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SUBLIME ŽIŽEK: GUARDING LENIN'S TOMB

Slavoj Žižek, the Giant of Ljubljana, is like the great brain of Goethe's fairytale "The Green Snake and the Beautiful Lily". In this revolutionary and allegorical tale (reputedly inspired by Mozart's *Magic Flute*) there are two lands separated by a river. There are only two ways to cross the river. One is by ferry, and the boatman is a kind of sadist that exacts bizarre tribute for the occasion. The other is to wait for the giant to appear and appropriate his shadow as a type of liminal bridge – perhaps a metaphor for the umbra (or penumbra) of semi-consciousness and imagination.

Žižek, as this giant (or giant brain), has cast a very long shadow indeed in what can only be termed "cultural studies" (though he would despise the characterization). He is effectively the most brilliant purveyor of Lacanian mischief, and, as a follower of the French "liberator" of Freud, Žižek's Lacan is almost exclusively transcribed in mesmerizing language games or intellectual parables. That he has an encyclopedic grasp of political, philosophical, literary, artistic, cinematic, and pop cultural currents – and that he has no qualms about throwing all of them into the stockpot of his imagination – is the prime reason he has dazzled his peers and confounded his critics for over ten years. He is also a legendary trickster (having learned his craft as part of the communist nomenklatura in Slovenia), a kind of Don Quixote for unrepentant Marxists and scourge of liberals, social democrats, new-age "obscurantists", multi-culturalists, and ... You get the picture.

I first sat through a Lacanian conference at NYU in the late 1990s and understood 10% of the language. It was, however, 110% thrilling. The sheer bravado of the performances by the French-inflected intellectuals was delightful and *sexy*. It was only later, in 2001, that I had an opportunity to hear Slavoj Žižek speak. The event was standing room only, and the venue was a very high-brow, conceptual art gallery called the Drawing Center in NYC. Žižek was reading/performing "Il n'y a pas de rapport religieux" from the latest edition of *Lacanian Ink* (#18), the movement's journal. In this particular essay he rehearsed Lacan's notion that there is no such thing as a sexual relationship but re-enscribed it in the context of something else (in this case "religion") – as he is wont to do with most all his tactical maneuvers. The print version is illustrated with works by Damien Hirst. More striking, however, was that this perhaps marked the beginning of Žižek's appropriation of Saint Paul. This appropriation of Saint Paul is significant insofar as when Žižek performs one of his acts of re-writing he is taking/ripping the original out of one context and inserting/transplanting it into another. In the case of Saint Paul, what interested him most was that here was a figure (not a disciple!) who constructed the entire edifice of the Christian faith on the crucifixion and resurrection. Recall that in Kazantzakis' *The Last Temptation of Christ* (or at least Scorsese's) Paul appears in the delusionary vision Jesus has – i.e., that he has escaped the cross and gone on to live, marry, and have children – and repudiates Jesus as an imposter. Žižek is quick to point out (often) that post-modernists have multiple versions of everything – e.g., multiple versions of Nietzsche and multiple versions of Marx or Freud – but he also is the master of re-branding a concept, or a historical figure, to elucidate what might be best termed "synchronic or structural phenomena". As a skilled structuralist (though he'd deny this too), Žižek constructs castles in the air and then sends a barrage of waves in pursuit of these tentative forms. He is Neptune to his own Odysseus – but he is also Minerva. In the case of Paul, as in the more recent resuscitation of Lenin, we witness Žižek isolating a critical moment, or even a failed moment, for purposes wholly related to the exasperating state of the *current* critical or failed moment – late-modern capitalism and post-modernity.

In such an intelligence we see the mark of an archaic *synthetic* brilliance – an almost heroic intelligence – that assembles, analyzes, and destroys. His actual performances are theatrical events. He sweats bullets as he unpacks his torrent of complex references, flings asides, flings aside asides, tackles a hard kernel of Hegel or Marx, drops in an allusion to Hitchcock or even some pop cultural trash like the *Worst-Case Scenario* phenomenon or Reality TV to explain away our symptoms – to talk through our collective delusions and paranoias. His agitated (agit-prop) presentations are exhausting for the audience and for the actor. When he concludes, he invariably loses his bearings and is led off stage by his host or hostess. At the Drawing Center, he was whisked away by handlers (before the Lacanian bacchantes/babes could get to him?).

So what is he up to? And why does he succeed, where others have failed, in constructing an "actually existing" alternative to left-right politics?

The version of Lenin that Žižek is re-enscribing into radical political discourse is ostensibly (by his own admission) the Lenin of the October Revolution, or the Lenin that had the epiphany that in order to have a revolution "you have to have a revolution". Why is he doing this?

Primarily the goal appears to be to demolish the coordinates of the liberal hegemony that permit excess and aberration insofar as it does not threaten the true coordinates. He suggests as well that the true coordinates are much better hidden than we realize. The production of cultural difference (a trendy subject) is to Žižek the production of the inoperative dream – a dream that recalls perhaps Orwell’s *1984* or even Terry Gilliam’s *Brazil* where a kind of generic pastoralism or a sexualized nature substitutes for authentic freedom – the flip side of this is film noir. Žižek has determined that late-modern capitalism has engendered a whole range of alternative seductions to keep the eye and brain off of the real Real. The Real only exists as a fragment and this fragment is fast receding on the horizon as fantasy and often phantasm intercede. These dreams and nightmares are systemic, structural neuroses, and they are part of the coordinates of the hegemonic. The hegemon – the prevailing set of coordinates – always seeks to “take over” the Real, and, therefore, this contaminated Real must be periodically purged.

Without descending into the Lacanian house of mirrors we can understand this on an everyday level if we observe what Žižek is up to with “Lenin”. In his essay “Repeating Lenin” (1997) – ever the trickster, he convened a symposium on Lenin in Germany in part to see what the reaction would be – Žižek sets up a deconstruction of the idea of form to effectively liberate the idea of radical form. “One should not confuse this properly dialectical notion of Form with the liberal-multiculturalist notion of Form as the neutral framework of the multitude of ‘narratives’ – not only literature, but also politics, religion, science, they are all different narratives, stories we are telling ourselves about ourselves, and the ultimate goal of ethics is to guarantee the neutral space in which this multitude of narratives can peacefully coexist, in which everyone, from ethnic to sexual minorities, will have the right and possibility to tell his story. The properly dialectical notion of Form signals precisely the IMPOSSIBILITY of this liberal notion of Form: Form has nothing to do with ‘formalism,’ with the idea of a neutral Form, independent of its contingent particular content; *it rather stands for the traumatic kernel of the Real*, for the antagonism, which ‘colors’ the entire field in question ...” (italics added). He is interested, as most fire-breathing artists are, in discerning the real Real amid the rubbish of systems. In part, in appropriating “Lenin” he is also looking for the moment when Lenin realized that politics could one day be dissolved for a technocratic and agronomic utopia – “the [pure] management of things”. That Lenin failed is immaterial, since Žižek is extracting the signifier “Lenin” from the historical continuum which includes that failure – or the onslaught of Stalinism.

He adds: “‘Lenin’ is not the nostalgic name for old dogmatic certainty; quite on the contrary, to put it in Kierkegaard’s terms, THE Lenin which we want to retrieve is the Lenin-in-becoming, the Lenin whose fundamental experience was that of being thrown into a catastrophic new constellation in which old coordinates proved useless, and who was thus compelled to REINVENT Marxism – recall his acerb[ic] remark apropos of some new problem: ‘About this, Marx and Engels said not a word.’ The idea is not to return to Lenin, but to REPEAT him in the Kierkegaardian sense: to retrieve the same impulse in today’s constellation.” He compares 1914 to 1990, and, in a superb bit of multi-tasking, describes how Lenin attempted to convince long-suffering Russian soldiers to withdraw from the front and turn on the Czar. He does this by drawing on multiple, but singular examples of times when the Slave came face to face with the Master, as in the famous case of Hitler’s train being momentarily stalled en route through Thuringia when a second train full of wounded soldiers pulled alongside permitting Hitler to see them and they to see Hitler dining in splendour. (As a Žižek-inspired aside, let us note that this scene was folded into the recent film *Enemy at the Gates* (2001), a rather mannered depiction of the Battle for Stalingrad, wherein two snipers go up against one another and the entire war is collapsed into a game of cat and mouse.) Žižek marshals (martial?) several versions of this accidental (catastrophic) confrontation which is *always already* suppressed to illustrate how the veil sometimes falls from the carefully constructed image we have both adopted and been inducted into. This image is the so-called Real but in fact the mirage constructed by the hegemonic “hidden hand”. Perhaps this is why Godard (and Herzog) both came round to admitting that there were no more images available for cinema and, as in Godard’s *King Lear* (1987), the audience is left effectively staring at a bare-naked light bulb.

“Today, more than ever, we should here return to Lenin: yes, economy is the key domain, the battle will be decided there, one has to break the spell of the global capitalism – BUT the intervention should be properly POLITICAL, not economic. The battle to be fought is thus a twofold one: first, yes, anticapitalism. However, anticapitalism without problematizing the capitalism’s POLITICAL form (liberal parliamentary democracy) is not sufficient, no matter how ‘radical’ it is. Perhaps THE lure today is the belief that one can undermine capitalism without effectively problematizing the liberal-democratic legacy which – as some Leftists claim – although engendered by capitalism, acquired autonomy and can serve to criticize capitalism.”

Here Žižek takes aim at all manner of post-cultural delusions – including Deleuzian escapisms, and/or new Situationisms – in the manner that Marxists have long endorsed. On the one hand, the Left has decided to indulge “the long march through institutions”. On the other, the new surrealist or rote formalist is merely indulging in “ludic” games. These games usually come with the price of disengaging from the “proper” political, or, as with 1920s French Surrealism, playing at the political. This severe “Socratic” agenda – of deconstructing the coordinates of the ruling hegemony – is, for Žižek, impossible if the crisis of identity plaguing the late-modern subject (the doubling, tripling, quadrupling of identity) is not ‘cauterized’ by intellectual fire.

In his critique of contemporary capitalism Žižek finds not simply the conditions that Marx anathematized but those same conditions reified and made nearly intangible. “A certain excess which was as it were kept under check in previous history, perceived as a localizable perversion, as an excess, a deviation, is in capitalism elevated into the very principle of social life, in the speculative movement of money begetting more money, of a system which can survive only by constantly revolutionizing its own conditions, that is to say, in which the thing can only survive as its own excess, constantly exceeding its own ‘normal’ constraints ... Marx located the elementary capitalist antagonism in the opposition between use- and exchange-value: in capitalism, the potentials of this opposition are fully realized, the domain of exchange-values acquires autonomy, is transformed into the specter of self-propelling speculative capital which needs the productive capacities and needs of actual people only as its dispensable temporal embodiment.” In the era of globalization, then, the main question is: “Does today’s virtual capitalist not function in a homologous way – his ‘net value’ is zero, he directly operates just with the surplus, borrowing from the future?”

What Žižek is hammering away at, repeatedly and in various guises, is the empty present-day concept of the Universal (what I would call the meta-Real). The Universal is the form of forms (perhaps the urform of all forms) – as it signifies the latent content of all possible forms. This may seem hyper-Platonic, but in fact such “higher” coordinates are the vacated premises of modern-day political economy. It is other possible concepts of political-economic form that are repeatedly revoked and/or given up for mutable, indeterminate, vague, and generally empty gestures in neo-liberalism. These empty gestures substitute for the meta-Real where everything critical is actually *manipulated*. This manipulated terrain, in Lacanian terms, interacts/intersects with the realm of the Symbolic – the place where the Thou Shalt Nots are inscribed. The Symbolic, in turn, is controlled by the collective force of the hegemonic, now “dematerialized” structures of late capitalism. Žižek’s complaints against “new social movements” is that they are generally “one issue movements” which do not engage the Universal. This totalizing language is partly a linguistic convention to confer a semantic and structuralist integrity to the idea of the Universal Singular, but also to circumvent or defuse the endless ineffective operations of “strictly limited goals” or “marketing” typified by the ubiquitous and generally tolerated NGOs. How many such organizations use a liberal, white guilt trip to raise funds? How many of these organizations exist *only because* government has been purged of its higher functions (its higher calling)?

“In a proper revolutionary breakthrough, the utopian future is neither simply fully realized, present, nor simply evoked as a distant promise which justified present violence – it is rather as if, in a unique suspension of temporality, in the short-circuit between the present and the future, we are – as if by Grace – for a brief time allowed to act AS IF the utopian future is (not yet fully here, but) already at hand, just there to be grabbed. Revolution is not experienced as a present hardship we have to endure for the happiness and freedom of the future generations, but as the present hardship over which this future happiness and freedom already cast their shadow – in it, we ALREADY ARE FREE WHILE FIGHTING FOR FREEDOM, we ALREADY ARE HAPPY WHILE FIGHTING FOR HAPPINESS, no matter how difficult the circumstances. Revolution is not a Merl[eau]-Pontyan wager, an act suspended in the *futur anterieur*, to be legitimized or delegitimized by the long term outcome of the present acts; it is as it were ITS OWN ONTOLOGICAL PROOF, an immediate index of its own truth.”

Hopping from peak to peak, and periodically descending into the valley of present-day culture for refreshment, Žižek outlines a topology of activity that recovers revealed truths. In many ways he is similar to a host of others who have sought to reverse the decimation of our experience of the world. Like Giorgio Agamben – see *Infancy and History* (1993) – he has utilized language to re-enscribe the terms of resistance and the game of turning things upside down to empty them out and examine them. His appropriations are classic as well as modern. His giant brain is an effective bridge to another world inside or opposite, above or below, or simply always already here. His agenda is to foster and engender a withering critique of the structural chains that enslave late-modern man. His nostalgia is for very large gestures – for the meta-Real, the Universal, and the Formal. “THIS resistance is the answer to the question ‘Why Lenin?’: it is the signifier ‘Lenin’ which FORMALIZES this content found elsewhere, transforming

a series of common notions into a truly subversive theoretical formation.”

OUTTAKES

Slavoj Žižek's essay "Repeating Lenin" (@ Lacan.com) – <http://www.lacan.com/replenin.htm>

The new **Karl Marx** – "Capitalism has now triumphed, it is 'the only game in town', statist socialism is 'dead', and, yes, that is what Marx had said would happen all along." Faisal Islam, "Tittering at High Gate" (*The Observer*, 05/18/02) – <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2002/may/19/highereducation.shopping>

Žižek reviews *Lenin* by Hélène Carrère d'Encausse – "In 1914, an entire world disappeared, taking with it not only the bourgeois faith in progress, but the socialist movement that accompanied it. Lenin (the Lenin of What Is to Be Done?) felt the ground fall away from beneath his feet – there was, in his desperate reaction, no sense of satisfaction, no desire to say 'I told you so.' At the same time, the catastrophe made possible the key Leninist Event: the overcoming of the evolutionary historicism of the Second International." Slavoj Žižek, "Seize the Day" (*Guardian Unlimited*, 07/23/02) – <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2002/jul/23/londonreviewofbooks>

Alain Badiou rehearses his reappraisal of the 20th century – "Where are we today? The figure of active nihilism is regarded as completely obsolete. Every reasonable activity is limited, limiting, constrained by the burdens of reality. The best that one can do is to get away from evil, and to do this, the shortest path is to avoid any contact with the real. Ultimately one comes up against the nothing, the there-is-nothing-real, and in this sense one remains in nihilism. But since the terrorist element, the desire to purify the real, has been suppressed, nihilism is deactivated. It has become passive, or reactive, nihilism, that is, hostile to every action as well as to every thought." Alain Badiou, "One Divides Into Two" (*CultureMachine*, 2000) – <http://www.lacan.com/divide.htm>

A version of this essay appeared in *CounterPunch* (July 27, 2002)
<http://www.counterpunch.org/2002/07/27/zizek-and-lenin/>

ŽIŽEK & BADIOU: THE NEO-MARXIST MAGICIANS

Alain Badiou's book *Saint Paul: Le fondation de l'universalisme* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997) first arrived/landed in France, as if from outer space, a topologically rich appropriation of the Pauline insurrection, followed by Slavoj Žižek's *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003). The former was then translated into English, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), at the same time as Badiou's more aggressively configured *Infinite Thought: Truth and the Return of Philosophy* (London: Continuum, 2003) appeared. As a complex, these books underscore a moment in time perhaps best described as the rediscovery of the so-called present-present, a form of radicalized time that is purely inherent in the very nature of being (of being alive). It is for this reason that Badiou expropriates Paul, given Paul's exquisite rhetorical circling of the question of being alive or dead (awake or asleep).

This arsenal of explosive, critical *matériel* is part and parcel of the principal cultural turn currently underway, in interdisciplinary venues, toward a reclaiming of universal concepts in the face of advanced nihilism, the outpouring (onslaught) of regressive tactical operations associated with late capitalism, a sinister non-thing foreseen by Adorno and Horkheimer as a withering, almost apocalyptic instrumentalization of everything and, notably, the attendant death of the subject (subject as consumer and/or endlessly manipulated thing). Thus the Baudrillardian specter of the Desert of the Real.

Žižek and Badiou (present-day "Fox" and "Hedgehog") build upon (while confronting) similar works by both Jean-Luc Marion and Giorgio Agamben, while also demolishing the last vestiges of the implicit wager, present since Pascal (renewed by George Steiner), on a transcendent some-thing else as compensatory illusion. In its place, what emerges is the subject-as-rupture, a purely radicalized self-insufficiency noted as the pure potential of all universals, and all supposed singularities: "There is singularity only insofar as there is universality". An excess, then, in-and-of-itself, and an anti-dialectical figure nailed to the ontological cross where immanence and transcendence converge in the present-present revealing the audacious (revolutionary) nature of the here-and-now.

This implied immanence of self is structured according to Lacanian gestures not toward the usual ineffable otherworldliness of intense inwardness (*inward inwardness* or inwardness doubled), but instead dependence on the subject as site for pure contingency and becoming. To accomplish this "splitting" of the subject into two (echoing Nietzsche's High Noon and the so-called not-self), Žižek resorts to excavating an extra-ethical subject-as-dimension within being that actually seeks its own demolition through revolutionary praxis. Transferred to the arts (and politics) this praxis supercedes all attempts to construct a new Master Signifier (a new conceptual sign of a totality), while also bracketing the extreme, inward or self-ironic (hyper-subjective) *jouissance* of the subject-as-victim (that sensibility that moves within so much of present-day art). In fact, both Badiou and Žižek confer on the subject (the late-modern self) the role of self-destroying angel, a figure that actually rescues the subject from its dependence on mutually "filiated" forms of subjection (slavery) and repression structurally imposed by the abstract principles operating within dematerialized and de-territorialized capital. And, as exemplified by Žižek's masterful deconstruction of popular culture, all authorized forms of "filiation" (consciously or unconsciously applied, as propaganda and/or entertainment) merely permit a minimal space in which the imperiled subject is "free" to effectively twist in the wind (enjoy his/her symptoms). As such, this polemical assault on the perverted nature of the late-modern subject represents a neo-Marxist sublime (a problematizing of subjectivity itself).

What this "splitting in two" seems to indicate for Badiou (and it is Žižek's purview to in some ways echo what is "happening" elsewhere) is that the self-recognition of the subject involves also a type of self-analysis (a being both analyst and analysand) leading to self-revelation, such that the subject notes that it only exists by virtue of its dual residence under the sign of death (the letter, the law, particularization) and the sign of life (the spirit, the resurrection, universality). What this seems to mean for Badiou, the "post-cultural" neo-Marxist, is that the subject – once it realizes its inherent slavery (impotence) – re-discovers its truly inherent singularity in universality. For Badiou, who always slips away at the crucial moment, this singularity within universality (and vice versa) signals a new life (re-subjectivization) for the subject. In short, Badiou is offering – by way of Saint Paul – the recovery of the ground of being *through* re-mapping the soul. This proposed new subjectivity is, in fact, the oldest subjectivity (the pre-Adamic Self proper) present, but also absent, in the folds and warps of modernity. Thus, and for very sound reasons (for Badiou is, after all, a materialist-rationalist), the late-modern subject must be re-configured. His expropriation of Saint Paul represents the most radical (insurrectional) form of this renewal. The "use value" of Saint Paul is legendary. It is perhaps Nikos Kazantzakis' *The Last Temptation of Christ* that is the ultimate

unreferenced reference here. In that scorching novel, and in a last vision, Jesus survives the cross only to be confronted by Paul and effectively denounced.

As such, re-territorializations are prefigured as revolutionary acts (declaratory acts) reclaiming the emptied (and empty) gestures of modern subjectivity (intentional and permissible “cultural” forms of alienation and anomie; that is, the perverse “allowable cut” of capitalist dis-ingenuity). By way of countering both the re-imposition of figures of law and dominance (the modern equivalent of the Platonic Big Lie), and by forcing the subject to reconstruct the possibility in one’s self of a new, better world, the post-phenomenological turn toward radical contingency (and radical subjectivity) points vigorously, and with considerable élan, to the “ground” always already overwritten in all instrumentalized systems; that is to say, toward the forever disfigured, hijacked, and desecrated ground of the “given”, or the very ground beneath our feet (*this world* endlessly gone awry). This proposition opens infinite, elective gestures within both the private universe of the modern subject and the multiple representational worlds of art, architecture, and literature (to name but the most obvious “names”). For Badiou, of course, it opens directly onto politics. But, these “multiple” worlds of disconnected forms of inhabitation (and critique) – such as *architecture parlante* (“talking architecture”) – are, in many senses (and in the most *advanced* senses), more powerfully connected to the world *as it exists* (and as it *might* exist) than the endlessly twisted, topologically disfigured world of political agitation.

Badiou goes straight to the heart of the matter when, in *Saint Paul*, he re-situates spirit in the here-and-now (in the present-present) as the always existing opportunity that is concealed by the impositions of a present-past (the short shadow of History-in-the-Making, or Law). By making the present-present a form of rupture (and anti-sign for the self), Badiou avoids the metaphysical conundrum of “here” versus “over there” (and its rhetorical sub-species). “Here” (as in “here-and-now”) becomes the site of/for some-thing else. This some-thing else forever slips away in Badiou’s writing, as well it should, because he is not of the mind to tell us what *it* is. As with Žižek, this *whatever it is* is for the subject, mired or un-mired in the latency of dual distresses, to figure (configure) for itself. This is not to say, as good Lacanians, that Badiou and Žižek are mere “analysts”. In a bizarre sense – a sense that might be perversely related back to the market and its very own *analysts* – Badiou and Žižek are Old Testament prophets. They have signaled the coming of a new subject. This subject is pre-figured in their exhaustive critique of the warped universe of late capitalism. Late capitalism – and all of its various, twisted symptoms (intentional and otherwise) of a type of insanity – *in its non-self* is the functional equivalent of the Law that Paul inveighed against (in his own vigorous, inimical, and evasive manner).

It is abject subjectivity (cipher for humanity as universal indivisible remainder), as an *excess* (surplus), that leads out of this horrific, contemporary impasse toward this implicit/explicit some-thing else always on offer. This some-thing else is the rediscovery of what has always existed beneath everything else anyway, anytime – that is, a some-thing else formulated quite simply as the “State of Emergency Known as Love”. It is this state of emergency that Žižek offers, brilliantly, as the all-purpose answer to all other so-called states of emergency (the latter which, as he indicates, are *always* announced to forestall the former).

GK (November 2003)

POSTSCRIPT (AFTER THE FACT)

A review, by Daniel Boyarin, of Badiou’s *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* appeared in *Bookforum* (April-May 2006), pp. 12-13, entitled “Neither Greek Nor Jew” ...

THE RUINS OF THOUGHT: ŽIŽEK – FIVE SCENARIOS TOWARD A SHORT FILM

SCENE 1 – A Slovenian city ... A film crew is setting up yet another Medieval romance shot in the former East Bloc by dragging carts and driving chickens and oxen into the town square while a truck passes by spraying everything and everyone with a brown goop. The camera zooms in on the passing truck to reveal a payload of offal stirred by a rotating blade. Civilians scatter holding their noses ... The camera pans (utilizing a crude maquette) to wooded hills above the city and a lonely dacha perched on a wooded bluff overlooking an abyss. N.B.: Utilize Brian Helgeland's *A Knight's Tale* (2001) and Jiří Menzel's *Larks on a String* (1969) for "associative affects".(1)

Intercut a second polished/glossy Žižek, in Hollywood, in a glass house high above Los Angeles, reclining in a Barcelona chair, writing. A picture of Aldous Huxley may be seen on the wall ... On the television is Bill Condon's *Gods and Monsters* (1998). Outside is a party ... Intercut scenes of the same from David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* (2002). On a table are dog-eared copies of Abercrombie & Fitch catalogues with post-its sticking out of them ... A young, blond and androgynous man/woman ("Alenka", as below) delivers a drink on a silver tray with a telegram which Žižek glances at ... Alternately, cut in images of a limousine ascending Mulholland Drive, perhaps cut from Nicolas Roeg's *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (1976). Cut in the window-washing/squeegee scene from the Wachowski's *The Matrix* (1999) and/or Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle's video ode to the Farnsworth House, *Le Baiser/The Kiss* (1999).

Night falls in both the glass house in the Hollywood hills and the woods above the generic Slovenian city ... Inside the rustic dacha Žižek is sitting by an open fire. On the floor are piles and piles of books (the complete works of Schelling, Hegel, Marx, Freud, Lacan, Adorno, Heidegger, Habermas) ... Unspooled VHS tapes litter the floor ... A bank of small Soviet-era, black-and-white television sets and videocassette players encircle the slumped figure wrapped in a colorful crocheted blanket. All of the television sets are on, but with sound off ...

Žižek eyes the dwindling fire, eyes the dwindling stack of firewood, then eyes his broadaxe resting in a corner of the room. Outside the trees all flee (walking hurriedly for higher ground) ... Painted spectral faces peer out of the darkness and vanish, as in Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man*, 1995.(2)

Inside Alenka (Žižek's "nephew/niece") attends to the weary savant/philosopher, bringing him a tray of biscuits and tea with a videocassette ... He picks up the cassette, blinks once and tosses it into the fire ... Alenka protests: "But 'Papa', it's Angelopoulos' *Weeping Meadow!*" ... He shouts: "Upstream! Nothing that moves upstream can know anything at all. Upstream is Nothingness. Downstream, Alenka! Always downstream! Always historicize!"

Outside the trees have all fled and the darkness of the abyss flows up against a denuded landscape. Inside Žižek looks toward the window, detecting the eerie emptiness outside, actually sniffing at it ... He settles deeper into his armchair in front of the fire, Alenka throws a few more logs into the fireplace and retires as he begins to nod off. The camera focuses on a television set playing Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle (La société du spectacle, 1973)* and then pans slowly outward to the snoring philosopher ... (3)

Cut to Barrandov studios Prague where a Medieval jousting tournament is underway ... Žižek is atop a small but sturdy pony with lance in hand. A dark knight approaches from the opposite end of the jousting track atop a black, neighing stallion. The knight in which all knights are black raises his lance ... A horn sounds ... Žižek (consummate knight errant and formidable opponent on the jousting field) looks forlornly toward the stand where "Alenka", the princess who has asked that he lose this round to prove his love, gazes toward him, a wry smile crossing her lips. The black knight charges and delivers a blow to the armour of the normally fearsome knight atop his pony ... (The peasant who loaned him the pony watches from afar, through the hands he is covering his face with in horror) ... Žižek takes the blow, winces, and stands his ground. The black knight delivers repeated blows ... Žižek "stands his ground" (cut in images from the similar scene in *A Knight's Tale*), his armour buckling and pieces flying off and landing with a dull thud on the ground. The black knight charges again, delivers his last blow and wins the tournament. Triumphant, he removes his helmet ... "Badiou!", the shocked spectators cry ... Tears cross the face of "Alenka" and she runs for her beloved. Žižek watches with a combination of trepidation and anticipation as "Alenka" approaches, veers off, and embraces Badiou.(4)

SCENE 2 – An Iroquois longhouse and meeting of the Elders ... The discussion regards the implications ten generations forward of the invasion of territory controlled by the Iroquois Federation by Jesuit missionaries. Žižek is present, a warrior of outstanding qualities renowned for counting coup in battle (riding into the maw of the enemy, English or French, waving his tomahawk and hooting, then retreating to “higher ground”). The longhouse is illuminated by several pit fires and the rough-hewn log walls are lined with scalps and slaughtered animals. Five figures sit around a fire, wrapped in fur, taking long draws on a pipe, exhaling slowly and contemplating the next day’s activities – to rout the Jesuit interlopers.

The next morning the noble savages attack the missionary encampment. Žižek now decked out in war paint and wearing only an eagle feather in his hair and a deerskin loincloth distinguishes himself in battle ... Pinning a black-robed Jesuit to the ground with one knee he disembowels the poor soul screaming: “Let me see your filthy *jouissance!*”. He polishes off the missionary, collects the scalp, scoops up the entrails and heads for the Iroquois camp at the river’s bend. Large vats have been set up and the rendering of the entrails ensues ... Boiling away in the late evening the vats emit huge clouds of billowing steam, wafting into the trees and off into the descending evening. The moon rises ... The camera pans to the blood-splattered faces and chests of the assembled warriors stirring the cauldrons. Three elders descend from the opposite bank of the river and walk slowly toward the encampment, smiling.(5)

SCENE 3 – An academic conference in an undisclosed, generic university ... The topic of the symposium is the “Non-rapport of sexual difference” (difference has been inadvertently spelled with an “a” in the conference booklet and an aid is scurrying around handing out errata slips making pro forma apologies) to all.(6) The errata slip says simply, “Derrida is dead ...”

At the head table the panelists are chatting amiably with the exception of Žižek. S/he is wearing a short black miniskirt, black halter top, red lipstick and tiara ... S/he seems distracted and is going over the notes of his/her lecture on *The Crying Game*. Badiou is nearby, but further down the table ... S/he is dressed in an Armani power pantsuit, hunched over his/her “programme” (the program simply says “Programme” on its cover). Looking up, s/he scans the forum for probable suspects to parody while making his/her presentation through subtle inflections of voice and demeanor such as raising his/her voice an octave or toying with the forelock that strategically falls over his/her right eye at a passage that seems to engage, yet does not, one or another of the assembled academic luminaries. Žižek eyes Badiou and vice versa ...

Cut to the Q&A session ... Žižek is defending the notion that the only true form of heterosexuality is lesbianism ... The all-male panel dressed in drag breaks for coffee as the all-female audience scurries to the wings to ingratiate itself with the celebrity panel ... Žižek heads for the restroom to freshen his makeup and finds Badiou teasing his hair in front of the mirror. S/he approaches Badiou, who sees him/her coming in the mirror. As Žižek places his hand on Badiou’s shoulder and both smile, looking at one another in the mirror, the mirror cracks, and the toilets, sinks, and urinals all flood ... The camera fades to black, plus sounds of dripping water.(7)

SCENE 4 – A Soviet-era swimming pool somewhere in Central or Eastern Europe ... Žižek and Badiou stand next to one another on the diving board wearing only a black speedo. Žižek dives into the pool ... Badiou follows ... They commence a synchronized swim, a watery ballet somewhat badly executed but none the worse for the effort. The camera pans to the empty stands, coming eventually to rest on a panel of ten judges from the French Theology-without-God camp holding up placards scoring the ballet: 0.0, 0.1, 0.0, -2.0, 0.0, 0.0, 4.1, 5.0, 3.0, 0.0 ... Fade to black with disembodied applause.(8)

SCENE 5 – The Drawing Center, New York City ... Žižek has just been introduced and the applause has settled. It’s standing room only ... Outside in Wooster Street hundreds of people jostle for a glimpse inside. Žižek is seated in a generic institutional plastic chair on a short platform/dais with a microphone and music stand to hold his notes (which he never refers to anyway). He switches off the light the organizers have placed in front of him and leans forward slightly toward the shadowy swathe of the assembled academics and merely curious. He is now backlit and the eyes and glasses of the audience reflect myriad small images of the hunched, disheveled virtuoso as he begins to speak. The lecture heads off in pursuit of Saint Paul and the radical kernel of Christianity (intercut scenes from Scorsese’s *The Last Temptation of Christ*, 1988) ... Along the way he develops several dozen tangents and to everyone’s surprise brings them all to a somewhat problematical resolve/crescendo in the all-purpose figure of the empty Universal ... A few tortuous questions are asked, but he

deflects them deftly and scratches his head while awaiting another of the same uselessness. Someone asks about Paris 1968, the last time “structure took to the streets” ... He pauses a moment before beginning to answer. Intercut scene of Žižek in “any American university” posting “office hours” on his office door and then filling in all of the slots with characters taken from American, French, and Russian novels ...

Outside a ruckus can be heard ... The doors burst open and several dozen young women flail their way into the gallery space where the symposium is being held. They are all wearing NYU t-shirts and their wild, unkept locks and darting eyes betray their intoxicated state. Žižek looks in their direction and he freezes ... They descend upon him, he vanishes beneath the flailing arms, patches of clothes, flesh, and bones fly through the air. The audience flees ... Chairs are overturned, the academics tear and pummel one another in the race to get out the door. They flee into the SoHo night, up Wooster Street ...

The camera returns timidly to the scene of the *melée*, first through the door now half off its hinges, then round and through the vestibule. One or two horror-stricken officials of the Drawing Center stand aghast as the last of the NYU bacchantes bolts for the door with a piece of Žižek’s clothing in hand ... Sirens sound ...

The camera returns and slowly follows the walls of the gallery space, works of art dimly emerging from the duskiess of the dimmed, now silent space. The sound of chirping crickets inexplicably emerges from the images on the wall, a selection of sketches by Antonin Artaud ... (Intercut psycho-therapeutic horrors from Charcot to mid-century electroshock treatment) ... As the camera pulls back (itself now mimicking a shocked “interloper” backing out of the gallery slowly), one step backward after another, trembling slightly, a dark pool of blood appears midway through this reverse path surrounded by fragments of bone and flesh ... The camera stops ... It returns to the pool by slowly moving in its direction again, this time straight ahead, calmly without erring. The debris field slowly turns into a landscape, the fragments and remains gaining definition as the camera approaches ... “Alenka”/Eurydice’s face appears in the pool ... (Music comes up ... Elvis Presley’s “Always On My Mind” ...) ... The camera closes in and comes to a full stop on a small dacha at the edge of the pool of blood, perched in the landscape of flesh and bone ... The camera spins *Vertigo*-like.(9)

THE CREDITS – “Always On My Mind” plays over the credits ... The titles roll against a black background inhabited by phantasmatic images from the film proper (distorted, free-flowing fragments of previous scenes cut free from their narrative mission) ... The credits end as the music ends.

CODA – Silence (plus crickets) ... We are back in the dacha in the hills above the Slovenian city. Žižek rustles in his chair, opens his eyes, gazes toward the window, blinking ... He leans forward and picks up Freud’s *Civilization and Its Discontents* and opens it. The first page he encounters is blank. Flipping through the book, slowly at first and then more rapidly, he finds that the book has no content ... Every page is blank. A crash and breaking glass is heard ... (Intercut quick, sequential images of the giant phallus from Kubrick’s *A Clockwork Orange*, 1971) ... Setting the book down, he goes to the window ... Looking down he finds a brick with a note attached. The note says simply, “Yours truly, ‘The Irreal Real’ ...” ... Looking out through the shattered window, outside is the protoplasmic “sea” from Andrei Tarkovsky’s *Solaris* (1972).(10)

GK (November 2005)

ENDNOTES & NOTES ON PRODUCTION VALUES

1 – This vignette might be constructed by intercutting “Medieval” street scenes from Brian Helgeland’s *A Knight’s Tale* (2001), starring Heath Ledger as Sir William Thatcher/Sir Ulrich von Lichtenstein of Gelderland and the lovely Shannyn Sossamon as Lady Jocelyn, or the PBS “Mystery!” series *Cadfael* starring Derek Jacoby as Brother Cadfael, plus the scene in Jiří Menzel’s *Larks on a String* (1969) where a passing truck sprays the buildings and any passersby of a small Czech town with whitewash in preparation for the visit of a Communist party dignitary. The dacha might be any number of small, remote country “summerhouses” (cabins) located in “the wilds” of the Czech Republic or Slovenia, while the pan to the hills recalls the relationship of the castle and the town in Tim Burton’s *Edward Scissorhands* (1990) ...

2 – The surround of black-and-white television sets might be playing a *mélange* of films by Hitchcock, Buñuel, Fellini, Lynch, Gilliam, Greenaway, Burton, Saura, and such – that is, classic “Hollywood”-type films plus the more nuanced “art-house” fare of Krzysztof Kieslowski et al., including Godard’s *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1988-

1998) perhaps, Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962), and/or Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* (1973) ... The fleeing trees suggest Peter Jackson's walking trees in the second film of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, *The Two Towers* (2002) and might allow a direct expropriation, while the spectral faces peering out of the night-time gloom might be taken directly from Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man* (1995) ...

3 – Godardian jumpcuts might be utilized between scenes within scenes, deploying repeatedly or in variation (e.g., German, French, English, Russian, Slovene versions) the singular some-thing (question mark) or “quelque chose” from Godard's *Éloge de l'amour* (2001).

4 – This scene should be shot in the internal streets of an abandoned abattoir in half film-noirish manner plus an aura of blissful innocence, versus the mock-heroic manner typical of the Medieval, Arthurian typology common to Hollywood. John Boorman meets Ridley Scott meets Peter Weir meets Carlos Saura ... Slaughtered cows/bulls might hang in the stands amidst the spectators. See the opening scenes of Saura's *Goya in Bordeaux* (1999) ...

5 – The descending elders might be three versions of the same figure; that is, the same actor times three (viz., the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real) ...

6 – The inadvertent “typo” forms the opening gesture of this scene, and the apparent pause in action is caused by the necessary distribution of the errata slips. Hence everyone is dawdling (temporizing) ...

7 – The flooding of the toilets, urinals, and sinks is based on an installation by Nicholas Folland at the Experimental Art Foundation, Adelaide, SA, October 7-November 5, 2005, called “Doldrum”. “The ocean doesn't function as a theme in these works, still less as a symbol or metaphor; rather, it is perceptible only as a kind of force, a *perpetuum mobile*, a principle of turbulence and erasure, totality and nullity. The ungovernable ocean erases all journeys, real and imagined. And though the age of exploration is over, the ocean remains, perhaps, the only place where the maps are still blank.” Russell Smith (EAF)

8 – This scene is quite short and Badiou and Žižek should be smiling at one another as they proceed with the watery ballet ... The indoor pool should be in a somewhat decrepit state with peeling paint and piles of rubbish here and there (based on the crumbling Sarajevo library in Godard's *Notre Musique*, 2004) ... Books from the French “theological turn” might be floating in the pool (intercut scenes from Peter Greenaway's *Prospero's Books*, 1991) ... Braziers might light the shadowy recesses of the stands, fueled by burning books (intercut scene of Dr. Yuri Zhivago/Omar Sharif feeding books into a stove from David Lean's *Doctor Zhivago*, 1965) ... Light should enter through high windows casting rays through the dusty interior and penetrating into the water. Several shots should be taken from underwater of the ballet illuminated by this one-directional light ... The panel of judges should be standing amidst ruined bleachers, partly in shadows, wearing mortar boards and ceremonial gowns.

9 – This scene should be shot at the Drawing Center and extras should include faculty from NYU, Columbia, Parsons, Cooper Union, and Fordham. The bacchantes should all be young, gorgeous, and half-dressed young women in the fashionable manner of the undergraduate vixen (Lolitas, so to speak). Scenes from Andrei Tarkovsky's *Nostalghia* (1983) and/or *Stalker* (1979) might be interwoven in the closing, spectral landscape of blood, bone, and flesh ...

10 – Tarkovsky's *Solaris* (1972) was a response to the antiseptic, technological vision of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). This final scene conflates the two films by way of the empty Universal form of the book (emptied of all specific content) and the protoplasmic sea as spectral, protean “brain” of that same Universal. Žižek's essay “The Thing from Inner Space” takes Tarkovsky's film as representative of the persistence of the Lacanian phantasmatic thing insofar as it permeates the Symbolic and renders the world “uncanny” at times when this “other” inhuman thing approaches the human.

SOUNDTRACK – Orchestral music from Wagner's “Der Ring des Nibelungen (Ring Cycle)” by Sir Georg Solti (Wiener Philharmonic) or Herbert von Karajan (Berlin Philharmonic) might be used to stitch the five scenarios together for example, “Magic Fire Music” for the opening scene) ... “Always on My Mind”, written by Wayne Carson Thompson, Johnny L. Christopher Jr., and Mark James (EMI Music Inc), has been recorded by figures as diverse as Elvis Presley (1972), Brenda Lee (1973), Willie Nelson (1982), Floyd Cramer (1988, 1997, etc.), The Pet Shop Boys (1988), The Stylistics, and Ryan Adams and the Cardinals (the latter appears as a bonus track on *Jacksonville City Nights, Lost Highway*, 2005) ...

MISE-EN-SCÈNE – “Suture” should be used throughout to underscore the slipperiness of the interlocking scenarios, such as the recurring motif of the mirror was used in Tarkovsky's *Mirror* (1974), or Lake Geneva was used in Godard's *JLG/JLG: Autoportrait de décembre* (1995); that is, something should come repeatedly to fill the camera to present “the Other” (the Thing that sticks out, the “indivisible remainder”, the Real-Irreal

synthesis) always repressed or lurking in the present moment, and this something should serve as passage to/from scenes within scenes. See Slavoj Žižek, "The Thing from Inner Space: On Tarkovsky", *Angelaki*, vol. 4, no. 3 (December 1999)

SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK AT JACK TILTON GALLERY, NEW YORK, NEW YORK, APRIL 23, 2009
“Architectural Parallax: Spandrels and Other Phenomena of Class Struggle”

Žižek’s grasp of architecture, much like his grasp of film, is thoroughly distorted by Lacanian concepts that structure things as spectral emanations of ideological superstructures – that is, in most situations Id and Superego collide, while the resultant Ego (the middle ground and nominal subject) flails, as Žižek flails, to find a purchase, a point of balance, in this case between architectural parallax (here a synchronic time machine) and possible utopian opportunities (the leftover bits or “exapted” forms) and functions freed of purpose in the evolutionary expansion of architecture to its postmodern formlessness, the latter a collapse of legibility illustrated by the bland, folded/cut facades of Daniel Libeskind or the knotted, pornographic fusions of Frank Gehry. (Žižek mentions the Sydney Opera House of Jørn Utzon as resembling copulating turtles and Gehry’s Fisher Center/Museum at Bard as resembling a cockroach.) It is for such specular and spectacular reasons that Žižek focuses on arts complexes, as symptomatic of the postmodern condition, and especially the role they play in obscuring capitalist reifications of ongoing exploitative practices. An easy mark, it is no less funny when he suggests that if the rich need an opera house to parade about and ogle one another in, let’s just dispense with the theatre and give them a building that is nothing more than a gigantic staircase (e.g., the Guggenheim). Here the monstrous nature of the Lacanian Symbolic (location of the Name of the Father) is exposed as perennial obscene joke.

The leftover bits that might or might not save utopian “free” space from neo-liberal capitalism end up being, for Žižek, halls, stairs, closets, and all manner of interstitial, psychologized nothings that service the privileged halls of architecture (its rooms and functions) – and it is the stuffing of services into unseen places (between floors, behind walls) that prompts Žižek to reveal that, as a good Lacanian, the irruptive often pleases him most (as when a stopped-up toilet threatens to overflow and “return” things expelled, versus swallow them and rid us of their unwantedness and/or wantonness). Thus, Žižek can point to the signature divorce of the Real by remarking that architecture “frames”, and that this in fact is an aspect of silencing the proverbial Other (nature, the outside, the unwanted, the undead, etc.). No surprise, this framing is merely done today in only apparently “liberated” ways. If Koolhaas’s proposal for the Bibliothèque Nationale de France is a set of “organs without a body” (Žižek quoting/paraphrasing Hal Foster), any number of new museums are forms without functions – “exapted” types for one reason alone, and that reason is that art museums are no longer galleries but discothèques, shopping malls, night clubs, restaurants, or banqueting venues of multiple vanities and appropriations – a return to origins, then. Žižek’s main confession (by way of Badiou) that there is “Great Art”, after all, and that it is Art that attends to universal principles and conditions, is the primary event of the collision of architecture and its corollaries – architectural events not “exapted”, but architectural facts expropriated, both from the production of ideology and hegemony but also from the expedients of its own history. If everything is possible “now” and all forms of architecture are present simultaneously and, therefore, depleted, it is not form that matters but, oddly, its antithesis. There is no question whatsoever that “Great Architecture” means (always) a formalization of intelligence – a metaphysics allied with the extreme and often particularized absolutes of universal truths. Yet Žižek demotes architecture to its role of servicing ideology, to essentially mock it, while wishing nonetheless that it were not quite true.

GK (April 2009)

A version of this essay appeared in *Log* 16 (Spring-Summer 2009)

QUESTIONS FOR ŽIŽEK

If “exaptation” is the possible answer to architecture’s cooptation by capitalist hegemony, is such not also a “huge” evolutionary process that eclipses architecture – that wipes it out? Is it a valid analogy? If then “synchronic” excuses (plucking things from here and there) might counter the nature of gigantic evolutionary time frames (negate the “huge” spreads of time involved), is it possible or even plausible that architecture can “exapt” at all without reintroducing the diachronic, historical development of architecture?

Mocking architecture is easy. Hegel did it, demoting it to an instrumentalized nothing – its soul sold in advance to ideology. Tired Jamesonian tirades aside, is all architecture automatically “post-modern”? Your recourse to the outmoded seems a sad excuse for possible “utopian” scenarios for architecture. It sounds like an appropriation from Surrealism.

Sure, the grotesque “jokes” of Libeskind and Gehry are well known – they are manifestations of a celebrity culture in architecture that is already passing away. Can you be sure they are the biggest jokes? What about celebrity post-Marxist philosophers hung up on Hegel and Lacan?

You once called Plečnik’s architecture in Slovenia “fascist”. You profess a bizarre regard for Stalinist “baroque” architecture – Soviet-era ideological junk that is now, weirdly, a style appropriated by the Russian *nouveaux riche*. What are your real reasons for taking extreme positions on architecture? Would you be happy with peasant cottages everywhere – an Arcadian, post-historical idyll?

Finally, “parallax” is a slippery term. The best example of parallax in architecture might be the Parthenon (and the Acropolis). Your version of parallax seems to be “historicized” (de-natured and abstract, but also dialectical). Bodies, sentient and otherwise, interact even if they try *not* to. One cannot avoid the fact that parallax is related to anamorphosis, and that anamorphism is a metaphor for the “here-and-now”. Is it not possible that ideality in architecture is the main problem, and that universal signifiers (or “utopian junk-space”) is a huge red herring? Do not “peasant cottages” conjure Heidegger and “all of that”? And doesn’t junk-space and/or “exapted architectural stuff” denote rank cynicism regarding the necessity of formulating worlds?

GK (April 2009)

See http://www.lacan.com/essays/?page_id=218