Did Somebody Say Ideology?
## Table of Contents

Introduction .............................................................................................................. 1

Part I. Philosophy, Psychoanalysis, Politics

Chapter One  ............................................................................................................. 8
Rex Butler and Scott Stephens
Capital’s Second Death: On Opera and Economics

Chapter Two ........................................................................................................... 21
Jodi Dean
Fascism, Stalinism, and the Organization of Enjoyment

Chapter Three ..................................................................................................... 41
Adrian Johnston
From the Spectacular Act to the Vanishing Act: Badiou, Žižek, and the Politics of Lacanian Theory

Chapter Four ......................................................................................................... 78
Ceren Özselçuk and Yahya M. Madra
Economy, Surplus, Politics: Some Questions on Slavoj Žižek’s Political Economy Critique of Capitalism

Chapter Five ....................................................................................................... 108
Marc De Kesel
Transcendental Confusion: Žižekian Criticism and Lacanian Theory

Chapter Six ....................................................................................................... 134
Dany Nobus
Beware of the Anacoluthon! On Žižek’s Ideology

Part II. Žižek in Context

Chapter One .......................................................................................................... 146
Heiko Feldner
Žižek versus Foucault
Table of Contents

Chapter Two .....................................................................................................178
Sis Matthé
“La blessure guérit, mais la marque reste”: Exploring the Lack of History in the Work of Alain Badiou

Chapter Three ...................................................................................................200
Frank Vande Veire
Beyond Value Itself: Deconstruction and the Fantasy of Capitalism

Chapter Four ....................................................................................................219
jan jagodzinski
Putting Filmic Art into the Abyss of Freedom: Truman’s Act of Redemption

Chapter Five .....................................................................................................237
Sean Homer
Nationalism, Ideology and Balkan Cinema: Re-reading Kusturica’s Underground

Chapter Six .......................................................................................................250
Fabio Vighi
Sexual difference in and out of European cinema: Žižek as a reader of Truffaut

Contributors .....................................................................................................277
INTRODUCTION

This volume comes almost two decades after Slavoj Žižek emerged on the international scene of contemporary philosophy and critical theory with his path-breaking *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989). If there is a time to take stock of the impact and overall significance of his thought, it is probably now. The publication in 2006 of *The Parallax View*, his latest summative work after the hugely influential *The Ticklish Subject* (1999), marks a point in his intellectual production that demands critical assessment.

When we planned a conference on Žižek’s theory of ideology and its potential applications, from which the present volume ensued, our aim was to focus on what we perceived as the distinguishing feature in his work. Žižek’s critique of ideology represents an innovative philosophical venture for a great number of reasons, some of which we hope have been unravelled in the pages of this book. The novelty of Žižek’s approach to ideology must first and foremost be attributed to the Lacanian method that informs his writing. Whether or not his understanding of Lacanian theory reflects fully the intended message of that theory is in this context of little consequence. In fact, the claim that Žižek would exercise an excessive twist over Lacanian concepts misses not only the key Žižekian point about “active intervention” into the work of a given author but also one of the fundamental tenets of Lacanian psychoanalysis itself, namely that interpretation must gather the courage to attempt to touch the Real (i.e. the disavowed unconscious underside) that always-already (su)stains every communicative act. For Žižek, reading Lacan implies precisely this effort to reach the implicit and at least partly disavowed presuppositions of his psychoanalytic enterprise, in the persuasion that such an effort is what the whole edifice of Lacan’s work effectively enjoins us to realise. What comes ever more to the fore in Žižek’s recent works is precisely this conviction that the lesson of Lacanian psychoanalysis lies in locating the repressed nucleus of a given text.

And where does the originality of Žižek’s brand of ideology critique lie if not in the knowledge that “everything” (since, in Žižek’s Marxist understanding, ideology moulds every aspect of our lives) depends on the “excluded part of no part”, the “little piece of the Real” that, despite its apparent insignificance or negligibility, magically sets up the necessary illusion that reality is ordered and at least minimally consistent? After all, the two main merits of Žižek’s psychoanalytic branch of ideology critique have been, on the one hand, that of introducing a theory capable of uncovering the dynamics responsible for the
opening up of the space filled in by ideology (since the first and crucial question is not “what is the content of ideology?”, but “how does ideological space emerge”); and on the other hand, a consequence of this first move, that of making manifest how a successful process of ideologisation relies on an invisible and yet crucial breach, an act of exclusion whereby part of the content is relegated to an enigmatic, “obscene” domain accessible only through enjoyment, Lacan’s jouissance. The truly ground-breaking move is in fact to be found in the Žižekian identification of ideology proper with the symptomatic hard kernel of Real jouissance that, albeit often unnoticed or mistaken for something else, pervades the ideological field and sustains it. The “Copernican turn” inaugurated by Žižek’s intervention in the arena of contemporary theory is captured in his reiterated claim that the ultimate substance of ideology coincides with “little jolts of enjoyment”. Such an assertion does not mean, of course, that we should neglect the practice of analytical enquiry into the specific contents of different ideological formations (the goal of traditional ideology critique). What it tells us, rather, is that these enquiries risk to remain mere contemplative exercises if they are not accompanied by an investigation of a different kind which targets the foundational act of radical displacement that splits open the universe of ideology. Only such an investigation allows us to locate the disjunction between the socio-symbolic order and the Real of enjoyment to which this order is anchored, and by which it is constantly, if obscurely, penetrated.

In what may seem to amount to a paradox, then, Žižek’s theory of ideology effectively adumbrates practical political consequences through his fundamental formalism, its stubborn insistence on the formal cut that both configures the ideological edifice and reminds us of its potential breakdown. More specifically, the power and irresistible vitality of Žižek’s writing spring from his desire to invest fully and uncompromisingly in what is generally excluded from academic discourse: the “dark” continent of enjoyment. It is impossible not to notice, when reading Žižek, that he makes no attempt to hide the excessive pleasure he derives from writing. His lesson is, first and foremost, the lesson of drive, of the compulsion to repeat endlessly a gesture that can only bring about enjoyment indirectly, tangentially, in the shape of that “mucuous stuff” that Lacan once saw through Freud’s eyes looking into Irma’s throat. In trying not to avoid the pervasive presence of jouissance, Žižek effectively shows us how to look at ideology. If anything, this book is a testament to that lesson.

As anticipated, the present volume reflects a felicitous two-day exchange among Žižek critics and aficionados staged as an academic conference. It is divided into two parts. The first part contains six essays exploring the theoretical, political and psychoanalytic foundations of the Slovenian
philosopher’s work, while the second practices Žižek’s own injunction about Lacan (“discover Lacanian themes everywhere!”) on Žižek himself, thus attempting to read his theories with other thinkers and through a number of different disciplines.

In the opening article, Rex Butler and Scott Stephens explore Žižek’s “passionate attachment” to opera (more specifically, Wagner) by articulating an argument concerning the conditions of possibility of Žižek’s philosophical thought. In their view, the secret presupposition of Žižek’s theoretical system lies in the coincidence between modern philosophy and capitalism, insofar as one cannot be posited without the other. The very space of metaphysical thinking to which Žižek owes allegiance was opened up by the advent of capitalism and commodity fetishism. From capitalism, the authors then proceed to discuss Žižek’s idiosyncratic view of Stalinism, exploring Žižek’s claim that it does not imply a break with capitalism but a relation of continuity.

The political theme is explored further by Jodi Dean, who in her essay focuses on Žižek’s differentiation between Fascism and Stalinism against the backdrop of his trademark notion of political enjoyment. Dean argues that, in stark contrast to liberal perspectives, Žižek’s critique of totalitarianism addresses the horrors of Stalinism in order to create a space for the recovery of the aspirations for justice and solidarity intrinsic in socialism. In highlighting the crucial place occupied by the notion of class-struggle in Žižek’s work, Dean discusses Nazism and Stalinism from the Lacanian point of view of the four discourses, those of Master, Hysteric, University, and Analyst.

Concentrating on Žižek’s theorisation of revolutionary intervention, in the following essay Adrian Johnston stages an encounter between Žižek and Alain Badiou in connection with the Lacanian notion of the act. Johnston argues that the Badiouian event and the Žižekian act both essentially entail positing a “parallax” gap (to put it in Žižek’s vernacular) between, on the one hand, actions stuck within the slow-moving inertia of status quo realities, and, on the other hand, acts/events suddenly irrupting within a static scene with the consequence of setting in motion traumatic trajectories of transformation. In Johnston’s view, however, this drastic dichotomy is questionable and problematic. After outlining aspects of Žižek’s recent engagements with Badiou, his paper examines the Lacanian concept of the act as it unfolds across the full span of Lacan’s teachings. The aim is twofold: first, to evaluate Žižek’s employment of this concept in his political thought; and, second, to use this re-reading of Lacan as a platform for proposing a model of change other than that offered by the common features shared between the Badiouian event and the Žižekian act.

Bringing back the focus on the critique of capitalism, Yahya M. Madra and Ceren Özselçuk reflect on Žižek’s analysis of the relationship between
jouissance and capitalist reproduction. On the one hand, they develop the Žižekian insight that all social organizations of class are structured around a foundational, constitutive lack, i.e. the impossibility of class relations. On the other hand, they address the question of how to conceptualise a psychoanalytically-informed notion of economic difference connected with the concept of class. They maintain that Žižek's analysis falls short of the crucial distinction between surplus labour and surplus value, thus failing to equate the circuit of capital with an accumulation drive. Žižek's critique therefore misses the opportunity to theorise economic contingency and economic difference – more precisely, difference from capitalism. By recovering Marx's focus on the different forms of surplus labour and by shifting the lens of psychoanalytic theory from consumption/exchange to the moments of production, appropriation, and distribution, the authors also propose to understand class difference in terms of sexual difference.

Part one ends with Dany Nobus' psychoanalytic reading of Žižek's concept of ideology, understood as a description of the fantasmatic yet formative principle that guarantees the consistency of our social space. Nobus claims that the centrality of fantasy in Žižek's branch of ideology critique should first of all alert us as to the seriousness of Žižek's enterprise. In a nutshell, can we really take him seriously? Drawing on a number of apparently contradictory passages in Žižek's work, as well as on his own personal encounters with the Slovene, Nobus emphasises how the role of fantasy in ideology entails a "seriously playful, or playfully serious configuration of sorts". He concludes with a Žižekian joke, suggesting that what structures social reality is not necessarily a "deep sense of meaning" but rather "a series of carefully crafted pieces of nonesense".

Part two takes off with three explorations of Žižek's relationship to the works of Foucault, Badiou and Derrida. To begin with, Heiko Feldner's essay argues that by unmasking reality as a contingent discursive fiction Foucauldian criticism has only deconstructed the world in different ways; the point, however, would be to discern the Real in what seems to be mere discursive fiction, and to change it. Taking Foucault's "peculiar historicism" and his notion of the positive unconscious as a starting point, Feldner shows the extent to which Žižek's theoretical choices are preferable to Foucault's in our endeavour to imagine, account for and effect political change.

Sis Matthé's contribution examines a number of questions concerning the status of contemporary historical theory by comparing Alain Badiou's and Slavoj Žižek's rejections of postmodern historicist relativism. While arguing for the need to re-ontologise historical thought, Matthé emphasises how the very concept of history can only be fully vindicated by bringing it in line with the question of historical change. In this respect, Alain Badiou's work cannot be
ignored. Focusing more on change than on time, Badiou is particularly useful in conceptualising the connection between lack, historicity, and change. While Žižek’s understanding of the discrepancy between historicism and historicity has much in common with Badiou’s, Matthé claims that the differences between the two thinkers’ positions are equally relevant.

Exploring the theoretical underpinnings of Derrida’s *Spectres of Marx*, and especially his interpretation of Marx’s theory of the fetish character of the commodity in *Capital*, Frank Vande Veire turns to Žižek’s critique of deconstruction in the attempt to clarify what is wrong with Derrida’s “Marxism”. He conflates Derrida’s theory of spectrality with his notion of *différance* to unravel how Derrida, despite acknowledging the close formal link between spectrality/différance and capitalism, fails to bring his intuition to full fruition, therefore missing the opportunity to adapt a transcendental theory of spectrality to the specific spectrality that qualifies capitalism. It is here that Žižek, rejecting the Derridean ethical prohibition to ontologise the spectre, begs to differ.

In his paper on Peter Weir’s film *The Truman Show* (1998), Jan Jagodzinski takes as a starting point Žižek’s reading of Schelling’s aesthetics, which is based on the idea that art proper exposes the chaotic primordial vortex of the Real covered by the veil of fantasy. Jagodzinski argues that *The Truman Show* is exemplary as a self-reflexive narrative fulfilling Žižek’s claim about the transformative potential of “true art”. More generally, he claims that by transforming spectatorship into forms of witnessing film harbours the potential to reveal the falsity of fantasy. Drawing specifically on Walter Benjamin’s messianic Marxism and Žižek’s engagement with it, this essay finally aims to explore the extent to which Truman’s final “escape” into freedom can be read as a revolutionary event.

Sean Homer surveys Žižek’s critique of ethnic nationalism in the former Yugoslavia by discussing his scathing attack on Western liberal/leftist readings of the cinematic production of Balkan directors such as Emir Kusturica and Milcho Manchevski. While he is sympathetic to Žižek’s reading of ethnic nationalism in terms of the necessity to find a “third way” between the dictate of NATO and the endorsement of nationalist politics, Homer finds the critique of the Western gaze on Balkan cinema problematic for a number of reasons. First, it reads film simply as an ideology text rather than a filmic text, failing, for example, to address those aspects of Kusturica’s *Underground* (1995) that draw attention to its status as a film and document of historical reconstruction. Second, Žižek overlooks questions concerning the reception of the text. Finally, he does not take into account the site of production of his own discourse, that is to say, the position of Slovene intellectuals in the mid-90s in relation to an emerging Slovene national identity.
In the final essay of the book, Fabio Vighi brings together Žižek’s reading of Lacan’s theory of sexual difference and film to explore the key Žižekian question of the correlation between the Symbolic and the Real. Drawing particularly on Žižek’s claim that the Real is to be found in the illusion itself rather than behind its veil, the essay shows how the study of cinema can provide the necessary framework to unravel the mechanisms that sustain symbolic representation and its inherent fractures. The argument is developed specifically through a critical appraisal of the Žižekian theme of sexual difference, which is first analysed theoretically and then applied to the cinema of François Truffaut, with additional references to a number of prominent European directors.

Fabio Vighi and Heiko Feldner
Cardiff, May 2007
PART I:
PHILOSOPHY, PSYCHOANALYSIS, POLITICS
Surprisingly, Slavoj Žižek has recently stated that *Opera’s Second Death*, his 2002 collaboration with Mladen Dolar, is the “closest to me out of all of my work”. This is a strangely revealing moment for a writer as guarded as Žižek, but it nonetheless begs the question: Why? Why of all the books that Žižek has written on major political and philosophical issues is this one (devoted primarily to Wagner and not to his more readily identifiable sources, Hegel and Lacan) the closest to him? In order to answer this question, we must first of all ask: What does Žižek mean by opera’s “second death”? And how does this “second death” apply particularly to Wagner? The meaning of opera’s “first death” – which refers, of course, to its birth: as Žižek puts it, opera was still-born from the beginning – is clear enough. It is the fact that opera involves a certain arresting or binding of the libidinal life-force of music by the suturing of the voice. But the sense of its “second death” remains a little more enigmatic. Žižek, at least in the first instance, invokes the second Viennese School of such composers as Schoenberg, Berg and others, in whose operas synchronous harmony is displaced into the melodic line. The effect is the erasure of singing proper, and in its place the voice as just another instrument. With opera’s second death, therefore, we no longer have the *sense* of the voice, as we do after its first death, but the jouissance of noise (at least the noise of the instruments themselves, no longer understood as mere accompaniment to the voice or as part of some overall harmony). We might even say that, if opera begins with a negation – its first death as a kind of symbolic cut into the imaginary of melody – it ends with a negation of negation – the entry of the Real into the symbolic.

In fact, without explicitly acknowledging it, Žižek replays here certain crucial aspects of Hegel’s argument in his *Aesthetics*. For Hegel, Romanticism – of which, of course, Wagner is a key musical example – is marked by the introduc-
tion of a kind of *noise* into art. We suddenly become aware of the form of the work, as distinct from its content. As a result, with Romanticism, the medium of art becomes newly historical. The artist no longer creates unconsciously within a received tradition, but consciously attempts to reflect upon that tradition, achieve some critical distance towards it, in effect choose the particular form their expression will take. That is, with Romanticism, a kind of gap opens up between form and content, or we might say between form and itself. Due to the interiority of this new aesthetic moment, every form becomes arbitrary, threatening to interpose itself between the content and its audience by failing to render Spirit palpable. Indeed, Hegel even says that music is the only medium in which Spirit (pure content) can be given adequate expression, for it alone is able to get rid of form – that is, expose the essential arbitrariness of form – and thus become Subject. As he writes:

> The negativity into which the vibrating material enters here is on one side the cancelling of the spatial situation, a cancellation cancelled again by the reaction of the body, therefore the expression of this double-negation, i.e., sound, is an externality which in its coming-to-be is annihilated again by its very existence, and it vanishes of itself. Owing to this double negation of externality, implicit in the principle of sound, inner subjectivity corresponds to it because the resounding… gives up this more ideal existence also and therefore becomes a mode of expression adequate to the inner life (Hegel 1975, 890-91; see also 1970, 136-38).

The unique character of music is thus that it enacts formally, materially, that most obscure and speculative of Hegelian notions: *the negation of negation*. In a first moment, there is the negation of silence (understood spatially as stasis) by vibration or movement. Then this vibration itself is negated by the resumption of silence. The crucial point, however, is that the character of this silence is now changed, having been transposed into affect: “Its expression likewise does not produce an object *persisting* in space, but shows through its free unstable soaring that it is a communication which, instead of having stability on its own account, is carried by the inner subjective life, and is to exist for that life alone” (Hegel 1975, 891-2).

Hegel thus provides us with an important insight into what Žižek might be aiming at in his association of Wagner with a “second death” of opera. The usual conception of opera as merely the formal oscillation of voice and music (the effect of which is meaning or sense) is shattered by the extraordinary series of cries that punctuate Wagnerian opera, from Brangäne’s piercing shriek at the end of Act II of *Tristan and Isolde* to Kundry’s blood-curdling scream at the beginning of Act II of *Parsifal*. These cries effectively reverse the conventional relationship between silence and noise (of silence as that vacuous space which is then filled up with noise, as seen in something like John Cage’s infamous Si-
In one of the most perceptive analyses of this unique phenomenon in Wagnerian opera, Michel Poizat remarks concerning Kundry’s scream that “the truth of the vocal object, this beyond or hither of speech and even of the cry, is silence, the fixed point around which the trajectory that structures the rest of the opera ceaselessly revolves”. The encounter with this almost tactile silence provokes an extreme sense of anxiety, “leaving the listener gasping in the face of the “discovery” of this emptiness” (Poizat 1992, 91). And it is this anxiety, according to Lacan, that constitutes subjectivity as such. The properly Hegelian point not to be missed, however, is that the silence following the negation of the cry, this negation of negation, does not simply take us back to the beginning, to that first style of opera with its opposition between silence and noise. Rather, in this second style of opera, silence and noise are no longer opposed, for we can think silence only in the very form of its loss, as that noise or cry that breaks it.

We are now in a position to consider why Opera’s Second Death is so meaningful for Žižek, and perhaps why it offers a clue to his work as a whole. It is because, we might say, Žižek throughout his work is also trying to “hear” a certain noise – or, more precisely, a certain silence through noise. Against those who see his work as another variation of cultural studies, or as an endless commentary on the perversities of everyday life, it is important to recognise that Žižek is (in his own words) “an old-fashioned European metaphysician” and that his work is truly philosophical, endlessly concerned with first principles, the question of Truth, its own conditions of possibility. At the same time, however, it is also a political philosophy, that is, a thinking of our situation within contemporary capitalism. But this latter has the consequence that, when Žižek does think our situation, it is not from somewhere outside. Rather, it would be better to say that for Žižek thinking is capitalism, just as capitalism is a form of thinking. Philosophy and capitalism arise at the same time; they come out of – and are – the same break in life experience. Philosophy is possible only because of capitalism, but capitalism similarly is possible only because of philosophy. The relationship between them is not simply one of opposition, nor are they exactly the same. One cannot be an effect of the other without also being its cause (which is why we are saying that each is at once an effect of this break and is itself that break). Instead, the relationship between them – a little like that well-known optical illusion of “two-faces-or-a-vase” that Žižek speaks of – is not-all. Philosophy and Capital each render the other not-all. Philosophy is secure, self-founding, able to state its own first principles, but only because of Capital. And
Capital for its part is total, with nothing before or outside of it, but only because of its thinking by philosophy.

So, how is one to grasp this Moebius-like structure in which philosophy and capitalism each finds itself “inside” the other, both causing and caused by the other? It is undoubtedly with this difficult question of “double genesis” that Žižek has been grappling for some time. In *Tarrying with the Negative*, for example, he writes that we must “conceive of radical Evil as something that ontologically precedes Good by way of opening up the space for it” (Žižek 1993, 96). In *Indivisible Remainder*, he writes that “the problem of the Beginning is the problem of ‘phenomenalization’ … how and why does this In-Itself split from itself at all, how does it acquire distance towards itself and thus clear the space in which it can appear (to itself)” (Žižek 1996, 14)? And in *The Parallax View*, finally, Žižek thematises the “not-all” act of genesis as such: “The primordial fact is not silence (waiting to be broken by the divine Word) but Noise, the confused murmur of the Real in which there is not yet any distinction between figure and background. The first creative act is therefore to create silence – it is not that silence is broken, but that silence itself breaks, interrupts, the continuous murmur of the Real, thus opening up a clearing in which words can be spoken” (Žižek 2006, 154). It is indeed this problem of Beginning that – in Žižek’s surprising and renovated version of it – is the fundamental question of any proper materialism. Why is there something rather than nothing? What is that break in Being that allows appearance to appear? But the other, unrecognised point that needs to be made – this is why Žižek is not merely a philosopher but a political philosopher – is that this break is not just metaphysical, but also occurs in history. It takes place with the advent of Capital, the introduction of commerce into the traditional societies of Asia Minor. (This has the rather unexpected result that, insofar as this break and the one in cognitivism – the emergence of consciousness from brain matter – are structurally identical, we only began to think, become human, after the advent of Capital. We might even say that on this point Žižek, like Lacan, is not so much an evolutionist as a creationist: evolution itself is impossible without some prior moment, the emergence of the human ex nihilo – and this “divine Word” is the very advent of Capital.)

But this attempt to think the origins of Capital poses a specific dialectical problem, for we can only think Capital in terms of Capital itself. As Žižek makes clear, citing Marx’s aphorism that “human anatomy contains the key to the anatomy of the ape”, we can reconstitute the origins of Capital only in retrospect (see Marx 1973, 105, cited in Žižek 2000, 91). We can think what comes before Capital only as though it had already taken place, as a “primitive” version of itself. But in a subtle way – and this is perhaps what Marx did not see – the very thinking of Capital as all that there is, the fact that we are entirely within Capital, is to think something “outside” of Capital. This “outside” is
Part I: Chapter One

precisely the thinking of that event with which Capital begins. And this again is Žižek’s point concerning the birth of the appearance as parallax. It is not that the appearance he speaks of as suddenly coming about is appearance as opposed to some underlying reality. It is not even, as in the common conception of philosophical perspectivism, a matter of one appearance as opposed to another (which still implies some underlying reality against which they can be compared). It is rather that appearance as all that there is, appearance as appearance, is possible only because of something other than appearance. The fact that appearance is all that there is necessarily means that appearance is already split, other than itself.

(It is in these terms that Žižek marks the difference between Hegel and Hölderlin in The Parallax View. It is not merely that Hölderlin – and this, we are almost tempted to say, was the form of his madness – held fast to the raw utopian energy of the founding act of the revolution, the exception to social reality, whereas Hegel attempted to locate “the rose in the cross of the present”, that is, the exception in or as social reality. The more profound distinction between them is that, as opposed to the conventional, self-alienating, dialectical thought of Hölderlin, for whom it was a matter of thinking an exception within an already-constituted causal order, for Hegel in a performative way – but in a way that means it can only be thought as lost – it was the very act of thinking that is the exception within the causal order; it is thinking that constitutes both the causal order and its exception.)

This fundamentally Hegelian conception of thought as constituting a kind of not-all is undoubtedly difficult and controversial. It goes against many of the so-called political readings of Žižek’s work and the whole Enlightenment understanding of thought as “critique” (exception). In order briefly to elaborate this different conception, we might recall here for a moment the well-known (perhaps too well-known) example of the vase as the first signifier that Lacan offers in his Seminar VII (Lacan 1992, 119-21). The vase is usually understood to serve as a signifier insofar as it is some type of an anthropologically primordial object encircling a void, thereby bringing about the difference between presence and absence. However, Lacan’s exact point – and it is for this reason that the vase constitutes a signifier – is that the form of the vase, for all of its primordiality, is ultimately arbitrary. That is, if in one way we can only ever see this void through the vase that delineates it, and thus there is always a proper fit between the vase (form) and the void (content), in another way the two can never entirely be brought together; there is always a certain excess of void (content) brought about by its very match with the vase (form). And it is for just this reason – this is Lacan’s other, forgotten point about the vase, as Žižek reminds us in The Puppet and the Dwarf – that the vase is able to serve as a commodity (Žižek 2003, 147-48). For, as Marx makes clear with his notion of the “self-fecundating” character of Capital, the commodity is also marked by a certain
excess of content over the form that produces it. In the very matching up of form and content, a certain extra content or surplus-value is brought about. This, for Marx, is the “mystical” aspect of Capital: the fact that the void (or the commodity’s value) is always greater than the forces that come together to create it; that the void is somehow able to give birth out of itself, “as a power springing forth from its own womb” (Marx, 1981, 966).

It is this vase, as both Capital and the thinking of Capital, that Fredric Jameson takes up in his attempt to historicise the advent of Capital in *The Seeds of Time*. But in locating the origins of capitalism with the birth of philosophy in ancient Greece, what Jameson ultimately emphasises is its perpetual out-of-time-ness (what he calls its “non-synchronicity”), its inability to be grasped as such. That is, in his identification of the origins of capitalism with the pre-Socratics, Jameson is suggesting, following Heidegger, that this moment occurs between two *alētheiai* or veilings: first, pagan nature-worship; and then, commodity-fetishism. However, to put it in Žižek’s own terms, what Jameson wants to see through these veilings is the *appearance* of Capital as such. Prior to the commodity there is no appearance, but merely the immanent, undifferentiated realm of nature. After the commodity we are in a realm of pure appearance, of appearance taking the place of things. But what Jameson is trying to think is how this appearance itself appears, the appearance of appearance, as it were. And, of course, in this Jameson repeats the outlines of Marx’s famous critique of the fetishisation of the commodity-form, which similarly situates the advent of Capital between two veilings through a kind of “parallax view”:

That great break with nature constituted by the coming of industrial capitalism or Weberian rationalization then at once brings its own myths and palliatives, its own alibis and objective irreals along with it, to cover up the rift it momentarily opened up. These new and historically original dimensions of concealment, of layers of appearance utterly distinct from existence itself, are of course the profit motive and the new and artificial role of money and abstraction in our societies, as well as the fetishisation of commodities, the coming into being of a wall or fold of manufactured objects within which labour is hidden and yet from which it mysteriously emanates with all the mesmerizing fascination of value itself (Jameson 1994, 85-86).

The realm of the commodity, of pure appearance, is thus a kind of negation of negation. The first negation is the break with that original pagan fetishism, in which we are confronted with the void for which the things of the world stand in. But we are living now through the covering over of this break, in which things take the place of, or attempt to stand in for, this void. It is as though this void does not exist or, what amounts to the same thing, as though it can be directly represented. And it is in this sense that Marx spoke of Capital becoming
virtual, which is a matter not of any dematerialisation, but rather – as with the vase – of commodities shedding their form, directly attempting to render the void, without realising that any such void would exist only as given shape to by its form. This is Žižek’s point concerning the *Kinder Surprise* chocolate egg, which, of course, replays aspects of the Lacanian vase (Žižek 2003, 146-47). Despite its attempt directly to represent the void by means of the plastic toy inside the egg, this void exists only insofar as the chocolate remains around it; any content (surplus-value, *objet petit a*) comes about only through the very mismatch between form and content, that is, the arbitrariness of form. We seemingly return, then, to that moment before the break with pagan fetishism. Commodities are for us today our immanent nature-religion, as it were. But precisely as commodity-fetish – and this is Marx’s parallax – appearance itself has appeared. We no longer live in the undifferentiated realm of nature, but only in its appearance. There is still only this appearance, but it is split, possible only because it stands in for a void.

To put this another way, Marx, as is well known, makes an equivalence between pagan nature-worship and latter-day commodity-fetishism. But what is often forgotten is that this equivalence is marked by an intervening moment, by a negation or death in-between. Pagan fetishism is a form of biological death but symbolic life (although it is immanent to life, it nevertheless believes in something more than life). But with the advent of Capital, there is no symbolic after-life, only a bare biological life. In fact, far from any ecstatic celebration of virtual Capital, what Marx observed is that here was a terrifying reality that was newly desacralised, stripped of its palliatives, which had to be supplemented with a form of religious fetishism because it did not allow for any possibility of providential guarantee. And perhaps – this is Žižek’s crucial insight – it is Stalinism of all things that best renders this terrifying moment between fetishes or veils. It is often noted that Žižek does not simply dismiss Stalinism as an aberration or corruption of what was potentially at stake for Lenin. However, less observed is his refusal entirely to dissociate the logics of Stalinism and capitalism. (Stalin’s Russia, unlike Castro’s Cuba, was never a “liberated territory”.) Rather, Žižek’s point is that Stalinism actually outperforms capitalism, particularly in its drive towards “total productive mobilisation”. Stalinism is thus closer to Capital, the fundamental break of Capital, than contemporary capitalism itself. It persists longer without the subsequent reveiling of the commodity-form or, to put this more accurately, without the fetishisation of the commodity. It is only later, with the so-called “socialism with a human face” of Brezhnev and Krushchev, that a kind of benevolent inertia sets in, an inertia that can also be seen today among those “Third Way” proponents of capitalism. Communism can thus be seen to predict in many ways the tendencies of modern capitalism. (The inertia of late-socialism was what Žižek undoubtedly experienced in the
first part of his life in the former Yugoslavia. And it is a rather amusing inversion of the usually understood flow of such things as bananas and pornography from the capitalist West to the “newly-liberated” East that, today, advanced democracies increasingly resemble some far-flung Soviet satellite in their post-political lack of alternatives, institutionalised corruption and imminent sense of collapse.3)

To go a step further, the purges of Stalinism can also be seen as replicating the very logic of Capital. What was attempted in these purges was the stabilisation of Stalinism, that is, the cutting free of its pure economic logic from all political and religious supplements (to have Capital without its contradictions). This allows us to understand why, in a first moment, Stalin sought to overthrow the fetishised idols of the original Bolshevik Revolution, but also why, in a second moment, the purge then turned on itself, eliminating both those who carried it out and the Party officials who ordered it.4 Here we have the fundamental contradiction of Stalinism. It must always return to that original moment of total productivity in order to try to grasp it as such, to get rid of any remainders so that it can become perfectly efficient and realise its historical destiny; and yet this return itself produces new remainders – that is, those who purged the previous remainders. (This would be, strictly speaking, Stalinism’s surplus-value: that excess produced when all accounts are settled, when there is a match, as it were, between its form and content.) To put this another way, when Stalin said that “we Communists are made of special stuff”, it was precisely to lead to the purification of the people, the stripping away of their weak, contingent flesh, in order to reveal the “special stuff” beneath them. But to paraphrase Lacan (who said that we are nude only beneath our clothes), this “special stuff” exists only as embodied in the people. Hegel’s critique of Romanticism – that the Spirit cannot entirely escape its form, but is revealed only through its arbitrariness – ultimately applies to Stalinism. This, we might say, was Pasolini’s error in setting his Sade-inspired Salò within Fascist rather than Stalinist totalitarianism: his brilliant elaboration of the endlessness of torture, the fact that it necessarily goes on forever insofar as it misses the “sublime object” it aims at, applies not so much to Fascist Italy as to Stalinist Russia. In Stalinism, as in Sade, we do not have some immortal, symbolic body persisting beyond the physical one, in-between-two-deaths, but the physical body outliving its symbolic support, caught in an endless second death.

Žižek’s point, in summary, is that Stalinism, in its effort to strip away all fetishes, to do away with all barriers to Capital, is the future of capitalism – a “capitalism without a human face”. With its forced collectivisation and recodification of all aspects of personal and social life (from education and marriage to the raising of children and primogeniture), Stalinism attempts at once to sever all natural connections and to begin again de novo. This is the same ambition, of
course, that Marx famously perceived in capitalism: “All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away” (Marx and Engels 1973, 70). Perhaps it is only with Stalinism that we finally “traverse the fantasy” in the Lacanian sense, and this is why Žižek so often affirms it. So, why does Žižek ultimately reject Stalinism (and in a way argue that capitalism goes beyond it)? When Žižek asserts the necessity of a certain politics over and against pure economism, he is absolutely not arguing for any simple restoration of human agency, for a “capitalism with a human face”. Indeed, if anything, he criticises Stalinism for still believing in a human destiny to the world. That is to say, Stalinism, although it does away with the notion of the agency of the individual human subject, nevertheless replaces it with the notion of the “objective laws of history” and the figure of the Party. Although it attempts to bureaucratis every aspect of human life, it fails to see that this would have to go on forever in the attempt to abolish all contingency; that is, it does not grasp the ultimate contingency of bureaucracy itself. And in attempting to get rid of every remainder, every inefficiency within the economy, to have an economics without political interference, it paradoxically impedes the process of capitalism by reducing it to an objective system without contradiction. In other words, what Stalinism does not see is that it is the very limits of capitalism that ensure it has no limits. Capitalism is not ultimately constrained by any causal order – whether economic efficiency or the laws of history – because it is first of all its own exception. The analogy might be made here between the Stalinist purges and that mad “rotary motion” that does not yet click into gear and “contract” into a world in Schelling. Economic systems do not work either when there is no remainder or when this remainder is seen as outside of the system, but only when the system becomes itself the remainder that is then turned over by another, when the system becomes its own remainder. In other words, they work only when the system no longer requires any external input for its continuation, but feeds upon itself, producing the very resources it needs to survive. Economics in its proper form (and its only proper form is capitalism) can function only when it is an autonomous, blind drive that requires neither the direction nor the safe-guards of any political control. And this is perhaps the true parallax of the Russian Revolution: the fact that its belief in political agency (at least, that of the Party) and its acephalous economic drive can never be brought together (evidenced by the fact that Žižek is never able to write about Lenin and Stalin together in the same essay). That is, on the one hand, we have the politics without economics of Lenin: the sense of the absolute contingency of the Revolution, the fact that the always premature moment for action must be seized, that one line in the Party platform can affect events for years to come. And, on the other hand, we have the economics without politics of Stalin: the sense of the historical destiny of the Revolution, its objective laws
embodied in the Party and the unswerving implementation of the Party platform in the bureaucracy. What this parallax means is that it is only in capitalism that the impossible “coming together” of these two takes place: politics and economics, contingency and necessity, the limit and the absence of the limit, the system and its exception.5

It is at this point, finally, that we return to Wagner, and more particularly to his Parsifal. In that wound in Amfortas’ side, we have, as Žižek points out, a literal embodiment of the death drive (which can be seen also in such modern-day equivalents as the monsters in the Alien series and even animated cartoons). But this wound is an instance as well of the negation of negation: it cures, but only in the form of the disease itself. And this wound is also a figure for opera, which produces silence, but only through the cry or noise. (In fact, a good definition of opera might be that which we continue to hear after the music is over; which is why, as Poizat points out, the question of whether or not to applaud at the end of an opera is such a vexed issue.)6 As Freud once said, music stands in for, sublimates the Thing as such, that is, the drive. But it is also true to say that it is this very attempt to cover it over that reveals the drive underneath. It is ultimately this circularity of a thing that is its own cause, a wound that is its own cure or a cure that produces its wound, that is the immortality of the death drive. (This is why opera can carry on after its “second death”, and even after Wagner. For, at the same time as the scream opens up a kind of silence, it also puts something in its place, renders it inaudible. This is true, of course, of Wagner’s own operas, which continue on after their famous screams, and in a way – this would be the sign of post-Wagnerian opera – even turn that silence or impossibility of singing into the subject of opera itself. In “modern opera”, since at least The Meistersingers, the characters need an excuse for singing.) That is to say, the death drive is not so much a split that occurs within sublimation or appearance – revealing something that is behind or beneath it – as the split that is sublimation or appearance, what must be assumed for appearance to have emerged.

It is this we mean by speaking of the immortal qualities of Wagner’s great characters, from the Flying Dutchman to Amfortas. Their immortality is founded on a subjective division, a split between their existential singularity and their social position. But if this condition testifies to a kind of perpetual homelessness – and, above all, Wagner’s operas are a genealogy of the European subject, or even, as many of Wagner’s commentators have noted, for all of Wagner’s own anti-Semitism, a Jewish one – it is not the usual state of in-between-two-deaths that Wagner dramatises (characters who are biologically dead but symbolically alive), but rather the much more uncanny second death (characters who are biologically alive but symbolically dead or, in the parlance of contemporary horror films, “undead”). In Wagner’s operas, the individual is reduced to that post-tragic state of being a mere support for a wound or an or-
gan-without-a-body (what Agamben means, for instance, by his notion of *homer sacer*). It is an immortality that is only to be obtained by being struck at again and again, a wound that never stops bleeding – there is a clear passage here from *The Flying Dutchman* through *Parsifal* to Kafka’s short story, “The Country Doctor”. It is in this sense, indeed, that we might say that it is Wagner’s operas rather than the Kolkhoz musicals that are the true musical accompaniment to Stalinism. This is perhaps the mistake of the continued identification of Wagner with Fascism, insofar as it reads his operas as tragic, and as stories of larger-than-life characters dealing with mystical or supernatural forces (Wotan, the Valkyries, the giants in Valhalla). Rather, Wagner’s operas can perhaps more accurately be understood as being about bureaucratic procedures that once unleashed become unstoppable, undirected means without ends, beyond the control of any single individual (or even God), and which secretly, behind the scenes, “pull the strings” of the characters we see on stage (the pilgrims of *Tannhauser*, the Niebelungs of *Das Rheingold*, the Knights of the Grail in *Parsifal*). It is absolutely this aspect of Wagner that is brought out in one of the great filmic adaptations of his operas, Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis*. And, indeed, as Žižek emphasises in *Opera’s Second Death*, the predominant tone of Wagner’s operas is not hot and erotic but cold and mechanical; their pitiful and ridiculous figures like the Dutchman and Amfortas are not so much tragic as comic:

Yes, *Tristan* is the story of a lethal passion that finds its resolution in ecstatic self-obliteration, but the very mode of this self-obliteration is as far as possible from the passionate violation of all rules – the immersion into night is rendered as a cold, declamatory, distanced procedure. No wonder that perhaps the ultimate staging of *Tristan* in the last decade, the one by Heiner Mueller, Brecht’s unofficial heir, emphasized precisely this aspect of an almost mechanical ritual (Žižek and Dolar 2002, 106).

It is perhaps at this point that we can finally answer our original question concerning the title of Žižek’s book on opera. Opera’s “second death” refers not so much to that state in-between-two-deaths, biological death but symbolic after-life, but the endless approach toward an impossible second death, a symbolic death but immortal life. And this second death in opera in a way precedes the first, and makes it possible. In Mozart’s operas, for example, the essentially frivolous and transitory music dies away so that their eternal and timeless stories can live on. But in Wagner these otherwise eternal stories, which take place, as in Mozart, in the realm of the gods, die away to leave the characters of his operas alone on stage, living on after what keeps them there is gone. However, as opposed to most readings and stagings of Wagner, there is no transcendence hinted at here, no symbolic meaning or redemption, no potential sublimation or transformation of this world. Rather, Wagner’s exact point is that the very ap-
pearance of these naked, unsupported characters as such already indicates a kind of split or other dimension – sublimation or appearance – appearing within this world. It is precisely with Wagner, we might say, that appearance itself appears.

1 This comment was made during a Q&A session following the screening of Žižek! (dir. Astra Taylor) at the Roxie Cinema, San Francisco, on April 21, 2005.
2 Our reading here is perhaps not too far from Catherine Malabou’s The Future of Hegel (Malabou 2005).
3 On the equivalence between our contemporary capitalist “inertia” and Really Existing Socialism, see Žižek (2006, 158-59); and one of the deep equivalences Žižek is working at is that between David Lynch and Andrei Tarkovsky, hinted at in Lynch’s decision to start up a film studio in an abandoned factory site in Lodz, Poland. Post-Wagnerian music too would be one of the great cultural bellwethers of this approaching “inertia”. We only have to think of the “Frère Jacques” motif of the third movement of Mahler’s 1st Symphony, the well-known “Adagietto” of his 5th and “Der Abschied” from his Das Lied von der Erde to hear what was originally joyful and uplifting turning into something dirge-like and deadly simply by being repeated. Bruckner too in the first movement of his 9th Symphony seeks to make us hear a certain “silence” through vast orchestral passages in which nothing happens. And all of this comes full circle, as it were, with the second movement of American post-Minimalist John Adams’ Harmonielehre, “The Amfortas Wound”, whose subject is the suffering of music itself after the abandonment of tonality (the title of the piece suggests a critique of the later serial Schoenberg in the name of his earlier expressionist work). The question to be asked here is whether Adams is faithful to that “second death” proposed by Wagner or attempts simply to go back to some time before it – or, what is the same thing, imagines that it no longer applies.
4 On this tension within Stalinism, see Priestland (2005, 181-201).
5 But it is here that we can identify the inherent failure of modern capitalism, the point at which it succumbs to the Stalinist temptation: that capitalism too will seek some objective guarantee in its own perfection, in the elimination of its excess (piles of waste, pollution, etc.) through the dream of “clean energy” or even “total recycling”. As Žižek observes, what is missed in this is the fact that these excremental objects (among which we would include oil, in its simultaneous filth and scarcity) are the very “stuff” of Capital’s death drive. They cannot be eliminated without the loss of drive as such.
6 On the question of applause in Wagner’s operas, see Poizat (1992, 89). Wagner knew very well that applause was a way of re-fetishising that silence he sought to bring about. And along the same lines we might think of the role of applause in Stalinism. Was not the constant applause that interrupted Stalin’s speeches to the Party a way of reassuring his audience that they still existed? In other words, was it not a way of re-subjectifying the Revolution? Conversely, might we not think of the musical accompaniment that continues on after the end of Chaplin’s City Lights as a way of getting us to hear silence, the strict equivalent of the film’s refusal to use sound? And might we not also think the famous sequence, in which the singer collapses during her mimed rendition of Roy Orbison’s “Crying” in Lynch’s Mulholland Drive, as a way of getting us to hear the void beneath her words?
References


CHAPTER TWO

FASCISM, STALINISM, AND THE ORGANIZATION OF ENJOYMENT

JODI DEAN

Breaking with liberal political and intellectual notions of “totalitarianism”, Slavoj Žižek emphasizes the differences between fascism and communism. His thesis is straightforward: the difference between fascism and Stalinism rests in their relationship to “class struggle”, that is, to the fundamental antagonism rupturing society. Each’s orientation to class struggle leads to a specific organization of enjoyment (jouissance). In this chapter, I present these differing organizations of enjoyment and, in so doing, argue not only for Žižek’s critical differentiation between fascism and Stalinism but for the importance of enjoyment as a category of political theory.

The Totalitarian Threat

In his 2001 book, Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism, Žižek claims that the term “totalitarian” prevents thought.1 The elevation of Hannah Arendt “into an untouchable authority”, he announces, “is perhaps the clearest sign of the theoretical defeat of the Left” (Žižek, 2001a, 2-3). Contra Arendt, Žižek asserts that fascism and communism are not the same: they mobilize enjoyment differently, have different projects and, indeed, have different degrees of greatness or authenticity.

By eliminating totalitarianism as a category, Žižek attempts to open up left thought and clear out a space for radical politics. Three aspects of this effort bear emphasizing. First, when he rejects the idea that fascism and communism are “totalitarian” regimes, Žižek is resisting the forced choice that entraps radical thought. Challenges to the present combination of global capital and liberal democracy typically encounter the rejoinder that revolution always leads to totalitarianism, that the present is the best we can have because any attempt to
change it will inevitably lead to something worse, as the experiments of the twentieth century made so bloodily clear. Žižek argues that to accept this forced choice between acquiescence to the present and the risk of a totalitarian future is to accept liberal democratic hegemony in advance. If there is not one totalitarianism, one alternative to liberal democracy, then the choice for liberal democracy is not so clear. One needs to think about it, to understand how other possibilities emerged and might emerge, what aspirations they held in the past and may hold in the future. One has to recognize the differences between Left and Right critiques of the present liberal democratic order.

Second, Žižek links the rise of fascism not to dogmatism but to liberalism’s suspicion of every form of engagement (Žižek 1999, 139). Many left intellectuals today reject deep, constitutive attachments to practices or beliefs as primitive or dangerous. Liberal neutrality and so-called postmodern relativism overlap in a skepticism toward convictions. In Žižek’s view, this rejection is indicative of a cynicism complicit with fascism. It produces the atmosphere of confusion and undecideability – all ideas are equal, none is better than another – into which the fascist decision for order intervenes. Precluding radical, dogmatic, defenses of equality or justice, suspicion toward engagement defangs left thought in advance by refusing the division or choice – this, not that – constitutive of politics.

Third, Žižek recollects the history of anti-fascism (Žižek 2002a, 117 and 2003, 167). WWII involved an alliance between liberal democratic and socialist countries. The Cold War steadily eroded this alliance. In the wake of the demise of socialism, it seems all but forgotten. This forgetting supports intensifications of global capital and the present rise of neoconservatism and religious fundamentalism. The grip of neoliberal economic policy and its rhetorical alliance with classic liberal appeals to freedom has meant that, officially at least, socialism is a dead project, a false start. Lost in this ideological convergence is an ideal celebrated under Stalinism, namely, a view of material production and manual labor as a “privileged site of community and solidarity”. What such a notion maintains, Žižek writes, is that “not only does engagement in the collective effort of production bring satisfaction in itself; [but also] private problems themselves (from divorce to illness) are put into their proper perspective by being discussed in one’s working collective” (Žižek 2001a, 133).

Little effort has been made to learn from the socialist experiment, to consider its successes, possibilities, and the traumatic results of its failure. One of the merits of Žižek’s critique of totalitarianism is thus the way that it addresses directly the horrors of Stalinism in order to create a space for this work of recovery. Stalinism was not totalizing in the sense that it closed the gap between real and ideal. It appealed to aspirations for justice and solidarity. Dissidents and critics could thus evoke communist ideals against the regime
Itself. In other words, they could draw on more than liberal democracy and more than market freedom. Real existing socialism was a tragedy in socialism’s own terms.

In the face of the fury of religious and ethnic nationalism at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first centuries, Žižek’s account of fascism and Stalinism’s differing organizations of enjoyment provides political theory with an important new way of understanding attachments to and excesses of political violence. His analysis of the difference between fascism and communism makes clear how not all opposition, not all revolution, is the same. In this respect, it can benefit emancipatory struggles against authoritarian and right-wing regimes as it learns from socialist experience and highlights the interconnections between capitalism and ethnic nationalism.

Parallax and antagonism

Žižek’s engagement with fascism and communism changes in the course of his writing. In Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?, Žižek considers the holocaust in Lacan’s terms, as Nazism’s “desperate attempt to restore ritual value to its proper place” through that “gigantic sacrifice to the obscure gods” (Žižek, 2001a, 44). Yet, in “Lenin’s Choice”, the afterword to his edited collection of Lenin’s writings, Revolution at the Gates, Žižek rejects Lacan’s reading of the Holocaust, accepting instead Giorgio Agamben’s notion of the Jews as homo sacer, ones who could be killed but not sacrificed (Žižek 2002b, 248 and Agamben 1998). He likewise changes his account of Stalinism, altering his early formulation of the “totalitarian” subject as he comes to emphasize what I argue is a split Stalinism, a Stalinism split between its perverse operation and its official bureaucratic face.

I approach these changes by emphasizing, one, the kernel that remains the same throughout the discussion and recognizing, two, that the changes often signal a “parallax gap”, that is, a displacement in an object that comes about when it is viewed from different perspectives (Žižek 2005, 9-10). To see parallax at work, stretch your arm out in front of you; point your index finger up; close one eye and then the other while looking at the tip of your finger. Your finger will seem to move back and forth. This movement, this shift, is parallax.

The concept of parallax accounts for the insurmountable gap or discord between different perspectives. Parallax expresses the way truth is not a matter of one or even multiple perspectives. Rather, truth results from the shifting of perspectives, in the distortion that results from a confrontation between one perspective and another (Žižek 2004a, 6). Truth, then, is manifest in the displacement.
The kernel that remains the same throughout Žižek’s work is “class struggle” as the fundamental antagonism both fascism and communism address. Žižek holds the view that “society” emerges around, through, and as a result of failures, struggles, and exclusions. Antagonism is the original trauma or impossibility at the “heart” of society. We can’t eliminate antagonism. But we can affect it. We can change the ways it’s materialized, the structures that form around it. Žižek thus conceives “class struggle” as the struggle over the meaning of society: which class stands-in for society as a whole and which class is thereby constituted as a threat to it (Žižek 2002b, 210)? He thus does not view class struggle in positive terms, that is, as referring to an opposition between existing social groups. To treat class struggle positively would be to integrate it within the symbolic, to reduce it to already given terms, and thereby to eliminate the very dimension of antagonism.

As I mention at the outset, Žižek’s rejection of the notion of totalitarianism hinges on different ways fascism and communism respond to “class struggle”. Fascism tries to resolve class struggle by displacing the antagonism onto race, placing all the blame for the upheavals of capitalism onto the Jew (Žižek 2004b, 99). The Jew is figured as a foreign body, corrupting the organic unity of the nation. The fascist solution is to purify the social body by eliminating the Jew. Racial difference takes the place of class struggle. In contrast, communism confronts antagonism directly. It attempts to hold onto unbridled productivity, striving to realize the capitalist fantasy of ever-accelerating development unconstrained by the capitalist form (Žižek 2000, 19).

**Fascism: The Discourse of the Master**

National socialism, Žižek explains, was an attempt to change something so that nothing would change (Žižek 1991, 186). It confronted capitalism’s revolutionizing, destabilizing tendencies. Yet it did so in a way that sought to ensure the continuity of capitalist production. Nazism tried to eliminate the antagonism fundamental to capitalism (and to society) by locating it in a specific cause that could then be eliminated (Žižek 1993, 210). Instead of acknowledging social division, it conceived society as a unified body. Nevertheless, it couldn’t avoid the very real disruptions fracturing Germany in the wake of its defeat in the First World War. So, Nazism treated this unity as an empirical social fact, one that could be identified and solved. Differently put, Nazism attempted to retain capitalist productivity by subjecting it to political control, that is, by displacing the economic crisis onto a set of political coordinates where the problem was identified and embodied as the Jews.

Žižek’s account of Nazism as an effort to have capitalism without capitalism relies on the notion of class struggle in two key senses. The first is historical and...