always constructed as an attempt to establish a basic consistency against the disintegrative effects of the Real. Just as being may be understood as being-towards-madness, reality is always reality-towards-the-Real. Every form of (symbolic-imaginary) reality exists as an impossible attempt to escape the various manifestations of the Real that threatens disintegration of one kind or another: trauma, loss, anxiety and so on.

In Žižek's early works the Real tended to be characterized in terms of some kind of force of negation (the Alien, the Medusa's head, forces of nature and so on). In the later works, however – e.g. *The Ticklish Subject, The Fragile Absolute* and *On Belief* – Žižek has been concerned to emphasize the more subtle dimensions of the Real. Thus the Real does not simply function as an external (hard) limit to signification, it also plays a more intangible role on providing a certain invisible-immanent twist that gives shape and texture to reality. Taking an analogy from art, this intangible Real could be said to function like the 'vanishing point': i.e. something that cannot be represented but which is nonetheless constitutive of representation.[3] In quantum

physics, by contrast, the Real would be the curvature space: something that cannot be dimensionally determined but which creates the conditions of possibility for dimensionality as such. Or, if we take Luhmann's systems theory, the Real is present in terms of the constitutive paradox whereby a system is able to establish its forms of internal coherence and unity only insofar as it cannot systematize its own principles of constitution.[4] The point is that the Real should not be identified exclusively as an explicit force of negation; it also plays a more implicit and evanescent role in the construction of our everyday forms of social reality.

It is in this context that Žižek has engaged in a certain 'deconstruction' of the real-symbolic-imaginary triad, such that each of these terms should be regarded as fractally integrated or mapped onto each other. In the case of the Real then we have the real Real, the symbolic Real and the imaginary Real (Žižek, 2001: 82–3). The real Real is the shattering experience of negation (the meteors, monsters and maelstroms of trauma). The symbolic Real, by contrast, refers to the anonymous codes and/or structures (vanishing points, space curvature, scientific formulae and so on) that are meaningless in themselves and simply function as the basic abstract 'texture' onto which (or out of which) reality is constituted. Žižek argues that in the contemporary era it is capital itself that establishes the essential backdrop to reality and which, therefore, may be regarded as the symbolic Real of our times (Žižek, 1999: 222; 276). In this way the new cyber stockmarkets – with their constant digital output – can be seen to function as a kind of oracular network of sacred information that in an abstract indifferent way determines the fate of the Enrons, the Worldcoms and entire national and international markets.

Finally we have the imaginary Real in which again there is an emphasis on an invisible-immanent twist that gives structure and specificity to the imaginary realm. The

(imaginary) dream landscape is a clear example of this. In dreams there is often a sense of infinite possibility. However, where one encounters a particular image of horror-excess (an immanent marker of the Real) – where the dream turns into a nightmare – there is an immediate compulsion to turn away and escape back into reality; to wake up. These immanent markers of the Real establish a kind of 'cartography' of the imaginary realm.

This is also what gives cyberspace (the postmodern digitalized imaginary) its ambiguity. The celebrationist (Gnostic) view of cyberspace is that of a free-floating universe, impervious to the Real, where identities can be manipulated and fantasies played out. Yet cyberspace can also function as the very medium that brings us into proximity with our most intimate fears and anxieties: fetishistic/morbid obsessions; fascination-repugnance towards certain sexual/social practices; an insufferable association with Otherness ('I might be like them') and so on. To put it in the vernacular, there is always the possibility of clicking on a window too far; one that sends us rebounding back towards everyday reality in order to avoid confrontation with those markers of the Real, of traumatic excess, that are inherent to the imaginary. It is this theme of attempting to escape back into reality that is explored in some of the more intelligent films in the horror genre: *Jacob's Ladder, Flatliners,* the Freddie Krueger *Nightmare* series and so on.

Yet it is not simply at the level of cinema and cyberspace that the imaginary Real is experienced. The tragedy of 11 September 2001 can also be looked at from this perspective (Žižek, 2002). In a way we could say that, especially for Americans, the trauma was doubly inscribed. First there was the cataclysmic event itself but, second, there was this dimension of the imaginary Real in which popular fantasies regarding the orgiastic destruction of New York (viz.

Independence Day, Godzilla, Deep Impact to name but a few) seemed to erupt through to reality – and thereby to render meaningless any escape back to reality. In this way the trauma of 11 September was intensified precisely as a result of this transdimensional breach; this transgression of the subliminal injunction that fantasies should 'stay there' and not pursue us.

Ideology and the status of the impossible

It is in the light of this more subtle perspective on the Real that Žižek has also revised his approach to the question of ideology. In *The Sublime Object of Ideology,Žižek* developed his famous inversion of the classical 'false consciousness' thesis. Thus ideology does not conceal or distort an underlying reality (human nature, social interests etc.) but rather reality itself cannot be reproduced without ideological mystification (Žižek, 1989: 28). What ideology offers is the symbolic construction of reality – the ultimate fantasy – as a way to escape the traumatic effects of the Real. Reality is always a 'virtual' take on the Real; a virtualization that can never fully overcome the Real or achieve homeostasis. In the language of Laclau and Mouffe, this means that Society as an integrated unity is universally impossible precisely because of the constitutive excess of the Real qua the unmasterable negativity upon which every positivization finally depends.

And it is here that ideology performs its supreme conjuring trick. What ideology aims at is a fantasmatic re-staging of the encounter with the Real in such a way that the impossibility of Society is translated into the theft of society by some historical Other. In Nazi ideology, for example, it is the contingent figure of the Jew who is made directly responsible for the theft/sabotage of social harmony – thereby concealing the traumatic fact that social harmony never existed and that it is an inherent impossibility (1989:

125–7; 1993: 203–4). By imputing the status of the Real to a particular Other, the dream of holistic fulfilment – through the elimination, expulsion or suppression of the Other – is thereby sustained.

More recently, however, Žižek has developed a new twist to this perspective. Ideology not only constructs a certain image of fulfilment (Plato's City of Reason, the Aryan Community, multiculturalist harmony etc.), it also endeavours to regulate a certain distance from it.[5] On the one hand we have the ideological fantasy of being reconciled with the Thing (of total fulfilment), but, on the other, with the built-in proviso that we do not come too close to it. The (Lacanian) reason for this is clear: if you come too close to the Thing then it either shatters/evaporates (like the frescoes in Fellini's *Roma)* or it provokes unbearable anxiety and psychical disintegration.

Crucial here is the status of the category of the impossible. For Žižek impossibility is not the kind of neutral category that we tend to find in Laclau and Mouffe (as in their impossibility-of-Society thesis) where it tends to connote a basic constitutive frontier of antagonism. Like the immanent markers of the Real, impossibility gets caught up in ideology and is configured in such a way that it both structures reality and determines the coordinates of what is actually possible. As Žižek argues in this book, beyond the prima facie ideological operation of translating impossibility into an external obstacle there is a further deeper stage to the operation: that is, the 'very elevation of something into impossibility as a means of postponing or avoiding encountering it'. Ideology is the impossible dream not simply in terms of overcoming impossibility but in terms of sustaining that impossibility in an acceptable way. That is to say, the idea of overcoming is sustained as a deferred moment of reconciliation without having to go through the pain of overcoming as such.

The central issue is one of proximity; of maintaining a critical distance by keeping the Thing in focus (like the image on a screen) but without coming so close that it begins to distort and decompose. A typical example would be that of someone who fantasizes about an ideal object (a sexual partner, promotion, retirement etc.) and when they actually encounter the object, they are confronted with the Real of their fantasy; the object loses its ideality. The (ideological) trick, therefore, is to keep the object at a certain distance in order to sustain the satisfaction derived from the fantasy 'if only I had *x* I could fulfil my dream'. Ideology regulates this fantasmatic distance in order to, as it were, avoid the Real in the impossible: i.e. the traumatic aspects involved in any real (impossible) change.

This allows for a more nuanced reading of ideologies. Let us take the case of an international crisis: the so-called 'liberation of Kuwait' during the 1990s Gulf conflict. Here the ideological discourse tended to operate along the following lines: 'we must achieve the liberation of Kuwait… while recognizing that any true liberation (i.e. abolishing Kuwait's feudal dynasty and setting up democratic structures) is currently impossible.' And do we not have something similar with the so-called New World Order? Any real (or indeed Real) attempt to establish such an order would inevitably require traumatic far-reaching changes: global democracy based on universal rights, popular participation, the eradication of poverty and social exclusion (etc.) as part of a genuine 'reflexive modernization'. However, what we actually have is the routine invocation of the New World Order in terms of an indefinite ideal that functions precisely as a way of preventing any real movement towards it. In the Kantian terms of the sublime, any convergence with what might be called the Bush–Blair 'axis of Good' would become an unbearable evil. So we have the same type of ideological supplement at work: 'we are moving towards a New World