



The Symbolic, The Sublime,  
and Slavoj Žižek's Theory of Film

Matthew Flisfeder



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For Robyn and Lilah,  
my world

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# Introduction

In order to understand today's world, we need cinema, literally. It's only in cinema that we get that crucial dimension we are not ready to confront in our reality. If you are looking for what is in reality more real than reality itself look into the cinematic fiction.

—Slavoj Žižek

## Ideology: Between *The Matrix* and *Inception*

The Wachowski brothers' *The Matrix* (1999) and Christopher Nolan's *Inception* (2010) each posit a particular thesis on ideology. In *The Matrix*, we get the standard conception of ideology as “false consciousness.” The matrix is a universe of symbolic fictions, regulating our relation to “reality.” Emancipation is possible once one removes oneself from and leaves this fictional reality, and one discovers the real reality, behind the illusion. *The Matrix*, then, appears to speak directly to cinematic fictions. Are we not all in “the matrix” when we are watching films?

This is certainly the claim made by Alain Badiou when he compares *The Matrix* to two other science fiction films: Vincenzo Natali's *Cube* (1997) and David Cronenberg's *eXistenZ* (1999). All three films deal in one way or another with the difference between reality and appearance, and they are of interest for Badiou since they present the thesis that, in his terms, “the visible (appearance) is in reality a particularly aleatory indication of the Real.”<sup>1</sup> Or to put things differently, according to Badiou, the cinema has the power to “render visibly uncertain the certainty of the visible.”<sup>2</sup> The three films cited by Badiou make a claim toward the relationship between appearance and reality. *Cube*, for him, poses a Kantian transcendental question about how the subject might react if the totality of its world were subtracted, removed from beneath its feet—that is, if the subject were to be pulled out of its “natural” environment. *eXistenZ*, in contrast, asks about how the subject might react if the surrounding world could not be given any kind of objective consistency. *The Matrix*, then, poses the Platonic question, evident in its connection to the allegory of the cave: What is the relationship between the reality of the subject and the formation of subjectivation

under the constraints of appearances? For Badiou, it is the latter that is superior to the other two films since *The Matrix* is self-reflexive enough to pose questions about the cinema itself. Yet I would argue against Badiou that *The Matrix* only speaks to one side of the equation between cinema and appearances.

*Inception* posits a different thesis. Ideology, here, is less about the symbolic fictions—the appearances—that regulate external reality. It has more to do with the underlying sublime fantasy that regulates our *approach* to reality. Subjects in the social world never truly approach reality spontaneously, at a zero level. Our approach to reality is always supported by our *a priori* assumptions and perceptions about the world, even if we do not yet realize this at a conscious level. In *The Matrix*, the radical act of the hero, Neo (Keanu Reeves)—the act that ultimately allows him to break free, to change the coordinates of his relationship to ideology—involves maintaining a safe distance between himself and the virtual world of symbolic reality, the matrix itself as the technological medium of appearances representing reality. *Inception*, however, is much harsher. In order to escape from the world of symbolic fictions, the hero, Cobb (Leonardo DiCaprio), is required not only to maintain a distance between himself and symbolic “reality.” He must go even further: he must identify with and risk the inner most kernel of his very being. He must traverse the very fantasy that structures his approach to reality itself.<sup>3</sup>

Taken together, *The Matrix* and *Inception* allow us to perceive the very coordinates of ideology today. Ideology is not only the set of symbolic fictions that regulate external reality, nor is it simply the fantasy that supports our approach to reality. Ideology is to be located in between the symbolic and the sublime. It has to do with the relationship between the external symbolic order that regulates social reality *and* the obscene underside of fantasy (an underside that remains unconscious) that attaches us ever more aggressively to external reality. My thesis builds on and draws on the work of the contemporary Slovenian political philosopher and psychoanalyst Slavoj Žižek.

One cannot say with certainty whether Žižek is simply a political philosopher or if he is cultural critic. It is more difficult to say whether he is a film theorist or simply a pop culture enthusiast. Some might also argue that Žižek creates a field of his own. In many ways, and paradoxically so, this most modernist of thinkers is truly the most postmodern thinker to date. The world with which Žižek engages is one that is, on the one hand, vividly familiar and quite representative of the images we confront daily in our consumerist “society of the spectacle” yet is, on the other hand, painfully obscure. In a single sentence, Žižek can pass from details in the films of Alfred Hitchcock and David Lynch to the most complex

conceptualizations of enjoyment, subjectivity, ideology, and politics in the works of Kant, Schelling, Hegel, Marx, and Lacan (among others). He is a thinker capable of conceptualizing variations in European ideology simply by making observations about the mundane details of toilets in Germany, France, and England.<sup>4</sup> He is also at the same time a well-known “joker” and, for some, the most dangerous philosopher writing today. It is often difficult to keep up with Žižek, as he has been averaging about two books per year for the last twenty years. This is either the product of a prolific genius or the work of an obsessive neurotic, never ready—or, perhaps, afraid—to settle on any one “answer.”

Žižek is also a figure who reaches beyond the confines of academic elitism. His appeal stems, partially, from his appearance *as* image. He is the subject of a documentary, *Žižek!* (2005), directed by Astra Taylor, and the writer and host of the film *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema* (2006), directed by Sophie Fiennes. A simple search for Žižek on Google or YouTube also results in an unending stream of images, videos, and texts. Commenting on an interview she conducted with Žižek for the Abercrombie and Fitch catalog—which, as she notes, is “well known in the United States for selling clothes by featuring barely clad teenage bodies in highly charged homoerotic photographs”—the political theorist Jodi Dean writes, “That Abercrombie wanted to feature this philosopher (who later supplied text for a particularly beautiful and risqué edition of the catalog) testifies to his near pop-star status.”<sup>5</sup>

The British cultural theorist Peter Dews comments that “the work of the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek seems to offer an irresistible range of attractions for theorists wishing to engage with contemporary culture, without accepting the flimsy postmodernist *doxa*, which is often the only available gloss on it.”<sup>6</sup> Alain Badiou adds that “the brilliant work of Žižek is something like the creation of a conceptual matrix that has the power to shed new light on a great deal of cultural facts.”<sup>7</sup>

What mostly attracts readers to Žižek's work is his ability to engage and expand on some of the most difficult questions facing theorists today, such as how to engage a critical theory of ideology at a time when we are said to be living in a “postideological era.” Such an understanding of ideology is not simply meant to undermine the reigning liberal-democratic *doxa* (which in different variations can also be conflated with neoliberalism or neoconservatism) à la Francis Fukuyama or Samuel Huntington that with the end of the Cold War we no longer have to be concerned with ideological warfare; we can simply resort to managing and administering the world as it is in “reality”—an attitude that has been severely questioned, Žižek notes, since the attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 (a tragedy), and the financial meltdown in 2008 (a farce).<sup>8</sup> In order

to engage in the critique of ideology under the conditions of the so-called postideological world, Žižek goes as far as undermining the very (Marxian) notion of ideology as a kind of “false consciousness.” As Žižek puts it, it is important to distinguish between constituted ideology—“empirical manipulations and distortions at the level of content”—and constitutive ideology—“the ideological form which provides the coordinates of the very space within which the content is located.”<sup>9</sup> In his own thought, Žižek refers to the German Idealist philosophy of Kant and Hegel as well as psychoanalysis in order to understand the operation of ideology when it is no longer a matter of mystification. For Žižek, ideology has less to do with a false representation of reality and more to do with the “primordial lie” that *constitutes* reality itself. As he puts it, “[i]deology really succeeds when even the facts which at first sight contradict it start to function in its favour.”<sup>10</sup>

Dews notes that Žižek's writings are “informed by a vivid and sophisticated grasp of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, and are enlivened by constant references to works of fiction, cinema, classical music and opera.”<sup>11</sup> Terry Eagleton even goes as far as to refer to Žižek as “Lacan's representative on earth.”<sup>12</sup> However, to limit Žižek's work to critical engagements with the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan and works of popular culture is to miss out on some of the central features of Žižek's “project.” While both Lacan and popular culture hold important places in Žižek's writings, they serve merely as linchpins for his broader endeavor to elaborate a theory of ideology and subjectivity that draws heavily on German Idealism. This philosophical project is accompanied by a strong commitment to revolutionary politics. Žižek often dismisses his own engagements with popular culture as mere examples used for the purpose of more clearly elaborating his philosophical project. Adrian Johnston's book *Žižek's Ontology: A Transcendental Materialist Theory of Subjectivity* (2008) is one of the most decisive engagements as of yet with the philosophical underpinnings of Žižek's theoretical and political tasks.

In the preface to his book, Johnston writes that “[w]hen Žižek declares that he employs, for instance, popular culture as a subservient vehicle for the (re)deployment of late-modern philosophy . . . he is quite serious. The chain Kant-Schelling-Hegel, knotted together vis-à-vis Lacan himself as this chain's privileged *point de capiton* (quilting point), is the underlying skeletal structure holding together the entirety of the Žižekian theoretical edifice.”<sup>13</sup> Johnston is at pains to argue that the cultural studies reading of Žižek is misguided and that Žižek's constant references to popular culture should not distract readers from his more philosophical goal of elaborating a transcendental materialist theory of subjectivity, the subtitle of Johnston's book.



Contrary to Johnston's claim, Paul Bowman suggests that "Žižek's disavowal of cultural studies is *deliberate* and *strategic*. . . Žižek's strategic and apparently belligerent relation to cultural studies actually offers something of a 'royal road' for appreciating and understanding his work; and that making sense of this peculiar relation in fact provides us with a number of important insights into his entire orientation."<sup>14</sup>

What follows is somewhere in between Johnston's and Bowman's assessments and is grounded in the way that Žižek's analyses of cinema show how, as Fabio Vighi puts it, "the subject connects with the ideological fantasy woven in external reality,"<sup>15</sup> demonstrating that Žižek "is the only theorist today who . . . advocates the convergence of psychoanalysis and film as part of a project for the radical re-politicisation of culture."<sup>16</sup> While the present investigation is developed in solidarity with Johnston's approach, its object of analysis is quite sympathetic to Bowman's and Vighi's comments regarding Žižek's critical orientation and his engagement with popular culture and cinema. Although Žižek's orientation is philosophical in stature, one cannot help but consider the central place of culture in his analyses of ideology and subjectivity, particularly his constant and continued engagements with film and cinema.

Two central objectives occupy the terrain of the present book: (1) to further articulate the contours of a Žižekian theory of ideology and (2) to expand on a strictly Žižekian theory of film. The latter requires engaging with two axes of Žižek's theoretical writings. The first and most obvious is Žižek's constant and recurring references to examples in cinema. The second is his overtly Lacanian approach to ideology critique. Because of his engagements with both cinema and Lacan, it is not difficult to understand why Žižek has been taken up in film studies, even if controversy remains regarding Žižek's status as a film theorist. In what follows, I argue that Žižek's film theory involves not theorizing about *film* as such. Instead, I seek to reverse the trajectory of film theory. Rather than theorizing film—an endeavor that, as I explain later, has become increasingly problematic—film theory must focus on theorizing ideology by way of film criticism. To do this, I begin by providing some context for the relationship between the critique of ideology and film theory.

### The Critique of Ideology

A single problematic occupies the field of the Marxian theory of ideology. As Fredric Jameson puts it, "if the world is as Marxism describes it"—that is, if society really is organized along the lines of domination and exploitation; if capitalism really does divide society into antagonisms between the

class that rules and the class that is exploited; and if all the legal, social, and cultural formations in the superstructure really are determined by the relations of domination and exploitation in the mode of production, and so on—"if this particular 'truth' about the world has finally been revealed to us in modern times, how is it that people continue to refuse it and insist on seeing the world in quite different terms?"<sup>17</sup>

The Marxian theory of ideology has developed, in various different guises, by way of various different methods, in order to answer the question as to why its particular "truths" have been encountered with so much resistance, especially by those whose interests it asserts. What is therefore at stake in the Marxian theory of ideology is not simply the "truth" value of that which it reveals about the world but rather the extent to which its revelations have enough force to actively transform the existing conditions of domination and exploitation. The theory (or "Theory") of ideology suggests that this "truth" alone is not enough to generate a "class consciousness" capable of transforming the existing conditions of existence.

One of the main problems facing Marxian theorists of ideology is that, as Colin MacCabe notes, Marx abandoned the subject of ideology after 1846.<sup>18</sup> Thus no such theory exists in Marx's later work. In an effort to build an understanding of why the Marxian critique of capitalism was met with so much resistance, Marxian scholars such as Antonio Gramsci and Georg Lukács returned to the problematic of ideology. Gramsci, on the one hand, sought an answer in his conception of "hegemony." Post-Marxists, such as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe,<sup>19</sup> have taken up Gramsci's conception of hegemony as a way of elaborating on a nondialectical theory of ideology. Lukács, on the other hand, built on the Marxian philosophy of dialectical materialism by examining the antinomies of bourgeois thought from a Hegelian perspective.

The limits of bourgeois thought, according to Lukács, parallel the limits of Kantian transcendental philosophy. Because of its own internal limits, bourgeois thought is incapable of perceiving its excesses as a result of its own system of rationalism. In the Kantian paradigm, the subject is capable of understanding everything about reality except for the fact of its own existence or the form of its own thought.<sup>20</sup> Bourgeois thought perceives excesses (the existence of the proletariat, for example) as instances of irrationality that trouble established rationality. As Lukács puts it, "Kant did not go beyond the critical interpretation of ethical facts in the individual consciousness . . . these facts were thereby transformed into something merely there and could not be conceived as having been 'created.'"<sup>21</sup> The Kantian approach, in other words, does not account for the historical development of objects of thought and their relation to the form of consciousness.

The difference between bourgeois and proletarian consciousness, according to Lukács, is not a difference between two different versions of objective reality. Objective reality “in its immediacy,” as Lukács puts it, is the same for both the bourgeois and the proletariat.<sup>22</sup> What is different is the particular historical, subjective position from which each engages with objective reality. In other words, there are not two different *versions* of objective reality. There is just one reality (or “Real”) that is split internally. At stake in the class struggle is the form or meaning of “reality”—bourgeois or proletariat—that will organize society. From the Marxian perspective, the form of the social coincides with the dominant form of thought.

Unlike the Kantian problematic, wherein the subject is capable of understanding all experience except for the contingent fact of its own existence, Hegelian dialectics, according to Lukács, allows the subject to comprehend the limits of thought as an effect of the historical *form* of thought itself. Hegelian dialectics allows the subject to comprehend its own existence in its historical contingency—that is, change in history means a change in the form of thought. Dialectics allows the subject to understand its own position in a totality, not by accounting for the irrational as an excess of the rational, but by understanding the rational *from the perspective of the irrational*, or from a perspective that is inaccessible to the dominant form of thought. The “irrational” represents that which the dominant form of thought cannot explain in its own terms; it is that which contradicts the dominant form of thought, and in order to be operative, the dominant form of thought must rid itself of contradiction. It is the irrational, the exception, that speaks to the (false) universality of the form. Put differently, there are not two universalities/totalities—that of the rational and that of the irrational. There is one universality, split between the particularity of the “rational” and the singularity of the “irrational.” One cannot understand the fallacies of the ruling ideology; one cannot understand the faults with its “rationalism,” according to Lukács, unless it is viewed from an external position in a totality—that is, unless it is viewed from the position of the “irrational,” what the ruling ideology cannot understand in its own terms. For Hegel, however, in a historical transformation, it is the concept rather than objective reality that is changed. History, from a Hegelian perspective, is the history of ideas. The shift from Hegel to Marx is simply an extension of this logic. From the Marxian perspective, the subject must transform the objective conditions of existence in order to develop an equal transformation in itself. In other words, a change in the concept is contingent on a transformation of material reality. This, in a nutshell, is how the Marxian philosophy of dialectical materialism should be understood.

Dialectical materialism is best rendered as a move from the Kantian transcendental subject to the historical subject in Hegel and finally to the

revolutionary subject in Marx, which destroys the limits imposed on its own subjectivity by transforming the objective conditions of its existence. A dialectical materialist critique of ideology is not just epistemological; it is, more important, ontological. Nondialectical perspectives—even those that are in solidarity with Marxism (i.e., the Marxism of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri)—fail to make the ontological connection between the class struggle and ideology.

The dialectical method of historical transformation, I claim, is mirrored in the transformation of the subject in the psychoanalytic cure. For both Marxism and psychoanalysis the point is not simply to change the perspective from which one perceives one's own objective conditions of existence; it is, rather, to change the objective conditions of one's existence in order to then reconstitute oneself anew. According to each, change is only possible when there is a coincidence of subject and object. In Hegelian terms, this is the position of Absolute Knowing (as opposed to Absolute Knowledge); in psychoanalytic terms, this is the position of subjective destitution—when the subject gains consciousness of the fallacies concerning the Symbolic (as opposed to the objective) conditions of its existence, or the Symbolic coordinates of its existence. Subjective destitution represents the ends of analysis. At this point, the subject can act in one of two ways. The subject can either reconstitute the fantasy that structures the Symbolic coordinates of its existence, or it can traverse the fantasy and change the objective conditions of its existence. Both the Marxian revolutionary subject and the psychoanalytic cure require an (ethical) act in concordance with the second option. The first is an operation of ideology.

This provides one answer to the Marxian problematic of ideology. Resistance to the “truths” of Marxian criticism, I claim, is pathological in the sense that the subject of capitalism is too firmly attached to the fantasy that structures the coordinates of its own existence within the Symbolic. In ideology, the subject is still too “passionately attached” to its Symbolic identity.<sup>23</sup> My thesis, like that of Lukács, is that the subject of capitalist society is still too Kantian. This is a subject that is inherently pathological, and for me, all the nondialectical theories of ideology and subjectivity are susceptible to perverse, psychotic, and/or neurotic conceptions of and relationships to power/authority. These pathological perspectives on power/authority are prevented from perceiving their own subjection as a result of the class struggle. In other words, they all suffer by ignoring the ontological attachment of the subject to authority. The subject, as a result of its “passionate attachment” to authority, is incapable of seeing beyond the confines of its own form of thought. In other words, the furthest that bourgeois thought and all the nondialectical theories of ideology can go is to try to *theorize* the matrix; the point is to change it!

## From the Critique of Ideology to Cinema

The dialectical critique of ideology, I argue, seeks to dissolve this ontological deadlock. Unlike other philosophical “systems”—systems that reproduced dogmatism—the dialectic in Marxism and psychoanalysis is better understood as a unity-of-theory-and-practice. Its goal is not to create certainty about the world but to constantly revise and recreate new conditions of subjectivity. But does this theory give too little credit to the subject? Is this just another theory of “false consciousness?”

It is often claimed that Marx treated workers as objects, ignoring the fact that workers are living human beings, with consciousness, and have the ability to articulate ideological, political, and economic preferences. They are people who are capable of adapting to different kinds of situations and are able to compromise. They also have the ability to “wage war” to protect their rights.

Marx, it is claimed, also tended to impose “theoretical constructs upon historical realities and so distorted history.”<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, the theoretical constructs that Marx applied to historical reality reflected not the actual practice of capitalism but merely capitalist ideology. Critics also claim that, in practice, the dynamics of workers’ resistance have helped to transform capitalist practice, turning it into a terrain of compromise. As David Harvey points out, not only do these criticisms challenge the basic elements of Marx’s theoretical and historical interpretation of capitalism; they also challenge the basis for his revolutionary politics.<sup>25</sup>

These criticisms, Harvey notes, are not entirely untrue. However, Marx’s claim, significantly, was that the world cannot be understood by way of simple, subjective experiences and interpretations—this, of course, is the error in the Kantian perspective. In order for the working class to realize its “historical mission” and understand its own enslavement, it must have access to a particular kind of knowledge grounded in scientific understanding. This claim does not deny the subjective experiences of workers their own validation, nor does it claim that their own personal experiences are unworthy of consideration. It is, as Harvey points out, important to understand how workers “cope” with their situation. It is necessary to understand something about the activities in which they take part, the games they play, the forms of entertainment they consume, the kinds of friendships they have, the dynamics of family life, the ways in which they cooperate with each other, the ways in which they confront and deal with authority, and the particular aspirations and senses of morality they promote in their everyday lives—all of which play a role *in making the labor process bearable*. The question that Marx asks, however, is “What is it that workers are being forced to cope *with*?” What types of conflicts and forms

of domination are workers dealing with that result in all these various cultural constructs from below?

Marxian theory “holds up to workers, as in a mirror, the objective conditions of their own alienation, and exposes the forces that dominate their social existence and their history.”<sup>26</sup> But the major dilemma of theory is that it does not present itself well to the consciousness of the proletariat. Political class consciousness, Harvey asserts, is not “forged” by some appeal to theory. The roots of political class consciousness are formed within the fabric of everyday life and (importantly) within the subjective experiences of ordinary people. This is both a barrier to and the *raison d’être* of “the Theory,” for it argues that the realities of exploitation under capitalism are obscured by fetishisms, for both the worker *and* the capitalist. What is obscured is the origin of surplus-value in exploitation. There is thus a gap between what subjective experience teaches and that which theory seeks to reveal. Nevertheless, despite the achievements of theory, Marx could not solve the problem of political class consciousness, a problematic that has been the single greatest challenge and undertaking for Western Marxists.

Beginning in the 1930s, Western Marxists started taking an interest in psychoanalysis. Like Marxism, psychoanalysis also takes into consideration resistances to its teachings—which are often unpleasant, painful, and difficult to absorb—within the terms of its own systematic accounts of power and repression. It is therefore easy to understand why Marxian theorists turned to psychoanalysis in order to build on the theory of ideology. Psychoanalysis proved to be quite influential for several key figures in the Frankfurt school, including Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and Herbert Marcuse. These thinkers focused primarily on the teachings of Sigmund Freud, and their work is often dubbed “Freudo-Marxism.” However, one of the most important configurations of psychoanalytic Marxism developed in the work of the French Marxian philosopher Louis Althusser.

Althusser’s theory of ideology is often the starting point for contemporary theories of ideology. Althusser’s psychoanalytic Marxism differs significantly from the Freudo-Marxism of the Frankfurt school. In contrast to the Freudian influence of the earlier versions of psychoanalytic Marxism, Althusser’s work draws its influence from the teachings of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. From the early 1950s to the mid-1960s, Lacan sought to reinterpret Freudian psychoanalysis by way of structural linguistics. He is most famous for arguing that the unconscious is structured like a language. The Lacanian influence in Althusser’s work comes across in his most well-known essay, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation).” Here, Althusser claims that ideology interpellates individuals as subjects in ideological apparatuses, such as the

school, the church, the media, and so on. Althusser's essay on ideological state apparatuses proved to be rather influential in several disciplines and fields of critical study in the 1970s, particularly because it introduced a conception of the subject into the Marxian theory of ideology. The Lacanian-inspired theory of the subject gained significance for critical theorists by way of Althusser, but its influence was perhaps strongest in film studies and "film theory."

Following the influence of Althusser, Marxian and Lacanian perspectives on ideology and subjectivity began to enter the field of film studies. Film theorists in the 1970s approached the study of cinema as an ideological apparatus. The theory of ideology became an area of interest for film scholars interested in spectatorship. However, film scholars in the 1970s were less interested in the study of *ideology*. They were more interested in understanding something about the way in which films function as ideology and how spectators are interpellated as subjects. They sought, therefore, to develop a theory of film, rather than a theory of ideology.

In the following, I argue that, instead of trying to use Marxism and psychoanalysis to understand something about film and spectatorship, Marxian theorists of ideology should try to further their understanding of ideology by studying film and spectatorship from a psychoanalytic perspective. Film in particular, and mass culture in general, is of interest because it is an aspect of everyday life and part of the culture from below that makes it possible to understand how people cope with the deadlocks of power and repression and of exploitation. Film theory, I argue, adds significantly to the theory of ideology—but not only for intellectuals. Film is of interest because it speaks in a popular language. Therefore, if theorists could speak in the language of cinema, perhaps, I claim, it could be possible to relate that which is necessary to understand in theory. This is precisely why Žižek is of interest for Marxian film theorists.

### Toward a Žižekian Film Theory

The way in which Žižek approaches films with regards to ideology and subjectivity actually gives us cause to rethink the entire project of film theory. What, in fact, were screen theorists working toward? Were they, as the American film scholar David Bordwell has suggested, trying to understand something about the social and psychic functions of *cinema*?<sup>27</sup> Or, closer to Žižek's project, were they trying to understand something about the social and psychic functions of *ideology and subjectivity*, focusing on film and spectatorship as objects of inquiry for the purpose of this particular investigation?

*Theory*, as Žižek, Bordwell, and others have indicated, has come to signify a certain assortment of structuralism, poststructuralism, deconstruction, Althusserian Structuralism, post-Marxism, and so on, all of which developed in the wake of the post-1968 leftist turn in cultural theory and the emergence of new social movements in politics. In other places (but also according to Bordwell), *Theory* has come to mean “Grand Theory,” or “Grand Narrative,” which in the work of postmodernists, such as Jean-François Lyotard, has become a code word for arguments against Marxism (“Grand Theory” seems to accomplish the same effect, for Bordwell, toward psychoanalysis).<sup>28</sup> For Žižek, then, Theory seems to be more specifically associated with the Marxian method: dialectical materialism—something of which he associates with his own Hegelian-Lacanian method.<sup>29</sup>

The problem with film theory, particularly psychoanalytic/Lacanian film theory, is that it misconstrued its object of analysis. Film theory, like Theory in general, must be aimed toward an analysis of ideology and not necessarily at some kind of Truth-Knowledge about film and spectatorship—that is, as some kind of objective knowledge about the latter. Within this context, it is worth considering Žižek’s own thinking on film studies. In his book, *The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieslowski between Theory and Post-Theory* (2001), Žižek takes aim at David Bordwell and Noël Carroll’s anthology *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies* (1996), a manifesto of sorts that seeks primarily to debunk the supposed reign of Theory (capital T) in film studies; but *Fright* also seeks to rethink the project of Theory in general and the place of cinema within this project.

My claim is that Žižek’s relevance in film studies is based not on his rethinking of Lacan, as some have suggested, thereby enhancing a strictly Lacanian film theory (this, however, is one of his accomplishments, although perhaps unintentional), but rather, Žižek’s relevance to film studies comes by way of his rethinking of the project of Theory and the role of film studies within *this* project. As a particular field of inquiry (as opposed to a discipline), film Theory shares a specific object of analysis with other branches of film studies, including post-Theory; however, it differs with regards to the nature of the questions posed and the methodologies practiced in examining films. Questions posed with regards to film can be either object based, seeking to know something specific about the film-object, or subject based, seeking to understand something about the particular subject-position from which films are approached and interpreted (including political interpretations). The difference between Theory and post-Theory, then, according to Žižek, is that the former admits its own particular subject-position, the position from which it examines the cinema (for Žižek, this is the political position of the proletariat)—a position that is subjective and knows itself to be so; the latter, however, does not,



and post-Theorists work under the guise of some kind of objective, neutral knowledge toward its object.

The first chapter of this book looks at the development of Lacanian film theory in the 1970s. Here, I also explain some of the key Lacanian concepts used by film theorists in the 1970s, writing mainly in the British film journal *Screen*. These concepts include the “mirror stage,” the “gaze,” “suture,” and the three orders of the Imaginary, Symbolic, and the Real. This chapter concludes by examining some of the criticisms pitted against “screen theory” by film scholars writing in the *Post-Theory* anthology. The second chapter, then, elaborates on Žižek’s use of film examples in his endeavor to articulate the contours of a Lacanian theory of ideology. Here, particular focus is paid to Žižek’s interpretations of Hitchcock and Lynch.

Chapter 3 takes up the debate between Žižek and Bordwell. Using the Lacanian matrix of the four discourses, I demonstrate the role of the class struggle in thinking critically about the post-Theory perspective and the way that it occupies the position of the ruling ideology. My arguments in Chapter 3 set the tone for the next two chapters, in which I set out to demonstrate Žižek’s approach to film analysis. Chapter 3 is followed by a short interlude that looks at *The Pervert’s Guide to Cinema* in the context of Žižek’s critique of ideology but also takes up Lacan’s discourse of the Analyst to expound on Žižek’s own position in this film as the analyst-pervert. Chapter 4, then, addresses Žižek’s textual analysis of cinema and the way that Žižek’s film analyses speak to the Symbolic fabric of ideology in everyday reality. In Chapter 5, I then move on to a discussion of Žižek’s theory of subjectivity and how it enables a new perspective on cinematic spectatorship. In this chapter, I argue that—unlike “screen theory,” which claims that films interpellate individuals as spectators/subjects—the cinema interpellates subjects as spectators by reproducing a degree of enjoyment.

I would like to make two final points about Žižek’s film analysis. First, my objective is not to rehash all the various cinematic examples provided by Žižek. For instance, I have strategically excluded examples such as Žižek’s reference to *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) or *Alien* (1979) in order to explain the psychoanalytic concept of drive or the Thing (*das Ding*). These are the kinds of examples that often get Žižek in trouble with film scholars. What I intend in the following is, rather, to refer to those films that truly give evidence toward Žižek’s own theory of film. The examples cited are ones that demonstrate the way in which Žižek develops a critique of ideology by way of the cinema. Therefore, particular attention is paid to those films and directors that much more vocally express Žižek’s brand of ideology critique.

Second, the reader will most likely notice a strong influence from the work of Fredric Jameson in the pages that follow. While it is not my explicit

objective, here, to show the ties between the cultural criticism of Jameson and Žižek, it is worth noting that, for me, Jameson's historical materialist cultural criticism provides the very "political unconscious" to Žižek's psychoanalytic and dialectical theory of film. This is, however, a productive tie and one that I believe advances a critical theory of ideology for film and cultural theory.

In *The Ticklish Subject* (1999), Žižek notes that the universes of David Lynch's films are often tied together by a special ingredient: a signifying chain structured by a particular phrase, which always returns. In *Dune*, it is "The sleeper must awake"; in *Twin Peaks*, "The owls are not what they seem"; in *Blue Velvet*, "Daddy wants to fuck"; and in *Lost Highway*, the phrase that is both the first and last words spoken in the film, "Dick Laurent is dead." In the latter, the entire plot proceeds in the time between the two moments when these words are spoken. At the beginning of the film, the hero hears these words spoken on the receiving end of the intercom in his house; at the end of the film, we see that it is he who speaks these words into the intercom. The film, in this sense, is circular, and the whole film, according to Žižek, "is based on the impossibility of the hero encountering *himself*."<sup>30</sup> This circular trajectory parallels the psychoanalytic experience, in which, at the beginning, the patient is troubled by some obscure, indecipherable but persistent message—the symptom—which, as it were, bombards him or her from outside; then, at the conclusion of the treatment, the patient is able to assume this message as his or her own, to pronounce it in the first person singular.<sup>31</sup>

The temporal loop that structures *Lost Highway* is, thus, the same temporal loop that structures the psychoanalytic treatment, in which, after the entire process of analysis, the subject returns to the same position but perceives it from an entirely different perspective.

It is my hope that if, at the beginning of the present book, the reader is struck by a certain feeling of despair and confusion—"What on Earth is he talking about?" "Who is this Žižek fellow and why is he so important?" "Shouldn't film analysis remain strictly about formalism and studies of authorship, genre, and national tradition?"—that by the end, she not only is well versed in Žižekian theory and Lacanian psychoanalysis but also is prepared to engage film criticism as a fully transformed revolutionary subject, having returned to the same position from which she began but from an entirely different perspective.

# From Film Theory to Post-Theory

## Žižek and Lacanian Film Theory

Many contemporary Lacanian film theorists credit Žižek for the recent rebirth of interest in Lacanian psychoanalysis for film theory. Žižek's philosophical rereading of Lacanian psychoanalysis has influenced many film theorists toward a reexamination of some of the problematics developed by early Lacanian film theorists, most of whom constructed psychoanalytic theories of film and spectatorship in the 1960s and 1970s. Notable figures in this endeavor include Jean-Louis Baudry, Christian Metz, Laura Mulvey, Colin MacCabe, and Stephen Heath (to name only a few).<sup>1</sup> These early adopters of Lacanian psychoanalysis for a theory of film—and, specifically, film spectatorship—employed a much earlier version of Lacanian theory, mainly developed in Lacan's work of the 1950s and 1960s in his *Écrits* and early seminars.

Lacanian psychoanalytic theory is predicated on three levels of inquiry: the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. Much of Lacan's early work focused on the levels of the Imaginary and the Symbolic, keeping the Real in the background. However, as many contemporary Lacanians will point out—Žižek and Joan Copjec in particular—beginning with his *Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (1959–1960), Lacan's trajectory started to move away from the Imaginary and the Symbolic, toward a more specialized focus on the Real as well as other provocative concepts like the Thing (*das Ding*); the “object” of psychoanalysis (the *objet petit a*); and, later on in his last seminars, on the “drive,” transference, fantasy, enjoyment (*jouissance*), and the *sinthome*.<sup>2</sup>

Despite these changes in Lacan's own thought occurring at the same time that many film theorists were beginning to refer to Lacanian psychoanalysis in order build conceptual models for an understanding of spectatorship and

ideology in the cinema, Lacan's later thought is absent from early attempts to adapt his thought to theories about film. Instead of referring to concepts such as the *objet petit a* (the "object-cause of desire"), fantasy, enjoyment, or the Real, Lacan's early adopters opted in favor of his previous theoretical conceptions, emphasizing the role played by the Imaginary and the Symbolic, the "mirror stage," "suture," and the "gaze."

By sticking to many of Lacan's earlier theories, Lacanian film theory has opened itself up to a series of critiques. The first of these came from feminist theorists in the 1980s working with concepts in psychoanalysis. Notable are the works of Mary Ann Doane, Constance Penley, Jacqueline Rose, and Kaja Silverman.<sup>3</sup> Rose, for example, was one of the first Lacanian theorists to point out some of the errors of early Lacanian film theory, particularly with regards to references to the Lacanian "mirror stage" and the Imaginary in the works of Metz and Jean-Louis Comolli. Rose also notes the lack of attention paid to "sexual difference" in psychoanalytic film theory.<sup>4</sup> Both she and Juliet Mitchell develop a more detailed explanation of Lacan's theory of sexual difference in their introductions to the small anthology *Feminine Sexuality* (1982), which includes some of the first English translations of Lacan's later writings on this topic.<sup>5</sup> This book, however, seeks to clarify details about Lacanian theory as such, rather than the application of Lacanian psychoanalysis to film theory. Philosophical interventions into Lacanian film theory by Copjec and Žižek have had a more profound influence on the recent resurgence of Lacanian film theory.

Copjec's book *Read My Desire: Lacan against the Historicists* (1994) begins with a chapter that examines the misreadings of Lacanian theory found in the film theory of the 1970s and 1980s, which, according to her, too often conflates the notion of the "gaze" as developed by Michel Foucault, particularly in his book *Discipline and Punish (Surveiller et punir, 1975)*,<sup>6</sup> and Lacan's own theorization of the "gaze." As is now commonly known among film scholars, early Lacanian film theory focused primarily on Lacan's conception of the "mirror stage" in order to interpret the relation between the spectator/subject and the levels of the Imaginary and the Symbolic in cinema.<sup>7</sup> However, as Copjec points out, early film theory "operated a kind of 'Foucauldization' of Lacanian theory; an early misreading of Lacan turned him into a 'spendthrift' Foucault."<sup>8</sup> This "Foucauldization" of the Lacanian theory of the "gaze" to which Copjec refers is most evident in the works of Metz and Mulvey, who, taking their Lacanian theories of the "gaze" from the "mirror stage" essay, neglected to consider Lacan's actual theorization of the "gaze" in his *Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* (1963–1964). Here, Lacan stresses that the "gaze" is of the object, not the subject. The "gaze" is the *objet petit a*

in the scopic drive. Todd McGowan most recently develops this rethinking of the Lacanian “gaze” for film theory in his book *The Real Gaze: Film Theory after Lacan* (2007).

Here, as well as in the anthology *Lacan and Contemporary Film* (2004), coedited with Sheila Kunkle, McGowan praises Copjec and Žižek for giving “life” back to Lacanian film theory. Žižek, in particular, has made a significant impact on contemporary Lacanian interpretations of films. This is made apparent by the kinds of Lacanian interpretations of films found in McGowan and Kunkle’s anthology as well as a recent issue of the *International Journal of Žižek Studies* (*IJŽS*), edited by McGowan, which focuses particularly on Žižek’s relevance for film studies.<sup>9</sup>

As McGowan points out in his introduction to the *IJŽS* issue on Žižek and cinema, there are many who object to the kind of engagement with cinema that Žižek practices in his work, one that has a tendency “to obliterate the specificity of the text he is interpreting in order to advance some aspect of his theoretical framework.”<sup>10</sup> Žižek is well known for referring to films primarily as an exegetic tool in his explanations of Lacanian theory. Many of his early books, such as *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (1991), *Enjoy Your Symptom!: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out* (1992), and the anthology *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lacan. . . . (But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock)* (1992), attest to this fact. As he points out himself, his use of popular culture and films is purely strategic: “I resort to these examples above all in order to avoid pseudo-Lacanian jargon, and to achieve the greatest possible clarity not only for my readers but also for myself—the idiot for whom I endeavor to formulate a theoretical point as clearly as possible is ultimately myself.”<sup>11</sup> McGowan notes, “Unlike thinkers who explore different texts on their own terms. . . . Žižek always finds within the texts he analyses the presuppositions of his own theory.”<sup>12</sup> The culmination of this kind of Žižekian referencing of films is his collaborative work with director Sophie Fiennes in the film *The Pervert’s Guide to Cinema* (2006), wherein Žižek, serving as “host,” proceeds to analyze films, on film, and even within reproductions of particular scenes from films that readers of Žižek will surely recognize: scenes from Hitchcock’s *Psycho* and *Vertigo* as well as the *The Matrix* and *Blue Velvet*. *The Pervert’s Guide* appears to be a perfect extension of Žižek’s work since, as Fiennes puts it, “Žižek’s own writings are film-like,” and “in film Žižek finally has found an adequate medium to fully express his thoughts.”<sup>13</sup>

Many feel that Žižek’s relevance for film studies is thus limited to his rethinking of Lacanian theory, which has enabled film scholars to reappropriate Lacan in recent times. As McGowan and Kunkle point out in the introduction to their anthology, new Lacanian film theory tends to focus

more specifically on *textual interpretation*, rather than *empirical research* into spectatorship and film reception.<sup>14</sup> This kind of textual interpretation surely gets its influence from Žižek's myriad of Lacanian interpretations of films. Yet, despite this influence, many still reject Žižek's relevance within film studies. David Bordwell, in particular, has criticized Žižek's method of film analysis.

Bordwell is one of the cognitivist film scholars who, beginning in the 1980s, led a project to debunk the older paradigms of film theory, particularly psychoanalytic film theory. Bordwell's anthology *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies* (1996), coedited with Noël Carroll, gathers its influence from the cognitivist movement in film studies. In this book, Bordwell and Carroll attempt finally to exorcise the demons of what they refer to as "Grand Theory."<sup>15</sup> The position of each is represented in their own articles in *Post-Theory*, in which they take aim at Grand Theory and advocate for more middle-level film scholarship, or *theories* (plural, as opposed to—capital *T*—Theory). *Post-Theory* has subsequently developed into a whole movement away from film Theory toward more strictly film-based scholarship, such as studies of genre, national cinema, authorship, audience studies, and so on as opposed to "Grand Theoretical" projects in the study of ideology and society. These are, of course, important avenues for film scholarship; however, the direction away from theory leaves little room for what is, perhaps, one of the most significant realms of film theory: the study of ideology. This, to be sure, is Žižek's primary concern.

As a Lacanian theorist who unapologetically practices precisely that which the post-Theorists despise—an interpretation of cinema for the purpose of theoretical "mise-en-scène"—Žižek has caused further divisions between the cognitivist and psychoanalytic camps in film studies with his book *The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieslowski between Theory and Post-Theory* (2001). This is a book that makes a significant contribution to Lacanian film studies by defending film theory against the cognitivists; but more important, it represents a significant stage in what is arguably a Žižekian approach to film studies. Bordwell has recently criticized Žižek's rejection of the post-Theory argument at the end of his book *Figures Traced in Light* (2004) and on his "website on cinema," emphasizing the lack of "serious" film scholarship in Žižek's work while simultaneously reiterating his disappointment with "Theory." As Bordwell puts it, Žižek "is an associationist *par excellence*. His use of films is purely hermeneutic, with each film playing out allegories of theoretical doctrines."<sup>16</sup>

Film scholars have tended, traditionally, to consider first and foremost the relevance of Marxism and psychoanalysis for *film* Theory and scholarship. In Žižek's case, we begin to see how film scholarship informs a

Marxian Theory of ideology, passing through psychoanalysis. Žižek's relevance for film studies is not simply confined to his contribution to Lacanian film scholarship. Rather, film scholarship is relevant to Žižek's critique of ideology.

Such a position thus begs the question: what is "film studies?" Is it a field of study? A discipline? Lee Grieveson and Haidee Wasson argue that a "discipline" is constituted by the institutionalization of scholarship and should be understood as a procedure that confers authority, the locus of which is the university.<sup>17</sup> (This, of course, marks the university as a ground for the struggle over political hegemony). However, the variation of film scholarship would suggest that there is still a lack of unity—at least enough to call into question film studies as a discipline. Disciplinarity suggests a methodological, and not just an objective, unity. Here, it is perhaps more appropriate to designate film studies as a multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary *field*. As such, film scholarship is at liberty to assume different forms. In contrast to much contemporary film scholarship, the kind of film scholarship practiced by Žižek centers not so much on adding to the knowledge of its object (film, cinema, spectatorship); Žižek's film scholarship takes greater aim at knowledge about ideology and subjectivity.

Žižek's film theory builds on and extends a project that emerged in the 1970s (primarily in so-called screen theory), continued throughout the 1980s, and is again reemerging with enthusiasm in the work of contemporary Lacanian film scholars. The latter, however, still seem to be following a trajectory that aims to add to knowledge of the film-object, as opposed to ideology and subjectivity. It is in the early attempts to confound a unified approach to film scholarship in the 1970s—particularly in the British journal *Screen*, a scholarship that focused on the film-object—that we find the latent debate between Theory and post-Theory.

### "First-Wave" Lacanian Film Theory<sup>18</sup>

It is important to recall that the first wave of Lacanian psychoanalytic film theory followed very closely to the 1968 political uprisings, particularly in France. At this significant moment, film scholarship was called on to enable a particular kind of *political* criticism. But what, exactly, did film theorists hope to accomplish by their political analyses of films? Film and media scholars have long been engaged in political analyses of media texts and reception. From early studies on media propaganda and the social psychological approaches to the study of media effects, to Adorno and Horkheimer's "culture industry" model, all the way to Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky's "propaganda model," media studies seem generally

to follow a political trajectory. At the same time, scholars have attempted to understand something of the utopian potential of media and film in particular. Such was the objective of scholars such as Walter Benjamin and Marshall McLuhan, the latter of course focusing more on television. The political reactions to film in post-1968 scholarship can thus be seen within the same kind of bifurcating (the ideological and the utopian) trajectory.

The years following 1968 are sometimes referred to in the context of the "Leftist Turn" in cultural and social theory. Influential texts included Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* (1967) and Louis Althusser's trilogy: *Reading Capital* (1965), *For Marx* (1965), and *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays* (1969). The latter had, perhaps, the most profound effect on the film theory of the time. In France, the influence of the post-1968 "Leftist Turn" and Althusser's writings on "symptomatic critique," ideological state apparatuses (ISAs), and the theory of ideological interpellation and subjectivity allowed film scholars to ask new questions regarding the relationship between film art and spectatorship. The French journal *Cahiers du cinéma* started focusing much more on political readings of films, influenced by Althusserian Structuralist Marxism. An editorial in *Cahiers* from the late 1960s, "Cinema/Ideology/Criticism," written by Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni, indicates a noteworthy shift in the journal's focus at the time. Here, they argue that the purpose of film criticism is necessarily one of ideology critique. They state that "the job of criticism is to see where [filmmakers] differ, and slowly, patiently, not expecting any magical transformation to take place at the wave of a slogan, to help change the ideology which conditions them . . . every film is political, inasmuch as it is determined by the ideology which produces it."<sup>19</sup> Other scholars, such as Edward Buscombe and Stephen Heath, agreed that "directorial consistencies [should] be understood as effects of society and history rather than personal expression."<sup>20</sup> What followed in the field of film scholarship was a flood of theories working toward these objectives. However, the late 1960s and early 1970s also saw the beginnings of institutionalized film scholarship. As a result, divisions started to arise in film studies between more or less "educationists" and "radical materialists." These two trends are arguably the seeds of the contemporary divide between Theory and post-Theory, the former siding with the political (i.e., radical materialist) approach to film scholarship, while the latter tends toward the apolitical (seemingly neutral) educationist approach. The two are perhaps better seen as a division between hermeneutic/interpretivist and formalist approaches to film scholarship. The former, developed as part of the "Leftist Turn," grew out of a Structuralist approach to literary criticism.



## The Structuralist Impulse

Some of the earlier attempts toward radical materialist, or hermeneutic, approaches to film theory grew out of the Structuralist writings of Roland Barthes and Claude Lévi-Strauss. Drawing on the methods of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, structuralism seeks to understand the overall system—or “structure”—of signs articulated in language. Structuralism is less interested in the individual uses of particular signs in order to posit meaning; it has more interest in the overall structure of sign systems themselves—as such, Structuralism had little interest in the role of the subject in the articulation of meaning. French theorists, such as Barthes and Lévi-Strauss, applied Saussure’s method to nonlinguistic structures, such as visual sign-systems in advertising and fashion, in Barthes’s case, and structures of kinship and “symbolic exchange,” in the work of Lévi-Strauss. Film theorists were also influenced by Saussure’s semiotic model of linguistic analysis and tried to come up with a theory of film “language.”

Semiotics refers to the “science of signs.” In his *Course in General Linguistics* (*Cours de linguistique générale*, 1916),<sup>21</sup> Saussure argues that, as a system of signs, language can be studied either *diachronically*, tracking changes over time, or *synchronically*, as a complete system, arrested at any given moment in time. However, he makes it clear that his interests lie with the latter. Looking at the system of signs within a language synchronically, it is possible, he claims, to divide language between *langue* (the entire system itself) and *parole* (the particular, individual use of signs within the system in order to make meaningful utterances).

Signs themselves, the individual elements of *langue* (or language), are made up of two elements: a *signified*—the concept designated by the sign—and a *signifier*—the word/sound-image that is articulated. Language on its own, however, according to Saussure, bears no ultimate and definitive relationship to “reality.” There is no natural bond between the sign and the real world. Signs, therefore, are arbitrary, but their meanings develop by way of their differential relationship to each other. Put simply, *A* is *A* because it is *not B, C, or D*, and so on. Synchronically, then, a signifying system looks something like the following:

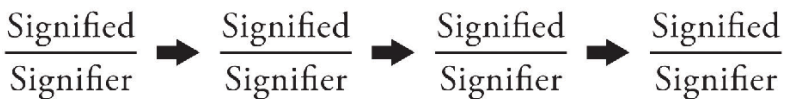


Figure 1.1 Saussure’s signifying chain

The meaning of every sign within a signifying system gets its own meaning, in other words, by way of its difference from all the other signs in the same “signifying chain.”

Building on Saussure’s semiotic approach to language, Barthes sought to develop a similar approach to the reading of visual texts, applying what he called a “second order” semiological system of signification. Barthes’s appropriation of semiotics was concerned with what he called “myth,” or a naturalized form of rhetorical discourse, linking language to ideology. Myth involves a particular use of language in order to establish and construct speech (*parole*), the goal of which is the encoding of a particular kind of meaning. In considering the difference between first and second order signification, Barthes adds a distinction between “denotation,” or the literal meaning of a sign, and “connotation,” the associative meaning of the sign derived from social, cultural, and historical contexts.

In the first order of signification, at the level of denotation, signifier and signified come together in a sign. In the second order of signification, the original (literal) sign becomes a signifier itself with a connotative signified, thus producing a new signification:

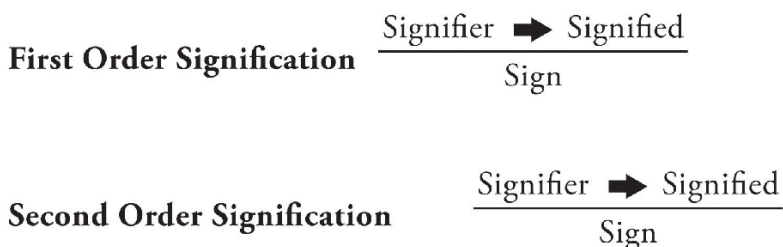


Figure 1.2 Barthes’s orders of signification

In order to explain the difference between the two levels of signification, Barthes famously refers to an image on the cover of *Paris-Match* that he sees one day in the barber shop: “On the cover, a young Negro in a French uniform is saluting, with his eyes uplifted, probably fixed on a fold of the tricolour.” This description must be understood as the first order of signification—that is, the denotative level of signification. He adds that “whether naively or not, I see very well what it signifies to me: that France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any colour discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism that the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors.” The latter is the connotative meaning added to the literal meaning. It represents the second order of signification

and the naturalization of meaning. It gives the visual text itself an added ideological dimension.<sup>22</sup>

It is not difficult to see here why structuralism and semiotics in particular might have appealed to film theorists. Structuralism offers film analysts a method for thinking about the production of signification in cinematic texts. One only needs to add, in the analysis of cinematic texts, the relation between shots and images in montage to further develop a semiotics of cinema, and this is precisely what film theorists set out to do. However, the application of semiotics to cinema did not come without controversy.

As Philip Rosen points out, structuralism and semiotics added to the further development of the already preexisting notion of “classical cinema,” conceived most poignantly by André Bazin. Classical cinema, according to Bazin, “denotes a set of formal and stylistic boundaries defined by a certain fundamental stability of editing and camerawork practices and by certain generic conventions.”<sup>23</sup> Orson Welles’s *Citizen Kane* (1942), according to Bazin, caused a rupture in classical cinema, leading toward a more realist approach to cinematic style. Nevertheless, as Rosen notes, while Bazin may have stressed the moral significance of film style in its attitude toward realism/reality, other film theorists made attempts to stress the *ideological* aspects of cinematic structure and the point that cinema does not necessarily represent “reality” but that the “reality” it depicts is always already structured from a position in ideology. For many in the post-1968 generation of film scholarship, the emphasis on realism and the depiction of “reality” in cinema has to do with the relationship between “classical cinema” and its connection to Hollywood filmmaking, or what has come to be known as “mainstream cinema.” Given the historical success of mainstream cinema, film semioticians perceived the possibility of locating a “film language” in the style of classical cinema.

Both Raymond Bellour and Christian Metz, for example, sought to develop a system of film language by looking at repetitions and “regulated differences” in classical cinema. They claimed that there exist certain identifiable types of organization in narrative cinema that make film intelligible for the spectator. The Structuralist theory of film language, therefore, posited that there is a recognizable system of signification in cinema based on networks of structural repetitions and differences. However, given that a Structuralist approach seems to suggest the existence of a set of *normative* features of signification, a political question follows, as Philip Rose notes: How might it be possible to *deviate* from the norm? That is, if realist (read “Hollywood”/mainstream) cinema is imbued with ideology through and through (as in Comolli and Narboni’s category “A”), how is it possible to break from this particular ideological structure?<sup>24</sup>

This is a question that a particularly politicized approach to film posed during the unique historical moment of May 1968. In this moment, film theorists began to concern themselves not only with the structure of the cinematic text but also, more important, with the possibilities of an oppositional cinema. If it were possible to understand the manner in which ideology is constructed into the text and the way in which spectators identify with the ideological text, then perhaps it would be possible to subvert ideology. Inquiries such as these into the ideological function of cinema were further opened by the appeal of Louis Althusser's theories of ideology, ideological interpellation, and the ideological state apparatuses (ISAs).

### **Ideology and the Apparatus**

The appeal of Althusser's theory of ideology came from his inclusion of a notion of subjectivity into inquiries about the representational aspects of ideology. For Althusser, ideology has a material existence embodied in both the subject and the institutions with which the subject engages. He refers to these institutions as ideological state apparatuses. In his well-known essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)," Althusser argues that "a social formation which did not reproduce the conditions of production at the same time as it produced would not last. The ultimate condition of production is therefore the reproduction of the conditions of production."<sup>25</sup> Ideology enters as a central concern for the reproduction of the conditions of production to the extent that it is that which calls out to subjects exploited by the reigning political and economic system, allowing them to identify with the reigning ideology while simultaneously misrecognizing their own direct position of exploitation.

Althusser distinguishes between two types of institutions necessary for the reproduction of the conditions of production: the repressive state apparatus and the ideological state apparatuses. The former includes institutions like the military that use direct force in maintaining the ruling order. The ISAs, however, reproduce the hegemony of the reigning order ideologically, without the use of force. These include institutions such as the church, the educational system, the family, the law, the political system (i.e., parliament, political parties, etc.), culture, and the media. It is through the ISAs that individuals learn to behave and participate in ways that reproduce the reigning social order materially.

Film theorists interested in questions about ideology foresaw immense potential in conceiving the cinema as an ISA. Jean-Louis Baudry, for instance, advances Althusser's conception of ISA in order to speak to the relationship between the cinematic text, the technological apparatus of

the cinema (the camera and the apparatus of projection), and the way in which the spectator is engaged by the film. In his essay "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus," Baudry argues that the combination of optical techniques found specifically in the cinema (i.e., projection, motion) and older visual techniques, such as pictorial perspective, turns the cinema into a "psychic apparatus of substitution, corresponding to the model defined by the dominant ideology." He argues that "[t]he ideological mechanism at work in the cinema seems thus to be concentrated in the relationship between the camera and the subject." The ultimate ideological effect of the cinema, according to Baudry, is the creation of a particular subject-position in the spectator *in accordance with* the dominant ideology.<sup>26</sup> The spectator, in other words, is subjectivized by the cinematic apparatus itself, which places him or her into an ideological subject-position.

Baudry is, here, relying on Althusser's theory of ideological "interpellation." In his ISA essay, Althusser makes the famous claim that ideology interpellates individuals as subjects. By this he means that ideology *constitutes* individuals as subjects who effectively materialize the reigning order. For Althusser, the category of the "subject" is one that is definitively "humanist" and bourgeois. In his lengthy reply to criticisms launched against him by the British Communist philosopher John Lewis, Althusser argues that the category of the "subject"—or, more specifically, "man" as the "subject of history"—has its origins in the legal categories of bourgeois ideology.<sup>27</sup> The subject, then, for Althusser is a position one assumes in ideology. It is a position that is, ultimately, a *function* of the reigning social formation. For Althusser, there is no subject except that which is formed by ideology. Ideology, he claims, interpellates individuals as subjects.

Althusser explains "interpellation" as a hail originating from the ISAs, directed at individuals, who assume positions in ideology. The latter allowed theorists of ideology to consider not simply the structural aspects of ideological representations but, even further, how structures of representation capture individuals in systems of signification. In film theory, this allowed for the possibility of thinking through the connection between the cinematic text and its structures of representation and the way in which the film text captures individuals as spectator-subjects. In other words, referring to the theory of interpellation, film theorists claimed that films "position" spectators as subjects. Structuralism, semiotics, and the theory of interpellation thus offered film theorists a way to consider those elements of the cinema, both at the level of the text and at the level of the audience, that produce an identification between the spectator and the ideology of mainstream cinema. However, structuralism and the theory of ideology alone were not enough for film theorists

to respond to questions about how spectators identified with film texts. It is in this context that film scholars began to look toward psychoanalysis for a theory of film and spectatorship. Lacan, at the time, seemed to be an obvious choice for moving from a theory of film “language” to a psychoanalytic theory of film. He was, after all, most well known for conceiving a Structuralist theory of the unconscious by famously arguing that the unconscious is structured like a language.<sup>28</sup>

### Enter Lacan

The Lacanian influence in film theory was largely announced by the publication of a 1975 issue of the French journal *Communications* that took as its theme the relationship between cinema and psychoanalysis. This was not the first time that psychoanalysis was called on to develop an understanding of film, culture, ideology, and spectatorship. Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and Herbert Marcuse, as well as Wilhelm Reich and Erich Fromm, all referred to Freudian psychoanalysis in their analyses of culture and ideology, often attempting to bridge Marxism and psychoanalysis and many American scholars developed theories of cinema by referring to ego-psychology. The English counterpart to the issue of *Communications* was a series of articles published in the British film journal *Screen* in the late 1970s, by authors such as MacCabe, Metz, Mulvey, and Heath. Metz and Mulvey are perhaps the most well recognized for their use of the Lacanian theory of the “mirror stage” and for speaking to the dimensions of the Imaginary and the Symbolic in their writings on film spectatorship. MacCabe focused on cinematic realism, and Heath drew on Jean-Pierre Oudart’s interpretation (as it was developed by Jacques-Alain Miller) of the Lacanian “*point-de-capiton*” (quilting point) in order to advance a theory of film narrative and spectatorship commonly referred to as “suture.”<sup>29</sup>

The Lacanian influence also came by way of Althusser’s essay on ideology and the theory of ideological interpellation, which drew heavily on the Lacanian concept of the Imaginary: ideology represents an imaginary relationship to the subject’s real conditions of existence.<sup>30</sup> Although, as Fredric Jameson points out, in this statement Althusser identifies a relationship between the Imaginary and the Real, bypassing the Symbolic.<sup>31</sup> Althusser’s focus on the Imaginary helps to account for film theory’s focus on the level of the Imaginary, particularly in Metz’s account—which argues that films are “imaginary signifiers”—and Mulvey’s notion of the “male gaze,” through which the spectator identifies with the imaginary “ego” of the male protagonist in mainstream cinema.

### The “Mirror Stage” and the Imaginary

Lacan’s essay “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience,” commonly referred to as the “mirror stage essay,” is perhaps the most cited of Lacan’s written work in film theory. The theory of the “mirror stage” is Lacan’s earliest contribution to psychoanalytic theory and is perhaps *the* concept for which he is most recognized. The idea was first introduced in a paper presented at the Marienbad International Congress of Psycho-Analysts in 1936, but it was later revised and presented in Zurich at the Sixteenth International Congress on Psychoanalysis in 1949. The latter is the version included in *Écrits*.

In the “mirror stage” essay, Lacan argues that the formation of the subject’s ego occurs somewhere between the ages of 6 and 18 months, when the child first learns to recognize his or her image as it is reflected in a mirror. The child identifies with this image, according to Lacan, as an *imago* of itself. The *imago* gives the child a misrecognized sense of mastery of his or her own body. This *imago* is what Lacan refers to as the Imaginary.

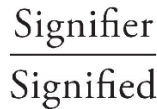
The mirror in the “mirror stage” need not necessarily be an actual mirror. The reflected image of which Lacan speaks in relation to the concept of the “mirror stage” may also be something as simple as the child’s jubilant experience of feeling him or herself recognized through the gaze of the parent. In this sense, the child identifies with the ideal image he or she has of him or herself as perceived from the point of an imagined gaze in the (M)Other. It is through this antagonism between recognition-identification and misrecognition that the ego is formed, first as an ideal ego (*le moi*), or the point from which the subject identifies with itself as an imaginary ideal Self, and then as an Ego-ideal (*le Je*), or the point from which the subject imagines itself as being looked at from the perspective of the Other so that it appears likeable. It is in the movement between the ideal ego and the Ego-ideal that the subject goes from being a “specular *I*” to a “social *I*.”<sup>32</sup> The latter is what signals the hook between the Imaginary and the Symbolic.

### The Symbolic Order and the Logic of the Signifier

Like much of the critical theory at the time, Lacan too was feeling the influence of structuralism by the early 1950s. Drawing on the work of Lévi-Strauss, especially his influential paper “The Elementary Structures of Kinship” (1949), Lacan introduced the notion of the Symbolic order into psychoanalytic discourse. The Symbolic order is best conceived as a structure in which intersubjective communication occurs. It can also

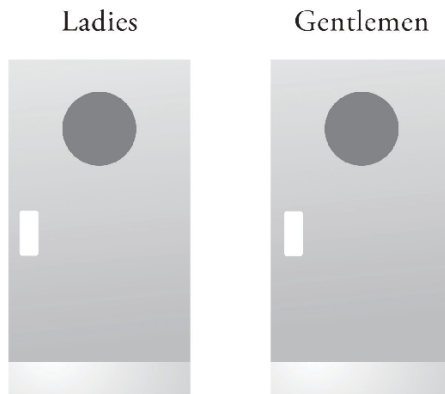
be understood as a field of intersubjective human “reality.” From Lévi-Strauss’s conception of “symbolic exchange,” Lacan went further to argue that “the unconscious is structured like a language”<sup>33</sup>—that is, it is not that the unconscious speaks to us as some kind of symbolic language but that symptomatic “emissions” of sorts produced by the body (such as nervous tics) can be read as a language. These tics tell us something about the subject’s unconscious that the subject itself is ill prepared to articulate in the first person. As well, adding to the notion of psychoanalysis as the “talking cure,” the Symbolic goes further in addressing the linguistic aspects of subjectivization.

To this extent, Lacan looked toward Saussurean structural linguistics to further articulate the contours of his emerging scientific and philosophical return to Freud. However, unlike Saussure, who gave primacy to the signified, Lacan is distinguished for having given priority to the signifier. Thus he reversed the order of signifier and signified above and below the bar:



**Figure 1.3** Relation of signifier and signified in Lacan

His point in doing so was to demonstrate the way in which the signifying chain of any particular language is organized in the differences between the signifiers and not necessarily their connections to signifieds (concepts). In his essay “The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious,” Lacan famously replaces the Saussurean paradigm with his own by referencing an image of two identical doors:



**Figure 1.4** Lacan’s example of the two doors



The doors (signifieds) are identical, yet we can see how they are distinguished by the difference between the two signifiers: “Ladies” and “Gentlemen.” Meaning, therefore, is not fixed by the relation of signifier to signified but by the relation between signifiers. Yet, in order to avoid the problem that nothing means anything at all—since it would appear that in Lacan’s signifying chain we are left with but a constant shifting between the series of signifiers above the bar and the signifieds below the bar—Lacan argues that there must be an anchoring point, or what he calls a “quilting point” (*point de capiton*), a contingent element that arrests meaning. This *point de capiton* is the point against which all the other signifiers will be defined through their difference from the originary quilting point. It is what Lacan later terms the “Master-Signifier,” a signifier without a signified. It represents meaning as such.

The Symbolic order, then, is constituted as the chain of signification, quilted together by the Master-Signifier that fixes the meaning of the system. Every term within a signifying system, then, bears a relation to the fixing of the Master-Signifier, but meaning is also generated in the Symbolic order because, through the process of communication, others use the same terms to designate particular objects/concepts. I know, for example, what the word “cup” signifies because others use the same term to designate this object. However, because others, in this general sense, cannot simply be reduced to fully empirical others, the Symbolic order refers to what Lacan called the “big Other” (*grand Autre*). The big Other is the order of the Symbolic. It is in this sense that Lacan argues that the unconscious is the discourse of the Other.

### “Suture”

The Lacanian conception of “suture” was later developed by Lacan’s son-in-law and influential disciple, Jacques-Alain Miller. Miller is a key figure in Lacanian circles and is also well known for compiling and editing the published versions of Lacan’s seminar. “Suture,” according to Miller, helps us to think more clearly about the way that the signifier makes possible the subject’s entry into the Symbolic order. Suture “names the relation of the subject to the chain of its discourse.”<sup>34</sup> It defines the moment when the subject enters the Symbolic “in the guise of the signifier.”<sup>35</sup>

Miller’s conception of “suture” has thus been taken up by film theorists to further develop a theory of cinematic spectatorship. In French theory, this was first taken up by Oudart, who argues that suture helps to situate the cinematic spectator in his or her relation to the ideology of the text. Oudart’s version of suture is conceived in its relation to the cinematic shot/reverse shot. As Kaja Silverman explains,

The viewer of the cinematic spectacle experiences shot 1 as an imaginary plenitude, unbounded by any gaze, and unmarked by difference. Shot 1 is thus the site of a *jouissance* akin to that of the mirror stage prior to the child's discovery of its separation from the ideal image which it has discovered in the reflecting glass. . . . However, almost immediately the viewing subject becomes aware of the limitations on what it sees—aware, that is, of an absent field. At this point shot 1 becomes a signifier of that absent field, and *jouissance* gives way to unpleasure.<sup>36</sup>

The limitation experienced by the viewer is imposed immediately by an awareness of the “frame,” or the screen. The latter is that which pushes *jouissance* out of its field and transitions the viewer from the Imaginary to the Symbolic. There is, however, in Oudart's conception, a spectator behind the field of the frame—that is, behind that which limits the viewer's ability to perceive things beyond the frame. This spectator is the “Absent One,” or the Other, and, according to Oudart, “all of the objects in the filmic field combine together to form the signifier of its absence” on the screen.<sup>37</sup>

Silverman explains that, for Oudart, this Absent One is the “speaking subject,” somewhat akin to the potent symbolic father (like the absent father of the horde in Freud's *Totem & Taboo*). The Absent One as speaking subject is then perceived by the viewer subject, the filmic spectator, as possessing that which he or she lacks. This, according to Silverman, explains why, in the suture theory of cinematic spectatorship, the spectator comes to desire something more. The spectator who is lacking desires to see more. Cinema, in this sense, produces unpleasure for the viewer.

Silverman adds to this theory of suture by referring to the use of the shot/reverse shot technique in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960). In one of the first scenes in the film,

Marion stands in the doorway of her bedroom closet, her right side toward the camera. . . . A bed separates the camera from her, and in the left corner there is a vanity-table and mirror. Suddenly the camera moves backward to reveal a corner of the bed shot not previously exposed, on which lies [an] envelope of stolen money. It [the camera] zooms in on the money, then pans to the left and provides a closeup of an open suitcase, full of clothing. During this time, Marion is facing the closet, unable to see what we see. . . . There is a cut to Marion, who turns and looks toward the bed. Once again the camera pulls back to reveal the packet of money. In the next shot, Marion adjusts her hair and clothes in front of the vanity table and mirror. She turns to look at the bed, and we are given a reverse shot of the stolen envelope.<sup>38</sup>

Silverman notes that this technique is repeated throughout the film. The scene itself, according to her, accomplishes a few things: it establishes

fascination with the money-object for both Marion and the spectator, but more important, according to Silverman, the sequence associates the object, the money, with a transcendental gaze: the gaze of the Absent One. The “objective shot”—the shot of the money-object, as opposed to the shots of Marion—is privileged. According to Silverman, here we see Hitchcock’s attempt to reveal to the spectator the operation of what Oudart calls the “Absent One,” behind the frame. This, perhaps, from the perspective of suture theory is what makes Hitchcock’s films much more subversive than mainstream Hollywood cinema.

Oudart’s theory of spectatorship sees the viewer as somewhat passive, which the cinematic text itself must conceal. One could speculate then that—if the operation of suture occurs in the real of the classical cinematic text, or the Hollywood/mainstream cinematic text—denying the operation of suture is a way to make the spectator active. Is it possible for a prohibition on the counter/reverse shot to sustain the *jouissance* of the spectator enough to cause a rupture in spectatorship that would interpellate some kind of active engagement with the text and (ultimately) reality?

Stephen Heath agrees with Oudart that “[c]inema as discourse is the production of a subject.”<sup>39</sup> It is also easy to see here a connection to Althusser’s theory of interpellation—ideology interpellates individuals as subjects. However, he adds that, along with the unseen absence of the One as a structuring loss (lack), there are other things lacking, particularly the willingness of the subject to misrecognize itself, allowing the characters on the screen to stand in for its own subject position. With this point, Heath comes very close to the conception of the “gaze,” or more appropriately, the “male gaze,” as it was developed by Laura Mulvey.

### The “Gaze”

Mulvey’s explicit aim in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” is to appropriate psychoanalysis for political purposes but in order to identify the phallogentrism of mainstream cinema. Unlike Oudart, who claims that mainstream cinema is in the business of recreating desire through lack/loss by inducing some sense of displeasure on the part of the spectator, Mulvey argues that mainstream cinema actually produces pleasure for the spectator. This, she claims, is in accordance with “the unconscious of patriarchal society,” which has “structured film form.”<sup>40</sup> Patriarchal society, according to Mulvey, is somewhat paradoxical to the extent that it is based around the necessary image of the castrated woman. It is woman’s “lack” “that produces the phallus as a symbolic presence.”<sup>41</sup> Woman, then, becomes a signifier of the Other in patriarchal society.

Cinema is of interest for Mulvey, particularly in relation to the Symbolic structures of patriarchal society, because it is, for her, an “advanced system of representation” that makes possible the questioning of the ways that the unconscious “structures ways of seeing and pleasure in looking.”<sup>42</sup> She is, however, much more interested in seeing the development of an alternative, oppositional cinema capable of destroying the kinds of pleasure produced under the ways of seeing in patriarchy. The formal characteristics of mainstream/Hollywood cinema, according to Mulvey, reflect the psychical obsessions of the patriarchal society in which it is produced. Oppositional cinema should focus on reacting against those formal characteristics that reflect the obsessions found in patriarchal society. This, for her, would require conceiving a new language of desire.

Mainstream cinema offers viewers two dominant forms of visual pleasure: scopophilia and narcissism; the former having to do with the pleasure in taking others as objects for pleasurable looking, whereas the latter has to do with taking pleasure in making oneself the object to be looked at. It is here that Mulvey links her arguments about visual pleasure in cinema to Lacan's conception of the “mirror stage.” She argues that “the cinema has structures of fascination strong enough to allow temporary loss of ego while simultaneously reinforcing ego. . . . At the same time the cinema has distinguished itself in the production of ego ideals as expressed in particular in the star system.”<sup>43</sup> She claims, then, that the power of the cinematic image makes possible the loss of the subject's own Ego-ideal, which is then supplanted by the image of the star-protagonist—more specifically, the male protagonist.

In patriarchal society, pleasure in looking is divided between the representation of active/male and passive/female. The image of woman, then, is there to be looked at, while the image of man is there to produce an identification in the spectator. The cinema, according to Mulvey, produces a series of interrelated “gazes”: that of the viewer/spectator, that of the camera, and that of the male protagonist. The first two are tied together by the agency of the third, thus producing a “male gaze” in the cinema, and it is the latter that subjectivizes the spectator by way of his or her identification with the image of the male protagonist as a misrecognition of his or her own Ego-ideal.

Hitchcock, here, is again discussed as a way of bringing clarity to the concept of the (male) gaze. Films such as *Rear Window* (1954), *Vertigo* (1958), and *Marnie* (1964) all position the male protagonist as the bearer of the gaze and the female character as the object of the gaze. Putting male and female characters into these positions shows his willingness, according to Mulvey, to work in accordance with a kind of “ideological correctness.” Even his heroes, Mulvey notes, exemplify the relationship between

the Symbolic and the moral law: a policeman in *Vertigo*; a dominant male possessing money and power in *Marnie*.<sup>44</sup> *Rear Window* even goes as far as mediating on cinematic spectatorship itself as Jeffries (James Stewart) gazes out the window at Lisa, which, Mulvey claims, adds an erotic dimension to the relationship between the two.

### Imaginary Signifier

“Suture” and “gaze” both appropriate Lacanian psychoanalytic concepts—the “mirror stage,” the Imaginary, the signifier—in order to advance a theory of cinematic spectatorship that accounts for the way in which the viewer is directly interpellated by the cinematic text. Both suggest that the cinema places the spectator into a particular subject-position predefined by the text itself and its formal characteristics. Likewise, and somewhat similar to Baudry, Christian Metz argues that the spectator’s subject position arises in accordance with the apparatus of the cinema, operating in between the Imaginary and the Symbolic.

“Film is like the mirror,” according to Metz. But it is not the same as the primordial mirror of the mirror stage to the minimal extent that the projected image on the screen is not the reflected image of the subject itself. In this sense, Metz differs from Mulvey’s assertion that the spectator finds in the cinema a reflection of his or her likeness. This is possible because, as Metz notes, the subject has already experienced the mirror stage, which makes possible an identification with the screen, even though the image on the screen is not that of the spectator him or herself. In this respect, the cinema is already on the side of the Symbolic.<sup>45</sup> But curiously, Metz claims that the cinematic signifier is an “imaginary signifier.”

The cinema is characterized by the fact that its object of representation is not itself present in the theatre. It is in this sense that, according to Metz, the cinematic signifier is “imaginary.” Because of the way that the cinema balances presence and absence—it is more perceptual than most other media—it involves us more in the imaginary. The spectator’s own image may be absent from the screen, and therefore he or she cannot identify with him or herself as an object-image. However, the spectator, according to Metz, identifies with him or herself as a pure, all-perceiving, transcendental subject. Thus, in Metz case, it is not the Absent One who is the all-perceiving, transcendental subject; rather, it is the spectator him or herself. But, similar to Baudry’s apparatus theory, Metz also claims that the spectator identifies with the look of the camera.

There exists, in the cinema, a symbolic apparatus that makes way for the imaginary self-identification of the spectator with him or herself, and

it is one that makes the apparatus of the camera itself significant. In order to understand the film, “I must perceive the photographed object as absent [in its immediate reality], its photograph as present, and the presence of this absence as signifying.”<sup>46</sup> The latter explains how Metz identifies the cinematic signifier as imaginary: it is, itself, a signifier of something absent. This is made all the more relatable to ideology, according to Metz, through the operation of fetishism disavowal in the cinema, which as Octave Mannoni explains is best understood through the phrase “*Je sais bien, mais quand même. . .*” (I know very well, but nevertheless. . .). The spectator, of course knows that the imaginary presented by the cinema is mere illusion, but nevertheless, he or she ignores this fact in order to be drawn in to the cinematic fiction: “everything is set to work to make the deception effective and to give it an air of truth.”<sup>47</sup>

### The Subject-Position of the Spectator

Regardless of the different takes on cinema and spectatorship in the film theory of the late 1960s and 1970s, there would appear to be an underlying consensus, particularly in Lacanian-psychoanalytic film theory, that the cinema is in the business of producing “subject-positions.” “Suture” theory holds that films create passive spectators by mending the “wound” opened by the gap between objective and subjective shots. The Absent One is concealed through the process of “suture”: the production of a cinematic signifier that offers up entry for the spectator into the symbolic of the cinema. The spectator is interpellated through unpleasure, inducing a sense of lack and a desire to see more in the cinema. “Gaze” theory, in contrast, claims that the cinema produces in the spectator a sense of pleasure by giving the spectator a position in which he or she may identify with the cinematic image of Ego-ideal in the male protagonist. Apparatus theory—in both versions articulated by Metz and Baudry—suggests a particular kind of identification between the spectator and the cinematic apparatus. In all cases, film theory seems to suggest that spectatorship is something that involves the direct subject-positioning of the viewer. The latter has been the single most significant point of attack from the more recent group of “post-Theorists” in film studies.

Stephen Prince is, perhaps, the harshest critic of psychoanalytic film theory in this respect. As he points out, film theory often neglects empirical data regarding audience interpretations of films. He argues that questions “about how people process, interpret, and respond to cinematic images and narratives are empirical questions” and that theory building should pursue empirical investigations of spectators rather than dogmatically informing

interpretations of spectatorship.<sup>48</sup> The conception of spectatorship found in the Theory, according to Prince, falls short of focusing on actual real-life audiences, referring only to some conception of the “subject,” or the “ideal spectator.” The greatest problem with psychoanalytic conceptions of spectatorship, for Prince, center on what he sees as the unreliable data produced by psychoanalysis. This has to do, mainly, with the fact that the published psychoanalytic case studies are incomplete—that is, analysts do not publish their actual notes from clinical sessions, and there are no established standards of practice in psychoanalysis so that each analyst can interpret data differently. For this reason, Prince argues that there is no basis for film theorists to refer to psychoanalysis for a theory of spectatorship. Prince’s critique of spectator theory is significant and raises some of the central concerns of post-Theory.

### Post-Theory in Film Studies

David Bordwell and Noël Carroll’s anthology *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies* (1996) is a manifesto of sorts, arguing for the end of Theory (capital T). The book, they claim, does not signal the end of theory, or *theorizing*. Instead, they allege to be bringing an end to “Grand Theory.” What they call “the Theory” is “an abstract body of thought which came into prominence in Anglo-American film studies during the 1970s”; “The most famous avatar of Theory was that aggregate of doctrines derived from Lacanian psychoanalysis, Structuralist semiotics, poststructuralist literary theory, and variants of Althusserian Marxism.”<sup>49</sup> “Theory” refers to what Bordwell and Carroll term the “orthodox” view of film studies, which their project seeks to end.

The goal of post-Theory, according to Bordwell and Carroll, is to demonstrate that film research can proceed without reference to Theory and that a kind of middle-level research is more appropriate for developing theories of film. The post-Theorists are particularly interested in demonstrating that film research can go on without references to psychoanalysis.<sup>50</sup> The organizing principle of the anthology, as they put it, “is that solid film scholarship can proceed without employing the psychoanalytic frameworks routinely mandated by the cinema studies establishment.”<sup>51</sup> In this respect, it appears that the central organizing principle of post-Theory is not simply a rejection of Theory but psychoanalytic film Theory in particular.

Bordwell and Carroll suggest that the best alternative to Theory is a kind of “middle-range” or “middle-level” inquiry that resists making connections between films and the broader social and political context (or

totality), which the “orthodox” view prided itself on developing. Instead of building on “big questions” (or “big explanations”)—the avenue of “Grand Theory”—post-Theory, they claim, is a kind of “problem-driven” research that operates by way of dialogue, testing, and empirical research.

The essays presented in *Post-Theory* converge on the area of “cognitivism,” arising mainly from a rejection of the psychoanalytic conceptions of film spectatorship. However, Bordwell and Carroll claim that cognitivism is, itself, not a Theory. It is best characterized as a “stance.” As they argue, cognitivist analysis “seeks to understand human thought, emotion, and action by appeal to processes of mental representation, naturalistic processes, and (some sense of) rational agency,” as opposed to the irrational agency of the unconscious in psychoanalytic theory.<sup>52</sup> Perhaps the best way to characterize the divide between Theory and post-Theory is through what appears to be the points of “suture” in each respective project: a theory of spectatorship and subjectivity taking psychoanalysis as its highest point of reference, in the case of Theory, and an object-based study of films, filmmakers, genres, narrative, and so on, developed in reference to cognitive theory, in the case of post-Theory. What the Theory/post-Theory debate amounts to, on one level, is a debate between psychoanalysis and cognitivism. But I claim that the terms of the Theory/post-Theory divide are also symptomatic of another dispute.

The Theory versus post-Theory debate is indicative of the divide between the criticism of ideology (or, ideological hegemony—ideology in general) and the rational, empirical study of (particular) ideologies. Post-Theory, in this sense, can be seen not as a reaction to Theory plain and simple. It is more significantly a reaction to critical theories of ideology and subjectivity. Post-Theory, I claim, is the highest form of contemporary bourgeois thought. It is a political reaction to Theory and one that is presented without seeming overtly political. It seeks to present cinema as something purely objective. This is an ideological gesture *par excellence*.

### **Cognitivism, Middle-Level Research, and the Critique of Theory**

Cognitivist film scholarship began to take shape in the mid-1980s. Since that time it has developed into one of, if not *the*, leading avenues of film scholarship in the field of film and cinema studies. The “cognitivist” momentum has been gaining a lead over other methods of film scholarship due, particularly, to its rejection of film Theory. Though cognitivists tend not to single out Lacanians, as some have claimed (Žižek), they do hold a particular disdain for the grouping of film Theory, inclusive of Lacanian psychoanalysis, developed in reaction to or in tandem with structuralism,



poststructuralism, and Althusserian Marxism. Yet still, Lacanian psychoanalytic theory does seem to hold a high place on the cognitivist “hit list.” This makes sense if we consider the fact that “cognitivism” refers to a specific refusal of psychoanalytic interpretations of film spectatorship. As Carroll puts it, cognitivists “take their task to be a matter of answering certain questions about film, especially about film reception and comprehension, most of which have already been asked or at least acknowledged by psychoanalytic film theorists.” However, Carroll also contends that “cognitivists claim to do a much better job answering those questions than psychoanalytic film theorists have.”<sup>53</sup>

The gaining momentum of cognitivist film scholarship, some would say, has managed to displace the leading role of film Theory. McGowan even goes so far as to suggest that, today, film theory is “almost nonexistent.”<sup>54</sup> However, others, such as Gregory Currie, claim that film theory is still the leading (hegemonic) realm for film scholarship, arguing that cognitivism is “often dismissed or ignored, sometimes castigated from a supposed adherence to positivism and hence for a betrayal of the new, radical insights of those approaches to film that have emerged in the wake of structuralism.”<sup>55</sup>

Cognitivism, it is claimed, is often difficult to define since it does not seem to present a unified, coherent set of scholarly principles; however, according to Currie, this difficulty can be alleviated if one is to consider cognitivism as a “program” rather than as a theory. This program, for him, has to do with two central themes (or what might be considered “rules of investigation”) in cognitivist thought. The first has to do with an attempt by cognitivists to make sense of films at various different levels of presentation, such as “sensory stimulus in light and sound, narrative, and object charged with higher-order meanings and expressions.” The second line of reasoning in cognitivist thought considers that the “perceptual resources,” those that people use to make sense of films, are the same as those used to make sense of the real world. In other words, cognitivists emphasize the resemblance between one’s experience of cinematic images and narratives and one’s perceptual understanding of events in reality.<sup>56</sup> Psychoanalysis, to be sure, shares some of these concerns; however, a key distinction between the two centers on the difference between *comprehension* and *meaning*.

Since its inception, cognitivist film scholarship has been a leading challenger to Marxian theories of ideology and psychoanalytic theories of spectatorship in film studies. Other contentions that cognitivists have with “the orthodox view” are thus concerned, on the one hand, with its particularly political (and, perhaps, often polemical) approach to film scholarship and, on the other hand (and more important), with its tendency toward “Grand Theory.” Bordwell argues that film Theory is “Grand Theory” in the sense that it tends to discuss film and cinema within schemes that seek

to explain very broad and general features of society, history, language, and the mind. For him, cognitivism represents a push toward “middle-level” research in film studies, which does not attempt to make big claims about films and spectatorship. Instead, middle-level research is more “localized.” It focuses on “film-based” problems rather than larger social, political, and psychological problems. The most prominent areas of middle-level research, according to Bordwell, have been “empirical studies of filmmakers, genres and national cinemas,” traditions that have been “enriched by gay/lesbian, feminist, minority, and postcolonial perspectives.” As well, middle-level research has helped film scholars to highlight other areas of film study that have been ignored by “orthodox” film theory, such as the works of filmmakers in the developing world or the global south.<sup>57</sup>

Despite their hard-line disdain for psychoanalytic film Theory, cognitivists, according to Currie, are not simply at odds with psychoanalysis, *per se*.<sup>58</sup> In fact, some cognitivists refer to versions of psychoanalysis to explain patterns of irrationality in film reception.<sup>59</sup> Cognitivists, rather, hold to a particular kind of psychoanalysis that is central to understanding the “psychology of film.” Folk psychology and perceptual psychology are two of the most common psychological approaches referred to by cognitivists. The “brand” of psychoanalysis-applied-to-film contested by cognitivists would thus, more clearly, appear to be the Freudian-Lacanian branch of spectatorship-ideology studies, or what Bordwell refers to as “subject-position theory.”

“Subject-position theory,” according to Bordwell, can be understood as asking the question, “What are the social and psychic functions of cinema?” In order to answer this question, film theorists, Bordwell argues, “built conceptions of cinema upon some basic assumptions about social organization and psychic activity.” “Subject-position theory,” as Bordwell explains, perceives the subject/spectator as “neither the individual person nor an immediate sense of one’s identity or self. It is rather a category of knowing defined by its relation to objects and to other subjects. . . . Subjectivity [in this sense] is constructed through representational systems.”<sup>60</sup> Or, as Stephen Prince puts it, film theorists “with little tradition of work in (and little respect for) empirical procedures, have constructed spectators who exist in theory; they have taken almost no look at real viewers.”<sup>61</sup>

Many of the criticisms waged against psychoanalytic film theory by cognitivists are not completely unfounded. As McGowan points out, the problem that most cognitivists and middle-level researchers have with film Theory is “its proclivity to apply psychoanalytic concepts to the cinema without regard for empirical evidence that didn’t conform to the theory.”<sup>62</sup> For Carroll, there is also evidence that demonstrates a confusion by some film theorists between “theory” and “interpretation.” There are many film

scholars, he argues, who “imagine that they are producing film theory when they are actually merely contriving interpretations of individual films, albeit in arcane, ‘theoretically’ derived jargon.” He adds that “often film exegetes proceed by reading the Theory into a film, as if the presence of subject positioning—putatively a causal process—could be confirmed by hermeneutically alleging to find the allegory of the Imaginary retold in a selected film. . . . Not only do contemporary film scholars pretend to find technique after technique and film after film that exemplify this or that general pattern . . . film scholars also claim to find films that *express* the theories in question.”<sup>63</sup> It is hard *not* to imagine that Carroll is, here, speaking specifically about Žižek.

## Sublime Objects of Cinema

### The Universal Singular

The claim that Žižek is nothing but an “associationist,” using cinema allegorically to interpret theory, or that he does nothing but interpret cinema using theoretical jargon is certainly substantiated by much of his writing on film and popular culture. This, of course, has not gone unnoticed by Žižek himself. In fact, he often remarks on the way in which he uses examples in his work and demonstrates a strong awareness of the criticism pitted against him for doing so.

In the 2008 edition of *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, Žižek makes some important remarks regarding his use of examples, particularly film examples. Because much of his work is centered on the critique of ideology in daily life, his analyses often involve references to numerous examples of popular culture taken from daily life. But he distinguishes between references that are philosophically “idealist” and those that are grounded in a “materialist” approach. For the idealist, “examples are always imperfect, they never perfectly render what they are supposed to exemplify, so that we should take care not to take them too literally.” For a materialist, however, “there is always more in the example than in what it exemplifies, i.e., an example always threatens to undermine what it is supposed to exemplify since it gives body to what the exemplified notion itself represses, is unable to cope with.”<sup>1</sup> An idealist always requires a constant stream of examples. No single example suffices. A materialist, in contrast, repeats the same example(s) over and over again and returns to it/them with an almost obsessive fixation. A materialist knows that he or she has discovered a truly wonderful example—an example that speaks to the Real—if it continues to haunt him or her, if its interpretation is never settled. The example itself, then, remains the same in every Symbolic universe. A materialist example becomes a pure “parallax object.”

Žižek explains in *The Parallax View* (2006) the concept of a parallax as “the apparent displacement of an object (the shift of its position against a background), caused by a change in observational position that provides a new line of sight.” Jodi Dean puts it better when she instructs her readers to stretch out an arm, point up with an index finger, and then close one eye and then the other while looking at the index finger. The finger seems to move; this movement is a parallax.<sup>2</sup> However, Žižek adds that “the observed difference is not simply ‘subjective,’ due to the fact that the same object which exists ‘out there’ is seen from two different stances, or points of view . . . subject and object are inherently ‘mediated,’ so that an ‘epistemological’ shift in the subject’s point of view always reflects an ‘ontological’ shift in the object itself.” In other (Lacanian) words, the subject’s “gaze” is always-already inscribed into the perceived object. According to Žižek, this pure parallax object is none other than the Lacanian *objet petit a*, the object-cause of desire, and, for him, the “sublime object” of ideology.<sup>3</sup>

*Objet petit a* is the “object-cause” of desire: not an actual object, but the lack of enjoyment, *jouissance*, objectified. As a pure parallax object, *objet petit a* is the “absent cause” of a “parallax gap”: it is the unfathomable X that constantly eludes the Symbolic and produces a multiplicity of symbolic perspectives and interpretations. Cinema operates, for Žižek, as a pure parallax object. But not cinema in general: Žižek’s sublime objects are particular film examples and the works of particular directors. Alfred Hitchcock and David Lynch surface most often in Žižek’s work.

Those examples to which Žižek constantly returns are something of the order of a “universal singular”: “a singular entity which persists as the universal in the multitude of its interpretations.” This is the case of a singular (example) standing in for the universality.<sup>4</sup> By constantly writing on the same examples, Žižek demonstrates an epistemological shift in the way in which we can think the universality of theory.

Nevertheless, one would be hard pressed in trying to argue that Žižek approaches cinema purely at the level of materialism. In fact, quite often, just like his predecessors Hegel, Freud, and Lacan, Žižek does succumb to an idealist approach to his cinematic examples, using the example to interpassively unravel the theory.<sup>5</sup> In his early pop culture/cinema books, the idealist use of examples to express the theory is in full force. What I claim, though, is that in Žižek’s examples there is an important coincidence of idealism and materialism, or in different terms a coincidence of subject and object, reflected in the exceptional quality of the examples he chooses to include and/or dissect. These examples are *of the Real*, very much in the sense articulated by Fabio Vighi that “the Real is on the side of the illusion, while reality is for those who cannot face film.”<sup>6</sup> The Real, here, in

cinema, shines through in those films that possess a certain *je ne sais quoi*: an unfathomable X that hands them over to the side of the Real. Žižek's sublime objects of cinema point toward the Real.

### **Ideology: Between the Master-Signifier and the *Objet petit a***

Žižek's Lacan is not that of semiotics or Structuralism. Of course, both have an important place in Žižek's reading of Lacan. But more important for him is the Lacan of the Real. Thus his primary objective as a Lacanian has been to show that Lacan's main effort, at least near the end of his career, was "to articulate the different modes of the real kernel (*das Ding, objet petit a*) which presents an irreducible obstacle to the movement of symbolization."<sup>7</sup> What Žižek means to do, then, is offer theorists a view of Lacan that does not reflect the earlier notions of the unconscious as structured like a language or the Lacan of the "mirror stage." But Žižek's Lacan does rely, to a minimal extent, on the language of semiotics, at least in order to define the operative role of the "Master-Signifier" in Lacanian theory, particularly in its relation to the Lacanian *objet petit a* (the "object-cause" of desire).

Žižek's most significant contribution to Lacanian theory is his elaboration on the notion of the Real, perhaps the most elusive concept in the Lacanian oeuvre. While earlier Lacanian theorists, particularly in film theory, focused on the Lacanian Imaginary and Symbolic, Žižek has helped to bring interest back to Lacan due to his emphasis on the Real. However, even within Žižek's own writings on the Lacanian Real, the concept still seems to slip into various different modalities. This has to do with the fact that there are, according to Žižek, three different conceptions of the Real in Lacanian theory: the imaginary Real, the symbolic Real, and the real Real.<sup>8</sup> The Real thus emerges at three different points in Žižek's philosophical rethinking of Lacan, first and foremost as the "sublime object," the *objet petit a*, or the object-cause of desire (imaginary Real). This is the "hard kernel" of the Real found in the interpretation of dreams as the unconscious desire that gets displaced and condensed within the content of the dream. This Real is the overdetermining principle of distortion of the unconscious desire in the dream. But the *objet petit a*, the "little piece of the Real," is the "sublime object" in another sense. It is the fantasy object, the "obscene" supplemental underside to the effective Symbolic reality. It is, in other words, the *pathological* supplement to the everyday, *practical* order of things—that is, the disavowed X on account of which various different attempts at its interpretation ultimately end up in failure, the result of which constitutes a "hook" of sorts onto the Symbolic. Here, then, it is possible to see the

connection between the imaginary Real and the symbolic Real in the subject's attachment to a (Master-)Signifier.

The Master-Signifier is the "quilting point," often referred to in screen theory's version of "suture." The Master-Signifier adds no new content to the series of ordinary signifiers; rather, it gives the series of ordinary signifiers a new harmony.<sup>9</sup> The Master-Signifier defines the relation between the series of signifiers, which turn back toward the Master-Signifier as their primary point of differentiation. It is a completely *contingent*, particular content, retroactively posited as *necessary* by the existing state of things—by the series of ordinary signifiers, which derive their own meaning by way of their differentiation from the Master-Signifier. The Master-Signifier is thus the signifier of the form itself. It is that which gives symbolic consistency to the entire field of meaning at the level of content. In order for all the other signifiers to have some kind of static or ultimately fixed meaning (to posit their own meaning as necessary), they must all refer back to the unary point of the Master-Signifier. It is in this way that content is hooked onto form, and vice versa.

The ending of Michael Curtiz's *Casablanca* (1942) is useful for thinking through the concept of the Master-Signifier, as Žižek does in *Looking Awry* (1991). It is the ending of the film that gives structure to the series of preceding events in the narrative. The ending, as Master-Signifier, retroactively gives consistency to the whole film.<sup>10</sup> While this may be the case for many films, *Casablanca* is exceptional because of the weight that the ending bears on the previous action. The impact of the film comes precisely from Rick's decision to allow Ilsa to leave with Laslow. Everything leading up to that point suggests that he will do otherwise: that he will perhaps turn Laslow in to Louie, the French officer, so that he can have Ilsa to himself; that perhaps he will let Laslow leave on the plane, but ask Ilsa to stay with him. The film's conclusion goes against the grain of the formation of the normal Hollywood couple. What the viewer expects from the Hollywood tradition is the formation of the male and female protagonists into a couple. In *Casablanca*, the opposite occurs: Rick and Ilsa do not end up together—but what is accomplished, in much more sinister fashion, is the preservation of their love affair. By sacrificing his life with Ilsa, Rick performs an act that risks the Real of desire but preserves the *fantasy* of the couple: by sacrificing his life with Ilsa, Rick preserves the fantasy of their relationship, summed up by the well-known phrase "We'll always have Paris." In this way, *Casablanca*—as an exception to the formation of the classical Hollywood couple—comes much closer to the preservation of the couple than do most films in which the couple ends up together at the film's conclusion. This is what makes the film truly

“romantic”: it is a romance that preserves the fantasy while denying the existence of romance within the coordinates of Symbolic “reality.”

Alternatively, the Master-Signifier can also be seen to function as a *fetish*. But because we are dealing, here, with ideology, it is important to understand the difference between the Marxian conception of fetish (as in “commodity fetishism”) and the psychoanalytic conception of fetish. In Marxism, a fetish “conceals the positive network of social relations”; however, in psychoanalysis, a fetish “conceals the lack (‘castration’) around which the symbolic network is articulated.”<sup>11</sup> Marxism, in other words, conceives a fetish as a veil hiding some positive reality. A fetish hides the value of the commodity derived through the amount of abstract labor time put into its production. Psychoanalysis, in contrast, conceives of fetish as that which masks the Void of subjectivity (\$, the Lacanian “matheme” for the subject of the unconscious), or the meaninglessness of unformed matter. A fetish gives meaning where it did not exist prior. The subject attaches itself to the Master-Signifier in order to avoid the traumatic abyss of the Real, the “nothingness” of being. The Master-Signifier, in other words, provides meaning in the place of meaninglessness. It is, perhaps, in itself completely meaningless and “irrational”; however, as the founding excess of the Symbolic order, its own irrationality paves the way for a particular conception of the rational that is to follow (or that is retroactively coordinated).

Another way of examining the relevance of the Master-Signifier, particularly in cinema, is by locating examples of formal failure. Žižek highlights three examples of films in which the agency of the Master-Signifier is foreclosed, thus rendering the *objet petit a* directly in the texture of each respective film. These are Robert Montgomery’s *Lady in the Lake* (1947), Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rope* (1948), and Russell Rouse’s *The Thief* (1952). *Lady in the Lake* is well known for being shot (almost) entirely from the point of view of the protagonist, the detective Marlowe. Here we have a case of a foreclosure of an “objective shot.” *Rope* presents a foreclosure of a different kind: a foreclosure of montage. The film appears to be shot as one single long take. There are a few instances where the film is cut; however, through some formal trickery (e.g., by closing in on the backs of characters who pass in front of the camera) the film appears seamless, without montage. *The Thief* is a sound film; however, it avoids the use of spoken dialogue to convey the main character’s sense of isolation and deprivation. In all three cases, a certain kind of foreclosure of the signifier (as either an objective shot, a cut, or dialogue) renders the Real, the *objet petit a*, in the texture of the film. The result is a rendering of the (psychotic) breakdown of the signifying chain. This is not to say that these kinds of prohibition of the signifier interpellate the spectator as a psychotic; rather, it helps to explain the uneasiness with which these films are received by the spectator—they



construct a representation that is difficult to watch because they prohibit the quilting element of the signifier. Or, if not directly creating an unpleasant experience for the spectator, the absence of the signifier producing a formal quality to the film is noticeable, enough to distinguish them formally from the classical Hollywood sound film. They all subvert, in some way, traditional montage and sound film, constructing an exceptional Symbolic texture. They are failures, in other words, or exceptions, because they subvert the standard or universal style of cinematic form.

### Hitchcockian Objects

Two features, then, that Žižek seeks to exemplify in Lacanian theory are the Symbolic Master-Signifier and the Lacanian object, the *objet petit a*. But he does so in their connection to the Real. In *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989), Žižek develops a conception of the Lacanian Real by making a strong distinction between the poststructuralist claim that “there is no metalanguage,” particularly in its connection to the deconstructionism of Jacques Derrida, and the Lacanian claim that “there is no metalanguage.”

The poststructuralist position, according to Žižek, suggests that “there is no metalanguage” simply because the speaker is incapable of separating him or herself from his or her own position of enunciation. That is, the enunciated content is always framed by the speaker’s own position of enunciation. “Metalanguage” assumes that there is some position outside of and external to the enunciated content, which could speak from the position of some kind of neutral, purely objective, knowledge. While agreeing, in a sense, with this position, Žižek maintains that the Lacanian perspective is still much more radical. Not only is there no metalanguage because it is impossible to dissociate the enunciated content from the speaker’s position of enunciation, but for Lacan, metalanguage is Real in the sense that “it is impossible to *occupy* its position.”<sup>12</sup> Since it is impossible to occupy this position, the position of the Real, there are two potential elements that may come to stand in its place: the Master-Signifier and the *objet petit a*.

As a way of articulating the impossible-Real in concrete terms, Žižek refers to the Hitchcockian “object”: the MacGuffin. The MacGuffin, as Žižek puts it, is nothing but the “pure pretext whose sole role is to set the story in motion but which is in itself ‘nothing at all.’”<sup>13</sup> Žižek explains the original story of the MacGuffin as follows:

Two men are sitting in a train; one of them asks:

Man #1: “What’s that package up there in the luggage rack?”

Man #2: “Oh, that’s a MacGuffin.”

Man #1: “What’s a MacGuffin?”

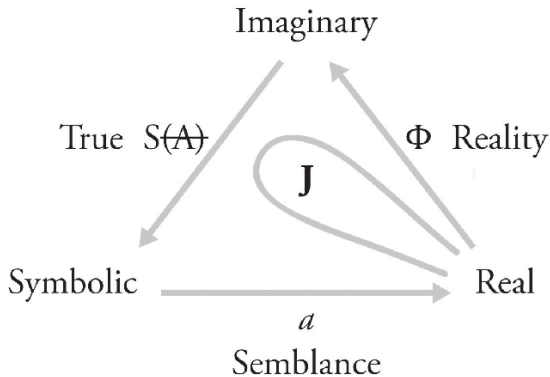
Man #2: “Well, it’s an apparatus for trapping lions in the Scottish Highlands.”

Man #1: “But there are no lions in the Scottish Highlands.”

Man #2: “Well, you see how efficient it is!”<sup>14</sup>

The MacGuffin, then, is a “nothing” that confers on the coordinates of Symbolic reality an efficient intersubjective relation. For Žižek, the MacGuffin exemplifies the logic of the Lacanian *objet petit a*: “a pure void which functions as the object-cause of desire. . . . [It is] a cause which in itself does not exist—which is present only in a series of effects, but always in a distorted, displaced way.”<sup>15</sup> But the *objet petit a* is not the only “object” present in Lacanian theory.

Žižek points out that there are three objects found in Lacan, exemplified by the diagram in Lacan’s *Seminar XX: Encore* (1972–1973):



**Figure 2.1** Diagram of Lacanian objects

The three objects here are  $S(A)$ ,  $a$ , and  $\Phi$ —that is, the signifier of the lack in the Other, the *objet petit a*, and capital phi, which Lacan uses to represent the “phallic signifier,” the Master-Signifier. For Žižek, these three Lacanian objects correspond to three different kinds of object found in Hitchcock’s films:

- First is the MacGuffin as *objet petit a*, the pure pretext, such as the secret clause of the naval treaty in *Foreign Correspondent* (1940).
- But there are also “circulating objects of exchange,”  $S(A)$ , such as the key in *Dial M for Murder* (1954), or even the child in *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1956).
- Finally, there is an object that embodies an impossible *jouissance*,  $\Phi$ , such as the birds in *The Birds* (1963).

While it is possible to notice the existence of these three Lacanian objects in Hitchcock—translated into Hitchcockian objects—it is necessary, perhaps, to rethink the connection between the examples Žižek gives for  $S(\overline{A})$  and  $\Phi$ .

It is my contention that the best way to read the diagram of the three Lacanian objects is to do so in a kind of “Pythagorean” way: the object must correspond to the coordinate of either Real, Symbolic, or Imaginary: of that which opposes it in the corner of the opposing side, so that  $S(\overline{A})$  corresponds to the Real,  $\Phi$  to the Symbolic, and *objet petit a* to the Imaginary.  $S(\overline{A})$  is the signifier of the lack in the Other. It is, in other words, the signifier of the real Real, the void of the impossible Real. It therefore corresponds to the bubble of *jouissance* (J) in the center, which opens up toward the vacuum of the Real. Since  $\Phi$  represents the phallic signifier, the Master-Signifier (S1), as Lacan indicates in *Seminar XX*, it is closer to the Symbolic than the Real. It is the symbolic Real. *Objet petit a*, then, is the imaginary Real: the semblance supported by the sublime object of ideology; it is the fantasy object that supports “reality” as a spectral supplement.

The *objet petit a* remains the same, then: it still stands as the representative of the Hitchcockian MacGuffin. However, it is necessary to flip the examples given by Žižek in connection to  $S(\overline{A})$  and  $\Phi$ . The latter, as the phallic signifier, should be recognized as the “circulating object of exchange,” the phallic object that sticks out, tying together the field of Symbolic “reality.” Without the operation of this object—the phallic object, the signifier of “castration”—“reality” would begin to disintegrate. The circulating key in *Dial M for Murder*, then, ties together the intersubjective relations between the protagonists. The signifier, “Kaplan,” functions similarly in *North by Northwest* (1959). The name itself functions as an object that floats around aimlessly—it is precisely a “signifier without signified,” landing, finally, on Thornhill; but, as we later discover, “Kaplan” never existed in the first place, so that Thornhill ends up in the end occupying the position conferred on him by the signifier itself. The birds then, in the film of the same name, are not  $\Phi$ . They are  $S(\overline{A})$ : they are in fact an objectification of impossible *jouissance*; but this is a position occupied by the signifier of the lack in the Other, not by the phallic signifier. The birds objectify fully the Symbolic order, while eliciting the Real.

### A Žižekian Historicity of Cinema

Taking into consideration the way in which particular filmmakers—and often, particular films—work out the relationship between the Master-Signifier

and the *objet petit a*, or between the Symbolic texture of the film and the supplemental fantasy that organizes the viewer's approach to the cinema, it is possible to look at the connection between cinematic form and the historical form of ideology. This, I believe, is something that Žižek accomplishes in his references to cinema, particularly the films of Hitchcock and Lynch. For Žižek, the cinema provides a means for historicizing the ideological supplement of ideology—of the “sublime object”—and the organization of the subject's enjoyment *in* ideology. The way to accomplish this historicization of ideology in cinema, according to Žižek, is to reflect on the historical break between modernist and postmodernist interpretation.

According to him, a modernist work of art “is by definition ‘incomprehensible’; it functions as a shock, as the irruption of a trauma which undermines the complacency of our daily routine and resists being integrated into the symbolic universe of the prevailing ideology.” The status of modernist interpretation, then, is to enable the integration of the work back into the coordinates of the Symbolic universe. Postmodernism, however, does the opposite. Postmodern objects make complete sense within the given coordinates of (ideological) Symbolic “reality.” The objective of postmodernist interpretation, for Žižek, involves estranging this “normal” object, obscuring it through the application of Theory—that is, by taking the normal everyday object and turning it into an object for Theory, complicating the everyday, turning it into a device for the critique of ideology.<sup>16</sup> It should not surprise anyone that this is, precisely, Žižek's own tactic. Does he consider himself, then, a postmodernist? The answer to this question depends greatly on the way in which we conceive the historicist distinction between realism, modernism, and postmodernism, to use Fredric Jameson's historicist periodizing schema.

In *Marxism and Form* (1971), Fredric Jameson reminds us that Marxism, owing to the nature of its objects of inquiry, has two “codes” with which it can conduct its analyses: one that is objective and the other that is subjective. The objective code is focused on the capitalist mode of production, while the subjective code looks at the class struggle. However, one must keep in mind that the objective code, which examines historical transformations in modes of production, is viewed from a particular subjective position in the class struggle, that of the proletariat. Thus Marxism is definitely not a “worldview” in the traditional sense. It does not speak as a total truth but as the particular, subjective truth of the proletariat. The truth-value of the Marxian critique of capitalism, therefore, admits its own bias. The difference between this position and the ideological position is that the former admits its own subjective position, while the latter does not.<sup>17</sup>

The object-based code is formulated as “historical materialism,” which seeks, on the one hand, to examine historical transformations of modes of production and, on the other hand, to look at the development of different ideas, cultures, and modes of interpretation that accompany transformations in modes of production. The subject-based code is formulated as “dialectical materialism” and seeks to understand something about the developments of consciousness or conceptions of Self that accompany objective transformations in the conditions of existence, leading toward the self-emancipation of the proletariat from the existing conditions of domination and exploitation. As a historical materialist, Jameson’s periodizing schema of cultural critique proposes a connection between particular stages in the capitalist mode of production (the industrial stage; the monopoly-imperialist stage; the financial stage), which are accompanied by particular cultural formations, hence his claim that “postmodernism” is the cultural logic of late (finance) capitalism. Jameson’s historical schema of culture is broken down into periods of realism (traditional society), modernism, and postmodernism. Something similar appears in Žižek’s reading of culture.<sup>18</sup>

As a Marxist, Žižek shares Jameson’s objective analysis of the relation between the mode of production and culture. However, since he is concerned, primarily, with ideology and subjectivity, his own periodizing schema is devised in relation to Lacanian psychoanalysis. Žižek is more on the side of dialectical materialism since, unlike Jameson, he is not as interested in understanding the connection between culture and the historical stage of the mode of production. Rather, he is interested in the historical organization of enjoyment, how this relates to a certain kind of subjectivization, and the possibilities for breaking free of ideology. In this regard, his analyses of cinema have much more to do with the features that relate to the organization of enjoyment, or the play between the (Master-)Signifier and the *objet petit a*. Thus his own historicizing schema looks at the interplay and shifts from the logic of the signifier to the logic of the object. The shift from signifier to object, or even the shift from symptom to fantasy, opens up an avenue for considering the historicity of ideology. This shift concerns the way in which the object fills in a hole—a gap—around which the Symbolic order articulates itself. This, in fact, is how Žižek often distinguishes between “historicism” and “historicity.” Historicism pertains to the order of the Symbolic, while historicity proper looks at the “ahistorical kernel” of history. Historicity does not look at the linear succession of historical epochs (the operation of historicism); rather, it is interested in the succession of failed attempts to deal with the traumatic Real. In Marxian terms, this ahistorical traumatic kernel has a precise name: class struggle. It is, however, in successive historical periods that we may come

to understand the order of the object coming to fill in the place of the ahistorical Real. Cinema, here, offers a “royal road” into the historicization of the Real.

According to Žižek, Michelangelo Antonioni’s *Blow-Up* (1966) is the last truly modernist film. He explains this in Lacanian terms. The main narrative in the film can be thought of as a game of the hero (the photographer) following the trajectory of his desire. He discovers a “stain” in a photograph he had taken earlier in the film: a dead body, hidden behind the bushes in the background. The title of the film refers to the enlargement of the photograph, enough for him to see that which caught his gaze. That night, he returns to the park where he had taken the photograph and, indeed, he finds there the dead body. The body, here, is representative of the *objet petit a*, the “sublime object.” However, returning again in the morning, this time with his camera, he finds that the body is gone.

It is this object that first troubles the photographer: it is the object-cause of his desire; or, as Žižek puts it, it is “the cause which starts the interpretive desire.”<sup>19</sup> It is the final scene, though, that ultimately points in the direction of how the film must be interpreted. In the end, we witness the arrival of a group of mimes (Žižek calls them “hippies”). This is the very same group of mimes that we see at the beginning of the film. At the end of the film, the mimes arrive at a tennis court and engage in an imaginary game of tennis—having neither racquets nor tennis balls, their actions signal their engagement in this play of imagination. The photographer watches as the mimes play out their game, but at a certain moment, he too becomes involved in the game. When the imaginary ball bounces over the fence, the mimes signal to the photographer to toss it back to them. He rushes to pick up the imaginary tennis ball, and after throwing it back, he disappears and the film ends. According to Žižek, the final scene speaks to the totality of the film, which is about the playing of the game of the Symbolic order. What the mimes show is that the game can operate *without* an object: the tennis ball. The mimes “do not need a ball for their game, just as in [the photographer’s] own adventure everything works without a body.”<sup>20</sup> For Žižek, then, the film demonstrates the modernist formal arrangement of the “playing of the game”—the playing of the Symbolic order—without an object.

In contrast to this interpretation, though, I must insist on another (equally Žižekian) reading of the film. What if the disappearance of the photographer at the end of the film is not meant to signal the operation of the Symbolic order without an object but in fact speaks to the Lacanian interpretation of *aphanisis* in its relation to *alienation* and *separation* of the subject toward the Symbolic order?

The alienation of the subject occurs by way of its attachment to the Symbolic order out of fear that, without recognition from the agency of the Symbolic big Other, it would cease to exist and fade away—a reversion into *aphanisis*. Keep in mind here that for Lacan the subject represents a gap in the Symbolic order, marked by the “barred” S—\$—the Lacanian “matheme” for the subject. In order to evade this position of gap, and potential nonexistence (*aphanisis*), the subject clings to the signifier that signals its existence within the Symbolic order—the “Master-Signifier” (S1). The subject, then, is faced with a primordial “forced choice”: “to be or not to be.” The subject is condemned to the forced choice of existence, submitting itself to the Law of the Symbolic order: it assumes a position of S1, of the signifier (its position as Ego-ideal), rather than risk its disappearance, *aphanisis*, into the void of subjectivity, \$, and is therefore “alienated” in the field of the big Other. What Lacan calls “separation,” in contrast, is the process of pulling away from the Symbolic order and thus a disalienation of the subject. It risks the possibility of *aphanisis* and the nonexistence of the big Other and realizes its substantiation in the small other, the *objet petit a*.

*Blow-Up* speaks precisely to *aphanisis* over separation. The film, it is true, demonstrates the relation between the Symbolic order—the mimes' game—and the object-cause of desire—the body/ball. But the thesis of the film is, rather, that there is no objectified substance of the Self outside of the game. One must continue to “play the game”—that is, one must continue to alienate oneself in the Symbolic order—in order to avoid the risk of disappearance, of nonexistence. *Blow-Up* is, in this sense, a rather conservative film.

If modernism deals with the subject's alienation into the field of the Symbolic big Other, postmodernism has to do, precisely, with the emergence of the object *over* the Symbolic: “[i]t consists not in showing the game which also works without an object and which is put into movement by a central emptiness, but directly showing the object, making visible the indifferent and arbitrary character of the object itself.”<sup>21</sup>

Following this pattern of historical periodization, I want to propose a relationship between the film examples often cited by Žižek and his own historicizing schema of *jouissance*. Hitchcock, I claim, represents for Žižek the structural form of the Symbolic of modernism—the play of the signifier in its connection to and elucidation of the object—while David Lynch's films speak to the surfacing of the object in postmodernism. But there is a third name missing here that accounts for the first period in the Jamesonian triad of realism-modernism-postmodernism. This third, missing name, I claim, is that of Charlie Chaplin. It is his pre-Oedipal, oral-anal

universe that speaks to the organization of enjoyment as the prior stage of realism in the cinema.

Chaplin's universe is one that is characterized by the "pre-Oedipal, oral-anal paradise of unbridled devouring and destroying, ignorant of death and guilt."<sup>22</sup> This, according to Žižek, is announced by the place of the "voice" in Chaplin's films. It is the voice that disrupts and intrudes into the innocence of silent cinema. The voice operates outside of direct dialogue in Chaplin's films and therefore announces something sinister about his texts. It is by rendering the vulgarity of the voice in the space of the Symbolic "reality" that Chaplin evokes something about the constitution of realism in Hollywood cinema. The voice operates "as a foreign body, as a kind of parasite introducing a radical split," which modernism endeavors to domesticate.<sup>23</sup> As Žižek puts it, "film was Chaplinesque, it will become Hitchcockian."<sup>24</sup>

### *The Wrong Man as Exception*

Žižek's dialectical approach to reading cinema often involves looking at the entire *oeuvre* of particular *auteurs*, such as Hitchcock. As he puts it at the beginning of his long essay "In His Bold Gaze My Ruin Is Writ Large" at the end of *Everything You Always Wanted to Know*, "the only way to reach the underlying law of a universe is through its exception."<sup>25</sup> Thus he begins his intervention into Hitchcock by looking at *the* film that, for Žižek, "sticks out": *The Wrong Man* (1956). This film, according to Žižek, is an example of Hitchcock's failure.

The exceptional feature of this film, according to Žižek, is the nature of Hitchcock's appearance in *The Wrong Man*. It is well known that Hitchcock tended to make very subtle and almost negligible cameo appearances in his films. It has become something of a game for fans: to "find Hitch"; almost like the children's books *Where's Waldo?* However, in *The Wrong Man*, Hitchcock appears directly, at the beginning of the film, and addresses the viewers, just like he does at the beginning of his television series, *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, and in many of the trailers to his films. In the prologue to *The Wrong Man*, Hitchcock asks the viewers to keep in mind the fact that the film dramatizes events taken from real life. This message at the beginning of the film, for Žižek, bears a direct relation to the failure of the film.

*The Wrong Man* tells the story of a musician who is falsely accused of robbing a bank. The story itself, according to Žižek, exemplifies Hitchcock's theological vision of a cruel God who plays a game of sadistically frustrating human destinies. Referring to Eric Rohmer and Claude



Chabrol's examination of Hitchcock, Žižek proposes that this particular view of a cruel God comes from the Catholic tradition of Jansenism.<sup>26</sup> The latter perceives a division between "virtue" and divine "grace." It holds the view that all people are immanently sinful, and thus salvation is not something that arises from the internal virtue of the individual but by way of some kind of divine, graceful intervention. From this view, "virtue" is not achieved through our individual actions but from the fact of our being "saved" by divine grace in advance. The Jansenist problematic of sin, for Žižek, is related to the relationship between the subject and the Law in the Hitchcockian universe.

The Hitchcockian universe often involves some accidental intervention, which is in no way caused by the protagonist him or herself and which drastically shifts his or her status in the Symbolic order: Thornhill is wrongly identified as "Kaplan" in *North By Northwest* (1959); Balestrero is wrongfully accused in *The Wrong Man*; and there is the irrational intrusion of some incomprehensible natural phenomenon in *The Birds* (1963). This universe, according to Žižek, demonstrates the interplay between the subject's own self-experience and the Symbolic network that somehow determines how it is to be seen from the perspective—the "gaze"—of the Other. The two, however, are always interrelated to the extent that the subject acts/behaves in reaction to its own interpretation of the intervention of the Symbolic. Žižek's point in speaking of this relationship is to show that the Hitchcockian universe is structured similarly to the Lacanian relationship between the "Master-Signifier" and the *objet petit a*. Both fields perceive the relationship between the subject's alienation in the field of the Symbolic and the role played by its own subjective desire to interact and "keep up" with the Symbolic itself. The problem with *The Wrong Man*, though, is that, according to Žižek, the message at the beginning of the film betrays the usual logic of the Hitchcockian universe. The prelude at the beginning asks the viewer directly to take the film seriously and thus retreats from the normal operation of the Hitchcockian allegory.

### Cinema as Allegory: The Case of Hitchcock

Because Hitchcock comes out at the beginning of *The Wrong Man* to give us, the viewers, his prelude, he ends up robbing us of the fantasy dimension of the film. The message at the beginning of the film backfires because, in his attempt to render the reality of the film more real than it appears by telling us that the events presented are based on real life, it takes away from the viewer that dimension against which we perceive Symbolic "reality": fantasy. Fantasy, according to Žižek, is what structures "reality." The fantasy

dimension in the Hitchcockian universe is contained in the allegorical mode of its revelations.

Žižek's claim apropos of the allegorical dimension of the Hitchcockian universe relies on his own precise definition of the modernist allegory. In traditional allegory, the narrative content operates as a representation of some kind of transcendental principle: Love, Honor, Betrayal, and so on. Modern allegory, in contrast, speaks precisely about itself; it is self-referential to the extent that its enunciated content (the diegetic space of the narrative) speaks to its own process of enunciation: the form of the enunciated—not simply the formal techniques and features of the articulated content but precisely the entire process of its production.<sup>27</sup> In the case of Hitchcock, the latter has to do with his own relationship with his viewers *through* his own place in the enunciated content of his films. In *The Wrong Man*, this allegorical dimension is revealed in a direct way. The film therefore subtracts the Hitchcockian allegory from its own universe. It indexes its own process of enunciation too directly and thus loses the fantasy dimension at the heart of the Hitchcockian universe. Hitchcock, in other words, says too much in *The Wrong Man*.

Žižek's interpretation of *The Wrong Man* is intended as a means of distinguishing between two modes of ideology critique. A classical Marxian approach, he claims, would surely view Hitchcock's introduction to the film as a clear sign of ideology critique. The claim here is that, because the film suspends the allegorical dimension, it comes very close (too close) to direct social criticism. From this view, the allegorical dimension renders invisible and neutralizes social criticism. Yet Žižek insists that it is precisely the strict adherence to the allegorical dimension in Hitchcock's films that inscribes into them such strong "ideologico-critical" convictions.<sup>28</sup> It is this attitude that will later lead Žižek to claim that in the films of the Polish director Krzysztof Kieslowski the Real is approached much more effectively once Kieslowski transitioned from documentary cinema to fiction. Documentary is too real and thus leads the viewer nowhere. In contrast to the direct approach to "social criticism" in *The Wrong Man*, Žižek proposes a Lacanian interpretation of *Psycho* (1960) that shows precisely how the allegorical dimension of the Hitchcockian universe can function as a critique of ideology.

### Hitchcock: The Pervert

*Psycho* presents, for Žižek, the clearest case of Hitchcock working out his own "benevolent-sadistic" playing with the viewer's fantasy—very similar to the cruel, Jansenist God. It is at this point that Noël Carroll's (implicit)

criticism of Žižek might appear to ring true. After discussing the importance of the allegorical dimension of Hitchcock's universe, Žižek moves straight into an explanation of the Lacanian schema of Sadeian fantasy.

Initially, the schema of the Sadeian fantasy ( $V \diamond S$ ) speaks to the Sadeian subject's endeavor to satisfy his enjoyment through the pain of the other.

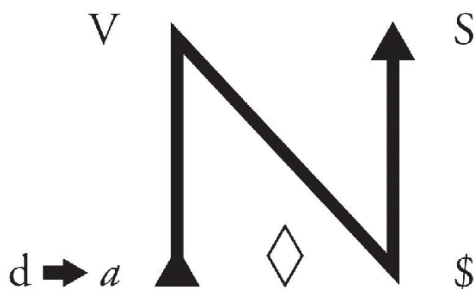


Figure 2.2 Schema of the Sadeian fantasy

The Sadeian subject causes pain in the other as a means of confirming his own being. Lacan's claim, however, in "Kant avec Sade" is that, below this manifest relationship between the "sadist" and his victim, there is another, latent, relationship. The latter speaks the truth of the former and appears in the lower part of the schema ( $a \diamond \$$ ): the relationship between the *objet petit a* and the "barred," split subject. The truth of the sadist causing pain, in other words, is that of an "object-instrument" of the Other's enjoyment. The sadist, in this assessment, acts not for his own enjoyment but for the enjoyment of the Other.<sup>29</sup> However, the story doesn't end here.

The first schema explains the Sadeian fantasy. But Lacan introduces another schema, which explains the place of this fantasy within another, determining, framework.

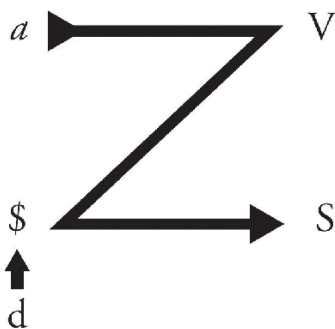


Figure 2.3 Schema of the will-to-enjoy

The second schema is produced by a simple rotation of the first. It posits that the subject who actually dreams the sadistic fantasy is none other than the “object-victim” (*a*). The sadist here is thus rendered as the victim. Žižek’s point in raising the Lacanian schemas of the sadistic, perverse fantasy is to argue that while it may appear at first that the sadistic transgression attempts to subvert the Law, its ultimate effect is the establishment of the Law. Perversion, then, as Žižek later puts it, is not subversion—why is there a need here to dissect the Lacanian schemas of the Sadeian fantasy?

In his films, it is none other than Hitchcock himself who is the ultimate sadistic pervert, who fills out the viewer with a “Will-to-Enjoy”—forcing the viewer to concede that he or she is possessed by the will to experience his or her own perverse violence on the screen—and then, by giving him or her exactly that which he or she desired, shows to the viewer that he or she has in fact been manipulated by Hitchcock himself as the true sadist. The ideologico-critical operation of the sadistic Hitchcockian allegory thus shows the viewer that before he or she can identify with the Symbolic frame of the filmic “reality,” he or she must first identify with him or herself as “pure” gaze—that is, the gaze as object: the *objet petit a*.

### Why Is *Psycho* Really about Perversion?

The basic strategy of the Hitchcockian allegory, according to Žižek, is that, by way of some kind of reflexive inclusion of the viewer’s gaze into the film itself, a *partial* awareness is formed as to the pathological nature of the viewer’s desire. Žižek claims that the shift from gaze as a point of symbolic identification—the gaze of the big Other—to the gaze as object—the gaze of the little other, *objet petit a*—forces the viewer to identify with his or her own desire but on an as yet unrealized level. This is a desire that is inscribed into the seemingly neutral gaze of the cinematic spectacle. He refers here to the scene in *Psycho* when Norman Bates watches Marion’s car sink into the swamp behind his mother’s house. At the moment when the car stops sinking, a feeling of anxiety is aroused in the spectator who, for that moment, according to Žižek, identifies his or her desire with Norman’s own desire. His point is that, with this scene, the seemingly neutral gaze of the film is subjectivized into the partial gaze of the viewer’s own desire: “the viewer is compelled to assume that the scene he witnesses is staged for his eyes, that his/her gaze was included in it from the very beginning.”<sup>30</sup> The same feeling of identification with the villain comes across in *Dial M for Murder*, when the murder of the wife does not go according to plan. The viewer’s expectation is subverted when things go awry, but this very

subversion demonstrates a sadistic “will to enjoy” on the part of the viewer, who desires the murder of the wife.

This desire is experienced as something that is transgressive. It is as if the desire experienced by the viewer somehow breaks the norm of that which is socially permissible. Here we encounter, according to Žižek, the way in which perversion becomes a socially constructive (rather than subversive) force. However, it is the viewer's identification with this transgressive attitude that marks the film as one that is critical of ideology. That is, “when Hitchcock appears at his most conformist, praising the rule of Law, and so on, the ideologico-critical mole has already done its work, the fundamental identification with the ‘transgressive’ mode of enjoyment which holds a community together.”<sup>31</sup> The “inherent” transgression of the Law is what truly holds together the Symbolic community—that is, an identification not with the letter of the Law but with a particular form of enjoyment, an enjoyment in transgression—that regulates our everyday connection to the Symbolic. As Žižek often points out, one truly becomes part of a community when one learns not how to follow the Law but how to appropriately break the rules. Community is formed when we all identify with the same transgression of the Law—a transgression that is culturally permissible. This operation is given further weight throughout *Psycho* as the viewer is forced to constantly rearrange the point with which he or she identifies.

The subjective perspective of the film constantly changes, beginning with Marion, then with Norman, then Arbogast, and finally with Sam and Lillah. This perpetual shift enforces a constant displacement of the viewer's identification. Yet Žižek insists that the spectators' identifications in the last third of the film are secondary, subordinated to the two previous positions: that of Marion and Norman. After Marion is murdered, it becomes impossible to identify with *the* personality that dominates. This, according to Žižek, is because the perspective from which the narrative is presented oscillates between the surface level of contemporary everyday life and the obscene, dark underside—put simply, it oscillates between Symbolic “reality” and obscene fantasy. The passage here is one from hysterical desire to psychotic drive: the two sides of the *objet petit a*.

### Back to the Psychosis of *Psycho*

The oscillation between desire and drive speaks to the two different sides of the *objet petit a*, separated by fantasy. In the logic of desire, *objet petit a* is the “object-cause” of desire. It is “lack” objectified. Therefore, *objet petit a* is not the object that is desired by the subject. It is precisely that which

objectifies the lack in the big Other (*grand Autre* as opposed to little other, *petit a*) that puts desire in motion. The reflexivity of desire, the constant search for the object that will wrest and finally satisfy desire, produces a kind of surplus-enjoyment. Drive, in contrast, is the enjoyment of failure. Drive, or the Freudian “death drive,” takes pleasure in failing to attain full enjoyment and satisfaction of desire. It is the enjoyment of being able to return to the initial position of lack and thus to “play the game” all over again. *Psycho*, according to Žižek, moves between the register of hysterical desire and psychotic drive.

The difference between hysteria and psychosis is conceivable in terms of the subject’s relation to the Symbolic order and its submission to the “paternal Law,” or the “Name-of-the-Father.” The hysterical position submits to the authority of the paternal metaphor: the Law that prohibits the satisfaction of desire. Enjoyment is prohibited in the hysterical subject position, which is the condition of possibility of surplus-enjoyment in desire. The hysterical subject position, therefore, falls under the Symbolic authority of the Name-of-the-Father. The psychotic, however, clings to the desire of the (M)Other. While the conditions of possibility of desire in the hysterical subject position are conditioned on the prohibitory order of the Law, the psychotic does not recognize this condition of possibility and clings to an objectified, impossible object of desire outside of the Symbolic order. Žižek argues, then, that Norman Bates remains a prisoner of the psychotic drive insofar as he misrecognizes the impossibility of accessing desire, foreclosed by the absent paternal metaphor. As he puts it, Norman is a kind of “anti-Oedipus” *avant la lettre*.<sup>32</sup> But *Psycho*’s movement between desire and drive is not limited to the psychic economy of the protagonists. This movement is effected filmically in two of the most powerful murder scenes in the film.

The shower scene comes almost out of nowhere. As Žižek notes, it is nowhere alluded to in any of the earlier parts of the film. The impact of this scene even distracts viewers, according to Žižek, from the second murder scene: the murder of Arbogast, the detective. What is interesting about the shower murder scene is that it is accomplished purely through filmic “devices”: careful editing, close-ups, and so on. We never see the actual murder of Marion—that is, we never see the direct piercing of her body with the knife. Žižek argues that the effect of the first murder scene on the viewer is to make the second murder appear as something that is expected. The first murder, in a way, plays on the subjectivization of drive, while the second—the one that is expected—plays on desire, so that the traumatic effect is that the viewer realizes a certain (surplus-) enjoyment in the pleasure of the second murder scene: as viewers, we desire the death of Arbogast!

### How Does the Gaze Function in Hitchcock?

Returning, then, to the Hitchcockian allegory, it is important to take note of how the “gaze” operates in his films. In contrast to the “gaze” theory developed by the Screen theorists, one must note that the “gaze” according to Lacan, as theorized in his *Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* (1963–1964), is of the object, not the subject. As Joan Copjec argues, Screen theorists often confused the Lacanian conception of the gaze by confusing the “mirror stage” with the notion of the gaze developed by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*.<sup>33</sup> Drawing on Jeremy Bentham’s theoretical Panopticon prison, Foucault argued that the subject is disciplined by imagining the bombardment of a surveying gaze. Film theorists have taken up this concept of the gaze to think of the film spectator as the occupier of the gaze in the cinema. But the gaze, according to Lacan, is an objective gaze: it is the *objet petit a* in the field of the “scopic drive.”<sup>34</sup> This uncanny gaze, in its true, Lacanian sense, is found throughout *Psycho*.

It appears, first and foremost, as a “petrified gaze.” The horrified gazes in the film, subjectivized by a particular character, allude to a horrible stain, something of which the viewer is as yet unaware. The subjectivized gaze stares out at something offscreen, outside the frame, which is ultimately at the spectator him or herself. This uncanny gaze returned to the spectator is, according to Žižek, another sign of Hitchcock’s Jansenism, reminding the viewer about the process of the film’s enunciation. The *objet petit a* of these scenes—such as Norman’s gaze at the end of the film; Lilah’s horrified gaze at the mother’s house—is the gaze itself, looking back at the viewer. What this does, though, is open up a “wound” of Symbolic reality. What we get back through the gaze here is a stain of the Real, unmediated by the Symbolic “Master-Signifier.” Here, then, we come to the two operative elements of surplus in the constitution of “reality”: the *objet petit a*—the “sublime object”—and the empty “Master-Signifier”—the signifier without a signified, tying together the field of the Symbolic order. The Master-Signifier, as the thread “suturing” the field of Symbolic reality—or, the symbolic efficiency of the filmic text—seals the wound opened up by the Real of the gaze.

We can understand, then, the Hitchcockian allegory in Lacanian terms as one that opens up the gaps in the Symbolic order. The Hitchcockian universe reveals a stain of reality, an intrusion of the Real into the field of the Symbolic, revealing the constitution of Symbolic “reality” around a precise position of enunciation. The Master-Signifier, then, is added to the field opened up by the stain of the Real in order to tie up—to close—the field of the Symbolic and continue to avoid the entry of the Real as traumatic.

### The Lynchian Universe; or, The Protrusion of the Real

If the Hitchcockian universe involves the train of following the object along long enough to seal the wound opened up by the object, the opening up onto the Real, the Lynchian universe, by contrast, has to do with “the discordance between reality, observed from a safe distance, and the absolute proximity of the Real.”<sup>35</sup> As a way of exemplifying this fact, Žižek points to the opening sequence of *Blue Velvet* (1986): “After the vignettes of the idyllic American small town and the heart attack of the hero’s father as he waters the lawn (when he collapses, the jet of hose water uncannily recalls surrealistic, heavy urination), the camera noses into the lawn, disclosing the bursting life there: the crawling insects and beetles, their rattling and devouring of the grass.”<sup>36</sup>

Such a procedure, the “overproximity to reality,” according to Žižek, has the effect of bringing about a “loss of reality.” That is, too much of the Real disturbs the space of Symbolic “reality.” The Lynchian universe therefore identifies fully with the Symbolic, excluding nothing, and thereby elicits the Real in the space of the Symbolic. This effect is brought about not only by the visual representation in Lynch’s films but also by way of his use of sound.

Žižek’s first example here relates back to the opening sequence of *Blue Velvet*. The images of the insects eating the grass is accompanied by an “uncanny noise” that is difficult to locate in reality. In Lynch’s universe, these uncanny noises are “caused by objects that are not part of [Symbolic] reality.”<sup>37</sup> They protrude from outside. They are nowhere grounded in the Symbolic texture of the film. Something similar appears in *The Elephant Man* (1980), during the nightmare sequence. The noise here, for Žižek, is an object that crosses the borderline between interior and exterior. This noise is a Real object that invades the space of Symbolic “reality”: it is the voice as object. While “gaze” represents the *objet petit a* in the scopic drive, “voice” is the *objet petit a* in the invocatory drive.

Another example of voice in Lynch is the indecipherable speech of the “dwarf” at the end of *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me* (1992). The subtitles, according to Žižek, domesticate this speech, giving it meaning through the medium of the big Other. While the medium of the big Other, the Symbolic order rendering accessible meaning and understanding, is usually concealed, here, according to Žižek, its operation is revealed. Žižek’s point is that this scene at the end of *Twin Peaks* reverses the Derridean formula of logocentrism: rather than operating as a hidden, illusory element contained in the text, the voice here is presented as obvious, self-transparent, cruel, and impenetrable. The voice is presented, precisely, as “a foreign body perturbing the balance of our lives.”<sup>38</sup>



### The Feminine “Not-All”

Žižek's version of Lynch thus presents his work as a kind of key for thinking through the Lacanian conception of *jouissance féminine*. The Lacanian “logic of sexuation” differentiates between the “masculine” and “feminine” approaches to enjoyment, expressed by the following formulas from his *Seminar XX: Encore* (1972–1973):

$$\begin{array}{cc|cc} \text{E}\text{X} & \overline{\Phi\text{X}} & \overline{\text{E}\text{X}} & \overline{\Phi\text{X}} \\ \Lambda\text{X} & \Phi\text{X} & \overline{\Lambda\text{X}} & \Phi\text{X} \end{array}$$

Figure 2.4 Lacanian logic of sexuation

These formulas should be read not as speaking to something natural about masculine/feminine enjoyment. They have, rather, to do with the way in which enjoyment is structured as a result of the deadlock of sexual difference.

The “masculine” side (on the left) represents the Symbolic concealment of the Real by way of an exclusion. The universality of the (phallic) signifier,  $\Phi$ , operates only on the condition that something remains excluded: the *objet petit a* as a “little piece of the Real.” The “feminine” side, in contrast, affirms a position of exception—a position of “not-all” (*pas tout*)—in which not all of the elements are submitted to the phallic function. “Masculinity,” in other words, is operative of Symbolic efficiency in its exclusion of the Real, whereas “femininity” returns the excluded to its position in the Symbolic, the result of which is a fracturing of the Symbolic order itself with the emergence of the Real in the field of the Symbolic. Femininity, in other words, in this very specific Lacanian sense, deprives Symbolic reality of its founding excess—its “primordial lie.” No other figure expresses the feminine “not-all” in the Lynchian universe better than Dorothy in *Blue Velvet*.

Dorothy (Isabella Rosselini), as Žižek explains, suffers from depression invoked by the kidnapping of her husband and child by Frank (Dennis Hopper). Frank torments her, blackmailing her for sexual favors as the cost of keeping her husband and child alive. One of the most famous scenes in the film occurs midway, when Jeffrey (Kyle MacLachlan) hides in the closet and watches the sadomasochistic sexual interaction between Dorothy and Frank. Žižek asks, though, for whom this scene is staged.

The first possibility is that it is, of course, staged for Jeffrey, who is hiding in the closet. Žižek argues that this scene mimics the scene of the

fundamental fantasy, of being present at the moment of one's own conception. Two features in this scene, according to Žižek, indicate the relevance of this reading: Dorothy's act of pushing the blue velvet material into Frank's mouth and Frank's heavy breathing into the oxygen mask. Despite the disturbingly violent feeling of this scene, these two elements represent, for Žižek, features of a visual hallucination of what a child might imagine in witnessing the parental act of copulation. This, perhaps, is what the child might hear while eavesdropping on his or her parents having sex. The scene, then, is an interpretation of the fundamental fantasy.

Another possibility is that this scene is staged for Frank—the violent, psychotic kidnapper. Both Dorothy and Frank put on a performance—for Dorothy, this performance is doubled since she knows that Jeffrey is in the closet watching (since she told him to hide in there). Both, as well, seem to be overacting. However, while Frank is unaware of Jeffrey's actual gaze, observing the scene, Žižek claims that this scene is still, nonetheless, staged with Jeffrey's virtual gaze in mind—but what purpose is served by Frank's overacting, not knowing in reality that Jeffrey is hiding in the closet? The key, for Žižek, is the way in which Frank constantly shouts at Dorothy, "Don't you look at me!" Why, Žižek asks, must she not look at him? Because there is "nothing" there to see—that is, this scene stages Frank's desperate attempt to displace his own traumatic impotence. Dorothy and Frank, then, from this reading, "feign a wild sexual act in order to conceal the father's impotence from the child; all Frank's shouting and swearing, his comical-spectacular imitation of coital gestures, serve to mask the absence of coitus."<sup>39</sup>

The final possibility that Žižek proposes is that the scene is staged for Dorothy herself. Žižek posits the hypothesis that this scene is staged as an example of the primordial aspect of feminine depression and that Frank's brutal assault is an identification with this primordial aspect of femininity. This scene, then, articulates a "desperate 'therapeutic' attempt to prevent the woman from sliding into the abyss of absolute depression."<sup>40</sup> For Žižek, this final reading shows evidence of a founding, original fact in the Lynchian universe: that of woman's depression, with man presenting himself as the object of woman's gaze, trying to reinstate woman into the "masculine" order of causality.

### Two Versions of *Femme Fatale*

In his debate with Judith Butler and Ernesto Laclau in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* (2000), Žižek points out that *film noir* was not originally a category of Hollywood cinema. It was, rather, a category of French

postwar criticism, developed while engaging with Hollywood cinema. *Film noir*, therefore, represents a French gaze looking on Hollywood cinema. Similarly, what the English tradition—primarily in the United States—calls poststructuralism usually refers to a series of French continental theorists, from Derrida to Foucault, who never used the term themselves. What we get, then, with a poststructuralist interpretation of *film noir* is a nonexistent theory writing about a nonexistent genre. Does this not also indicate the important status of the *femme fatale* in masculine/patriarchal discourse? The category of *femme fatale* is sinister in its ability to both support *and* disrupt the masculine logic and consistency of the Symbolic order.

The classic *femme fatale*, according to Žižek, serves as a support for patriarchal domination: she represents the “inherent transgression” of the patriarchal symbolic universe, “as the *male* masochist-paranoiac fantasy of the exploitative and sexually insatiable woman who simultaneously dominates us and enjoys her suffering, provoking us violently to take her and to abuse her.”<sup>41</sup> The “threat” of the *femme fatale* is thus false: as a support of patriarchal domination, she represents the externalization of the fantasy object, substantiating the impossible-Real into an obstacle. *Femme fatale* is “a fantasmatic formation which is needed, but cannot be openly assumed, so that it can only be evoked on condition that, at the level of the explicit narrative line . . . she is punished, and the order of male domination is reasserted.”<sup>42</sup> This, then, is the classic *femme fatale*. The postmodern version is significantly different.

In neo-*noir* films, such as Lawrence Kasdan's *Body Heat* (1981), John Dahl's *The Last Seduction* (1994), or Paul Verhoeven's *Basic Instinct* (1992), it is the *femme fatale* who triumphs. She ends up subverting the male fantasy by “brutally realizing it, acting it out in ‘real life.’” The postmodern *femme fatale* most fully undermines male domination by “giving them what they want.”<sup>43</sup> In Lynch's *Lost Highway* (1997), both versions (the classic and the postmodern) of *femme fatale* are realized. For Žižek, the film serves as a kind of metacommentary on the opposition between the two versions of “woman.”

Žižek offers an interesting comparison between *Blue Velvet* and *Lost Highway*, in the sense that the former goes from idyllic small town life to dark and traumatic underworld, whereas *Lost Highway* moves between the dark underworld and the despair and alienation of “normal” everyday life. In the latter, in other words, the everyday is certainly not idyllic; on the contrary, it is one of depression and alienation in the order of the big Other. *Lost Highway* therefore presents not the opposition between a positive and a negative reality; it presents, rather, the opposition between two horrors.

In the film, we get two opposed scenarios of fantasy decomposed: one that engages with the utter drabness of mundane everyday life; the other that represents the fantasmatic support (the spectral fantasy) of the first, not, according to Žižek, in its sublime version but in its brutal, obscene cruelty. Therefore, according to Žižek, the film presents a choice between bad and worse, and the transition between one and the other occurs at the precise moment when the (male) hero engages in a failed sexual act.

The first occurs between Fred (Bill Pullman) and Renee (Patricia Arquette), when he is not able to bring his wife to orgasm (because of his impotence) and she gives him a patronizing pat on the back. Through a kind of psychotic twist (a potential hallucination) in the film, after discovering that Renee has been murdered and being convicted for the murder, Fred transforms into an entirely different character, Pete. In the guise of this character, Pete begins to interact with the mobster Mr. Eddy/Dick Laurent and his mistress, Alice, a blond “reincarnation” of Renee. The impossibility of the sexual relationship is then reasserted as Alice informs Pete, “You’ll never have me!”—at which point Pete turns back into Fred.

Žižek reads these two different versions of Patricia Arquette—Renee/Alice—as two different sides of the sublime object, the *objet petit a*. In the transition from the “normal,” everyday couple to the neo-noir universe, the status of the *objet petit a* changes. In the first part, the *objet petit a* as obstacle is inherent—as in the Lacanian phrase, “there is no sexual relationship”—while in the second part, the *objet petit a* as obstacle is externalized into a positive obstacle that prevents and prohibits the sexual act: Mr. Eddy.

### Cynicism as Ideology

What the obstacle ultimately accounts for is the failure of the subject to get at the Thing (*das Ding*) of (impossible) *jouissance*, or enjoyment, or the Kantian Thing-in-itself. The Thing is that which is originally “lost,” the Void of subjectivity, which is filled out by the noumenal fantasy object, the *objet petit a* (which is why the Lacanian formula for fantasy is:  $\$ \diamond a$ ; the “barred subject”—the Void of subjectivity—in its encounter with the fantasy object). The subject is, therefore, capable of participating in Symbolic reality only insofar as it is inaccessible to itself as Thing.<sup>44</sup> The Real is thus to be located in the Symbolic by way of a certain void or gap. The Master-Signifier, on the one hand, masks this void in the Symbolic, while the *objet petit a* fills in the void on the obverse side of the Symbolic, below the surface—in fantasy.

This is why Žižek refers to the *objet petit a* as the “sublime object of ideology.” The “sublime object” helps us to explain certain attachments to the

reigning ideology within the postmodern context of the “postideological era.” It represents the pathological supplement—a kind of “belief before belief”—that operates even beyond the limits of “false-consciousness,” or naïve consciousness. This is what helps Žižek explain, following Peter Sloterdijk, how the dominant ideology that prevails at the end of ideology is cynicism. Cynicism, for Žižek, is best captured by the psychoanalytic formula for “fetishism disavowal” developed by Octave Manoni: “*Je sais bien, mais quand même. . .*” (“I know very well, but nevertheless. . .”). Cynicism, as Sloterdijk puts it, is “enlightened false consciousness.” It is the state of consciousness “that follows after naïve ideologies and their enlightenment.”<sup>45</sup> Cynicism, for Žižek, is the ideology that emerges at a point when (as he puts it in the introduction to *In Defense of Lost Causes*) “big explanations” no longer suffice; when big political projects toward emancipation no longer resonate; when “common sense” tells us “the furthest we can go is enlightened conservative liberalism . . . there are no viable alternatives to capitalism . . . [but] left to itself, the capitalist dynamic threatens to undermine its own foundations. This concerns not only the economic dynamic . . . but, even more, the ideologico-political dynamics. . . . Within this horizon, the answer is neither radical liberalism *à la* Hayek, nor crude conservatism, still less clinging to old welfare-state ideals, but a blend of economic liberalism with a minimally ‘authoritarian’ spirit of community . . . that counteracts the system’s excesses.”<sup>46</sup>

This is the context in which Žižek organizes his rejection of the reactive and protective stance of “post-Theory” and its “counterrevolution” against Theory. The attitude of “post-Theorists” is representative of the kind of cynical reason that predominates today—the attitude that posits the end of “Grand Theory.”

# Class Struggle in Film Studies

The class struggle has not only an economic form and a political form but also a theoretical form. Or, if you prefer: the same class struggle exists and must therefore be fought out by the proletariat in the economic field, in the political field, and in the theoretical field. . . . When it is fought out in the theoretical field, the concentrated class struggle is called philosophy. . . . Philosophy is, in the last instance, class struggle in the field of theory.

—Louis Althusser<sup>1</sup>

## A Case of Displacement

Žižek begins his introduction to *The Fright of Real Tears* (2001) by stating that had the book been written 25 years earlier at the high point of “structuralist Marxism,” at a time when both psychoanalytic and Marxian film theory were booming, then perhaps its subtitle would have been “On Class Struggle in Cinema.” The book’s actual subtitle, however, “Krzysztof Kieslowski between Theory and Post-Theory,” indicates something about the way in which Žižek perceives the ideological displacement of the Marxian criticism of ideology in contemporary film studies, not to mention the entire institutional (the university) apparatus as such.

The debate between Theory and post-Theory can, in this light, be seen as an instance of a political battle for the hegemony of intellectual discourse. The post-Theory rejection of film Theory, I argue, seeks not only to rid the latter from film studies but also to rid the university of the entire project of ideology critique. I begin with a discussion of “class struggle” in order to indicate how I use the concept in this chapter. This is a conception of class struggle that builds on Žižek’s own references to “class struggle”; however, here I develop this concept further in order to argue that the debate between Theory and post-Theory is an instance of class struggle at the level of academic discourse. I then develop a methodology for studying class struggle within the institutional apparatus of

the university using the Lacanian “University discourse.” Again, this is a methodological approach that I borrow from Žižek; however, I add some additional elements that are useful for studying the ideological effects of academic discourse in postmodernity. This leads into my discussion of the debate between Žižek and Bordwell, in which I propose that post-Theory represents the hegemonic position of contemporary film studies, seeking to depoliticize the field.

Here, I interpret the meaning behind the displacement in the subtitle of *Fright of Real Tears* and argue that post-Theory is of the highest form of counterrevolutionary ideology in the era of postmodernity. It is ideology presented as counterideology, somewhat like the “rebel-conservative” in Tim Robbins’s film *Bob Roberts* (1992). This “mocumentary” film follows the election campaign of Bob Roberts, a conservative folk singer running for public office—a kind of “bizzaro” Bob Dylan. Roberts and his campaigners construct an image of the liberal Left as the reigning ideology, thus making it possible for Roberts to present himself as a rebel, out against the mainstream, while at the same time reenforcing the actual reigning ideology. Post-Theory, I claim, engages in precisely the same kind of campaign, presenting Theory as the reigning ideology and post-Theory as the “rebel” fighting the Master. Still, I claim that the two are dialectically counter to each other and that this antagonism speaks to a much broader historical process that neither is capable of articulating on its own. The “Thing” that mediates between the two is the political class struggle.

I should point out, though, that the terms of the debate between Theory and post-Theory center on psychoanalysis in film studies rather than the Marxian critique of ideology. However, I interpret the focus on psychoanalysis as one that speaks more generally to the critique of ideology. As I argue further down, psychoanalysis operates within the Marxian critique of ideology, especially for Žižek, as a version of dialectical materialism appropriate for the era of postmodernity. Therefore, I take the post-Theory critique of psychoanalysis equally as a critique of dialectical materialism.

### **The Missing Term between Theory and Post-Theory**

According to Žižek, post-Theorists acknowledge differences among the various forms of Theory—that is, they generally concede that “the Theory” is not just some monolithic entity encompassing a single trajectory, however uniform its general trajectory; yet they still claim that psychoanalysis represents a tying thread within the entire field of film Theory, and they strike particularly at Lacanian film Theory. The post-Theory project is, ultimately, a negative one, defining itself in its opposition to psychoanalytic

film Theory. This negative project is indicated by Noël Carroll, who claims that cognitive film scholarship (as one instance of post-Theory) “is a stance that has increasingly come to define itself as an alternative to psychoanalysis in film studies.”<sup>2</sup>

Bordwell, however, claims that the objective of post-Theory is not to attack Lacanians, despite the fact that there is still a strong sense in which their project does involve attacking, primarily, psychoanalytic film Theory, if not Lacanians *per se*.<sup>3</sup> The introduction to *Post-Theory* actually states that “if there is an organizing principle to the volume, it is that solid film scholarship can proceed without employing the psychoanalytic frameworks routinely mandated by the cinema studies establishment.”<sup>4</sup> Here, one should note the connection being made between psychoanalysis and the so-called cinema studies establishment.

Žižek, however, is more interested in the link between psychoanalysis and film theory read as Lacanian theory. He reads the post-Theory criticism of psychoanalytic film Theory as a direct attack on Lacanians, but he insists that the theorists whom Bordwell, Carroll, and Prince refer to in *Post-Theory* are not true Lacanians. Apart from himself, Joan Copjec, and some of his Slovenian colleagues such as Mladen Dolar and Alenka Zupančič, Žižek does not believe that there are many film theorists who accept Lacan as their foundational background. Although it is true that Bordwell and Carroll do not directly attack *Lacanian* psychoanalysis, Žižek still feels it necessary to work out a paradox occupying the terrain of psychoanalytic film Theory—that is, the ambiguous relationship between the “reference” to Lacan that has been predominant in psychoanalytic film Theory and the Lacan fully endorsed by Lacanian critics who have engaged in a “self-criticism” of the appropriation of Lacan in film Theory. This includes Lacanian critics, such as himself and Copjec, but also others, such as Jacqueline Rose and Kaja Silverman.

Žižek further approaches the antagonism between Theory and post-Theory as indicative of something that is occurring more generally within the larger field of cultural studies. The underlying question that occupies much of Žižek’s recent criticism of academic discourse—and here he places post-Theory and cultural studies on equal footings—is: Does it “provide an adequate instrument to counteract global capitalism?”<sup>5</sup> That is, does scholarship today provide an adequate degree of reflection on the underlying structures of global antagonism? For Žižek, true scholarship cannot proceed without Theory—Theory is needed in order to make sense of the existing conditions of existence. For him, the “antagonism” between Theory and post-Theory is indicative of a general retreat from meaning and understanding within the *political* context of scholarship. This antagonism, he claims, “is a particular case of the global battle for intellectual hegemony



and visibility between the exponents of postmodern/deconstructionist cultural studies and, on the other hand, cognitivists and popularisers of hard sciences" (*FRT*, 2). But a third term (between cultural studies and cognitivism) is missing. This third, mediating term provides the background against which the post-Theory stance must be taken into consideration. The cultural studies position, in other words, is not enough to counter the force of post-Theory. Žižek's position is that the post-Theory argument displaces the radical-political core of Theory and therefore displaces the "true dimension of the conflict" (*FRT*, 3)—which conflict?

Žižek characterizes the post-Theory perspective as rather reactive and protective. For him, the post-Theory description of Theory is a caricature, designed around simple misunderstandings and misreadings (*FRT*, 5). But these misunderstandings and misreadings come from a particular subjective position within the political class struggle—that of the reigning ideology.

The post-Theory stance against not just psychoanalysis but Theory in general is symptomatic of the postmodern cynicism described by Fredric Jameson as "the end of this or that."<sup>6</sup> As Terry Eagleton argues, this postmodern cynicism is symptomatic of a supposed defeat of radical movements on the Left. This is a stance that is symptomatic of the post-Cold War era, in which notions of alternative political futures and big emancipatory projects have been jettisoned.<sup>7</sup> This is a condition in which it is possible for a counterrevolutionary movement like post-Theory to prosper, leaving only post-Marxist and postmodern cultural studies (both of which are also skeptical of big emancipatory project and totalities) as its main opponents on the Left, and it is important to point out that both post-Theory *and* postmodern cultural studies suffer from this supposed defeat of the Left. Bordwell and Carroll claim that their book is not about the end of "theory." It is, instead, about the end of "Theory," and after the end of Theory, they urge, there is not to be another "Theory" but "theories" and "theorizing."<sup>8</sup> This position is, ironically, grounded on the postmodern rejection of "Grand Narrative," *the* paradigmatic ideological symptom of the class struggle in postmodernity.

Theory and post-Theory, then, speak from two different subjective positions that are historical and emerge as opposing subjective positions within the class struggle. My thesis in what follows is that it is only possible to see the mediating force of the class struggle in the debate between Theory and post-Theory if they are viewed as diametrically opposed but consubstantial in the production of knowledge in academic discourse and in film studies in particular. Put differently, the debate between Theory and post-Theory represents the moment of the historical class struggle at a standstill. My claim, however, is that post-Theory is on the side of the

reigning ideology since it takes its own knowledge as factual and objectively neutral because, from the perspective of post-Theorists, empirical research is the key to understanding the truth of its object. Like Žižek, I claim that Theory, in contrast, acknowledges its subjective position. Empiricism is significant, but it is meaningless—at least politically—without Theory, and the conception of Theory that I present here speaks from the subjective position of revolutionary subjectivity. Theory is the scientific discourse of the revolutionary subject. Post-Theory, in contrast, is the hegemonic discourse of the ruling class.

### On Class Struggle *in* Theory

Before moving on to consider the debate between Žižek and Bordwell in the context of Theory versus post-Theory, I want to comment on the relationship between the Marxian theory of ideology and another “post-” perspective—that is, the perspective of postmodern, poststructural cultural studies. The key difference between the two has to do with a politics centered on class struggle. Although the Marxian and the cultural studies perspectives share certain stakes in their own political projects, the cultural studies perspective lacks political strength due to its resignation toward a politics centered on class struggle.

It should be pointed out that both the Marxian interpretation and the post-Marxist/postmodern/poststructuralist cultural studies interpretation share a perspective that is grounded in a certain kind of historical analysis. Since the late 1960s, both have been lumped under the term “Theory.” The two, however, are distinguished by an important element. The Marxian perspective contends that there is a link between the historical form of domination and exploitation and the historical mode of production, while the cultural studies perspective does not. The Marxian perspective contends that forms of domination and exploitation rise and fall in conjunction with particular historical modes of production. The cultural studies perspective, however, suffers from a kind of postmodern cynicism, the most significant symptom of which is a resignation toward a politics centered on big emancipatory projects, or “Grand Narratives.”

The way in which I interpret “class struggle” depends largely on the Marxian conception of history. It is therefore necessary to make a distinction between the Marxian notion of “class struggle” and the more common, historically static notion of “class” as it has been defined by bourgeois sociology. This is the notion of “class” against which post-Marxists, postmodernists, and poststructuralists react. As Fredric Jameson puts it, “[t]he difference between the Marxian view of structurally dichotomous

classes and the academic sociological picture of independent strata is . . . more than a merely intellectual one. . . . these two approaches to the social classes—the academic and the Marxist—are themselves class-conditioned and reflect the structural perspectives of the two fundamental class positions themselves.”<sup>9</sup>

Part of the problem, I argue, has to do with two different approaches to the class struggle: one that is dialectical and sees class struggle as part of a larger historical process of domination and exploitation (the Marxian perspective), and the other, which is nondialectical and sees “class” as something empirical and static (the academic/sociological perspective). Thus in postmodern society, where space is becoming more important than time, the synchronic is more important than the diachronic, and the horizontal is more important than the vertical—that is, where history is becoming less visible (postmodernism, as Jameson puts it, is a condition of existing in a perpetual present)—class struggle is becoming harder to see. In this situation, “class struggle” is subordinated to more visible forms of social antagonism, such as racism, sexism, homophobia, and so on. In postmodernism, struggles for “national liberation,” for example, often take precedence over class struggle.

The “post-” perspectives contend with a notion of “class struggle” that elevates “class” above all other social antagonisms. However, I claim that these more visible social antagonisms are ideological *effects*, or “symptoms,” of class struggle, viewed from a position where the historical process of the struggle is at a dialectical standstill. These other social antagonisms are the content of contemporary political struggle, while class struggle is what gives them their *ideological form*. Class struggle, in other words, is the “overdetermining” principle of the other social antagonisms. It is not more important than all other social antagonisms; however, all other social antagonisms are effects of the class struggle, which is not simply the struggle of the proletariat for emancipation. Class struggle, I argue, also implies the struggle of the ruling class to forcefully maintain its rule. This is not to suggest that class struggle must take *priority* over all other social antagonisms; rather, it is to suggest that all the various other social antagonisms are always already articulated in conjunction with the historical class struggle, even if the form of the class struggle remains invisible.

To put things somewhat differently, one can speak of racism, sexism, homophobia, and so on as examples of ideology at the level of representation, and it is important to contend with oppressive and exploitative stereotypical representations of race, gender, sexuality, and so on. Cultural studies perspectives are to be commended for highlighting the fallacies at the heart of these representations. However, to make the same case against something called “classism,” I claim, is somewhat absurd (as in the cultural

studies mantra, race-gender-class), as if conditions will be ameliorated for the working class (often the perceived “victim” in instances of “classism”) once these stereotypes are destroyed. Following the same kind of logic, one could equally claim that the upper classes are, themselves, often unfairly stereotyped (e.g., in films such as Denys Arcand’s *Le déclin de l’empire américain* (1986), which portrays the rich upper-middle class as a bunch of liberal-hedonistic adulterers), resulting in another kind of “classism” from below (of course, the same argument can be made in bad taste against anti-white racism, or “heterophobia,” or antimale sexism). I consider “class” as the negative term against which the empirical representations of race, gender, sexuality, and other stereotypes are articulated in ideology. Social class is what divides all the other social antagonisms, *diagonally*. Representations of race, gender, and sexuality, in other words, are instances of ideology that maintain the class division.

This distinction is important when considering the differences between the Marxian, cultural studies, and post-Theory perspectives. There is no difference between the Marxian and cultural studies perspectives at the level of content. Both assert the political need to combat the reigning, oppressive, and exploitative ideology. There is, however, a difference at the level of form. By ignoring the historical principle of the class struggle, cultural studies weakens its position against post-Theory. The cultural studies version of ideology critique, I argue, is one that focuses on the critique of ideology at the level of content, within discourse, and avoids the critique of ideology at the level of form. The latter depends on an understanding of politics grounded in the class struggle.

The notion of class struggle that I defend, though, is one that does not necessarily take the “working class” (not to mention the “industrial working class”) as the ideal candidate for the revolutionary subject. The “working class” did hold this position during the earlier stages of industrial capitalism, not because it held some kind of ontological priority over other social identities, but because it held a strategic position within the capitalist relations of production. If Marx’s critique of “commodity fetishism” teaches us anything, it is that the *commodification* of labor-power is ontologically prior to capital. Labor-power must be commodified before it can function as capital and generate surplus-value by way of unpaid labor time (this how surplus-value originates in exploitation). Class struggle from below therefore implies the coming to consciousness of a class of subject-object “commodities”—the coincidence of subject and object, “Absolute Knowing”—that can transform the society of capital. Marx and most of the Marxian tradition believed that the “industrial working class” held a strategic position to dissolve capitalism because commodified labor-power was at the center of capitalist accumulation. Today, however,

it is no longer possible to hold the traditional “working class” in such a position. Nevertheless, capital still relies on the exploitation of commodified labor-power. The difference today is that not just labor-power but life in general is becoming increasingly commodified and exploited for the purpose of capital accumulation. Not just the “working class” and labor-power but labor in general (including what Hardt and Negri call “immaterial labor”—that is, labor that does not produce material objects, such as affective labor, identified much earlier by feminist social theorists, or intellectual labor) is at the heart of capital accumulation.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, I argue that the exploited class is increasing in size and is not limited to the traditional industrial “working class.” However, there is a dilemma at the level of class consciousness.

It is more often the case today that many people have yet to recognize their own subjective position in the class struggle. The cultural studies perspective, I claim, is “conservative” or reactionary in this sense. By placing class on equal footing with race and gender, it limits its potential to threaten existing conditions of exploitation, and it appears to be seeking only to ameliorate conditions within capitalism rather than partake in the class struggle to end capitalist exploitation. The cultural studies perspective is exemplary of “middle-class ideology,” which, as Marx puts it, fights “against the bourgeoisie in order to save from extinction its existence as the middle class. . . . they try to roll back the wheel of history.”<sup>11</sup> Here, again, I do not want to downplay the importance of cultural studies for politics; however, the disavowal of class struggle runs the risk of depoliticizing cultural studies. Cultural studies, I claim, must therefore make a choice between a politics centered on class struggle and a postpolitics structured by the reigning ideology. The latter, I argue, is a position occupied by the post-Theorists. Class struggle at the level of intellectual discourse involves choosing sides between the existing conditions of domination and exploitation, supported by the counterrevolutionary perspective of post-Theory, and the truly critical perspective of Theory. Nevertheless, it is the ambiguous place of the postmodern, cultural-studies Left that blurs the lines of this division.

It is on this basis that I look at the debate between Theory and post-Theory, which must be seen as an ideological effect of the class struggle at the level of academic thought—that is, it represents a struggle between two different modes of interpretation: one that articulates the position of the subject from below (Theory) and the other, which articulates the position of the subject from above (post-Theory). The antagonism itself, I claim, has arisen against the historical background of postmodern capitalism—the financial stage of capitalism. Just as class struggle, according to Žižek, has to do with the meaning of society as such—that is, the struggle “for

which of the two classes will impose itself as the stand-in for society ‘as such,’ thereby degrading its other into the stand-in for the non-Social (the destruction of, the threat to, society)”—the antagonism between Theory and post-Theory, I argue, has to do with the meaning of film studies “as such.”<sup>12</sup>

### Discursive Formulations in the University

First, a word on method—later I refer to Lacan’s four psychoanalytic discourses from his *Seminar XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis* (1969–1970): the Master’s discourse, the University discourse, the Hysteric’s discourse, and the Analyst’s discourse. I refer, primarily, to the University discourse in order to elaborate further on the antagonism between Theory and post-Theory and the relation between class struggle and ideology at the level of academic discourse.

The elements of each discourse are the Master-Signifier (S<sub>1</sub>); Knowledge, or the Symbolic order (the chain of signification, S<sub>2</sub>); the Subject of the unconscious (§); and the *objet petit a*, the object-cause of desire (*a*).

$$\begin{aligned} S_1 &= \text{Master-Signifier} \\ S_2 &= \text{Knowledge/Symbolic order} \\ \$ &= \text{Subject} \\ a &= \text{object-cause of desire} \end{aligned}$$

Figure 3.1 Lacanian mathemes

Each of these elements is placed on one of four coordinates, depending on the particular discourse. The top-left coordinate indicates the position of the “agent” in the discourse, the top-right indicates who does the “work” (the other), the bottom-right signifies that which is “produced,” and the bottom-left represents the “truth” of the agent.

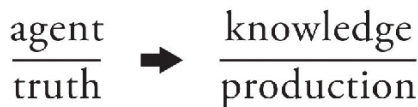


Figure 3.2 Order of elements in Lacanian discourse theory

These coordinates are read clockwise, beginning with the position of the agent, so that, in the Master’s discourse, the Master is the agent (S<sub>1</sub>),

the work is done by those with Knowledge (S2), the worker produces desire (*a*), and the truth of the Master is that he is split internally ( $\$$ ).

$$\frac{S_1}{\$} \quad \longrightarrow \quad \frac{S_2}{a}$$

**Figure 3.3** Master's discourse

Here, we have the standard relationship of domination and exploitation, most commonly recognized by the political relationship established in monarchy. As Marx puts it in a footnote in *Capital Volume One*, “one man is king only because other men stand in relation of subjects to him [S1—S2]. They, on the other hand, imagine that they are subjects because he is king.”<sup>13</sup> Here, we have a relationship of reflection whereby the king thinks he is king because he is treated as such by his subjects—because he is recognized as such by the Symbolic order; however, the subjects only perceive themselves to be subjects because they recognize themselves in relation to the king, who stands in as the “suture” tying together the entire social-Symbolic field. This, of course, is the elementary definition of hegemony, whereby some contingent element within the field of discursive representation comes to stand in to define the meaning of the field itself; this *contingent* element comes to occupy the position of *necessity*, as the ground that makes everything else *possible*. This is the function of the Master-Signifier: it is the signifier “for which all the others represent the subject”—that is, it comes in to *represent* the gap ( $\$$ ), the position of the subject, in the Symbolic order (S2); it is the signifier that masks the Void ( $\$$ ) in the structure, but it is also the signifier (S1) that represents the subject ( $\$$ ) for another signifier (S2).<sup>14</sup> The bottom level of the Master's discourse signifies the Lacanian formula for fantasy ( $\$ \diamond a$ —here, the subject ( $\$$ ) comes into contact with the *objet petit a*, surplus-enjoyment, or desire). The point to be taken is that fantasy effectively supports the relationship in the upper level of the discourse. Fantasy is the support of ideology; it establishes the coordinates in which people imagine their own position of exploitation as valid as well as their own position vis-à-vis “freedom.”

It is the shift from the Master's discourse to the University discourse that signals the transition from the *ancien régime* to modern capitalist “democracy.” Here, Knowledge stands in the position of agency; work is done by (subjects of) desire, producing a hystericized, split subject ( $\$$ ); but the truth of the agency of Knowledge is that it is, in fact, holding a position of power, represented by the Master-Signifier (S1) in the bottom-left coordinate.

$$\frac{S_1}{S_2} \quad \rightarrow \quad \frac{\$}{a}$$

**Figure 3.4** University discourse

For Žižek, the upper portion of the University discourse represents the contemporary formulation of what Michel Foucault refers to as “biopolitics” (S2—*a*), and the University discourse represents “the hegemonic discourse of modernity.”<sup>15</sup> Biopolitics, for Žižek, is indicative of a certain kind of rule in modernity: that of “expert administration.”

In the University discourse, agency is given to Knowledge—scientific discourse—representing the empirical “truth” of “reality.” Everything from biology and quantum physics up to governance is fully realized by empirical data, giving us the “formula” of the Real. This is what “governs” populations in contemporary biopolitics. In “democracy,” we are told and come to expect that we no longer have to worry about authoritarian rule—we are now ruled by science and expert administration. The formula on the top level of the University discourse even gives us Foucault’s conception of power and resistance, or of Law and desire. Here, *power is productive of desire*. We are now, according to the ruling ideology, all subjects of desire, no longer repressed, able to fully realize ourselves. Here, the “truth” of the situation is guaranteed by the assertion of a particular form of Knowledge. But where is ideology here?

With the chain of signification (S2) occupying the position of agency, all we have is a series of free-floating, unchained signifiers—very similar to the way in which Fredric Jameson defines “postmodernism” with reference to Lacan’s formula for psychosis: as a “breakdown of the signifying chain” (borrowing a phrase from Deleuze and Guattari).<sup>16</sup> Using the University discourse as a point of reference, I posit the difference between modernity and postmodernity as one between all the coordinates of the discourse, in the case of modernity, and one that forecloses (indicated by brackets around the Master-Signifier) on the bottom left coordinate, in the case of postmodernity:

$$\frac{S_1}{(S_2)} \quad \rightarrow \quad \frac{\$}{a}$$

**Figure 3.5** Foreclosure of the Master-Signifier in the University discourse



Without a Master-Signifier suturing the field of floating signifiers, all we are left with is a series of free-floating discursive elements without identity. The Master-Signifier is that which “quilts,” all the “protoideological” elements into a unified field of meaning. This is why, as Ernesto Laclau suggests, empty signifiers (the Lacanian Master-Signifier) are important for hegemony.<sup>17</sup>

Having now developed some of the methodological considerations that I take into account in the present analysis, I am now in a position to point out what is missing in the “post-” conception of hegemony and why “class struggle,” as I have been arguing, is the overdetermining principle of all other social antagonisms and struggles.

The postmodern perspective misses the bottom portion of the University discourse (S1—\$). Postmodernism forecloses on the Master-Signifier, producing what is, in (Deleuze and Guattari's) Lacanian terms, a “break-down of the signifying chain.” As Žižek has recently argued, the primary feature of postmodernism is that “it tries to dispense with the agency of the Master-Signifier,” and this, as a result, “leaves as the only agency of ideological interpellation the ‘unnameable’ abyss of *jouissance*: the ultimate injunction that regulates our lives in ‘postmodernity’ is [the superego command] ‘Enjoy!’”<sup>18</sup> The problem here is purely ontological: enjoyment, *jouissance*, is impossible-Real. In order to evade this impossibility, the subject attaches itself to some authority. The subject explains its inability to attain enjoyment by way of the prohibitory Law of the Master. Attachment to the Master is what makes enjoyment perceivably possible, if only it were not prohibited. Thus attachment to the Master helps to evade the impossibility of enjoyment. But now, in our postmodern, postideological era, without traditional authority, we are all supposedly “free” to enjoy—more than that, according to Žižek we are more and more *obligated* to enjoy. We are confronted, then, with the *anxiety* that develops in approaching the Real (the impossibility of enjoyment). That is, until we realize that there is still a relation of domination and exploitation in our liberal-democratic society preventing us from enjoying; there is still a Master who sutures the field of meaning. There are still ideological effects within discourse related to relations of domination and exploitation. The background necessary for understanding this predicament is the global relation of capitalist exploitation. There is, in other words, still a “truth” to contemporary hegemony. This “truth” points to capital as the Real of our time. Capital is the historical background to the class struggle.

Again, going back to the transition from the Master's discourse to the University discourse, it is possible to theorize the transition from feudalism to capitalism in terms of the two different modes of fetishism that define each respective mode of production. In feudalism, relations between people

are fetishized; relations of domination and exploitation are all founded on the fundamental relationship to the “crown.” However, in capitalism, relations between people are not fetishized because here we have “commodity fetishism”; “what we have here are relations between ‘free’ people, each following his or her proper egoistic interest. The predominant and determining form of their interrelations is not domination and servitude but a contract between free people who are equal in the eyes of the law.”<sup>19</sup> This, according to Žižek, is how Marx “invented the symptom.” In the passage from feudalism to capitalism the relations of domination and servitude are not abolished but simply repressed, and this repressed truth “emerges in a symptom which subverts the ideological appearance of equality, freedom, and so on.”<sup>20</sup> This symptom is developed in the hysterical subject (\$)—the subject without substance (*substanzlose Subjektivität*), Marx’s definition of the proletariat—when the relations between people are repressed by relations between things (commodities).

The University discourse helps us to develop an understanding of class struggle at the level of administrative knowledge. As Žižek argues, the University discourse shares certain features with contemporary biopolitics. Post-Theory, then, is the embodiment of the University discourse in film studies. The university, I claim, is one of the most important social-cultural-political institutions responsible for the repression of class struggle.

### Dialectical (Re)Mediations

Žižek claims that, for post-Theorists, the end of Theory is perceived as an end to the burden of “Grand Theory,” or TOEs (Theories of Everything). Post-Theorists, according to Žižek, reproach Theory with two “mutually exclusive” deficiencies: Theory as a new version of TOE and Theory as “a cognitive suspension characteristic of historicist relativism: Theorists no longer ask the basic questions like ‘What is the nature of cinematic perception?’ they simply tend to reduce such questions to the historicist reflection upon the conditions in which certain notions emerged as the result of historically specific power relations” (*FRT*, 14). In other words, post-Theorists reproach film Theory (and cultural studies), on the one hand, with claiming too much (TOE), and the other hand, claiming too little (historicist relativism). Is the way out of this impasse (between post-Theorist middle-level empirical research and Theory/cultural studies historical relativism), Žižek asks, a simple return to old-fashioned TOEs? His answer is that Hegelian dialectics offers a solution, but it is important, Žižek adds, to distinguish what he refers to as “dialectics” from the post-Theory version of dialectics.

According to Žižek, the post-Theory approach to “dialectics” proceeds via a “notion of cognition as the gradual process of our always limited knowledge through the testing of specific hypotheses” (*FRT*, 14). Noël Carroll elaborates on the post-Theory notion of dialectics, claiming that it involves a process of dialogue with opposing theories, what he calls “dialectical comparison.”<sup>21</sup> For Žižek, however, a distinction must be made between “dialectics proper” and the cognitivist version of dialectics; this is a distinction that has to do with the inclusion of the subject’s “position of enunciation.” As he puts it, “the cognitivist speaks from the safe position of the excluded observer who knows the relativity and limitation of all human knowledge including his own” (*FRT*, 15). He adds that “while the problem-solution model of historical research can undoubtedly lead to a lot of precise and enlightening insights, one should nonetheless insist that the procedures of posing problems and finding solutions to them always and by definition occur within a certain ideological context that determines which problems are crucial and which solutions acceptable” (*FRT*, 17).

Žižek’s point here concerns the way in which the problem-solution model of post-Theory dialectics necessarily avoids reflecting on the researcher’s own position of enunciation within the particular relations of ideological contemplation. The post-Theory problem-solution model simply displaces the existing ideological relations of domination and exploitation, something that Theory seeks to extrapolate. Here, I am not necessarily referring to ideology as “false consciousness.” Instead, ideology here must be understood as a *misrecognition* of form—particularly, the form of the discourse on film.

Dialectics, according to Žižek, is simply a process of examining the way in which a particular ideological content is elevated to (hegemonizes) the status of universality. Ideology, in other words, has to do with the way in which a particular subjective position is raised to the status of Truth, or what Foucault calls power-knowledge (this is the position of S2 as the agent in the University discourse). The way to understand this universalizing process is by locating a singular (symptomal/traumatic) element that sticks out, which indicates something about this false universality, what Žižek proposes as “a direct jump from the singular to the universal, bypassing the mid-level of particularity so dear to Post-Theorists” (*FRT*, 25). Here, power-knowledge can be contrasted with the truth of the (excluded) subjective position (\$) that represents the false universality of the existing dominant discourse in the field.

The difference between Theory and post-Theory, I argue, concerns the way in which each approaches its “object.” Post-Theory, on the one hand, approaches the film-object as a neutral thing—that is, as something about which objective knowledge is possible. It, therefore, presents itself as

a neutral, objective science. Theory, on the other hand, accounts for its own subject-position and thus speaks to the film-object as a Thing (*das Ding*). Film Theory and post-Theory ultimately speak to and produce knowledge about the same object, but they do so from two particular positions in the “class struggle”: one that imagines itself to be neutral, object based, outside of relations of domination and exploitation—as a discourse that adds knowledge to our understanding of the film-object (post-Theory); and the other, which is subject based, one that takes sides in the “class struggle,” that adds to our knowledge, *not of the film-object, but to the way in which the film-object can add to our knowledge of the form of ideology in general.*<sup>22</sup>

Post-Theory can, therefore, respond by asking how Theory can be so sure that it has grasped the correct, singular position from which to investigate the film-object. Post-Theorists might ask whether it is not necessary to compare different examples, different approaches, and different conclusions in order to speak more generally to the Truth-Knowledge of film. Should we not, they might ask, make more empirical observations before we come to general conclusions about *film*? The dialectical counterargument, however, according to Žižek, is that “all particular examples of a certain universality do not entertain the same relationship towards their universality: each of them struggles with this universality, displaces it in a specific way, and the great art of dialectical analysis consists in being able to pick out the exceptional singular case which allows us to formulate the universality ‘as such’” (*FRT*, 26).

His point is that all the empirical examples will simply ignore the form of the universality of the reigning discourse on the object. The objective of dialectical analysis is to locate the exception (which varies in different cases) that speaks to the false universality of the form itself. One needs to locate the point of *negativity*—in other words, “tarry” with the negative—in order to understand the way in which each positive, empirical example adds to the universality of the form. This is the procedure, I should point out, which is found both in Marxism and in psychoanalysis.

Marxian theory asserts that the only way to understand something about the “normal” functioning of a system is by observing it during a period of crisis—that is, during a period of negativity. Marx’s analysis of capital is premised on interpreting crises in capital and the way in which capitalists organize to minimize the effects of crisis. A crisis in capital equals a broader ideological crisis; therefore, the need to remedy economic crises is equally the need to remedy an ideological crisis. For Marx, it is the event of crisis that speaks to the universal form of capital. Freud, likewise, was able to interpret the form of the “paternal Law” (the paternal metaphor, “Name-of-the-Father”) by observing it in the beginnings of the historical breakdown of “Oedipal” social organization.

Locating exceptions in periods of crisis thus aids in locating the “founding gesture of universality” (*FRT*, 27), and it is the exception that coincides with the universal. In order to understand Žižek’s analyses of film examples one needs to understand the dialectical method of analysis with which he is engaged. The examples to which he refers stand out as exceptions that speak to the universal form, *not of film, but of ideology*. Žižek is concerned, first and foremost, with the form of ideology and subjectivity, and therefore his analyses of films are not object based; they are not based on understanding something about the film-Thing; they are, rather, subject based and refer to the form of films, to the form of cinema and spectatorship, in order to understand something about the form of ideology and subjectivity. This, I claim, is something that gets completely lost in Bordwell’s reading of Žižek.

### David Bordwell: Say Anything

Žižek’s critique of post-Theory in *The Fright of Real Tears* has not gone unnoticed by its key figures. Bordwell responds to Žižek in two places: at the end of his book *Figures Traced in Light* (2004) and in an article on his “website on cinema,” “Slavoj Žižek: Say Anything” (2005).<sup>23</sup> I will deal with his response in the “Say Anything” article before discussing his other critique of Žižek in *Figures* because it is more specifically focused on the problem of “dialectics.”

Bordwell begins his response by referring to what he calls Žižek’s “missed chances.” In the “Say Anything” article, Bordwell contends that many of Žižek’s criticisms against post-Theory do not address the actual arguments made by himself, Carroll, and Prince against psychoanalysis or film Theory. He notes that Žižek could have pointed out elements of “mischaracterization” in the post-Theory understanding of psychoanalysis, Freud, and Lacan. This, for Bordwell, would have been a better way to reject the claims of post-Theory. Žižek, he argues, “could attack my [Bordwell’s] characterization of Freud, Lacan, and the rest. . . . and above all my outline of the two trends [subject-position theory and culturalism].” But, of course, Žižek does not do this—apparently a source of frustration for Bordwell, who states that “[Žižek] feels no obligation to engage with my [Bordwell’s] claims.” This is, perhaps, due to the fact that the kind of “dialectical” program to which Bordwell is committed differs greatly from the kind elaborated by Žižek in his voluminous writings. What is striking, and apparently aggravating for Bordwell, is that Žižek does not engage him on Bordwell’s own terms.

Bordwell wants Žižek to criticize Bordwell’s own characterization of Freud and Lacan. He rejects Žižek’s criticism because it does not find flaws

in Bordwell's own interpretation of these two figures. He also rejects Žižek's criticism because it does not address anything to do with "subject-position theory" or "culturalism." In other words, he wants Žižek to engage in the post-Theory version of dialectics: of compare and contrast; of defending theories "through a dialogue with opposing theories, by demonstrating that they succeed where alternative theories fail" (*FRT*, 15). Consider that Bordwell proceeds in his rejection of Žižek's critique by claiming that he refuses to "discuss" or engage in "conversation" or "debate" with post-Theory:

[I]n Žižek's hands, confirming Carroll's objections once more, Lacanian theory functions as a set of axioms or dogmas rather than working ideas to be subjected to critical discussion. . . .

*Post-Theory* argues against the very idea of Theory and supports the idea of *theories* and *theorizing*. . . . *Theories* operate at many levels of generality and tackle many different questions. *Theorizing* is a process of proposing, refining, correcting, and perhaps rejecting answers, in the context of a multidisciplinary conversation. . . .

[D]ialectics is an alternative to the method Žižek embraces, that of deriving a film theory from axioms or first principles. Instead, dialectical exchange is a form of debate. . . .

Žižek eliminates the communal and comparative dimensions of inquiry Carroll invokes. . . .

Žižek fails to grasp the intersubjective dimension of theorizing because he doesn't believe in theory as a conversation within a community, a process of question and answer and rebuttal.

In all these instances, Bordwell advances a conception of dialectics that is significantly different from that of Žižek, and he proceeds by criticizing not only psychoanalysis and not only Theory but Hegel as well: "To assume that Hegel possesses the only valid concept of the dialectical is something of an undergraduate howler."

In the same manner in which Bordwell rejects Žižek's criticism of post-Theory—in the same way that it frustrates him that Žižek does not engage in a "dialogue" with the post-Theory interpretation of Freud and Lacan—Bordwell is also frustrated by the fact that, in *The Fear of Real Tears*, Žižek "nowhere defends Hegel's idea of dialectic against the hosts of objections that have been raised by over a century of critics; nor does he defend his somewhat idiosyncratic version of Hegel." Here, we should note, contra Bordwell, that Žižek has, in fact, been defending his reading of Hegel for more than twenty years.<sup>24</sup> His entire intellectual project has been involved in rethinking Hegel against his critics, via Lacan.

Žižek states in the introduction to *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989) that, against Hegel's critics, "far from being a story of its progressive

overcoming, dialectics is for Hegel a systematic notation of the failure of all such attempts—'absolute knowledge' denotes a subjective position which finally accepts 'contradiction' as an internal condition of every identity."<sup>25</sup> In his work, he has continued to argue for Hegel against well-known theorists and philosophers, such as Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, and more recently theorists such as Ernesto Laclau and Judith Butler (concerning the latter, Žižek mostly disputes her mode of interpreting Hegel). And as many acquainted with Žižek's work know by now, he is far more Hegelian than Lacanian. His "project" involves reactualizing Hegelian dialectics "by giving it a new reading on the basis of Lacanian psychoanalysis." Žižek argues that the "current image of Hegel as an 'idealist-monist' is totally misleading: what we find in Hegel is the strongest affirmation yet of difference and contingency—'absolute knowledge' itself is nothing but a name for the acknowledgement of a certain radical loss."<sup>26</sup> It is his new reading of Hegelian dialectics that has allowed him more recently to rethink the contours of a Marxian dialectical materialism (particularly in *The Parallax View* [2006]), thus linking him to figures such as Georg Lukács and, more recently, Fredric Jameson, rather than figures like Louis Althusser.

Bordwell, finally, rejects the way in which Žižek appeals to "enunciation theory" since, according to Bordwell, this is a theory that "relativizes" human knowledge. Oddly enough, both Bordwell and Žižek continue to criticize the relativist argument, particularly in cultural studies. However, Bordwell's rejection of Žižek's appeal to (what he calls) "enunciation theory" goes to the heart of Žižek's dialectical assessment of the "class struggle" in film studies. When Žižek asserts that "[w]hat separates dialectics proper from its cognitivist version is the way in which the subject's position of enunciation is included, inscribed, into the process," he is claiming that Theory takes into consideration its own position within the form of the debate. A theorist knows that he or she does not speak from a position of objective, absolute Truth; he or she recognizes his or her own position within the Symbolic. Post-Theorists like Bordwell, however, speak "from the safe position of the excluded observer" (*FRT*, 15). Žižek is not being relativistic; he is claiming that there are, essentially, two different positions from which one can speak in the class struggle. One can speak either from the position of the ruling class or from the subjective position of the ruled. One can speak from the position of the ruling class overtly or covertly or even through misrecognition. Bordwell misrecognizes his own position here (what used to be called "false consciousness"). He essentially misses the form of the debate particularly in his frustration that Žižek does not challenge him at the level of content, arguing that Žižek finds no faults in Bordwell's descriptions of Freud and Lacan.

In speaking from the subjective position of the ruled, one fully recognizes one's place within the relations of domination and exploitation and the form that structures the content of the argument. Bordwell completely rejects Žižek's argument on the basis that he does not engage him on his own terms and therefore demonstrates the extent to which he misses the core of Žižek's argument. More than that, Bordwell's assessment of the debate is of the highest form of ideological displacement—he takes factual elements within Žižek's argument and manipulates them to fit the terms of his own rejection of Theory. It is almost as if Bordwell and Žižek are each speaking to two completely different topics. But this is, precisely, the point!

Both Theorists and post-Theorists refer to the same object: the film-Thing. One can assert that—along the lines of the Lacanian “there is no sexual relationship” or the Marxian “there is no class relationship”—in film studies, there is no Theoretical relationship. Both sides refer to the same object; one side that knows itself to be partial, to be engaged in a partial project (the political project of the proletariat), and the other side, which takes itself as the “neutral” observer that has Knowledge (the position of agency in the University discourse, below) about the object itself. This division between Theory and post-Theory comes across most potently in Bordwell's critique of Žižek in *Figures Traced in Light*.

### Comprehensibility and the “End of Narrative”

In *Figures Traced in Light*, Bordwell argues that cross-cultural or transcultural norms exist in films at the level of stylistic devices and techniques. According to him, there is a “craft tradition” that “binds filmmakers across cultures,” and “helps their films to cross boundaries.”<sup>27</sup> Yet despite the existence of this “craft tradition,” Bordwell claims that there are still some media and film theorists who resist the idea of “transcultural norms,” among whom he includes Žižek.

Bordwell notes the distinction that Žižek makes between “trans-cultural universal features” and features that are specific and particular to people, cultures, and historical periods. What bothers Bordwell about Žižek's distinction between the two is that, from Bordwell's perspective, they appear to be in agreement, yet Žižek continues to criticize Bordwell's approach (again, a misrecognition of form). Here Bordwell confuses Žižek's distinction between the universal (style/form) and the particular (content). The way Bordwell perceives the distinction is tantamount to the central antagonism between the two. From Bordwell's perspective, Žižek seems to be suggesting that “the idea that film style fulfills storytelling needs is somewhat ethnocentric” (*FTL*: 261). This is not altogether false but requires some



elaboration since Bordwell's critique leaves out the ideological implications of Žižek's argument.

Bordwell cites Žižek from *The Fright of Real Tears*, posing the question, "[I]s not modern (post-Renaissance) Western culture characterized by its own specific notion of narrative (which is why, say Chinese or Japanese novels often strike us Western readers as 'dull' and 'confused')?" (*FRT*, 16; *FTL*, 261). Bordwell takes issue, on the one hand, with Žižek's homogenizing notion of "modern" Western culture, which, on the other hand, seems to negate Žižek's own criticism of Bordwell's "monolithic" notion of transcultural norms. For Bordwell, it seems as though Žižek is contradicting himself. What is at issue here are two different notions of narrative: one that conceives narrative in terms of style and comprehension (Bordwell) and the other that examines narrative in terms of cultural/subjective interpretation (Žižek).

Bordwell defends his conception of narrative by stating that "[v]irtually all narratives seem to. . . share some components, such as agents and temporal sequence" (*FTL*: 261). Here, form and content get reversed. While Bordwell is interested in film and comprehension at the level of form/style, he fails to recognize the connection between the universality of form and the particularity of content. Bordwell takes Žižek's reference to Asian literature—that they appear "dull" and "confused"—to mean something along the lines of comprehension and style: recognizing agents, temporal sequences, and so on. For Bordwell, "the issue is comprehensibility, and a dull story may [still] be intelligible" (*FTL*: 261). Thus, for him, the issue regarding transcultural norms has to do with style—the manner in which the story itself is conveyed. He adds that often cultural contexts may be required; however, this should not necessarily "impede comprehension."

Bordwell goes on to note Žižek's reference to the supposed "crisis of narrative." Žižek asks whether there is such a global notion of "comprehension." Here, it may strike Bordwell to consider that, for Žižek, there is something emerging along the lines of a global notion of comprehension, but this is at the heart of—what he refers to as—the "crisis of narrative." In the passage cited by Bordwell, Žižek asserts that such a homogenizing notion of neutral, global comprehension is the cause of the crisis of narrative in the sense that films are starting to return to early "cinema of attractions": "[B]ig blockbusters have to rely more and more on the wild rhythm of spectacular effects, and the only narrative which seems still to be able to sustain the viewer's interest is, significantly, that of the conspiracy theory" (*FRT*, 16–17; *FTL*, 262). Žižek goes on to cite James Cameron's *Titanic* (1997) as an example of a film that, because of the homogenizing nature of global comprehension, requires the added element of the disaster in order to make the story somewhat interesting; otherwise, without the disaster,

the film would just end up being another boring story about an impossible romance. His point is that there definitely has been a push in narrative cinema toward more cross-cultural homogenization in style, but it is this very push that has caused a crisis in narrative, not in terms of comprehensibility but in terms of pleasure and enjoyment. There are fewer and fewer good films, according to Žižek, and the only way to resuscitate enjoyment in cinema is through the added element of spectacle.<sup>28</sup>

Bordwell, however, thinks that Žižek is somehow suggesting that a crisis in narrative means a crisis in comprehension and intelligibility—a cognitivist assumption that could not be further from the truth. Žižek's point is that narrative—in terms of great stories with culturally specific nuances—are suffering at the hands of a global homogenizing tendency, with capitalism and the pursuit of profit in the background.

Žižek accepts techniques such as depth of field and crosscutting as universal and cross-cultural features of cinema in terms of style, which, for Bordwell, demonstrates that at this level the two are in agreement. Part of the problem stems from Bordwell's misguided interpretation of Žižek, thinking that, like some poststructuralist thinkers, he is skeptical about universals. For Bordwell, then, on the issue of technique, it seems as though Žižek is in agreement with him, even when Žižek says that he is not (*FTL*: 299, n. 59). But, evidently, in terms of style and technique, *there is no dispute*. Both certainly do hold to universal notions of film style and technique and to some universal conception of comprehension. The difference is that, for Žižek, things do not simply end there. Bordwell does not consider the cultural-historical level of *meaning*. Meaning is an important aspect of pleasure.

For Žižek, content is still important at the level of the particular—something of which speaks to the *form* of the universal but also indicates something about the form of ideology, one of Žižek's primary concerns. This is something that Bordwell completely misses in his critique of Žižek, and in doing so, Bordwell displaces the central concern of Theory. But this, I claim, is precisely how ideology functions. Bordwell addresses not the central issues in Žižek's arguments but instead displaces these onto less relevant matters—a “red herring” if ever there was one! No one is disputing the comprehensibility of films. What is at issue is the form taken by ideology within the content of films and the activation of desire producing pleasure (or surplus-enjoyment) for the spectator. This is the historical dimension that Bordwell misses. As I argue in Chapter 4, it is the historical form of the narrative that indicates something about the ideological dimension of the film text.

Regarding the notion of cross-cultural interpretation—as opposed to comprehension—Žižek has noted some cultural distinctions in the

Japanese and Chinese translations of the conclusions of Victor Fleming's *Gone with the Wind* (1939) and *Casablanca* (1942). These examples demonstrate how elements of content add to the displacement of form. In the Japanese translation of *Gone with the Wind*, Clark Gable's "Frankly my dear, I don't give a damn!" is translated as "I fear, my darling, that there is a slight misunderstanding between the two of us," which Žižek claims is a "bow to proverbial Japanese courtesy and etiquette." Likewise, in the Chinese translation of *Casablanca* (in the People's Republic of China), Humphrey Bogart's "This is the beginning of a beautiful friendship!" is translated into "The two of us will now constitute a new cell of anti-fascist struggle!" which Žižek argues asserts the priority of struggle against the enemy over personal relations.<sup>29</sup>

Another example is given of the censored version of William Wyler's *Ben-Hur* (1959) in Communist ex-Yugoslavia. In order to eliminate the Christian content from the film (a difficult task to be sure), the censor cut out of the first two thirds of the film all the scattered references to Christ as well as the entire final third of the film, so that it ends following the chariot race when Ben-Hur defeats Massala, who then informs Ben-Hur that his mother and sister, whom he believed were dead, are in fact alive and confined to a leper colony. Ben-Hur then "returns to the race ground, now silent and empty, and confronts the worthlessness of his triumph—the end of the film."<sup>30</sup> Here, Žižek contends, the censor's work is "breath-taking": "although undoubtedly he had not the slightest notion of the tragic existentialist vision, he made out of the rather insipid Christian propaganda piece an existential drama about the ultimate nullity of our accomplishments, about how in the hour of our greatest triumph we are utterly alone."<sup>31</sup> These particular examples of cross-cultural translation speak to the universal form of ideology itself—that is, to the way in which the form taken by ideology ultimately works toward some resolution between power and desire, which is itself cultural and historical. This, I argue, is the dimension missed by Bordwell and other post-Theorists, and it is here, in this lack of historical-cultural interpretation, that the Kantian subjectivism of post-Theory is to be located. This is also where the "class struggle" may be located in film studies, between Theory and post-Theory.

### The Hegemony of "Science" and Post-Theory

Based on the preceding arguments, my claim is that the shift from direct authoritarian rule to the rule of Knowledge, discourse, and science is the perfect context in which to understand the division between Theory and post-Theory in film studies. Or, more precisely, the two different

interpretations of the University discourse—one that effectively misses the role of the Master-Signifier versus the one that continues to indicate its central importance—indicate where the two different perspectives in film studies fall politically.

Today, Žižek argues, there is a strong divide between that which counts as knowledge and that which counts as “truth.” According to Žižek, science has, for Lacan, the status of “knowledge in the Real.” One could equally claim that the same holds for Marx: *Das Kapital* was Marx’s scientific investigation into the relations of domination and exploitation within capitalism; Marx sought to locate the Real of class struggle within the processes of capital. However, there is a dimension of human reality that science has difficulty in explaining—namely, the human social bond, which according to Žižek is based on a certain kind of “faith.” Faith, or trust, adds a subjective dimension to the engagement with knowledge. For example, there is a performative dimension of faith/trust in language, whereby one takes for granted the fact that the “ingredients” of meaning in one’s speech are received in the intended fashion by one’s interlocutor. Scientific discourse, however, reduces this performative dimension to an element of registration in knowledge.

Žižek provides the example of “paternal authority.” According to him, paternal authority is based purely on faith, “on trust as to the identity of the father: we have fathers (as symbolic functions, as the Name-of-the-Father, the paternal metaphor), because we do not directly *know* who our father is, we have to take him *at his word* and *trust* him.” Žižek argues that “the moment I know with scientific certainty who my father is, fatherhood ceases to be a function which grounds social-symbolic Trust.”<sup>32</sup> With DNA testing, the symbolic Trust in the paternal metaphor becomes unnecessary. For Žižek, then, the hegemony of scientific discourse “suspends the entire network of symbolic tradition that sustains the subject’s identifications.” In political terms, this signals the shift “from power grounded in the traditional symbolic authority to biopolitics.”<sup>33</sup> Here, I want to emphasize that the point is definitely not to mourn the loss of the performative in the Symbolic authority of the father but rather to indicate a certain shift in the way authority functions.

For Žižek, this transition also indicates the postmodern end of “Grand Narratives” or “big explanations”; there are now a multitude of local discourses with a means of defining knowledge in relative terms. This is where we begin to see the flourishing of various different discourses on this or that object of knowledge, the so-called disciplinarity of knowledge. Against this background, we have witnessed over the last three decades something of an intellectual struggle for hegemony, particularly between proponents of Theory and Theory’s critics, the “post-Theorists.”

Contemporary post-Theorists are those “public intellectuals” who seek to bring scientific knowledge back into the popular realm. Topics such as evolutionary theory, quantum physics and cosmology, and cognitivism, for example, are represented popularly by figures such as Richard Dawkins, Stephen Hawking, and Daniel Dennett. In film studies, David Bordwell has taken up the task of bringing scientific, empirical research to bear on films and spectatorship. However, as Žižek points out, the typical response of contemporary cultural studies against the post-Theory figures of the public intellectual is the suggestion that its loss is the result of the transition from the predominance of the (usually white, male) modernist intellectual, which in postmodernity “has been replaced by a proliferation of theoreticians who operate in a different mode . . . and do in fact address issues which concern the wider public.”<sup>34</sup>

Žižek claims that this (typical) cultural studies response against post-Theory is too easily produced; however, there is a degree of truth in it. The themes addressed by cultural studies are central to contemporary ideologico-political debates around issues of Power and domination, while proponents of post-Theory busy themselves with clarifying scientific “enigmas,” passing over silently “the burning questions which actually occupy center stage in current politico-ideological debates.”<sup>35</sup> Although Žižek finds it necessary to address science as “knowledge in the Real” (i.e., Marxism) and therefore criticizes some of the reigning practices in cultural studies, particularly a certain variety of historical relativism, he considers this silent passing over of the tough ideological questions by post-Theorists to be somewhat of a spontaneous ideological attachment to the reigning political power. As he puts it, “[m]uch more worrying than the ‘excesses’ of Cultural Studies [i.e., historical relativism] are [what he refers to as] the New Age obscurantist appropriations of today’s ‘hard’ sciences which, in order to legitimize their position, invoke the authority of science itself.”<sup>36</sup>

What Žižek refers to as the “historical relativism” of cultural studies is a certain kind of practice, found predominantly in American (as opposed to British) cultural studies, informed by a “proto-Nietzschean notion that knowledge is not only embedded in but also generated by a complex set of discursive strategies of power (re)production,” such as the Foucauldian relationship of power-knowledge.<sup>37</sup> *Historicism* evades the encounter with the Real, as the “absent cause” (to use an Althusserian-Spinozan term) of the Symbolic, whether objective *or* subjective, whereas *historicity* proper understands the Symbolic writing of history as so many failed attempts to grasp the meaning of the Real (in political terms, I am referring to the relations of domination and exploitation, the “class struggle” as the subject of history). This is where Lacan differs from the poststructuralist notion of power-knowledge since, for him, *there is truth in the Real*—modern science,

for him, “*touches on the Real* in a way that is totally absent from premodern discourses.” For Žižek, one must not play the relativist “game” of validating every and all forms of knowledge as just so many different particular, local *truths* (plural).<sup>38</sup> In this sense, post-Theory does propose a relevant critique against cultural studies, returning to big ontological questions; however, by imagining science as *absolute* Truth, without taking into account the position of enunciation of the speaker (the value of which *is* found in cultural studies), post-Theory loses the philosophico-transcendental, *hermeneutic* dimension of reflection. While modern science brings us closer to understanding “reality” as it actually is, the job of a hermeneutic philosopher, according to Žižek, is

to insist that, with the passage from the premodern mythical universe to the universe of modern science, *the very notion of what “reality” (or “actually to exist”) means, of what “counts” as reality, has also changed*, so that we cannot simply presuppose a neutral external measure which allows us to judge that, with modern science, we come closer to the “same” reality as that which premodern mythology was dealing—as Hegel would have put it, with the passage from the premodern mythical universe to the modern scientific universe, the measure, the standard which we implicitly use or apply in order to measure how “real” what we are dealing with is, has itself undergone a fundamental change.<sup>39</sup>

The question for a hermeneutic philosopher is not “Is this real?” or “Does this exist?” It is rather “*With which conception of ‘reality’ do I perceive this as real?*” This is the ideological question regarding science: how does one react to it—to the knowledge that is produced through scientific research?

How does science transform our *understanding* of “reality?” How, in other words, does a transformation in the object result in an equal transformation in the subject? Put differently, a particular understanding of the object (whether we are talking about nature or culture) will have a particular subjective reaction depending on the subject’s own presupposed position with regards to the judgment of “what really exists.” This, I claim, is where Theory (*and* cultural studies) helps us to speak to the truth of the scientific discourse. Post-Theorists, according to Žižek, emphasize that “politically, they are not against the Left—their aim is to liberate the Left from the irrationalist-elitist, and so on, postmodern fake; nevertheless, they accept the distinction between neutral theoretical (scientific) insight and the possible ideologico-political bias of its author.” Theory, in contrast, involves “the properly dialectical paradox of a Truth that relies on an engaged subjective position.” Žižek argues that the ideological dimension

of the standard “professionalism” of the academic institution—the post-Theory penchant for solid, positivist, empirical research—is only visible from the position of Theory.<sup>40</sup> Truth, Žižek points out, “is, by definition, one-sided.”<sup>41</sup> Truth involves the gesture of choosing sides. In other words, in the division between Theory and post-Theory, we do not have two sciences; rather, we have one science “split from within—that is to say, caught in the battle for hegemony.”<sup>42</sup> In this way, the debate between Theory and post-Theory displaces, in terms of academic and intellectual criticism, the terms of the “class struggle.” While post-Theory presents itself as “neutral,” impartial knowledge, Theory reminds us that *there is no neutrality*; every Truth is a one-sided, subjective interpretation. Every shift in our understanding of the object has an equal transformation in our own subjective conception of Self.

The question to ask, regarding the divide between Theory/post-Theory in terms of the “class struggle” is not, Žižek suggests, “how do they explicitly *relate to* power, but how are they themselves *situated within* the predominant power relations?”<sup>43</sup> The very resistance to Theory today suggests that it remains as an excess in existing academia; post-Theory, on the other hand, attempts to standardize the function of academic knowledge through the practice of “professionalism,” rationalism, empiricism, “problem-solving,” and so on, in order to “get rid of this intruder”—Theory.

The two most exemplary cases of the kind of “nonacademic knowledge” found in Theory detested by post-Theorists, according to Žižek, are Marxism and psychoanalysis. Both, of course, are active in a particular, engaged notion of Truth: not some neutral truth, but “the truth about the position from which one speaks.”<sup>44</sup> In a sense, Žižek argues, both Marxism and psychoanalysis are theories about the resistance to themselves—just as Marxism “interprets resistance against its insights as the ‘result of the class struggle in theory,’” psychoanalysis “interprets resistance against itself as the result of the very unconscious processes that are its topic.”<sup>45</sup> In opposition to both, post-Theory presents itself as the epitome of the University discourse, as *the very model* of “neutral,” intellectual “freedom.” *The ideological gesture par excellence!*

In the preceding, I have argued that the debate between Theory and post-Theory in film studies must be seen as an example of class struggle at the level of ideology within intellectual discourse. In solidarity with Žižek’s critique of Bordwell, Carroll, and the entire post-Theory project, I argue that the latter is the highest form of ideological displacement of the ruling ideology. By presenting itself as “counterideology,” post-Theory is presented as occupying a minority position. With reference to Žižek’s interpretation of the Lacanian University discourse, I argue, on the contrary, that post-Theory is representative of the reigning ideology.

Also, insofar as the postmodern cultural studies Left continues its cynical resignation toward “Grand Narratives” it poses no threat to the reigning ideology. Instead, it poses itself as the key target of post-Theory criticism. While, politically, postmodern cultural studies may stand in solidarity with the Marxian critique of capitalism, its rejection of the class struggle and the dialectical conception of history, I claim, leaves it susceptible to ideological diffusion. Post-Theory and postmodern cultural studies are thus two sides of the same coin, as Žižek might put it. They are the front and back of the same ideological resignation toward a politics centered on class struggle. For both, there is no class struggle in the Marxian sense. The repoliticization of film studies is dependent on both the resurgence of Theory and the questioning of the place of class struggle in the University discourse.



## Interlude

# The Pervert and the Analyst

### Psychoanalysis: Between Cinema and Ideology

Which position, then, makes it possible to subtract from the University discourse and enter the field of subversion? How, in other words, to repoliticize film studies? *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema* (2006) offers a step in this direction. In the film, it is apparent that Žižek does not interpret cinema directly. Instead he performs a *psychoanalytic interpretation of ideology through the cinema*. While it appears as though he is using film examples to explain concepts in psychoanalysis, I argue that *The Pervert's Guide* is a perfect example of how Žižek refers to the cinema in order to interpret ideology. In this film, Žižek performs what I call a “film theory of ideology.” Although he speaks in the language of psychoanalysis, his true motivation is the critique of ideology and not simply an exegetic interpretation of his method of analysis.

For Žižek, films in general are worth analyzing because of their proximity to both Symbolic reality *and* the underlying level of fantasy. Film, as such, is a fake—a fiction. However, in its very form as fiction, in appearance, it becomes more real than (Symbolic) “reality” itself. While it is generally the case that films are approached as fictions, as mere appearances, they manage to approach the Real in their honesty, *as* fictions, while Symbolic reality—the fiction that structures our everyday, effective reality—is misrecognized as the real thing. In this way, there is more Truth in the appearance, in the form of cinematic fiction—we admit it as such, as a fiction, whereas we tend to avoid recognizing Symbolic reality itself as mere fiction. This is what we can learn from cinema: how to understand the appearances that structure our everyday—fake—Symbolic reality. This, I claim, is precisely what Žižek argues in *The Pervert's Guide*.

If there is a central theme to the film, it is that which has to do with, in psychoanalytic terms, the relationship between desire and drive and the “screen” of fantasy. The film opens with Žižek posing the question,

how do we know what we desire? He argues, in terms of psychoanalysis, that we have to be *taught* to desire and that cinema “teaches” us how to desire. In order to make this point, he refers to the choice in *The Matrix* (1999) between illusion and reality.<sup>1</sup> In *The Matrix*, Morpheus presents Neo with the option of remaining in the Matrix “reality” (the virtual world of illusions-fictions) or subtracting himself from the illusion and entering into the real reality. The choice between illusion and reality in *The Matrix* is equal to the choice between illusion and reality in the cinema—this choice is also inherent to the relationship between ideology (Symbolic “reality”) and the Real. But, as Žižek indicates, the choice is not as simple as that between illusion and reality. The question is, rather, how is reality constituted by way of illusion? Herein lies the interest in cinema.

Films, like the Symbolic order, are fictions that effectively structure “reality”—the Symbolic order—that is, the subject’s relationship to reality. Or, more precisely, the Symbolic order (S2) announces the subject’s “place” in reality. The subject represents the Void, or gap (\$), in the Symbolic. The subject’s place is given form by the signifier (the Master-Signifier, S1) that *represents* the subject’s place in the Symbolic. This signifier is a fiction—the choice of illusion—that gives structure to the entire field of signification. This is what defines the form of the Symbolic for the subject. The cinematic fiction, similarly, structures “reality” by way of its form—by way of the cynical reaction toward it; it is not meant to be taken seriously—it structures reality by way of the spectator’s cynical “distanciation” toward it, whereas the Symbolic order is a fiction that *is* meant to be taken seriously.

In the first part of the *Pervert’s Guide*, Žižek deals with the form of horror films. In dealing with horror films, Žižek asks, what does the “horror element” *add* to the story? In other words, what is accomplished by telling the story through the form of the horror genre—by adding the horror obstacle? In Hitchcock’s *The Birds* (1963), for example, the birds enter and thus disturb the Symbolic, thereby disintegrating “reality.” For Žižek, this intrusion has the structure of the Lacanian *objet petit a*, as drive, invading the space of the Symbolic. The entire thrust of the story deals with finding a way to domesticate the problem, to domesticate the drive; in other words, to get rid of the birds so that Symbolic reality can be reconstituted.

The first part of the “guide” examines films that deal, in some way, with the intrusion of the Real in the Symbolic, by way of drive. Apart from *The Birds*, Žižek refers to the “voice” in William Friedkin’s *The Exorcist* (1973) (the possession of the young girl is expressed through the strange voice that emits from her body), the “voice” in Fritz Lang’s *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* (1933) (the secret, invisible voice, “floating” in inner space, that controls things behind the scenes), and the “voice” in Charlie Chaplin’s

*The Great Dictator* (1940) (which marks the distinction between Hinkle/Hitler and the Jewish barber). Žižek also refers to the music in *The Great Dictator*—the same music is played in two instances: when Hinkle is playing with the balloon globe and when the barber addresses the crowd in the guise of Hinkle. Music, for Žižek, can be expressive of drive since, with music, one can never be sure of its ethical implications; it is potentially always a threat. He compares this use of music to the “free floating” singing in one particular scene in Lynch’s *Mulholland Drive* (2001), where it appears that opera singing is emanating from a singer on stage; however, after the singer falls ill to the ground, the singing continues. The singing here is for Žižek an example of drive as a “partial object,” or an organ without body (reversing the Deleuzian “body without organs”).

There is, according to Žižek, another sense in which desire and drive are dealt with in cinema: as the conflict between “myself” and “my” double. Here, *objet petit a* and the Master-Signifier are rendered as two opposed versions of the subject, where ideal ego and Ego-ideal come into conflict. This is portrayed, for example, in David Fincher’s *Fight Club* (1999), where the central character is confronted with himself in two guises: as the Symbolic, “castrated,” ordinary Edward Norton (the way the character experiences himself in the guise of his Ego-ideal) and as the Imaginary, pulsating, obscene double Brad Pitt (the way in which he experiences himself in the guise of the ideal ego). In one particular scene in the film, the two modes become identical. This occurs during the scene when Norton beats himself up in his boss’s office. This scene, according to Žižek, exemplifies “a politics of drive,” or a fidelity to the Real. In order to get rid of that which is in “myself”—the pathological supplement that attaches “me” to the Symbolic, the ideal ego, or the unconscious fantasy—the subject must assume the agency of drive (as opposed to desire). This agency is that of the subject stripped of its support in either the obscene supplemental fantasy or the Symbolic. Norton’s fist in this scene functions as a “partial object” of drive, similar to the fist in Stanley Kubrick’s *Dr. Strangelove, or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964). The only (ethical) way to get rid of the partial object is to *become* this partial object—that is, for the subject to assume the agency of this partial object of drive as its own. Drive represents this irrational element invading the space of the Symbolic, and the only way to domesticate it is by reconstituting the fantasy that shields the subject from the irrationality of the drive.

Fantasy is, in the psychoanalytic sense, the screen between desire and drive, or that which separates the subject from these partial objects of blind drives, positioning it within the perspective frame of desire. It transforms the “disgusting,” irrational object of drive into an intruding (or protruding) object of desire. Desire, as Žižek puts it, is the “wound of reality.”

It inscribes itself into reality by distorting it and is an essential component of ideology (the “pure form” of ideology); cinema further functions as ideology by arousing desire (not, as Oudart, for example, claims by denying desire and pleasure). “The art of cinema,” as Žižek puts it at the end of the first part of *Pervert's Guide*, “consists in arousing desire to play with desire. But at the same time, keeping it at a safe distance, domesticating it, rendering it palpable.” This, according to Žižek, is how the cinema “teaches” us how to desire. It does so by constructing a fantasy screen between our Symbolic “selves” and our unconscious “Self.” But it is important to keep in mind that there is still a level of irrationality at the level of desire, which is why it must be kept at a “safe distance” from the subject. The fantasy is still at the level of the unconscious.

While the first part of the “guide” deals particularly with the relationship between desire and drive, the second part concerns the relationship between fantasy and “reality,” by way of the sexual relationship. Žižek begins part two with what he calls “the Freudian question,” which is *not*, he claims, why is every meaning inscribed with some obscene sexual content? The Freudian question is *not*, why, whenever we are doing something, are we always thinking about sex? The question is, what are we thinking about when we *are* having sex? In other words, what is the obscene supplemental fantasy that frames our perspective of the act in which we are engaged? This question should not imply that, in order to cope with reality, we have to *invent* fictions to keep us distracted; rather, in order to sustain our agency *in* the act effectively, some supplemental content—one that frames our perception of the act—must be disavowed. Or, to put things differently, in order to make sense of our actions, some irrational, nonsensical element must remain outside the conscious framework of our actions. Awareness of this errant element would hinder the subject's ability to act. There is therefore a minimal level of distancing between the subject's conscious “Self” and the Real. This distancing is made possible by the framework of fantasy. Fantasy is that which “protects” the subject from the traumatic Real. When the fantasy breaks down, “reality” becomes too Real for the subject to bear.

In this respect, and again referring to *The Matrix*, Žižek asks the question, not, why does the Matrix need our energy (the energy of human desires); rather, why does the energy (libido, drive) need the Matrix? The machines, he argues, could have easily found another, more reliable form of energy, but it is the energy of humans that is still needed—what is this energy? According to Žižek, the only consistent answer is that “the matrix feeds on the human's *jouissance*,” the surplus-enjoyment of human desire.<sup>2</sup> Yet, at the same time, the humans, Žižek argues, rely on the Matrix as a way of disposing of excess surplus-enjoyment. His point is

that Symbolic fictions (such as those in the Matrix) are needed in order to feed our drives while still keeping them at bay. Libido needs illusion in order to sustain itself; nevertheless, we transubstantiate drive into desire in order to prevent our own access to the horrible, meaninglessness of the Real.

Andrei Tarkovsky's *Solaris* (1972) serves as Žižek's reference for demonstrating the importance of thinking how the intrusion of the fantasy object into the space of the Symbolic causes a potentially traumatic rupture. In the film, the fantasy of the return of the protagonist's dead wife is actualized within the coordinates of Symbolic reality. Žižek compares this with Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958), where the dead Madeleine returns in Judy. In both cases, the fantasy object returns through a certain breakdown in the Symbolic order. The fantasy that protects the subject from unbearable reality breaks down, thus causing anxiety in the subject. Interestingly enough, in both *Solaris* and in *Vertigo* the unconscious fantasy that frames the coordinates of Symbolic reality for the protagonists is the unconscious desire for the death of the female characters: the wife in *Solaris* and Madeleine in *Vertigo* (or, rather, the desire for them to remain dead). The conclusion of *Solaris* is telling of this when at the end, according to Žižek, the hero is reunited with his father, the Symbolic figure of Law. Law at the end is reconstituted, prohibiting the entry of the fantasmatic object of desire. In contrast, the Symbolic "reality" of *Vertigo* is reconstituted at the end when Judy, in the guise of Madeleine, dies by falling off of the bell tower, just like the original Madeleine. This ending has the structure of nightmare, where, according to Žižek, the desired fantasy becomes a reality, thus reconstituting the connection between fantasy and the paternal metaphor, the signifier of the Law. Both films, at the same time, demonstrate for Žižek the utter phallocentrism at the heart of the Symbolic order.

The paternal metaphor, according to Žižek, is also central to Lynch's films. In both *Blue Velvet* (1986) and *Lost Highway* (1997), the line between fantasy and reality is either dissolved or reconstituted by a foreclosure or intervention of a paternal figure. In *Blue Velvet*, Jeffrey is thrust into the nightmarish underworld the instant his father suffers from a stroke. In *Lost Highway*, reality is reconstituted through the intervention of the crazy figure of Mr. Eddie/Dick Laurent. Mr. Eddie and Frank (from *Blue Velvet*) are examples of phallic father figures. Their power is a complete fake. This fake is constitutive of the Symbolic order. The Symbolic is "masculine," phallic, in the sense that it is a complete fabrication. Phallus, in psychoanalysis, represents the fiction of meaning. The Law is a fake, and it is the entry of the (impossible) fantasy object into the framework of the Symbolic that dissolves "reality." However, when fantasy disintegrates, or enters the frame of the Symbolic, we do not get real reality; rather, what we get

is the Real—the horror of the formless matter, the “night of the world,” in Hegelian terms.

Part two of the “guide” thus deals with films that realize the spectral, obscene fantasmatic underside of “reality” within the space of the Symbolic. These examples all have the structure of psychosis, whereby the repressed fantasy object returns in the space of the Symbolic. It is important to note, of course, that for Žižek, the cinema itself is phallic in this sense; it is a fake that operates toward the domestication of the subject/spectator’s desire/drive.

In part three, Žižek finally argues that as *the* art of appearances, cinema tells us something about reality itself. That is, it teaches us about how “belief” functions in the constitution of “reality” and how the symbolic efficiency of reality is tied together. Reality, according to Žižek, is incomplete, unfinished. Similarly, he argues, cinema became a truly modern art as the depiction of an “unfinished reality.” For him, modern films are about the possibility/impossibility to make a film. And the question of analysis becomes one of asking how is it that, even when we know that the fiction we are presented with is a fake, we are still fascinated by it? This question, for Žižek, seeks to investigate that which is Real in the illusion.

The logic of demystification is not enough. Even in postideological society, there remains, according to Žižek, a kernel of belief—a “sublime object” of ideology that still attaches us to the effective Symbolic reality. This is the paradox of belief in fetishism disavowal: “*Je sais bien, mais quand même. . .*” The fundamental delusion today, according to Žižek, is in not taking illusions seriously enough—this is a cynical attitude that is developed in reactions toward both cinema *and* reality. This is why, in concluding the “guide,” Žižek states, “In order to understand today’s world, we need cinema, literally. It’s only in cinema that we get that crucial dimension which we are not ready to confront in our reality. If you are looking for what is in reality more real than reality itself, look into the cinematic fiction.”

*The Pervert’s Guide to Cinema* serves as a perfect introduction to Žižek’s psychoanalytic interpretation of film. What he accomplishes is, more properly speaking, a psychoanalytic interpretation of ideology, with film serving as his object of analysis. The study of cinema, for Žižek, allows us to reflect on many of the questions that need to be addressed in the problematic of ideology, primarily at the level of belief. Why, particularly when one is aware of the gaps in the existing ideology, does one still participate in the activities organized by the existing ideology? Žižek’s answer is that there is a level of unconscious belief, determined by the fantasy frame that is ontologically prior to one’s attachment to the belief

in both the cinematic reality and the Symbolic, ideological reality. It is this unconscious “belief before belief” that is disavowed in one’s participation in everyday “reality.” But before returning to this problematic of the “belief before belief” in Chapter 5, I want to look at some of the ways in which Žižek interprets the texts of films in order to better answer the question, what makes the text itself believable? My thesis is that the believability of cinematic texts relies on, on the one hand, the introduction of some kind of paradox between power/authority and desire presented in the film and, on the other hand, the ideological resolution of this paradox. These elements within the text, I claim, are universal, and it is the resolution between them that indicates something about the form of ideology. However, before taking up this element of analysis, one question still remains regarding the “guide.” Why, I want to ask, is this the *pervert’s* guide to cinema? In order to understand this, I will, again, refer to Lacanian discourse theory.

### What Is So Perverse about Žižek’s “Guide” to Cinema?

Following Jacques-Alain Miller, Žižek links the Analyst’s discourse to the “discourse of the pervert.”<sup>3</sup> In the Analyst’s discourse, the *objet petit a* occupies the position of agency, and the subject (\$) occupies the position of work, which produces a new Master-Signifier with Knowledge in the position of Truth.



Figure I.1 Analyst’s discourse

In the “guide,” Žižek occupies the position of the *objet petit a* in the Analyst’s discourse. However, this is not the position of “subjective destitution,” indicative of the “end of analysis.” Instead, he occupies *this* position of interpretation, which has not yet become revolutionary. In other words, his position is itself caught between a Kantian and Hegelian perspective, which is not yet Marxian.

Despite his keen interpretations of cinema and ideology in *The Pervert’s Guide to Cinema*, it is evident that Žižek is, himself, still caught in ideology. This problem can be explained further with reference to a passage in *The Fright of Real Tears*. In the introduction to *Fright*, Žižek recounts an incident when he was asked to comment on a painting in an art round table. As Žižek puts it, he engaged in a “bluff”:

The frame of the painting in front of us is not its true frame; there is another, invisible, frame, implied by the structure of the painting, which frames our perception of the painting, and these two frames do not overlap—there is an invisible gap separating the two. The pivotal content of the painting is not rendered in its visible part, but is located in this dislocation of the two frames, in the gap that separates them. Are we, today, in our post-modern madness, still able to discern the traces of this gap? Perhaps more than the reading of a painting hinges on it; perhaps the decisive dimension of humanity will be lost when we lose the capacity to discern this gap. . . . To my surprise, this brief intervention was a huge success, and many following participants referred to the dimension in-between-the-two-frames, elevating it into a term. This very success made me sad, really sad. What I encountered here was not only the efficiency of a bluff, but a much more radical apathy at the very heart of today's cultural studies.<sup>4</sup>

Then, near the end of the book, he repeats this analytic conception, but without the cynical distance toward it:

One of the minimal definitions of a modernist painting concerns the function of its frame. The frame of the painting in front of us is not its true frame; there is another, invisible, frame, the frame implied by the structure of the painting, which frames our perception of the painting, and these two frames by definition never overlap—there is an invisible gap separating them. The pivotal content of the painting is not rendered in its visible part, but is located in this dislocation of the two frames, in the gap that separates them.<sup>5</sup>

Here, the reading that *must* be taken seriously is the second one, without the ironic distance toward the mode of analysis. It is worth pointing out that the two frames, the visible and the invisible, represent the relation between the Symbolic and the Imaginary in Lacanian psychoanalysis—that is, between the apparent content and the obscene supplemental underside, and the gap between them is the Real, or the place of the subject. The point I want to make apropos of Žižek is that his ironic distance toward his own method of interpretation is symptomatic of his own “passionate attachment” to ideology. As Žižek himself puts it apropos of this curious repetition, one must consider that “even if the subject mocks a certain belief, this in no way undermines this belief's symbolic efficiency—the belief continues to determine the subject's activity. When we make fun of an attitude, the truth is often in this attitude, not in our distance toward it: I make fun of it to conceal from myself the fact that this attitude effectively determines my activity.”<sup>6</sup> It is in his inability to take *himself* seriously that I believe we can find a hint of ideological belief in Žižek.



Here, however, I want to provide a psychoanalytic explanation for the persistence of Theory. Žižek explains the shift from the oral to the anal phase as “a certain dialectical shift in the intersubjective symbolic economy.”<sup>77</sup> In the oral phase, the subject’s demands are satisfied by the (M) Other; however, in the anal phase, the subject subordinates its own desire to the demand of the Other. Here, the “the object-cause of the subject’s desire (*a*) coincides with the Other’s demand.”<sup>78</sup> The subject’s needs can be satisfied only on the condition that it complies with the Other’s demand. In the anal phase, in other words, the subject earns a place in the social order by satisfying its needs in compliance with the Other’s demands.

Žižek argues that there exists a certain kind of anal attitude when it comes to Theory: particularly, the postmodern obsession with Hitchcock—that is, “the endless flow of books and conferences which endeavor to discern theoretical finesses even in his minor films.” Žižek suggests that it is possible to account for this obsession “by way of a compulsive ‘bad conscience’ on the part of intellectuals who, prevented from simply yielding to the pleasures of Hitchcock’s films, feel obliged to prove that they actually watch Hitchcock in order to demonstrate some theoretical point?” In other words, the Theorist is only “allowed to enjoy something insofar as it serves Theory qua my big Other.”<sup>79</sup> But is it not obvious that Žižek is, here, referring ultimately to himself? Is he not the epitome of an anal intellectual, unable to enjoy unless it is under the pretense of Theory?

Although Žižek’s interpretation of cinema is perverse, his method, I claim, does provide insight into the function of ideology. So while the interpretation of cinema does pose a dilemma for the analyst, this should in no way discourage a psychoanalytic interpretation of film. What the analyst as pervert does demonstrate, though, is that Theory is only a prelude to an act.

## Cinema, Ideology, and Form

Cinema, as the art of appearances, tells us something about reality itself. It tells us something about how reality constitutes itself. . . . It is through . . . an ontology of unfinished reality that cinema became a truly modern art.

—Slavoj Žižek

### Ideology and Form

How, then, does Žižek stand when it comes to the *form* of ideology? Although it may appear that form does not figure strongly in Žižek's film theory—that is, particularly as he comes across in his debate with the neoformalism of David Bordwell—form still plays a central role in the critique of ideology. Here, it is necessary to point out that something quite different is going on when Žižek speaks about the form of ideology, especially as it relates to the form of cinema. When Žižek speaks about form, it is definitely not in the same sense that Bordwell might talk about film form. Žižek, unlike Bordwell, is not (necessarily) interested in the technical apparatus or medium of the cinema. It is perhaps more appropriate to say that what concerns Žižek is less the form of cinema/ideology than its structure, particularly that which gives structure by way of addition/exclusion.<sup>1</sup>

It is a well-known fact that Žižek likes to distance himself from the politics of his first English book, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989)—he feels that the book is far too sympathetic to liberal democracy. Nonetheless, already in this book Žižek outlines some of the central ways in which the critique of ideology is related to the founding *formal* act. In terms of the Hegelian dialectic of form and content, “[t]ruth is of course in the form.”<sup>2</sup> As he puts it more recently, “one should distinguish between constituted ideology—empirical manipulations and distortions at the level of content—and constitutive ideology—the ideological form which provides the coordinates of the very space within which the content is located.”<sup>3</sup>

The very first section of the first chapter in *Sublime Object* is titled “Marx, Freud: the Analysis of Form.” Here, Žižek points out the fundamental homology between the interpretive procedures of Marx in his analysis of commodities and Freud in his analysis of dreams. In both instances, “the point is to avoid the properly fetishistic fascination of the ‘content’ supposedly hidden behind the form: the ‘secret’ to be unveiled through analysis is not the content hidden by the form . . . but, on the contrary, *the ‘secret’ of this form itself*.”<sup>4</sup> For Marx, the secret of the commodity form was not (necessarily) the hidden work behind the production of the commodity, according to Žižek, but rather why (labor) value assumed the form of the commodity in the first place. Likewise, for Freud, the “secret” of the dream is not its manifest content, nor is it truly the latent content of the dream. It is, rather, the unconscious desire that itself gives structure to the dream. It is the very kernel of desire that is played out in the dream—its “pure form”—so that the question of Freudian dream analysis is not “What do I desire?” but rather “Why does desire hide out in the form of the dream?” And the same goes for ideology.

When looking at the form of the cinema, at least from the perspective outlined here, the question to ask is, how does ideology achieve its form in the texture of the film? To put matters differently, our concern here is with a particular “content” that is elevated to the structuring detail of the form. It is this sense of form that is of interest for a Žižekian theory of film. While it is essential for film studies to bring focus to elements of film style and film/cinema as an aesthetic medium—elements that allow the author to construct meaning for the spectator—the question of ideological analysis is, how to unravel the hidden kernel of ideological content in the form of the cinema? Here, we are back to the structuring roles played by the Master-Signifier and the *objet petit a*. The former must be understood as that which is added to the field of (“floating”) signifiers, giving them shape and structure. The Master-Signifier, in other words, is the signifier of the form—it is *the* crucial piece of content that gives form to structured field of diegetic content. *Objet petit a*, in contrast, is that which is excluded, and ideology operates best when the subject is interpellated by its imaginary effect.

The latter is best exemplified by the sinister role of subtitles in Kevin Costner’s *Dances with Wolves* (1991). On the one hand, the film displays a sincere understanding of the harm and racism afflicted on Native Americans; on the other hand, however, the film maintains in itself a certain racist subjective position, noticed only in an ambiguous detail related to its use of subtitles. As the examples at the end of Chapter 3 demonstrate, subtitles are often used not only to translate the dialogue of a foreign language. Often, the particular use of language is itself transformed in a way

that makes it more identifiable with the local culture viewing the foreign film. Usually, this means incorporating local expressions and figures of speech, jargon, slang, and so on into the text of the subtitles in order to get the full *meaning* across to the audience in a way that would be otherwise impossible through direct translation. Often, the meaning being conveyed at the superficial level of language does not translate directly; therefore, in order for meaning to be translated and registered at the level of the big Other, direct translation does not always suffice. In this way, subtitles are used to convey *meaning* rather than language. However, what we see in *Dances with Wolves* is precisely the *direct* translation of Sioux dialogue. The translated, subtitled dialogue uses the direct translation of the Sioux—the syntax of which differs from that used in English—instead of using the “proper” English syntax in the subtitles. The subtitles therefore mock the broken English of the stereotypical image of Native Americans.

The obverse of the latter can be seen in the use of subtitles in Jim Abraham and David Zucker’s screwball comedy *Airplane!* (1980). Throughout the film, two black characters speak using Ebonics slang. The dialogue is then translated using subtitles, which mock the distinctions between supposedly “white” and “black” speech. Subtitles are invoked in this case to produce a comedic effect, one that evokes, and exposes, the racist core of language. In *Dances with Wolves*, however, the racist core of language is disavowed and repressed, only to return in the very form of the subtitles. *This* is precisely how we should understand the concept of the “sublime object” of ideology. The film’s subtitles give evidence to its own disavowed racism.

Something similar occurs at the level of the Master-Signifier of the form in two recent films. Lone Scherfig’s *An Education* (2009) and Eytan Fox’s *The Bubble* (2006) are the front and back of the same film, as Žižek might put it. What is interesting about these films is that they each represent a certain version of the anti-Semitic figure of the Jew but in a way that remains concealed by the very form of the films themselves. *An Education*, on the one hand, is very similar to *Dances with Wolves* in the sense that it appears to give over to liberal antiracist ideology. *An Education* is a film about a young Christian girl, Jenny (Cary Mulligan), who is seduced by an older Jewish man, David (Peter Sarsgaard). Jenny’s parents and friends initially object, appearing to be rather anti-Semitic. On this level, the film seems to challenge anti-Semitism by representing the racism of the parents as archaic and outdated. Nevertheless, David ends up deceiving and corrupting Jenny; he is already married and has a child. He is also a con artist: in one segment he tells Jenny about how he “helps” poor black families move into neighborhoods inhabited by wealthy upper class women as a way of encouraging these women to sell their houses quickly at a low cost out of their own racism toward blacks. David then buys the houses at a low

cost and resells them. At one point he even uses the derogatory Yiddish slang for blacks, saying “the schfartzahs have got to live somewhere”—is David not precisely the perfect representation of the anti-Semitic figure of the “dirty Jew?” Although Jenny challenges other characters in the film who are anti-Semites, the film itself ends up reproducing the very anti-Semitic image of the Jew denounced by the surface level of the film. At the level of constituted ideology, then, the film appears very liberal, yet at the constitutive level—the level of the form—it is undoubtedly rather anti-Semitic. Despite Jenny’s protestations, David ends up being the very model of the “dirty Jew” about whom she had been warned. If *An Education* hides the form of the anti-Semitic image of the “dirty Jew,” *The Bubble* reproduces the form of the image of the Jew as Communist threat.

*The Bubble* is an Israeli film that tells the story of three young hip Israelis living in Jerusalem. Those in the know of cultural theory will undoubtedly find these characters rather sophisticated, as they even cite references to Michel Foucault and Judith Butler. One of the characters, Noam, has just finished his army service. While on duty, he had encountered a Palestinian man, Ashraf, who secretly comes to Jerusalem to find Noam. After meeting, the two men fall in love, and the film goes in the direction of an impossible, Romeo-and-Juliet-style romance.

The romance between Noam and Ashraf encourages the group of friends to help organize a beach rave to promote peace between Israelis and Palestinians and tolerance and understanding toward the Other. However, after Ashraf returns home to the occupied territories, we learn not only that Ashraf’s family is homophobic but also that his brother-in-law is a member of a Palestinian terrorist organization. After learning about his relationship with Noam, his brother-in-law encourages Ashraf to date a pretty Palestinian woman. Later, on the day of his sister’s wedding, an Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) raid of Ashraf’s village is conducted following a bombing in Jerusalem. During the raid, IDF soldiers kill Ashraf’s sister. Fuelled by the sadness of his sister’s murder and the influence of his brother-in-law, Ashraf agrees to conduct a suicide bombing in Jerusalem. He approaches the restaurant where Noam works, and as they come near to one another, Ashraf sets off the bomb, killing them both.

The obvious/typical reading of this film would suggest a substantial amount of Zionist racism toward the Palestinian Other. Ashraf’s family is represented as extremist, homophobic, and intolerant, in contrast to the tolerant liberal-communist Israelis who are accepting of difference and otherness and who want to promote peace between the two peoples. *The Bubble* differs from *An Education* in the sense that the depiction of Israeli racism toward the Palestinians is much more overt. Nevertheless, what one should notice at the level of form is that the film is, rather, constituted

by the threat of the liberal-communist Israelis themselves. The underlying message of the film has more to do with the image of the ignorant, tolerant Israelis who believe that they can create a peaceful coexistence with the Palestinians. It is in this way that *The Bubble* manages to reproduce the obverse side of the anti-Semitic image of the “dirty Jew.” It is constituted by the cynical image of the idealistic liberal-communist Jew; an image that is based on what Žižek refers to as “Zionist anti-Semitism.” The point it makes is that one should not lose oneself in the idealism of tolerant coexistence. What both films demonstrate, then, is the ideological operation of an added Master-Signifier—the constitutive form—to the series of “floating” signifiers—the constituted content. But here we should also pay close attention to the role played by the image of the “Jew” as the *objet petit a* of the Symbolic order itself and not just the Symbolic texture of the film.

The figure of the “Jew” in Europe functions as the *objet petit a* in the sense of representing an externalized structural obstacle to the Symbolic order. In other words, the inherent limit of the Symbolic order is displaced onto the anti-Semitic figure of the Jew. Anti-Semitism is, then, for Žižek, the very model of racist ideology. Fascism, for example, displaces the inherent political antagonism (the class struggle) onto the anti-Semitic figure of the Jew. The failure of capitalism in the 1930s was displaced by the Nazis onto the figure of the Jew in order to evade the inherent limit of the existing conditions of the Symbolic coordinates of the social and political orders. Today, then, after the Holocaust, all of Europe can share in its renunciation of anti-Semitism—which is then displaced onto the State of Israel as the *objet petit a* in the contemporary constellation. Nevertheless, one should not miss the central category of the *objet petit a* as externalized obstacle in the State of Israel itself—not simply the Palestinian Other but the image of the Leftist, liberal-communist Israelis and diaspora Jews who criticize the repressive practices of the State of Israel.<sup>5</sup> Thus, while *An Education* stands for the anti-Semitic figure of the Jew in Europe, *The Bubble* is its counterpart, representing the anti-Semitic figure of the Jew in Israeli discourse. These examples spell out the connection between the constitutive and constituted levels of ideology in their relation to the Master-Signifier and the *objet petit a*.

### The Primordial Lie

The constitutive level of form may also be conceived in terms of what Žižek calls the “primordial lie.” It is this condition of the primordial lie that, according to Žižek, makes Christopher Nolan’s *The Dark Knight* (2008) worth considering in its relation to the constitution of ideological “reality.”

When, at the end of the film, District Attorney Harvey Dent dies, it is up to Batman to ensure that the wound opened up by the Real is concealed so as to preserve the structural order imposed by Dent himself as the figure of the Law. Dent, corrupted by the Joker, had turned away from the “good” toward the villainous as he became the evil “Two Face.” In order to save Dent’s work against corruption by the mafia in Gotham City, Batman decides to take the blame for the crimes committed by Dent/Two Face. As Žižek puts it, here there is a “need to perpetuate a lie in order to sustain public morale,” and, as the film demonstrates, “only a lie can redeem us.”<sup>6</sup> Batman’s lie, in other words, is constitutive of the legal order represented by Dent. In Lacanian terms, Dent stands in for the “reality” of the constituted legal, Symbolic order, while Batman represents the underlying Master-Signifier, suturing the field of “reality” on the grounds of a founding lie. What, then, is the Truth of the constituted/constitutive Symbolic order?

According to Žižek, the figure of Truth in *The Dark Knight* is none other than the Joker. The aim of his attacks on Gotham City is clearly identified in the film: he will only stop once Batman removes his mask and reveals his true identity. Unlike Batman, who is hidden behind his mask, the Joker is, for Žižek, a figure who is fully identified with his mask. In other words, the Joker *is* his mask. The Joker represents, for Batman, the death-drive embodied. This is how, according to Žižek, *The Dark Knight* “touches a nerve in our ideologico-political constellation: the undesirability of truth.”<sup>7</sup> That is to say, the ideological coordinates of “reality” are constituted so that the (constitutive) Truth is concealed beneath the (constituted) “truth.” Truth, in other words, always has the structure of a fiction, but there is always, nevertheless, the protrusion of the death-drive, pulsating below the surface, ready to disrupt the ordered structure of everyday “reality.”

### Universality and Its Exception(s)

Žižek’s textual interpretations of cinema employ two methods. On the one hand, Žižek refers to the Oedipal “master code” in order to interpret the relationship between power and desire in film texts. More specifically, he refers to the link between the Master-Signifier and the *objet petit a*, passing through the subject. His “master code,” in other words, is his continued reference to the Lacanian Real. On the other hand, he employs a dialectical method that seeks to locate exceptions within series of films that speak to a universal quality of film form—that is, the way in which the form structures the content.

According to Žižek, the only way to understand the universality of form is through its constitutive exception. The exception speaks to the universality of the form. Žižek's procedure is thus to locate exceptions—formal exceptions, the work of exceptional *auteurs*, even exemplary exceptions (films, scenes) within the entire oeuvres of particular *auteurs*—in order to understand some universal quality in the (“normal”) form of films as well as the form of ideology.

If there is a single truth to Žižek's constant references to examples, film examples in particular, it is that they cannot be read on their own. Everything has to be read relationally—that is, dialectically. This is similar to the way in which Marx reads the relation between “use value,” “exchange value,” and “value” in *Das Kapital*. In order to understand the “labor theory of value,” Marx has to demonstrate that the value in a commodity embodies the labor of the producer—how does he do this? First, by distinguishing the two values embodied in the commodity: use value and exchange value. How, though, should we understand the values of use and exchange? Use value is simple: it embodies the usefulness of a commodity. Exchange value is more difficult: Marx shows that it embodies both a use value and value—that is, the value of the labor embodied in it. But how can we measure the value of labor? Marx's answer is that we have to understand the value of labor through exchange: concrete labor is measured in units of abstract labor time, which are given an exchange value (i.e., wages). So we end up with a conception of use value in a commodity, measured in terms of exchange value and value; we then understand exchange value measured in terms of use value and value; and, finally, we understand value (the labor embodied in the commodity) measured in terms of use value and exchange value. In other words, the only way to understand the value of a commodity is to measure the labor embodied in it in terms of use and exchange. We therefore get the “labor theory of value” only when we interpret it in relation to the other forms of value. The meaning of the one is measured in its *relation* to the others. And this is precisely how Žižek examines the ideology embodied in the form of cinema, which is best demonstrated in his study of Kieslowski in *The Fright of Real Tears*.

The lucidity with which Žižek shifts from example to example and from film to film is often criticized as a mere “free association” of examples. As Bordwell puts it, *The Fright of Real Tears* is nothing more than “a fairly conventional book of free-associative film interpretation.”<sup>8</sup> One reviewer comments that while the explicit focus of the book is the work of Kieslowski, “Žižek continually cycles back to American films and narratives as anchor points for his argument. . . . The deeper into *The Fright of Real Tears* one delves, the more frantic, free-associative, and collage-like Žižek's style of argumentation becomes.”<sup>9</sup> It is clear from these remarks that neither



commentator has fully understood the methodology that Žižek employs in this work of Theory.

Žižek practices a very precise dialectical method that examines films in relation to each other. The “art” of dialectical analysis consists in locating the “exceptional example,” the singular case that speaks to the (false) universality of the form itself. For example, Žižek argues that Hitchcock is in a position of exception when it comes to the standard Hollywood narrative. His style poses an exception to the standard Hollywood cinema, which is why his work is engaged with such enthusiasm by critics. As well, the exception in Hitchcock’s own oeuvre, as we have seen (in Chapter 2) according to Žižek, is *The Wrong Man* (1956). It is an exception that “coincides with the founding gesture of a universality.”<sup>10</sup>

In terms of Kieslowski’s films, the particular topic of *The Fright of Real Tears*, Žižek points to one of his earliest films, *Blind Chance*, as the singular exception that sustains Kieslowski’s entire oeuvre. However, it is only by comparing the form of *Blind Chance* to other (non-Kieslowski) films, particularly Tom Tykwer’s *Run, Lola, Run* (1998) and Peter Howitt’s *Sliding Doors* (1998), that its own relative position as the “key” to Kieslowski is developed.

For Žižek, Kieslowski’s films are defined by a certain kind of “open-endedness.” In Lacanian terms, they are set by an inability to “quilt” a final version—a final narrative. All Kieslowski’s films, according to Žižek, are different versions of the same basic form: the inability to define closure. Kieslowski’s films, according to Žižek, deal with the theme of “alternative histories”—however, none more so than *Blind Chance* (1987). As a film that deals specifically with the theme of “alternative histories,” *Blind Chance* sets the stage for Kieslowski’s entire oeuvre.

### Ethical Choices and Their Alternatives

The “key” to Kieslowski’s films, according to Žižek, is the theme of open-ended repetitions of the same basic narrative (of alternative histories), which repeat without any determinate closure. All his films are therefore various different Symbolic articulations of the same basic Real. Every deadlock in the preceding version results in its rearticulation in the next. All Kieslowski’s films, in other words, are remakes of the same basic story but from a new vantage point.

For Žižek, a common theme in Kieslowski’s films is that of “alternative histories,” or alternative narrative lines, represented by *Blind Chance* as Žižek’s “master code” for interpreting Kieslowski’s work. According to him, this theme is another case of an artistic content pushing the boundaries

of form, as if the content, the narrative itself, has to be invented in order to practice the form. Kieslowski's films, according to Žižek, present a "new life experience," one that "explodes the form of linear, centered narrative and renders life as a multiform flow" (*FRT*: 78). His films present various parallel, overlapping, alternative narrative lines, disrupting the linear flow of narrative cinema. Žižek argues that the way to understand this procedure in Kieslowski's films is by interpreting them through the theme of "ethical choice," particularly the choice between "calm life" and "mission." This choice is presented in the relation between each new version and its previous incarnation: each new version is prompted by a deadlock in the previous one, regarding the failure to make a proper ethical choice.

Žižek distinguishes three versions of alternative histories in Kieslowski's films: "direct presentation of three possible outcomes in *Blind Chance*, the presentation of two outcomes through the theme of double in [*The Double Life of*] *Veronique* [(1991)], and the presentation of two outcomes through the 'flashback in the present' in *Red* [(1994)]" (*FRT*: 79). But these variations take on different forms in Kieslowski's many films. *Veronique* is another key (or "master code"); it is *the* film that stages the choice between vocation (leading to death) and quiet satisfied life (the result of compromising one's vocation) (*FRT*: 137). The key distinction is played out by the two "Veroniques." Veronique herself is melancholic and reflective, while Weronika is directly enthusiastic for the cause. This theme of "ethical choice" is also played out in the television series *Decalogue* (1989). Each of the ten segments of *Decalogue* stages one of the Ten Commandments but in a disjointed way so that, according to Žižek, each episode in the series stages a commandment in the order that precedes it—that is, *Decalogue 1* stages the second commandment and so on, whereas *Decalogue 10* stages the first commandment. Each installment, however, is about the transgression of a commandment, leading to a deadlock that thrusts the narrative into the next film and the next commandment, each failing in making an "ethical choice."

Rather than giving some indication of liberation, alternative histories, Žižek argues, are in fact quite enveloping: "[T]he fact that there is only one reality leaves the space open for other possibilities, i.e., for a choice. . . . If, however, these different possibilities are realised, we get a claustrophobic universe in which there is no freedom of choice precisely because *all* choices have already been realised" (*FRT*: 79). Having all possibilities realized eliminates the openness of choice; everything is given determinate closure. This closure is, perhaps, what is expressed by Witek's cry—his desperate shout—at the beginning of *Blind Chance*.

This cry signals at the beginning the determinate suture, closing on the deadlocks experienced in the two other alternatives presented in the film.

Žižek argues that the entire film presents “flashbacks” of alternative histories of a person who, aware of his imminent death, reflects on alternatives that could have been. He reflects on his three possible lives (*FRT*: 80). Žižek interprets these three different versions as intertwined to the extent that each passes into the next as the result of a deadlock in the previous scenario: “[T]he deadlock of the socialist apparatchik’s career pushes him into dissidence, and non-satisfaction with dissidence into a private profession” (*FRT*: 80). It is only the final version that is “real”: the one that ultimately ends back at the beginning, with Witek’s cry as he realizes that he is about to die in the plane explosion. The deadlock of the other two realities, the two realities where he does not die in the end, still throw him into the “real” reality: the one where he must die. The final version, the “real” one, gives finitude to the deadlock of “choice” and in this way transforms the various contingent possible realities into a single necessary reality (the final version retroactively authorizes the *necessity* of the Master-Signifier as the only possible solution).

The psychoanalytic point that Žižek makes apropos this relationship between the possible, contingent alternatives and the necessary determinate *one* reality is the relationship between the sublime, spectral fantasy object and the Master-Signifier. The possible alternatives resonate below the surface—the fantasy of that which could have been, haunting us in the present—and the necessity of the choice made that gives closure to the “real,” effective, Symbolic reality. It is the elevation of *one* of the contingent possibilities (one element of content, S2) into the only—necessary—existing choice, retroactively suturing (S1) the entire field of the form of “reality.” However, these possible alternatives still haunt us below the surface (*a*) and are disavowed by the effective “real” reality. These overlapping fantasies of possible alternatives are, in other words, the *fantasmatic* support for the effective Symbolic reality. The “truth” of this effective reality, the truth of the appearance of reality, is found in the exception of these possible alternatives.

Žižek, finally, contrasts *Blind Chance* with *Blue* (1993). *Blue* is, according to Žižek, “the obverse of the psychoanalytic treatment: not as the traversing of fantasy, but as the gradual reconstitution of the fantasy that allows us access to reality” (*FRT*: 176). The film tells the story of a woman, Julie (Juliette Binoche), who is coping with the death of her husband and daughter, who both have died as the result of a tragic car accident. After the accident, Julie is, according to Žižek, deprived of the “protective shield” of fantasy and is thus confronted with the Real in all its traumatic disgusting pulsating nothingness—its nonpurpose; its nonmeaning. Throughout the film, Julie falls further and further into depression, attempting suicide and distancing herself from her friends, and ultimately learns that her late

husband had been having an affair. In the process of trying to discover the identity of her husband's mistress, Julie starts to reenter the structure of her former life, before the accident. The film concludes, according to Žižek, once Julie is able to reconstitute the fantasy that protects her from the Void of the Real. *Blue* is thus "not a film about the slow process of regaining reality, to immerse oneself in social life, but rather a film about building a protective screen between the subject and the raw Real" (*FRT*: 176). The difference between *Blind Chance* and *Blue* is thus one of ethical choice between "calm life" in *Blue* and "mission" in *Blind Chance*. And, as Žižek might put it, is this ethical choice between "calm life" and "mission" not also the choice between the "calm life" of post-Theory and the (political) "mission" of Theory? In Alain Badiou's terms, between Being and Event? Or in Freudian terms, between the "pleasure principle" and the (death) drive "beyond the pleasure principle?" Is it not a choice between fidelity to the Symbolic fiction and fidelity to the Real (*FRT*: 148–149)?

The theme of alternative histories—alternative narrative lines—thus exposes another aspect of the supplemental underside of fantasy. All the various unrealized possibilities frame the perspective of the fully realized, retroactively necessary, Symbolic "reality"—the outcome. So long as they remain unrealized, these possible alternatives inform our perspectives on the realized Symbolic reality. Kieslowski's films are thus, I claim, "obscene" in a way that is similar, yet distinct, from Lynch's films. His films allow the obscene supplemental underside of fantasy to rise to the surface; however, again, it is the form of this resurfacing and their final submergence—particularly in the case of *Blue*—that they remain domesticated. Lynch and Kieslowski, I argue, thus represent a particularly postmodern method of dealing with content that pushes the boundaries of ideological form.

### Hysteria, Perversion, and Psychosis in the Cinema<sup>11</sup>

The Master-Signifier and the *objet petit a*—as well as being correlative to the subject's Ego-ideal and ideal ego, respectively—also represent particular orders in the psychoanalytic paradox of desire and authority, the most famous elaboration of which is the Oedipus myth. The basic problem that occupies the various psychoanalytic interpretations is this question: *Why is it necessary to prohibit that which is impossible? If something is ontologically impossible (enjoyment, in the psychoanalytic sense), why is the prohibition necessary?* Or, in Žižek's terms, how can we account for the fact that *the absence of Law universalizes prohibition?*<sup>12</sup> It is the relationship between Law/prohibition and desire that, according to Žižek, orders and imposes a certain relationship to *jouissance*, or enjoyment. This takes on various

modalities, the most common of which are described in terms of psychosis: perversion and neurosis. Each represents a particular form of the relationship between the subject/desire and authority.

Desire, in itself, is impossible—or, to put things differently (structural) impossibility (the gap in the Symbolic) is the very condition of desire.<sup>13</sup> In Lacanian theory, desire is self-reflexive; it is the desire of the Other. According to Žižek, drive is the original fact, not desire. Drive represents that which, for Hegel, is constituted by “abstract negativity,” or the “night of the world,” the pure “nothingness” of being; or, in other words, the “pre-ontological” status of the subject.<sup>14</sup> Drive is the obverse of desire; it is formless matter, which is transubstantiated into desire by way of fantasy.<sup>15</sup> An encounter with this pure “nothingness” of formless (meaningless) matter, according to Žižek, is what constitutes “trauma”—trauma represents the subject's encounter with its own nonbeing, or the impossibility of “Self.” As Žižek puts it, “the entire psychoanalytic experience focuses on traces of the traumatic passage from this ‘night of the world’ into our ‘daily’ universe of *logos*.”<sup>16</sup> Desire is thus the transmutation of drive by way of the “screen” of fantasy. It is the transformation of the impossibility into possibility by telling “the story which allows the subject to (mis)perceive the void around which drive circulates as the primordial loss constitutive of desire.”<sup>17</sup> However, in order to disavow the impossibility of desire, the subject must find some kind of explanation for this loss. This is how the subject gets attached to authority (Law/prohibition). *If desire is prohibited then it is inaccessible, not because of its impossibility, but because of the Law.* Attachment to the Law thus allows desire to be perceivably possible. The subject thus engages in a kind of (primordial) masochistic submission to authority in order to evade the impossibility of desire while still trying to transcend prohibition—what Žižek refers to as the “inherent transgression.” This is why Žižek claims that perversion is a “socially constructive attitude.”<sup>18</sup> The “normal” relationship to authority (in a postauthoritarian/postideological world) is perverse.

Psychosis and hysteria represent two other manifestations of the relationship between desire and authority. The psychotic perceives it possible to attain the object of desire by eliminating (“foreclosing” on) the prohibitory Law, not realizing that the Law is the condition of possibility for desire. Psychosis is thus the result of trying to maintain the possibility of desire without attaching oneself to authority. In a sense, this is how, following Fredric Jameson, we can characterize the contemporary, postmodern relationship to authority. Jameson refers to the Lacanian conception of psychosis as an aesthetic model for understanding postmodernism.<sup>19</sup> Psychosis for Lacan (in terms used by Deleuze and Guattari) is constituted as a “breakdown of the signifying chain.”<sup>20</sup> Psychosis, in other words, is

the form of consciousness that forecloses on the Master-Signifier so that the field of ordinary signifiers are no longer “sutured” within a field of meaningful *totality* (something of which cultural studies and post-Theory approaches both hold with disdain); thus we are (seemingly) left with free-floating content without form—with signifiers that have no point of reference with which to differentiate themselves (this is also another reason class struggle remains invisible in nondialectical analysis). As Žižek puts it, “[t]he basic feature of our ‘postmodern’ world is that it tries to dispense with the agency of the Master-Signifier,” and, as Žižek has been arguing for the past twenty years, “[t]he suspension of the Master-Signifier leaves as the only agency of ideological interpellation the ‘unnameable’ abyss of *jouissance*: the ultimate injunction that regulates our lives in ‘postmodernity’ is ‘Enjoy!’”<sup>21</sup> In other words, with the “end of authority,” “end of history,” and “end of ideology,” the subject of postmodern liberal-capitalism is supposedly free to enjoy; however, since desire is impossible, the foreclosure of prohibition actually brings about feelings of *anxiety*—the result of an encounter with the (impossible) Real. The objective of a postmodern critique of ideology is thus to indicate where the Master-Signifier *does* actually operate to suture the field of meaning.

Without the quilting of the Master-Signifier, desire is interpellated not by the Symbolic order but by what Lacan refers to as the “gaze” and “voice.” As Žižek puts it, “in psychosis, we effectively hear the voice of the primordial Other addressing us, we effectively know that we are being observed all the time.” In psychosis, what is missing is the Master-Signifier, which “returns in the real in the guise of psychotic apparitions.”<sup>22</sup> Under “normal” circumstances, in order to maintain some kind of consistency of Symbolic “reality,” the *objet petit a* must remain *excluded* from “reality.” In psychosis, *objet petit a*, the piece of the Real, invades the Symbolic space of “reality.” This is where film theorists have tended to misconstrue the Lacanian notion of the “gaze.”

In one of his earliest essays on Lacan and film theory, “The Undergrowth of Enjoyment,”<sup>23</sup> Žižek notes that the renewal of Lacanian film theory first developed in the 1980s as a reinterpretation of the notions of “gaze” and “voice,” particularly in the works of Pascal Bonitzer and Michel Chion.<sup>24</sup> I would argue that Lacan has two theories of the “gaze”: the first developed in the “mirror stage” essay and the second developed in *Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. In “Undergrowth,” Žižek advances the relevance of the latter over the former. In *Seminar XI*, Lacan posits the “gaze” as the *objet petit a* in the scopic drive and as the “voice” in the invocatory drive. As Žižek explains, “gaze” “marks the point in the object (the picture) from which the viewing subject is *already gazed at*: it is the object which is gazing at me.” The “gaze,” in other words,

is of the object, not the subject. It “functions as a spot or stain in/on the picture, disturbing its transparent visibility and introducing an irreducible split in my relation to it.” “Voice,” in contrast, is attached to no object. It addresses the subject “without being attached to any particular bearer, floating freely in some horrifying interspace.”<sup>25</sup> Unlike the “gaze,” which is presented as a “blind spot” in the visible, a stain that marks the Void of subjectivity—the ultimate surfacing of “voice” is silence; not in the sense of no sound but rather as a “spectral voice” beyond comprehension, which is impossible to locate in a body.<sup>26</sup>

The examples of “psychotic” cinema (cited in Chapter 2) are ones of formal failure. They are failures in the sense that, by opting to foreclose on certain formal features of traditional narrative cinema, they render certain elements in the texture of the film that diminish the pleasure of the text. However, there are particular ways in which the “drama” of desire and authority can be rendered in the text of the film, which manifest as versions of hysteria, perversion, and psychosis. Here, my interest is in the way in which the plot is *resolved* by either a hysterical, perverse, or psychotic relationship between the elements of desire and authority in the narrative. Such resolutions indicate something of the way particular impasses, or deadlocks, in the relationship between desire and authority are reified into ideological texts.

Žižek claims that if we try to examine Hitchcock’s entire oeuvre together, we end up with a random assortment; however, if we separate them into series of threes, they begin to formulate around certain themes. Žižek takes the following five films as constitutive of the “Hitchcockian Universe”: *The Wrong Man* (1956), *Vertigo* (1958), *North by Northwest* (1959), *Psycho* (1960), and *The Birds* (1963). He then separates them into triads. The first triad concerns “false identity”: *The Wrong Man*, *Vertigo*, and *North by Northwest*. The second triad concerns filling in the gap of the “empty place”: *Vertigo*, *North by Northwest*, and *Psycho*. The final triad concerns the motif of the “maternal superego”: *North by Northwest*, *Psycho*, and *The Birds*. All three triads deal, in one way or another, with the relationship between desire and authority, manifested as either a hysterical relationship, a perverse relationship, or a psychotic relationship.

The theme of mistaken/false identity approaches the relationship of hysteria. Hysteria is best understood as “failed interpellation.”<sup>27</sup> In hysteria, the subject refuses the symbolic mandate conferred on it in the “Symbolic universe.” it begins to question the symbolic authority of the Master-Signifier. In a sense, hysteria is the reverse of psychosis: in psychosis, the subject is too attached to desire, whereas in hysteria, the subject begins to lose the attachment to desire, the underside of surplus-enjoyment, which sustains its attachment to the Master-Signifier. The hysteric thus bombards



authority with the question “*Che vuoi?*”—“Why am I what you [the big Other] are saying that I am?”<sup>28</sup> This is how Žižek approaches the first triad. In *The Wrong Man*, the protagonist, a poor musician, is accused of two robberies he did not commit; in *Vertigo*, Judy protests the way in which Scottie tries to “dress her up” as Madeleine; and in *North by Northwest*, Thornhill is mistaken for the (nonexistent) Kaplan. In each case, one of the characters in the film is conferred with a particular symbolic mandate that he or she refuses.

The second triad, tied together by the theme of filling in the gap of the “empty place” concerns a perverse relationship between desire and authority—that is, of assuming the symbolic mandate conferred on the subject by the big Other. The pervert works fully toward satisfying the desire of the Other—that is, in working toward the Other’s enjoyment.<sup>29</sup> In *Vertigo*, Judy does assume the symbolic mandate conferred on her, assuming the role of Madeleine, both initially, when Scottie first encounters the woman he believes to be Madeleine (but who is, in fact, Judy, playing the role of Madeleine) and at the film’s conclusion, when she suffers the same fate as the (real) Madeleine. In *North by Northwest*, Thornhill assumes the mandate—fills in the gap—of the empty signifier, “Kaplan.” He becomes Kaplan and a CIA operative. He becomes, in the end, what he protests at the film’s outset. In *Psycho*, finally, Norman Bates assumes the role of his mother, wearing her clothes and speaking in her voice. Significantly, it is the signifier of the wig that confers on Norman this mandate, which he assumes. In each case, assuming the symbolic mandate masks the gap in the Symbolic itself and brings the narrative to a rational (reifying) conclusion.

The final triad revolves around the motif of the “maternal superego.” This has the structure of psychosis—the subject being interpellated not by the Master-Signifier but directly by desire (again, this is how we can understand Žižek’s argument, following Jameson, that the postmodern era is characterized by a foreclosure of the Master-Signifier and the direct interpellation of the superego: Enjoy!). Žižek notes that in each of the films in this triad, the heroes are fatherless, and each has an overbearing mother who is “strong” and “possessive.” We meet Thornhill’s mother at the beginning of *North by Northwest*. She is presented as scornful and mocking of Thornhill, chastising him for his inability to enjoy (or, rather, for what she perceives as his “foolishness,” which, if only he would give it up, he could be able to “enjoy”). In *Psycho*, Norman appears to be acting in direct accord with the interpellation of his (dead) mother. And in *The Birds*, Mitch’s mother is particularly involved in his romantic “relationship” with Melanie.

In each of these triads, we encounter, in some way, the paradoxical relationship between desire and authority, manifested in various different forms of hysterical, perverse, and psychotic relationships. The point here however,



is not to suggest that the films themselves play out instances of theoretical doctrine, something that Carroll suggests is practiced by practitioners of “the Theory,” nor is it to suggest that films are useful toward an exegetic reading of psychoanalysis.<sup>30</sup> Here, Žižek’s primary concern is in ideology and in developing a mode of interpretation that addresses the dynamic between the subject and authority and the different ways in which this relationship is manifested and rationalized (i.e., reified) into a believable text. In other words, the question for the criticism of ideology is, which ideas—ideas that resolve contradictions between relationships of desire and authority—are believable enough to produce a degree of enjoyment—or pleasure—for the spectator? My argument is that what Žižek develops in his interpretations of the films is not simply a psychoanalytic reading of films; it is, rather, a psychoanalytic interpretation of ideology that focuses on film form—narrative films that resolve contradictions in particular ways—as material examples of ideology.

### Cinema as the Political Unconscious of Reality

Cinema can, however, function (borrowing a term from Fredric Jameson) as the “political unconscious” of our everyday “reality.” The concept of the “political unconscious” was inherent in my arguments in Chapter 3 in the sense that, for me, it is the political unconscious of the class struggle that has played a determining role in the dispute between film theory and post-Theory—between Žižek and Bordwell in particular. However, cinema can also function as the political unconscious of the everyday to the extent that it is capable of telling us more about the underlying fantasies that structure our effective connection to the reality of the Symbolic. To this extent, Žižek’s interpretation of the *Star Wars* saga is of particular interest.

According to Žižek, the failure of *Star Wars, Episode III: Revenge of the Sith* (2005) is that it does not live up to the proposals it makes in the first two installments—I would even go so far as to say that, as the final installment of the saga chronologically, the conclusion does not meet the potential proposed in the first trilogy. For Žižek, what is significant is the parallel between the transformation of Anakin Skywalker into Darth Vader and the political transformation of the (good) Republic into the (evil) Empire. The political question that the film asks is, how does a democracy turn into a dictatorship? As the film shows, it isn’t that the Empire conquers the Republic. The Empire itself *is* the Republic: “[T]he Empire thus emerged out of the inherent corruption of the Republic.”<sup>31</sup> In other words, it is not that “the bad Empire is out there; it emerges through the very way we, the ‘good guys,’ fight the bad Empire, the enemy out there.”<sup>32</sup>

For Žižek, the problem is that the central thesis of this political transformation of the film is not met with the transformation of Anakin into Vader: “[I]nstead of focusing on Anakin’s hubris as an overwhelming desire to intervene, to do good, to go to the end for those he loves (Amidala) and thus to fall into the dark side, Anakin is simply shown as an indecisive warrior who is gradually sliding into evil by giving way to the temptation of power, falling into the prey of the evil Emperor. . . . Instead of oscillating between good and evil, he should have turned evil through the very wrong mode of his attachment to the good.”<sup>33</sup> What we should expect at both levels (the individual and the political), in other words, is the transformation from good into evil on the basis of trying to stick to the good, thereby demonstrating how one’s strict—and narrow-sighted—attempt to do “good” ultimately ends up falling into evil. For Žižek, the missed opportunity of the film would have been to portray Anakin/Vader as a good figure who becomes evil through “his very *excessive* attachment to the good.”<sup>34</sup>

Nevertheless, what ultimately attaches Anakin to the evil “dark side” of the force is a certain attachment to the desire of the (M)Other. As Žižek notes, Anakin’s internal psychological conflict is related to his own feelings of betrayal toward his mother—he is not able to save her from her capture and murder at the hands of the (racialized) “sand people.” His inability to save his mother is then displaced onto his love for Padme and his attempt to save her from her own death (of which Anakin is, unknowingly, the cause). Anakin’s eventual turn to evil is premised on his relationship toward his own objectification of loss in both cases—that is, loss turned into an object, the *objet petit a*. I would suggest that Anakin is, for this reason, an unethical character along the lines in which Žižek distinguishes between an ethics of desire and an ethics of drive.

In opposition to Lacan’s dictum that one must not give way to one’s desire, Žižek proposes that political ethics proper involve sticking to drive over desire. Anakin’s actions demonstrate, in a sense, that he sacrifices *jouissance* in order to save from saturation his desire (for his mother/Padme). He compromises his enjoyment as a defense mechanism against losing his desire. In contrast, an ethics of drive involves a commitment to one’s own enjoyment as *sinthome*—the inner most kernel of one’s very being—that is, a commitment to the original fact of subjectivization: the position of loss. By turning his back on this founding element of his own subjectivization—the fact that interpellates Anakin as a Jedi warrior (having to denounce, in a pseudo-Buddhist sense, all connection to objects as persons or things)—Anakin effectively becomes an unethical character.

Here, it is crucial to note an error in the way that Žižek reads Anakin’s turn toward evil. While he sees this as a simple rupture, a choice to turn evil, it is precisely because of his intention to do good for those that he

loves that he turns from the good Anakin Skywalker into the evil Darth Vader. In this sense, there effectively *is* a parallel between Anakin's transformation into Darth Vader and the shift from good Republic to evil Empire. Anakin Skywalker should, in a sense, be compared to the ethical stance of Keyser Söze in Brian Singer's *The Usual Suspects* (1995).

As Žižek explains, "when, in the flashback scene from *The Usual Suspects*, the mysterious Keyser Söze returns home and finds his wife and small daughter held at gunpoint by the members of a rival mob, he resorts to the radical gesture of shooting his wife and daughter themselves dead . . . in [this] situation of forced choice, the subject makes the 'crazy,' impossible choice of, in a way, *striking at himself*, at what is most precious to himself."<sup>35</sup>

Here, the point is that the only truly radical, ethical gesture is the one of, under the conditions of an impossible forced choice, choosing impossibility itself—of choosing that which, within the coordinates of the existing conditions of existence, only appears as something impossible. Through the radical gesture of striking at oneself, the impossible is made possible. Back to *Star Wars*: would it not have been much more tragic (and fulfilling for the spectator) for Anakin to have recognized his own position of forced choice, striking at himself (perhaps separating himself from Padme in some way) in order to avoid the trap set forth by the Emperor? This, to be sure, would make Anakin a much more tragic figure, truly turning to the dark side out of his ethical gesture to do good, placing him in a position "between the two deaths," as Žižek might put it.

The *Star Wars* saga, particularly the transformation of Anakin into Darth Vader, thus speaks to the supplemental underside of our political constellation today. More than simply the parallel between the Republic's endeavor to fight the enemy "out there," and thus transform it into the Empire out of its own internal misrecognition of the struggle, and Anakin's endeavor to protect Padme, which ultimately leads to his own transformation into Darth Vader, the failure of the film speaks to the ideological dilemma faced by today's Left. The failure of the Left, in a way, mirrors the failure of Anakin to perform a radical gesture of choosing the impossible. From this perspective, we might be able to see how cinema gives an indication of our contemporary political unconscious.

### The Artistic Sublime

According to Žižek, art and science engage with sublimation each in their own way. Science, on the one hand, sublimates abstraction: it evacuates lived reality, reducing it to a mathematical abstraction. Its only contact with the Real is that of pure formula. Art, on the other hand, remains

attached to lived reality. It takes from it a fragment, elevating it to the level of the Thing (the Lacanian definition of sublimation). Science, then, while touching the Real, seems not to want to evoke the Thing, keeping it at a distance by way of the abstract formula. Art, however, directly evokes the Thing. Here, sublimation remains incomplete. Because the artist clings to a piece of (experiential) reality, the incompleteness of sublimation allows him or her to create the *effect* of the sublime, by raising the “pathological” remainder of reality (the remainder that science seeks to exclude) to the “dignity of the Thing.” What is beautiful in art is precisely its ability to manifest that which effectively resists the formulaic in knowledge.<sup>36</sup> The artistic sublime exists outside of language: words fail! Does theory, then, work better than the formulaic of scientific knowledge in thinking about the sublime in art? That is, does Theory work better than the formalistic approach of post-Theory?

The conception of the artistic sublime evoked here bears a resemblance to the Lacanian notion of *jouissance féminine* (feminine enjoyment). Unlike masculine enjoyment, which constantly postpones enjoyment in order to maintain the pleasure of surplus-enjoyment, feminine enjoyment (in the Lacanian sense) is not submitted to the Law of the phallic signifier and, as such, remains at a distance from the threat of castration. To put things differently, masculine enjoyment distances itself from full enjoyment in order to preserve the pleasure in desire. Feminine enjoyment, in contrast, directly identifies with enjoyment. My claim here is that art—the (radical) artistic sublime, as opposed to the merely beautiful—is feminine.

“Masculine” logic is related to the sublimation of “woman” in courtly love, which operates by way of an internalized obstacle that replaces the impossibility of the (sexual) object. The Lacanian interpretation of courtly love has recently been developed in film theory by Fabio Vighi. As Vighi indicates, the three women in Federico Fellini’s film *La dolce vita* (1959) represent three different versions of the sublimated woman in the psychoanalytic conception of courtly love: Maddalena is woman as prostitute; Emma opposes the cliché of faithful and maternal wife; and Sylvia represents a modern version of the lady in courtly love.<sup>37</sup> The key to all three is that they are all elusive figures. Here, Vighi emphasizes a fundamental characteristic of masculine enjoyment: the paradoxical enjoyment of *missing the object*.

Vighi’s interpretation of François Truffaut’s *Jules et Jim* (1962) and David Lean’s *Brief Encounter* (1945) also demonstrate aspects of the masculine enjoyment of missing the object. The former is usually thought of as a film about experimenting with alternative love ethics; however, Vighi reads it as a film about the impossibility for the couple to attain full autonomy: the traumatic implication being that  $1 + 1 = 3$ . The film, according

to Vighi, is not about the failure of the love experiment but about the fact that there is always a missing third—a third “gaze,” perhaps—in every couple. *Jules et Jim* is a film about two friends who share the same woman and remain friends because of the mediating role of the woman as missing third. The missing third, in other words, is “the necessary supplement that sustains the ‘healthy’ functioning of the couple.”<sup>38</sup> This is not unlike Woody Allen’s *Vicky, Cristina, Barcelona* (2008), in which the love relationship between Cristina (Scarlett Johansson), Juan (Javier Bardem), and Marie Elena (Penelope Cruz) only functions as a threesome. As a couple, the relationship between Juan and Marie Elena was violent and disastrous. Their relationship required the materialization of the missing third, Cristina, in order to operate without any rupture. *Brief Encounter*, conversely, shows how the idealization of the love relationship disavows its own presupposition: “[T]he obstacle to the accomplishment of the illicit affair between Alec and Laura is *its very cause*, its condition of possibility.”<sup>39</sup> It is the fantasy of the affair that allows them to avoid the Real of enjoyment. The affair does not take place, not to preserve the sanctity of the institution of marriage, but because, according to Vighi, the two are afraid of losing the fantasy that binds them. Their love relationship is bound by the very impossibility of the sexual relationship, externalized as a fantasy object. As Vighi presents them, all these examples speak to the masculine side of the formulas of sexualization and the (masculine) desire to keep desiring.

Atom Egoyan’s *Chloe* (2009) similarly exhibits the ideological function of masculine enjoyment. In the film, Catherine (Julianne Moore) suspects her husband, David (Liam Neeson), a professor, of having an affair with one of his students. In order to test whether or not this is true, Catherine hires an attractive escort, Chloe (Amanda Seyfried), to seduce David. Chloe reports back to Catherine that David did, indeed, sleep with her. She recounts the details to Catherine who, in the days following, continues to fantasize about the affair between her husband and Chloe. However, it is Catherine who becomes aroused by the fantasy, and she and Chloe begin a love affair. We later discover that the affair between Chloe and David never actually took place in reality; yet the story itself still functions in arousing Catherine’s desire. The love affair between Catherine and Chloe, although it is presented as sex between two women, is not necessarily a lesbian relationship. Catherine’s fantasy, in fact, follows along the lines of the masculine logic of sublimation of the woman in courtly love, whereby the fantasy of an internalized obstacle (David’s alleged affair with Chloe) replaces the impossibility of the sexual object (the impossible love relationship between Catherine and David). *Chloe*, then, still maintains the structure of masculine surplus-enjoyment.

Key to the film is also the role played by the hair clip dropped on the floor by Chloe at the beginning of the film, which initially draws Catherine's attention to her. The hair clip is passed back and forth between Catherine and Chloe as a fetish that objectifies the impossibility of the sexual relationship itself. Chloe later give the hair clip to Catherine as a token of her affection. At the film's conclusion, after Chloe's death, glances are exchanged between Catherine, David, and their son, Michael, signaling the reconstitution of the conjugal family relationship. However, immediately following this exchange, Catherine turns around, showing the back of her hair to the camera, where we see that she is still wearing in her hair the clip given to her by Chloe. We should read this image of the hair clip as the Master-Signifier sealing the wound of the Real opened up by the desire aroused in Catherine by Chloe.

### The Political Vision of Feminine Enjoyment

What, then, is so radical about feminine enjoyment? While sublimation in masculine logic is aligned with the merely beautiful, feminine logic in art is sublime. Femininity "undermines the masculine field by abolishing the fracture between the Symbolic and the Real, thus depriving the Symbolic of its founding excess."<sup>40</sup> Man is caught in the metonymic search for the excluded object; woman, however, "has a chance to disengage from the masculine urge to symbolize and, instead, 'enjoy' the Real inconsistency of the symbolic field—the fact that 'the big Other does not exist.'"<sup>41</sup> Woman disturbs the symbolic order by removing the exception or, rather, by returning the exception to its place in the Symbolic—an intervention of the Real in the Symbolic. As Todd McGowan puts it,

Female subjectivity is "female" because it does not orient itself in relation to the phallic signifier but in relation to the absence of this signifier. As a result, the structure of female subjectivity is inherently political because it is attuned to the incomplete nature of the signifying structure. . . . Unlike the structure of male subjectivity which is defined through an exceptional signifier (the phallus) that creates a closed set of men, female subjectivity has no signifier of exception, which means that the set of women is a set without a limit, an infinite set that must remain incomplete. Ideology works on the basis of a masculine logic of exception because it must create the illusion of a whole—a whole society and whole identities—in order to provide a scene of social stability.<sup>42</sup>

The strength of Alfonso Cuarón's *Y tu Mamá También* (2001) lies in its exemplification of the contrasting representations of masculine and

feminine logic. On the one hand, the film is structured along the lines of masculine desire embodied in Luisa as the elusive figure of the woman in courtly love. She is framed as the impossible object of desire for the two boys, Julio and Tenoch. But at another level, she is also the figure of their overlapping fantasies. This is presented near the end of the film in a particularly arousing scene, where the three engage in a *ménage-a-trois*. Again, we are back to the formula  $1 + 1 = 3$ . The latter is demonstrated as Luisa moves down, out of the frame, presumably to perform fellatio on both Julio and Tenoch, at which point the two boys begin to embrace and kiss one another. The value of this scene is that it demonstrates, as Luisa moves out of the shot, the structuring role of fantasy in the relationship between the two boys. On the one hand, the overlapping fantasy of woman here suggests that there is nothing “homosexual” about the sexual act between Julio and Tenoch—the fantasy is still “heterosexual” at the level of fantasy, similar to Catherine’s fantasy in *Chloe*. But it is this fantasy that brings about the conditions of possibility of the “platonic”—that is, nonsexual—relationship between the two. On the other hand, by exposing this overlapping fantasy, Luisa effectively disrupts the friendship between Julio and Tenoch. By exposing the fantasy, Luisa returns the excess of the Real back to its place in the Symbolic. This aspect of female enjoyment is also introduced in an earlier scene.

Midway through the film, Luisa is talking on the phone to her husband, Jano. Before going on the road trip with Julio and Tenoch, Luisa learned not only that Jano has been having affairs with other women but also that she has developed cancer. As she is speaking to Jano in the telephone booth, Luisa maintains a quiet whimper, crying softly so that neither Jano nor the two boys can hear the sadness in her voice. As the door to the phone booth stays open, we see a reflection of Julio and Tenoch playing foosball in the distance: an image of the “Whole,” without exception/excess. This image should be read as an objectification of Luisa’s fantasy of completed Symbolic order, outside of the limit of “castration.” By later returning the Real to its place in the Symbolic—in her own fantasy of the noncastrated Symbolic order embodied in the embrace between Julio and Tenoch—Luisa effectively disrupts the Symbolic order, making her the most ethical character in the film.

Julio and Tenoch’s overlapping fantasy in the film should also be contrasted with another recent film, Lynn Shelton’s *Humpday* (2009). This offbeat comedy tells the story of two “heterosexual” friends who come to the conclusion that the most masculine thing that they can do is to follow through on a dare to have sex with each other on videotape. What is significant, though, is that in the end this does not take place. In a sense, although definitely not at a conscious level, what they realize is that having

sex with each other would effectively destroy their friendship by exposing and bringing to the surface their own repressed desire to have sex with each other. The thesis of the film could be read as a depiction of “heterosexual” masculine friendship as one that successfully represses the desire to have sex with each other so that the difference between male homosexuality and heterosexuality is that in the case of the latter, this desire is ultimately repressed, whereas in the case of masculine homosexuality, fantasy becomes reality. Back to *Y Tu Mamá También*: it is perhaps by directly realizing the repressed fantasy—even one that is still structurally heterosexual—of the homosexual core of their friendship that Luisa manages to disrupt the connection between Julio and Tenoch.

We should also keep in mind that this film is set against the background of political protests in Mexico City against the WTO and globalization. The film is political but only insofar as the political stays strictly in the background. It emerges only by way of “anamorphosis,” which Lacan explains in relation to Holbein’s *The Ambassadors*.<sup>43</sup> In the foreground of the painting, there is an elongated image of a skull, which is only perceivable if viewed from an angle. In order to see the image of the skull, one must “look awry” at the painting. Žižek invokes the category of “anamorphosis” in his discussion of Cuarón’s film *Children of Men* (2006), where, in this instance as well, the political is located precisely in the background.<sup>44</sup> In the foreground of both films is located a depiction of the impossibility of the sexual relationship—the relationship between Julio and Tenoch in the case of *Y Tu Mamá También* and the impossibility of sexual reproduction in the case of *Children of Men*—but this is then paralleled with the impossibility of class relationship in the background. In Cuarón’s films, the antagonism central to the sexual relationship is met by the antagonism within the political/social relationship. In the case of these films, two lacks overlap, the antagonism of the sexual relationship and that of the political relationship, demonstrating both where the Symbolic order is constituted and where it may be subverted. His films, I claim, are in this sense exemplary of the radical sublime connected to the Lacanian dimension of *jouissance féminine*.

### The “Family Myth” in Hollywood Cinema

On the other side of cinema, then, we are back to the constitutive inscription of ideology. As Žižek’s interpretation of *Star Wars* suggests, there is, in contemporary Hollywood, a continued integration of Oedipalization as a means of constituting ideology into the texture of the narrative. The latter allows us to further articulate the connection between the Master-Signifier



and the *objet petit a*. The relationship between the Master-Signifier, the *objet petit a*, and the subject is important at two different levels. On the one hand, analytically, they represent the three main characters in Oedipal analysis: the authority, desire, and the Subject. Ideology takes a particular form, depending on the resolution of the relationship between Authority and desire. For the critique of ideology it is necessary to demonstrate how the ideological resolution of this relationship is pathological and can be interpreted as either a perverse, psychotic, or neurotic text. On the other hand, the relationship between the Master-Signifier and the *objet petit a* is important for locating the subject in between the Symbolic texture of the cinema (or “reality”) and the supplemental fantasy that structures the subject’s relationship to text.

The second chapter of *In Defense of Lost Causes* (2008) focuses specifically on the Oedipalization of the content of films as ideology. As Žižek puts it, “in a typical Hollywood product, everything, from the fate of the knights of the Round Table through the October Revolution up to asteroids hitting the Earth, is transposed into an Oedipal narrative.”<sup>45</sup> According to Žižek, the films of Steven Spielberg, for example, all incorporate the motif of the impasse of paternal authority and its restoration. One should remember, he notes, that “the small boy to whom E.T. appears was abandoned by his father . . . so that E.T. is ultimately a kind of ‘vanishing mediator’ who provides a new father (the good scientist who, in the film’s last shot, is already seen embracing the mother)—when the new father arrives, E.T. can leave and ‘go home’” (*IDLC*: 56).

*Jurassic Park* (1993), according to Žižek, similarly incorporates the motif of paternal authority. As Žižek describes it,

In the very first scene of *Jurassic Park*, we see the paternal figure (played by Sam Neill) jokingly threatening the two kids with a dinosaur bone—this bone is clearly the tiny object-stain [*objet petit a*] which, later, explodes into gigantic dinosaurs, so that one can risk the hypothesis that, within the film’s fantasmatic universe, the dinosaurs’ destructive fury merely materializes the rage of the paternal superego. A barely perceptible detail that occurs later, in the middle of the film, confirms this reading. Neill and the two children, pursued by the monsters, take refuge from the murderous carnivorous dinosaurs in a gigantic tree, where, dead tired, they fall asleep; on the tree, Neill loses the dinosaur bone that was stuck in his belt, and it is as if this accidental loss has a magical effect—before they fall asleep, Neill is reconciled with the children, displaying warm affection and tenderness toward them. Significantly, the dinosaurs which approach the tree the next morning and awaken the sleeping party, turn out to be of the benevolent herbivorous kind. (*IDLC*: 56)

For Žižek, the entire plot of the film involves the resolution of the impasse of paternal authority, which is reconstituted through the relationship between the two children and Sam Neill. However, at a more controversial level, Žižek claims that *Schindler's List* (1994) is a remake of the same basic plot. He suggests that *Schindler's List* is a remake of *Jurassic Park*, with the Nazis representing the dinosaurs, the Jews as the threatened children, and Schindler as the paternal figure, whose authority is reconstituted once he passes from being "a cynical, profiteering and opportunistic paternal figure" to "his transformation into a caring and responsible father" (*IDLC*: 56–57). Despite the similarities, I would argue, in contrast to Žižek, that the latter is not really a remake of *Jurassic Park* but simply another "remake" of the Oedipal narrative.

*War of the Worlds* (2005) again reaffirms this reading of the Oedipal narrative in Spielberg's films. In the same way that Žižek notes the importance of the horror element in *The Pervert's Guide*, he suggests that *War of the Worlds* can be imagined without the added element of the alien invaders, "so that what remains is in a way 'what it is really about,' the story of a divorced working-class father who strives to regain the respect of his two children" (*IDLC*: 57). More interestingly, though, for my purposes, is the way in which Žižek interprets James Cameron's films *Titanic* (1997) and the recent blockbuster *Avatar* (2009).

According to Žižek, the Oedipal element in *Titanic*, the love story between the two protagonists, is added in order to evade the traumatic element of the class struggle in the film. It is important, he claims, to take notice of the precise moment when the disaster occurs in *Titanic*. It occurs immediately following the lovers' consummation. As well, Kate Winslet, as Žižek puts it, "passionately tells her lover [Leonardo DiCaprio] that, when the ship reaches New York the next morning, she will leave with him, preferring a life of poverty with her true love to a false and corrupted existence among the rich" (*IDLC*: 57). It is at this moment, Žižek notes, that the disaster occurs. According to Žižek, the disaster is essential for preventing the true disaster of the class struggle between the two lovers.

"One can safely guess," Žižek argues, "that the misery of everyday life would soon have destroyed their love" (*IDLC*: 58). For him, the accident occurs in order to save their love and the illusion-fantasy that if not for the disaster they would have had a happy life together. Žižek claims that the same kind of operation functions in *Avatar*.

In a recent critique of *Avatar*, Žižek comments that a full understanding of the film requires thinking through the way it conceptualizes the distinction between "reality" and fantasy.<sup>46</sup> Here he argues that *Avatar* should be compared to a film like *The Matrix*. In both films, the hero is caught between two "worlds": the "real" world and the "fantasy" world. Each film,

in a way, forces the hero to choose between reality and fantasy. The problem with *Avatar* is that it treats both the real world and the fantasy world as two different versions of the "real world" so that the choice is not between reality and fantasy but between two (compromised) versions of reality. In choosing the second alternative, the fantasy-reality of the alien world, the hero, effectively, does not traverse the fantasy; he merely reconstitutes the symbolic coordinates of his already existing supplemental, spectral fantasy, in the psychoanalytic sense. The problem here, according to Žižek, is that nothing really changes for the hero, who simply maintains a perverse relationship to his spectral fantasy, thus positioning himself within the symbolic coordinates that will allow him to maintain this particular subjective position and the "pleasure" (as opposed to enjoyment) derived from it. Here, I claim, we see something in the range of what Fredric Jameson refers to as the "utopian dimension" of the film: the "celebration of the renewal of the social order and its salvation, not merely from divine wrath, but also from unworthy leadership."<sup>47</sup>

The film, according to Žižek, should also be read as an Oedipal narrative. Like the other typical Hollywood films referred to previously, the entire plot works toward resolving the difficulty for the two love interests to form a romantic couple. This is ideology at its purest: the Oedipalization of commentary on social-historical-political problems, which Žižek compares to films like *Titanic* and Warren Beatty's *Reds* (1981), both of which Oedipalize the class struggle.

What would we get, Žižek asks, in the story without the Oedipal narrative between the two protagonists? For one thing, the blue aliens in the film would not be "humanized" in the same way and the sympathies of the audience would not lie with them. The Na'vi, I claim, would be treated much in the same way as the alien monster from one of Cameron's other blockbusters, *Aliens* (1986), or perhaps even the cyborg monster from *The Terminator* (1984). The monsters in these films are the obverse of the Na'vi from *Avatar*; they are the front and back of the same X, as Žižek might put it, and it is, I would argue, the fantasy frame that supports the way in which we (the audience) relate to them in symbolic reality. For Žižek, then, the "true avatar" of the film is the film itself, "substituting for reality."<sup>48</sup>

Another example from popular, Hollywood cinema demonstrates the operation of the masculine logic of courtly love in everyday ideology. Robert Zemeckis's *Back to the Future* (1985) is a story about a teenage boy, Marty McFly (Michael J. Fox), who travels back in time, where he meets his own parents as teenagers themselves. This is a film that must be fully aligned with the kind of Oedipalization found in Spielberg's films. It is important to compare the image we get of Marty's parents before he travels back in time with the image we get of them as teenagers and then

the transformed image of his parents after he goes back to the future (or his own present). At the beginning of the film, Marty's father, George, is presented as an impotent weakling, unable to stand up for himself and defend himself against the bully Biff Tannen. Marty's mother, Lorraine, however, is presented as the primary source of interference/prohibition with Marty's own love affair with his girlfriend, Jennifer.

Marty meets his parents in the past, and he is most surprised to discover that, contrary to his expectations, Lorraine is not the prudish and chaste girl that he assumed her to be (because of her earlier protestations about his relationship with Jennifer). Instead, Lorraine proves to be rather rebellious and adventurous, developing an infatuation with Marty, whom she, of course, does not realize is her own son, thus introducing a typical Oedipal narrative into the film. Lorraine's infatuation with Marty gives him anxiety, as though he were approaching too closely the Real of desire: the desire of the mother. Marty's task, then, is to transform his father from his status as impotent weakling into the powerful figure of the Law. The entire film can, in a sense, be thought of as the process of bringing back to power the determinant agency of the threatening figure of the castrating father. The film is, in this sense, rather conservative, a fact that is justified by the close connection the film plays to Reagan-era politics. There are a couple of interesting references to Ronald Reagan throughout the film, most notably the joke made by Doc Brown (Christopher Lloyd), the inventor of the time machine, who comments in the past, "No wonder your president has to be an actor: he has to look good on television." The mocking of Reagan, here, functions by concealing the true conservatism of the film, which seeks to restore the threatening figure of the father. *Back to the Future* is thus a rather conservative film, fully in line with the reigning conservative ideology of the 1980s.

Žižek's interpretations of Cameron's films as well as those of Spielberg, I argue, are exemplary of the way in which his references to films speak to the form of ideology. Like Fredric Jameson, who reads narrative allegorically—with history as his "master code"—Žižek interprets narrative against the analytical framework of psychoanalysis. His purpose, however, is not simply to understand something specific about cinema; it is, rather, to understand something about ideology. As I have been arguing in this chapter, Žižek's method of psychoanalytic critique—particularly his references to Lacanian concepts, such as the Master-Signifier and the *objet petit a*—adds to a film theory of ideology. Film interpretation teaches us about the way in which ideology is constituted at both the level of Symbolic "reality" and the supplement level of fantasy. The subject, in ideology, exists in between these two levels.

## Enjoyment in the Cinema

### Which Subject of the Cinema?

Film and mass culture are of interest because they represent aspects of everyday life and the part of the culture from below that makes it possible to understand how people cope with the deadlocks of power and repression and of exploitation. Film theory adds significantly to the theory of ideology, but a Žižekian analysis of cinema, rather than simply adding to film theory, is better suited to the critique of ideology. One area where film analysis and the critique of ideology overlap is on the category of enjoyment. For Žižek, enjoyment, or *jouissance*, is a political problematic that is connected to ideology. By analyzing and interpreting enjoyment in cinema, Žižek adds to our understanding of enjoyment in ideology. A Žižekian analysis of cinema, while paying little attention to the specificity of the filmic medium, does develop a much stronger analysis of the mediation of ideology. This chapter introduces a Žižekian analysis of cinema that focuses on the production of enjoyment in spectatorship and in ideology.

Here, I take up the notion of the subject as it has been developed by Žižek in order to rethink the category of ideological interpellation, both for film studies and for critical theory. Primarily, I argue that the subjective position of the spectator is developed prior to cinematic spectatorship and thus films *do not* interpellate individuals *as subjects*. Quite the opposite—ideology, I claim, in contrast to the teachings of Althusser and the “screen theorists,” always interpellates *subjects as individuals*: the bourgeois “individual” to be more precise, or what Colin MacCabe refers to as a “unified subject of experience.”<sup>1</sup> Subjects, in other words, are interpellated as *X*, as some symbolic identity or “mandate.” This distinction is important since it speaks to the difference between the agency of the subject and the repression of the latter in ideology.

Ideology interpellates subjects through the reproduction of what is in Lacanian terms referred to as “surplus-enjoyment,” which I conceive as analogous to desire and pleasure as opposed to enjoyment as such. I base my equation of surplus-enjoyment and desire primarily on the fact that the *objet petit a* is the very “surplus” of enjoyment that objectifies a Real lack; it is lack objectified and the very *raison d'être* of desire. It is only by following the path of the *objet petit a* in the mode of desire that enjoyment is dismissed for mere pleasure; it is in this way—through the production of pleasure—that subjects are interpellated in ideology. This claim is significant because it challenges the notion that the spectator always and necessarily identifies with the ideological content of the cinema—this account, therefore, allows for the possibility of a failed interpellation, where desire, or pleasure, is *not* reproduced. As well, here it is necessary to point out the difference between this last point and the way in which “suture” theory speaks about the production of desire in spectatorship. In terms of the latter, the desiring subject as spectator is always the subject of a lack. However, my point is precisely that the subject as spectator is the subject of a *surplus*.

For my purposes, the distinction between pleasure and enjoyment is important. Pleasure is of the order of the Symbolic: it is attached to surplus-enjoyment, or the little jolts of enjoyment that are allowed to seep through the cracks of the Symbolic, to which the subject remains passionately attached. Through the reproduction of desire, the subject holds onto and stays attached to its particular subjective position, therefore also reproducing the objective conditions that guarantee this subjective position (this is one way of answering the Marxian question: Why do the exploited resist the theory of their own exploitation?). Enjoyment, in contrast, is of the order of the impossible-Real: as Žižek puts it in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, “*jouissance* does not exist, it is impossible, but it produces a number of traumatic effects.”<sup>2</sup> The paradox of enjoyment is that it has consistency *because* it is prohibited; its prohibition gives rise to pleasure as “surplus-enjoyment.” Seeking out prohibition in order to save surplus-enjoyment and desire from saturation makes pleasure “perverse” in the strict psychoanalytic, masochistic sense. There is, of course, nothing original about the claim that cinema reproduces pleasure for the subject. My claim, however, is that ideology reproduces pleasure for the subject in exactly the same way that cinema produces pleasure.

### The Dialectic of Appearance and Fantasy

In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek explains Hegel's thesis that “the supersensible is appearance *qua* appearance”<sup>3</sup> in the following way: “The

appearance implies that there is something behind it which appears through it; it conceals a truth and by the same gesture gives a foreboding thereof; it simultaneously hides and reveals the essence behind its curtain. But what is hidden behind the phenomenal appearance? Precisely the fact that there is nothing to hide. What is concealed is that the very act of concealing conceals nothing.”<sup>4</sup>

The fact that there is more truth in the appearance than in that which is supposedly concealed by it is one that decisively speaks to the connection between film theory and ideology critique. The essence, supposedly hidden behind the appearance, is already contained within the logic of the appearance itself. It is in this sense that cinematic “reality” is much more real than reality itself. Nevertheless, the appearance perceived *as veil* is constituted through the fantasy that gives it consistency. The appearance cannot disintegrate until the fantasy that gives it support also starts to deteriorate. The two films that solidify this dialectic between appearance and fantasy in Žižek’s texts are *Vertigo* (1958) and *Mulholland Drive* (2000).

*Vertigo* is, according to Žižek, “the film about the captivating force of a sublime image.”<sup>5</sup> It is a film about how “there is more truth in the appearance than in the true story behind it.”<sup>6</sup> As Žižek puts it, the shock of the film “is not that the original turns out to be merely a copy . . . but that (what we took to be) *the copy turns out to be the original*.”<sup>7</sup> Against some film critics who maintain that *Vertigo* is truly immersed in a Platonic problematic (of appearance and reality), Žižek claims that the film is ultimately rather anti-Platonic: “The murderous fury that seizes Scottie when he finally discovers that Judy, whom he tried to make into Madeleine, *is* (the woman he knew as) Madeleine, is the fury of the deceived Platonist when he perceives that the original he wants to remake in a perfect copy is already, in itself, a copy.”<sup>8</sup>

There are three key scenes in *Vertigo*, according to Žižek, that show how Scottie relates to Judy. The first is the scene of their initial evening date, when Scottie notices a woman in the restaurant who resembles Madeleine; she is dressed in the same grey clothes worn by Madeline. For Žižek, this scene, particularly the moment when both Judy and the woman in grey appear in the same shot, is the moment when the Absolute appears as the suprasensible dimension that “shines through” in reality. The second scene is the one in Judy’s room in the Empire Hotel after their evening date. It is in this scene that we see the profile shot of Judy in the dark. Judy’s face is then shown, half covered by shadow. It is the complement to the earlier scene in Ernie’s restaurant where we see Judy, dressed as Madeleine, in profile. This, according to Žižek, is the scene in which Judy herself is subjectivized, where she is reduced to “less-than-object, to a formless pre-ontological stain.”<sup>9</sup> The third scene occurs at the dance hall when, as Žižek

puts it, "Scottie's disgust at Judy's body" is fully rendered. In this scene, Judy wants desperately to be close to Scottie. He, in contrast, seems to want to maintain a safe distance from her. For Žižek, this scene should be read as an indication about the difference between love and sexual *jouissance*. The latter is, according to Žižek, inherently masturbatory and speaks to the core of subjectivity. Love, however, is not a condition of renouncing the core of sexual *jouissance* but of sharing this inner core with my sexual partner. Referring then to this distinction, Žižek makes the point that, perhaps, Scottie does not truly love Judy-Madeleine. Rather, what he wants is "to masturbate with the aid of her real body."<sup>10</sup> This follows from Žižek's formula that "sex" is essentially masturbation with a real partner.

We can imagine this problem by referring to another well-known example that Žižek uses to explain the role of fantasy as a support of reality. In an English beer advert, a fairy-tale scenario is presented in which a princess sees a frog, kisses it, and it turns into a handsome prince. The prince then kisses the princess, and she turns into a bottle of beer. This advert, for Žižek, speaks to the Lacanian thesis that "there is no sexual relationship." What we might imagine, then, is that, at the level of the obscene fantasy, the support of the romantic image of a prince and a princess is the image of a frog embracing a bottle of beer . . . back to *Vertigo*.<sup>11</sup>

According to Žižek, these three scenes form a Hegelian syllogism: the first premise, "Scottie is looking for Madeleine in Judy"; the second, "Judy is herself reduced to a proto-entity, an incomplete, formless slime, a kind of Platonic *chora*, a pure receptacle for the sublime Idea of Madeleine"; and the conclusion, "Judy, in her bodily presence, can only be an object of disgust for Scottie."<sup>12</sup> The way to read this syllogism, I claim, is to conceive it along the lines of our earlier thesis about the relation between appearance and fantasy. The truth about Judy-Madeleine lies in the copy/appearance. Scottie's "disgust" then emerges as a confrontation with the *underlying* truth connected to the appearance, the truth that comes by way of the fantasy that structures his approach to reality. The film that speaks much more clearly about this encounter with the fantasy—an encounter that subsequently fully disturbs the effective "reality"—is *Mulholland Drive*.

The key scene, for Žižek, takes place in the nightclub *Silencio*. Here, Betty and Rita watch as a singer performs a Spanish version of Roy Orbison's "Crying." However, in the middle of the song, when the singer falls ill and faints while the singing continues, we get the message, according to Žižek, that when the fantasy falls apart, reality disintegrates, but the Real persists—or, rather, it "insists." The voice as a spectral object of the Real shines through as a Real object—*objet petit a* in the invocatory drive—suggesting for Žižek that the Real remains even when "reality" falls apart. The voice here signals the shift from desire to drive as the frame of fantasy



is disrupted. In typical Lynchian fashion, it is at this point, the point at which fantasy disintegrates, that we enter into the nightmarish world of the film. It is with the disintegration of the fantasy that we encounter the traumatic void of subjectivity.

### Screened Beliefs

We can also imagine the way in which cinema functions as a support of ideology by way of Žižek's notion of "interpassivity."<sup>13</sup> The clearest example of the latter is the effect of "canned laughter" on television sitcoms. After a hard day's work, I can come home and turn on the television to help me relax. But since I am so exhausted, I cannot even bring myself to laugh out loud at the comedic scenario unfolding for my amusement—luckily, the television set itself laughs for me. Interpassivity speaks to the way in which belief functions today. With interpassivity, I am no longer required to subjectively assume a particular belief. Belief, instead, is objectified in institutions of governance but also in cultural objects.

As Žižek continues to argue, ideology critique today is no longer a matter of demystification. Ideology is not a matter of knowledge; it is, rather, a matter of belief, objectified in our very everyday actions. The problem for the critique of ideology is how to convince the subject of its submission to the reigning order when it is already well aware of the knowledge that pertains to existing forms of power. While it may not be the case that the subject believes at a conscious level, its actions demonstrate otherwise. Ideology here takes on the perverse form of fetishism: "I know very well, but. . . ." Cinema, significantly, also operates as an instance of interpassive objectified belief. What we see with the cinema is an example of belief displaced from the subject onto the objective form of the medium. I am no longer required to believe in harmony, community, love, romance . . . the cinema believes, interpassively, in my place.

A clear example of the latter, particularly for progressive leftists, can be seen in the documentary films of Michael Moore. Moore's final statement at the end of his film *Capitalism: A Love Story* (2009) is quite indicative of the way in which he as well perceives the interpassive role of the cinema. At the film's conclusion, Moore states that he cannot continue to make his movies without some kind of action on the part of his audience. In other words, he expresses his own frustration at the interpassivity of audiences who view his films but do not take to the streets, who do not get up off of the couch and take political action. The problem that he himself does not even see is that—precisely because he holds to the view that ideology is a matter of debunking false knowledge—audiences do not feel the need

to take political action—they do not need to subjectivize their belief in a political cause—because his films believe in their place.

Screened beliefs also operate by objectifying some of the underlying fantasies that structure our attachment to the reigning ideology. Recent science fiction/disaster films speak to this last fact. Žižek often cites a point made by Fredric Jameson in *The Seeds of Time* (1994) that “[i]t seems to be easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the end of the earth and nature than the breakdown of late capitalism.”<sup>14</sup> Referencing Jameson, Žižek often points to the increasing prevalence of films such as Mimi Leder’s *Deep Impact* (1998), Michael Bay’s *Armageddon* (1998), and Roland Emmerich’s *2012* (2009). These films all articulate one of the leading underlying fantasies of late capitalism: that it is easier for us to imagine the end of the world than a much more modest transformation of the capitalist mode of production.

We should even take note of the fact that the most recent film in the *Star Trek* franchise, J. J. Abrams’s *Star Trek* (2009), does not follow chronologically from the previous films in the series. Instead, it takes us back to a point prior to the original television series. There is even an indication that the film is meant to be read as a representation not of a distant future but of a world much closer to the present era. This is indicated by an almost neglected feature in the film: the song that is playing as the young, teenage James Kirk speeds along the highway in an automobile is the Beastie Boys’ “Sabotage”—a song that one would, perhaps, not expect to hear being played as part of the diegetic space of this future “reality” scenario. The turning back of the *Star Trek* narrative in the direction not of the future but of the past suggests that for us today—particularly at a time when the financial stage of capital increasingly forces us to borrow from the future in order to live in the present—the future (an alternative future, that is) almost seems impossible to even imagine.

One final example indicates this underlying fantasy of the impossibility of utopia: the popular trend of vampire films for teenagers, encapsulated primarily in the *Twilight Saga*. Why are these films (and books) so popular among teenagers? I would risk the hypothesis that today, when it is no longer possible to imagine a world beyond the despair of late capitalism, the vampire offers the possibility of a life beyond death in a way that is capable of curing the malaise of today’s teenagers. Vampires—and particularly the romantic aspect of the vampire narratives—offer to teens the fantasy of a lifeworld outside of the cynical reality of late capitalism. *Twilight* and similar films desubjectivize our active engagement with the politics of late capitalism, objectivizing the surplus of our belief—and enjoyment—in the screened fantasy of the life beyond death. Films such as these relieve us of the need to identify with the very void that is at the heart of subjectivity.

### Psychoanalysis and the Self

Žižek's notion of subjectivity is best addressed by beginning with the questions "What is the Self?" and "Is there freedom?" Both questions are related to issues centering on determinism, or determination. Cognitivist film scholars, such as Bordwell, seek to answer similar questions in film studies by looking at human mental activities—such as recognition, comprehension, inference-making, interpretation, judgment, memory, and imagination in film viewing—and in many ways they attempt to close the gap between scientific and philosophical inquiry.<sup>15</sup> For Žižek, however, the problem of closing this gap is a false problem. The problem, for him, is not how to close the gap but rather *how to rethink this gap* (between science and philosophy) *with each new scientific discovery*. For Žižek, the questions should be "How do our conceptions of 'reality' and our conceptions of consciousness change with discoveries of the New? How, in other words, does the New come to be in the context of determination?"

Science, as a knowledge in the Real, seems to push more and more toward a *formal* determinism as opposed to freedom. If thought is merely a pattern of measurable brain activity and if action is nothing more than sensory impulse, from where does the agency of the subject come? How do I know that my thoughts and actions are not directly stimulated by access to the brain processes? Is all that "I" am simply determined by these purely biological and chemical factors? In terms of the cinema, how can I be sure that the pleasure I take from it is *not* the result of some direct stimulus to the brain and the senses? These are also important questions for filmmakers and often surface in the content of cinema. Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner: The Director's Cut* (1993), for example, posits questions about the formation of the "Self" and consciousness by playing with the relationship between dream and memory and consciousness of the Self. Both Deckard and Rachel believe themselves to be human, not because they have been programmed to believe that they are human, but because of the way in which their conscious "Selves" react to processes in their (electronic/mechanical) brains. The content itself (memories/fantasies) may have been implanted in their minds; however, what matters is the way in which their conscious "Selves" register and misrecognize this content.

Here, consciousness, the "Self," and subjectivity are to be radically differentiated from the *substance* of the brain. Consciousness, or the "Self," is that gap between nature and culture; it is the result of a constitutive *imbalance*. It arises through a process of reflexivity, by which the Self registers its own misrecognition *to itself*. Consciousness arises by registering this imbalance. It is a phenomenon that emerges out of a deadlock of impossibility. Consciousness is the positing of the possible *and* necessary (the fact

of the subject's existence) in the face of impossibility and contingency; the latter are those elements of thought that are relegated to the unconscious.

The notion of consciousness that I am developing here needs to be distinguished from the traditional Cartesian conception of consciousness—that is, the bourgeois conception of the subject of certainty and unified experience, which early film theorists claimed is interpellated in the cinema. Against some structuralist/poststructuralist thinkers who have turned away from the Cartesian subject, one of Žižek's philosophical aims has been to bring back to prominence the relevance of the Cartesian *cogito*. In his return to the *cogito*, Žižek outlines the difference between the modern, bourgeois subject of unified experience (the “conscious subject”) and the psychoanalytic subject of the unconscious.

### *Cogito and the Forced Choice of Being*

According to Žižek, *cogito* is important for understanding the unconscious in Lacanian psychoanalysis. Lacan set out to elaborate on the Freudian method, which begins by assuming the position of the subject of certainty—that is, from the position of the fully self-aware, centered bourgeois subject of modernity or, in other words, the Cartesian reduction of *cogito* to *res cogitans*: the reduction of existence to consciousness—*cogito ergo sum*. As Lacan puts it, “Freud's method is Cartesian—in the sense that he sets out from the basis of the subject of certainty. With this aim, the first thing to be done is to overcome that which connotes anything to do with the content of the unconscious—especially when it is a question of extracting it from the experience of the dream—to overcome that which floats everywhere, that which marks, sustains, spots, the text of any dream communication—*I am not sure, I doubt*.”<sup>16</sup>

Against the background of the Cartesian *cogito*, psychoanalysis follows the Kantian “transcendental turn” in pointing out the disjointedness of the subject within the totality of the universe. The subject (of the unconscious) in psychoanalysis parallels the Kantian subject in the sense of lacking a definitive place. This lack is constitutive of the subject. The point of psychoanalysis is that the subject is radically decentered. Consciousness is the result of a *misrecognition* of its place—its “position of enunciation”—within the Symbolic. What psychoanalysis, following Kant, brings back to the table is the elementary aspect of Self-doubt. This is what Lacan sets out to argue by referring to the Cartesian *cogito*.

*Cogito*, according to Lacan, results from a forced choice of being. Lacan contends that the subject is forced to choose between thought and being (existence). In order to exist, within the confines of the Symbolic that is,

the subject is *condemned* to the choice of being, and thought is relegated to the unconscious. A *person* becomes a *subject* by way of this forced choice of being, which relegates thought to the place of the unconscious. As Žižek puts it, the unconscious is precisely the “thing which thinks” and is in this way inaccessible to the subject. Lacan’s paraphrase of Descartes is “I am, therefore *it* thinks.”<sup>17</sup> Žižek explains that Descartes’s error was the assumption that the choice of thought secured for the subject a piece of being, thus attaining the certainty of “I” as a “thinking substance” (*res cogitans*).

Žižek’s point, apropos the Lacanian forced choice of being, is that the being chosen by the subject has its support in unconscious fantasy. It is not the conscious subject that thinks (not, “I think therefore I am”); it is, rather, the unconscious fantasy that “thinks” (“I am, therefore ‘it’ thinks”). It is in the choice of being that the subject’s ideal ego is then formed in the *Imaginary*; it is part of the subject’s “fundamental fantasy”—the point from which I see myself as “this.” It is the *image* of myself—my ideal point of identification with myself—which is the Imaginary, pathological support for my everyday, practical engagement with Symbolic reality. *Blade Runner: The Director’s Cut* is again useful in considering the role of fantasy as a support of being and “reality.” Deckard’s fantasy image of the unicorn speaks to the way in which our everyday, practical conception of being is supported in fantasy. References to this image within the film indicate something about Deckard’s (post)human status. The unicorn fantasy is presented as the bare substance of Deckard’s attachment to humanity and speaks to the way in which fantasy supports his attachment to “reality.” At a certain level, the unicorn fantasy is the inverse side of Deckard’s “humanity” (Deckard = Unicorn).

The fantasy-frame, through which I see myself seeing myself, is the original, constitutive symptom of subjectivization, what Lacan referred to as the *sinthome*, as opposed to “symptom.” While “symptom,” on the one hand, represents a Symbolic formation that emerges as a result of repression—as a pathological return of the Real in the Symbolic—*sinthome*, on the other hand, according to Žižek, “is literally our only substance, the only positive support for our being, the only point that gives consistency to the subject.” *Sinthome* answers the question, “[H]ow do we account for patients who have, beyond any doubt, gone through their fantasy, who have obtained distance from the fantasy-framework of their reality, but whose symptom still persists?”<sup>18</sup> *Sinthome* posits the fact that the subject “enjoys” her symptom: it is “the minimal formula of the subject’s consistency.”<sup>19</sup> The *sinthome* is the only, final remaining substance of the subject’s ontological attachment to impossible enjoyment.<sup>20</sup> In a sense, *sinthome* is the original, constituting symptom of the subject—a symptom that forms as a “fundamental fantasy,” giving consistency to the

subject in place of (Self-)doubt. Fantasy is that which closes the gap of the preontological Real, the Void of nothingness.<sup>21</sup> This points to the psychoanalytic theory that, as Žižek puts it, “what should remain inaccessible to us is not the noumenal Real, but our *fundamental fantasy* itself—the moment the subject comes too close to this phantasmatic core, he loses the consistency of his existence.”<sup>22</sup> This notion of *sinthome* plays a central role in Christopher Nolan’s *Inception* (2010).

In the film, the very idea of “inception”—of implanting an idea into the subconscious mind—requires changing the subject’s *sinthome*—that is, the very image (*imago*) or ideal ego it has of itself. Affecting the *sinthome* allows the subject to perceive the inspiration for a conscious decision as something that occurs spontaneously to the subject itself. The subject misrecognizes the fact that the idea was implanted, because its origins are perceived as pertaining the subject’s own inner sense of Self. Cobb (Leonardo DiCaprio) and his team are able to implant an idea into Fischer’s (Cillian Murphy) mind by having him perceive, on a subconscious level, a change in the way that he viewed himself from the ideal position of his father.<sup>23</sup> The task of analysis is thus to have the subject identify with its *sinthome*.

The ontological thesis of psychoanalysis is that in order to gain access to Symbolic reality, something must remain foreclosed from it: the errant, irrational fantasy-object that sticks out, the *objet petit a*, the object-cause of desire, the remainder of the Real; the object without a place in the Symbolic, which is, conversely, the very object that *is* the subject. It is the piece of the subject that it itself cannot even identify. It is this that remains misrecognized in the form of ideology. The truth of the subject is neither its Symbolic identity nor simply its place, the gap or Void, in the Symbolic. It is the thought of the unconscious, the *objet petit a*, which directly *is* the subject. It is that which is “in” the subject that the subject is not ready to assume. Doing so would challenge its own Symbolic existence. Its recognition would signal a contradiction between the practical, rational (i.e., reified) consciousness of the subject and the irrational, unconscious fantasy, the misrecognition of which creates the illusory image of closure in the former.

Fantasy and *sinthome* are “two sides of the same coin.” Fantasy is foundational as the constituting “substance” of the subject. It is an encounter with this irrational fantasy that is truly traumatic for the subject. The fantasy/*sinthome* is obscene in the sense that it says something about the subject that it is itself not ready to accept or assume in the first person. The subject, in other words, is not ready to take responsibility for its own pathological supplemental fantasy, which structures its very own subjectivization within the coordinates of the Symbolic. Fantasy and *sinthome* are condensed into the form of the Lacanian object, the *objet petit a*.

My reference to the *objet petit a* in this sense has to do precisely with the Imaginary, pathological fantasy-object that remains inaccessible to the subject. *Objet petit a* is the very kernel of the subject's being—thought transferred to the unconscious. It is the *frame*, or the “pure form” of our experience, which is constantly misrecognized. It is in this context that Žižek argues that fantasy structures reality—not fantasy as the Symbolic texture of reality or some kind of daydreaming naïve consciousness by which we experience the world, but fantasy as the very support of the Symbolic, beneath the surface.

Desire, then, is produced through the subject's entry into the Symbolic order (through “symbolic castration”) in the forced choice of being. Desire is retroactively posited as the (unconscious) presupposition of the subject's very existence (within the Symbolic). The Symbolic is what prohibits full *jouissance*, or enjoyment but also what regulates the subject by producing little “jolts” of enjoyment—or, more precisely, surplus-enjoyment (or surplus-*jouissance*)—through the constant (re)production of desire. Desire, for Žižek, is best rendered through a joke about a conscript who pleads insanity in order to avoid his military service: “[H]is ‘symptom’ was compulsively to examine every document within his reach, and exclaim: ‘That’s not it!’; when he was examined by the military psychiatrists, he did the same, so the psychiatrists finally gave him a document confirming that he was released from military service. The conscript reached for it, examined it, and exclaimed: ‘That’s it!’”<sup>24</sup> The point, of course, is that the search itself generated its own object. This is precisely how desire functions, and the cinema adds to this reproduction of desire by staging another Symbolic fiction within which the subject/spectator produces its own surplus-enjoyment in the process of searching for enjoyment itself. It is this constant reproduction of desire that maintains the subject's existence within the Symbolic. It makes possible the conditions of being.

### Conditions of (Im)Possibility

From the Lacanian perspective, being is grounded by the conditions of possibility of *jouissance*. Ideology (or hegemony) relies on the masochistic submission of the subject to Symbolic authority. According to this logic, the subject submits itself to the prohibition of authority in order to *evade the impossibility of full enjoyment*. *Jouissance* becomes ontologically possible if I blame my inability to gain access to it on prohibition. What is truly traumatic in the subject's encounter with the Real is the realization that full enjoyment is ontologically impossible. However, the way to avoid this impossibility is to assume that its inaccessibility is due not to its status as

impossible-Real but to prohibition. This, I argue, is how power/authority is productive of desire, and *this is how subjects are interpellated by ideology*.

According to Žižek, our politics today are more and more directly the politics of *jouissance*. Politics today are concerned with the different ways of soliciting, regulating, and controlling our enjoyment.<sup>25</sup> Today, in our free, postpolitical, “end of history,” liberal democratic societies, not only are we supposedly free to enjoy; we are more and more enjoined to do so. For Žižek, postmodern societies are societies of the superego. If modern society was characterized by the hard work of production and the authority of the paternal law, postmodern society is characterized by the ideology of consumption, pleasure, and the maternal superego injunction: “Enjoy!”

As Žižek points out, Law, in the psychoanalytic sense, is “the agency of prohibition that regulates the distribution of enjoyment on the basis of a common, shared renunciation (the ‘symbolic castration’), whereas superego marks a point at which *permitted* enjoyment, freedom-to-enjoy, is reversed into *obligation* to enjoy.”<sup>26</sup> The Law is what *regulates* pleasure in order to “save” us from the imposition, by the agency of the superego, to enjoy. This is the hypothesis of the Master in psychoanalysis: in order to save our desire from saturation, we “externalize the impediment, the inherent impasse of desire, transforming it into a ‘repressive’ force which opposes it from outside.”<sup>27</sup> Perversion, then, is the result of assuming *the necessity* of the Law in the production of desire, yet the pervert continues to “enjoy one’s symptom,” so to speak.

Through the regulation of enjoyment, of desire, the Law produces surplus-enjoyment, the transformation of the raw Real of drive into something domesticated, off of which the reigning order maintains itself. The reigning Symbolic order is self-reproductive to the degree that it is capable of generating surplus-enjoyment in the subject. The only problem with the contemporary reigning order is that it *appears* to have, as Žižek points out, dispensed with the agency of the Master-Signifier—the agency of the Law and Power. This is what leaves as the only agency of ideological interpellation the superego injunction to “Enjoy!”<sup>28</sup> However, since enjoyment is impossible-Real, this superego injunction is met with *anxiety*, or a traumatic encounter with the impossible. Postmodernity is in this sense, I claim, truly the “age of anxiety.”<sup>29</sup>

### The Symbolic Mandate

Contrary to the Althusserian notion of interpellation, ideology does not involve some kind of *internalization* of external contingent notions in the ideological state apparatuses (ISAs). According to Žižek, “ideology is



the exact opposite of internalization of the external contingency: it resides in the externalization of the result of an inner necessity”—the subject’s own inner necessity of existence, of sustaining the surplus-enjoyment, the desire, at the heart of Symbolic existence-agency—“and, the task of the critique of ideology here is precisely to discern the hidden necessity in what appears as a mere contingency.”<sup>30</sup> For Žižek, the problem with Althusser is that neither he nor his successors was ever able to elaborate on the link between ISAs and ideological interpellation: “[H]ow does the Ideological State Apparatus . . . ‘internalize’ itself; how does it produce the effect of ideological belief in a Cause and the interconnecting effect of subjectivization, of recognition of one’s ideological position?”<sup>31</sup> The first thing to do, I claim, is to stop thinking of interpellation as an internalization of ideology *into* the unconscious.

Interpellation is not the actualization of an individual into a subject. We must begin to think of interpellation as the goal of the subject to have its identity recognized by the Symbolic big Other; this is why desire is always the desire of the Other. It is not the subject who recognizes the call of the Other; it is, rather, the Other for whom the subject endeavors to have itself recognized in the guise of some symbolic mandate: “I am (this).” Identity, as such, is a fake and is, in this sense, “phallic.” The “phallus” in psychoanalysis is not a guarantee of (masculine) power; it is, rather, the fake of masculinity. The masculine position in psychoanalysis is a performance (in the Butlerian sense), which we play at in order to generate some kind of recognition of ourselves on the part of the big Other. This is the misrecognition central to the ideological sense of Self. A Lacanian logic game is helpful for an explanation of this process.

Žižek often refers to Lacan’s paper on “logical time,” in which Lacan presents a problem: a prison warden brings together three inmates and explains that he must free one of them for reasons that are not mentioned.<sup>32</sup> He tells them that he will conduct a test to decide which of the three he will release. The warden holds five disks: three of them are white, while two are black. A disk, either white or black, will be placed on the head of each inmate. They will then be left together in a room but banned from communication. The first to accurately figure out the color of the disk placed on his head will be set free. This conclusion, however, must be based on a logical assessment to be presented to the warden after passing through the door; doing so is an indication that he has discovered the color of the disk on his head.

Three possible solutions are presented to this problem:

1. If one inmate sees a black disk on the heads of the other two, he immediately knows that the disk on his own head must be white, since there are only two black disks.

2. If one inmate sees on the heads of the other two one white disk and one black, he can then surmise that if his were black then the inmate with the white disk would get up and walk out the door. Since he does not, this inmate can infer that the disk on his own head must not be black. His own solution to this problem comes from the inaction of the other two.
3. If one of the inmates sees two white disks on the heads of the other two, he can reason that, based on the inaction of the other two, his own disk must be white: if it were black, then—following the logic in the previous solution—one of the other inmates would have already stood up and walked out the door. Since neither does so, it is logical to assume that all the inmates have a white disk on their heads.

Here, Lacan refers to logic in order to develop the notion of self-reflection. Consciousness of the Self comes to the subject through a temporal delay—in the case of the final solution, there is a double delay whereby the subject must first hypothesize the inaction of the others before assuming the solution. However, in ideology, this is definitely *not* how the subject assumes a symbolic mandate—quite the reverse. In ideology, I claim, the anxiety of existing without a symbolic mandate forces the subject to assume a nonreflexive mandate: “I am this.” As Žižek puts it, “in the case of the symbolic mandate, we never simply ascertain what we are; we ‘become what we are’ by means of a precipitous subjective gesture.”<sup>33</sup> This precipitous gesture of *assuming* a symbolic mandate implies a shift from object to signifier—symbolically, in the logic game, from the disk-object to the assumption of a signifier (white or black); the disk is the object “I am”—that is, *objet petit a*—and “its invisibility to me renders the fact that I can never get an insight into ‘what I am as object.’”<sup>34</sup> In the subject’s misrecognition of the Self as object, then, we find the relationship between the subject and the object (*objet petit a*) in the psychoanalytic sense. What is always inaccessible to me is the object that sustains my Symbolic-phenomenological existence as Self—that is, the supplemental fantasy object. This is what is necessary for understanding the psychoanalytic conception of desire. Desire is the surplus-enjoyment that sustains my own sense of existence, my own sense of Self, within the Symbolic. Ideology, I claim, interpellates the subject through the (re-)production of desire. It is this unconscious level of desire that attaches the subject to its own exploitation in ideology. Žižek’s notion of the “parallax gap” helps to account for the subject’s misrecognition of the desire that attaches it to authority.

### Parallax View

What Žižek refers to as a “parallax view,” or a “parallax gap,” is best described as a link between two or more different perspectives for which no neutral common ground is possible. There are several different ways to approach this notion of “parallax” in Žižek’s work. On the one hand, we might consider it in relation to what Žižek calls a “parallax Real.” While the standard, Lacanian Real is that which always returns as the same—the non-Symbolizable Thing (*das Ding*)—the parallax Real is that which accounts for the various different *representations* of the same underlying Real.<sup>35</sup> The parallax Real, in other words, accounts for the multiple different Symbolic appearances that all try to grasp the gap/Void of the Real at their core. On the other hand, a parallax gap may be understood as the “minimal difference,” or the “pure difference,” between these various different representations. It is the minimal difference that cuts across and divides the same object among the various different perspectives. This minimal difference is represented by the *objet petit a*, which is, Žižek tells us, a “pure parallax object.”<sup>36</sup> This object is thus (what Althusser, following Spinoza, refers to as) the “absent cause” of the Symbolic. Again, the various different Symbolic appropriations of the object are split internally and derive from different attempts to get at the object itself.

Žižek’s philosophical-psychoanalytic, ontological claim is that the subject itself is internally split like a parallax gap. This is the parallax between the “lack” and the surplus, between the *empty place* in the structure and the errant object *without a place* in the structure. Žižek asserts that these are not two elements but the same element viewed from two different perspectives in a “parallax view.” They are one and the same entity viewed from two different subjective positions.<sup>37</sup> Žižek suggests, then, that the *objet petit a* is precisely “the paradoxical object which directly ‘is’ the subject.”<sup>38</sup> In order for the subject to move beyond some pathological constraint in its everyday practical state of existence, it must begin by assuming this object in the first person—to take responsibility for the pathological, itself—that is, by risking the objective, noumenal kernel of its own phenomenal existence, the subject must “traverse the fantasy” and enter a state of “subjective destitution.”

Žižek contends that when we are dealing with ideology, it is not enough to resort to some debunking of the level of appearances as some form of naïve or false consciousness. Rather, it is important to understand that within the subject there is an inner necessity that ties it, ever more aggressively, to the level of appearances, beyond all attempts at demystification. Fantasy, as a scandalous, paradoxical element, directly subjectivizes the order of appearances. What I am dealing with here is what

might be thought of as the “objectively subjective”: the fantasy object that subjectivizes the subject toward the Symbolic order.<sup>39</sup> There is, in other words, no subjectivization, no identity within the Symbolic without some sublime fantasy object in the subject through which it is subjectivized. The “objectively subjective,” in other words, is the way things objectively appear to the subject even if it is not ready to assume this appearance in the first person.

This, finally, is how I believe we need to approach spectatorship in the cinema. When speaking of “subject-positions,” it is important to avoid the conception of spectatorship developed by the screen theorists as well as the poor image of it developed by film scholars such as David Bordwell, Noël Carroll, and Stephen Prince. What we have to keep in mind, though, is the parallax gap between the spectator as subject and the sublime underside of fantasy that subjectivizes the subject, producing its own subjective encounter with the Symbolic text of the cinema. In contrast to the psychoanalytic film theory of the 1970s and 1980s, we do not have one spectator assuming the same “gaze” (such as the “male gaze”) as that intended by the filmmaker. Rather, we have different subject-positions in a parallax Real, all of which are subjectivized by the particularity of the fantasy object as objectively subjective.

### Symbolic Fictions

If it is now possible to induce pleasure through direct stimulus—through drugs or electro-chemical inducements on the pleasure centers of the brain—why then is there still anything like (big C) Culture or art? Why, in other words, do we have art and Culture for our aesthetic pleasure rather than simple and direct stimuli? Why do we still need Symbolic fictions for our pleasure? This is the problem that Žižek invokes regarding the Wachowski brothers' *The Matrix* (1999). The question Žižek asks apropos of the Matrix, the virtual universe of Symbolic reality in the film, is not, why does the Matrix need our energy?—the human libido as the energy used to power the machines; rather, the question to ask is the opposite one: why does the energy need the Matrix?<sup>40</sup>

*The Matrix* seems to offer a valuable frame of reference for Žižek's analysis of cinema and subjectivity simply because of its own self-referentiality. The film speaks to the very process within which its spectators are engaged. *The Matrix* forces us even to ask, how can we be certain that our own effective, everyday Symbolic reality is not just some computer-generated simulation? I suggest that the topic of human sexuality can be of assistance here.

Humans can, in a way, be distinguished from animals in the sense that humans do not just have sex for the purpose of procreation. What we call “sexuality” is the Symbolic universe within which sex itself is constantly displaced. Here, then, I am referring to the Lacanian thesis that “there is no sexual relationship” (*ils n’y a pas de rapport sexuel*). On this topic, Žižek evokes a cognitive psychologist explanation for the evolution of human intelligence.<sup>41</sup> Geoffrey Miller argues that the impetus for intellectual evolution was not survival but, rather, competition in sexual choice. The evolution of human intelligence, according to Miller, developed through efforts to convince a potential mate to choose “me” as a partner. This developed into “fitness indicators,” which demonstrate one’s advantage over others in sexual competition. For Miller, human mental abilities are examples of psychological fitness indicators. However, what Miller misses, according to Žižek, is the fact that only in humans are these indicators (if the argument is in fact correct) elevated into ends in themselves. In other words, it is not the act of having sex that is the desired end in human sexuality. Rather, it is the act of *arousal*. If the desired end were only the act itself, we would most likely witness an end to seduction.

Žižek’s point in referring to this example is that we have “sexuality”—the Symbolic universe of eroticism and seduction—*because* of its inherent failure. Sexuality spills over into all other contents because of its own inherent impossibility—that is, the inherent impossibility of its “end” in the attainment of the object of desire. The sexual act is never enough. Do we not always end the sexual act wanting more? The uniqueness of humanity, according to Žižek, is that we seem to take more pleasure in “fitness indicators,” the process of seduction, and the Symbolic universe of sexuality than in the act itself. Here, he reverses the formula: it is not that sexuality develops as a means to enact procreation; rather, we procreate (or, we engage in the sexual act) in order to take further pleasure in seduction. Sexuality, in other words, is a “game” of Symbolic fictions that serve to displace the traumatic energy of drive. The Symbolic is thus that in which we immerse ourselves in order to discharge our libidinal energy. It is in the Symbolic real of sexuality that humans evade the traumatic abyss of the Real, of blind drives. It is the Symbolic that assigns meaning to these blind drives. The passage from the Real to the Symbolic is the one from meaninglessness to meaning. It is nonmeaning that is utterly traumatic.

Cinema is of interest precisely because of its very form *as* a Symbolic fiction that activates desire. In this sense, cinema reproduces perfectly the elementary matrix of identity (as opposed to subjectivity) within the Symbolic coordinates of ideology. It does so, I argue, by generating an unconscious fantasy that sustains the pleasure that it derives, that fully integrates the spectator in the act of spectatorship. In this way, the cinema, I claim, is

“sexualized.” It operates by arousing desire. It serves as a very precise example of the relation between the Symbolic level of ideology and the sublime level, the obscene underside of ideological “passionate attachments.” Cinema stages the full relationship between culture and ideology.

Here, following Žižek, I want to suggest that “culture” represents all those activities in which “I” participate without fully believing in them—toward which I maintain a distance. However, in participating there is still a sublime level of belief in the fantasy-object that sustains attachment to the Symbolic. In cinema, it is not that “I” do not take seriously the form of the Symbolic fiction. What “I” do not take seriously is my own active, subjective engagement with the form of cinema. What I do not take seriously is the disavowed fantasy-object that sustains my enjoyment in the cinema—not simply a suspension of disbelief but *a suspension of my belief in disbelief*. What I suspend is not my actual disbelief but the belief before belief—the supplemental fantasy—that sustains my disbelief. What the spectator is not ready to accept—what he or she is not ready to fully assume—I claim, is that there is more reality in the Symbolic fiction of the cinema. Not in its content but in its form. It is the form of the cinema that is perfectly homologous to the Symbolic form of everyday, functional reality.

Both cinema *and* everyday reality are sustained through fetishism. I am allowed to disbelieve only to the extent that I invest my belief in some contingent element (the Master-Signifier, in Lacanian terms) retroactively posited as necessary. The goal of ideological analysis, I argue, is to locate this contingent element raised to the level of necessity—the element on account of which I am allowed not to believe, since my belief in the necessity of this contingent element fills in the gap in the Symbolic as an evasion of the traumatic Real.

What, then, is the belief that sustains my disbelief in the Symbolic efficiency of the cinema? How is it that I can approach the Symbolic fiction of the cinema through “distanciation” while at the same time taking seriously the Symbolic fiction of reality? It may be that since the reality of the cinema is technologically reproduced, we can produce a greater distance between it and ourselves. But is not “reality” more and more technologically mediated and reproduced today? Is this not the point of Jean Baudrillard’s conception of “hyperreality” or Guy Debord’s notion of “spectacle?” Why are these other technological mediations of reality perceived as “more real” than cinema?

What is really “real” in the cinema, I claim—as in actually functioning Symbolic reality—is the level of emotion it is able to evoke. But emotions lie—emotions are capable of masking the Real. The only emotion that does not lie, from the psychoanalytic perspective, is anxiety. All other emotions

have an object (the *objet petit a*). Anxiety, according to Lacan, is the only emotion without an object and, therefore, touches the Real.<sup>42</sup> With anxiety we come closer to recognizing the phallic form of the Symbolic, because it is a sensation that arises when there is a loss of the protective shield of fantasy. Anxiety is the one emotion that cannot be produced by the cinema, whereas it can be felt in “reality.” The cinema does a better job, I claim, of producing pleasure than everyday “reality” itself. This is why it is not taken seriously. In this sense, it is more “real” than Symbolic “reality” itself.

Although the cinema is distinguished from “reality” in its ability to avoid anxiety, it is still of interest for the study of ideology precisely because of the way it activates the same kind of misrecognition that is implicit in the everyday functioning of ideology. Cinema, like ideology, is in the business of organizing *jouissance*, or enjoyment.

### Prohibition and Desire in the Cinema

Two instances of Žižek’s film criticism speak to the problematic of *jouissance* in spectatorship and in ideology. In the first case, Žižek takes note of the importance of the level of appearances in cinema by drawing on a thesis developed by Richard Maltby in his contribution to *Post-Theory*, “‘A Brief Romantic Interlude’: Dick and Jane Go to 3 ½ Seconds of the Classical Hollywood Cinema.” The cinematic order of appearances allows us to conceptualize the role of fetishism in ideology. In his article, Maltby highlights the relevance of a particular shot from *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942) of the airport tower at night, in between a shot of Rick and Ilsa sharing in an embrace and then a shot from outside the window of Rick’s room, “where he is standing, looking out, and smoking a cigarette. He turns into the room, and says, ‘And then?’ [Ilsa] resumes her story.”<sup>43</sup> Maltby suggests that viewers may interpret this scene in at least two mutually conflicting ways: either it suggests that Rick and Ilsa had slept together during the interlude where the scene dissolves into the shot of the airport, or it indicates that they have not and is simply added to denote the passage of a short amount of time, during which Ilsa continued to recount her story to Rick. Maltby focuses on this scene “as an example of the way in which Hollywood movies presuppose multiple viewpoints, at multiple textual levels, for their consuming audience”<sup>44</sup> and indicates something of Hollywood’s “contradictory refusal to enforce interpretive closure at the same time that it provides plot resolution. [According to Maltby] The movie neither confirms nor denies either interpretation.”<sup>45</sup> However, for Žižek, the question is not simply “Did they ‘do it’ or didn’t they?” It is not simply a question of interpretive closure and plot resolution. Instead, for

him, the more important question is, which *content must be added* in order to disavow the potential, obscene supplemental interpretation that they *did*, in fact, sleep together?

As Žižek puts it, in Lacanian terms, the question to ask is of which content *is allowed* to enter the “public domain of the symbolic Law, or the big Other.” Or, put differently, *which content is added in order to disavow the (supposedly) prohibited content?* According to Žižek, this shot indicates the essential character of appearances—that is, the need for appearances that are added in order to activate and disavow obscene surplus-enjoyment. This added content speaks to *the form* of the appearance itself.<sup>46</sup>

In the three-and-a-half-second shot in *Casablanca*, Rick and Ilsa did *not* “do it”; they did not sleep together for the Symbolic big Other—for the “order of appearance,” as Žižek would put it—but they *did* “do it” “for our dirty fantasmatic imagination.”<sup>47</sup> This fantasmatic, obscene supplement has the structure of what Žižek calls the “inherent transgression,” and, according to him, Hollywood needs both levels—the explicit order of appearance *and* the obscene supplemental fantasy—in order to function.<sup>48</sup>

Here, we encounter the relationship between prohibition and desire, where the added shot provides the space for the disavowal of obscene surplus-enjoyment. This relationship between prohibition and desire is, for Žižek, how we must understand the function of ideology. It is neither a naïve false-consciousness nor simply the ideas that seem to dominate; it has to do, rather, with *the fetishistic attachment to a particular kind of avowed supplement* (the Master-Signifier) *and its disavowal, sustained by one's attachment to some supplemental underside* (the fantasy object, *objet petit a*). The critique of ideology has to ask, what is it that is added to the order of appearances in order to generate a subjectivized element of desire, one that supplements the subject's actual, practical attachment to the order of appearances?

This underside, the fantasy object, conceals the fact that the Symbolic order is structured around some traumatic impossibility that cannot be symbolized, the Real of enjoyment. Fantasy is what “domesticates” this impossibility and transforms it into surplus-enjoyment.<sup>49</sup> In cinema and in ideology, fantasy is definitely *not* part of the order of appearances, or that which appears on the screen. It is, rather, that which allows the subject to take pleasure from the order of appearances, or from the screen, as surplus-enjoyment. Fantasy is the Imaginary, “invisible frame” that coordinates our *perception* of the visible, Symbolic frame.

Another example that continues to return in Žižek's work is that of the “Say fuck me!” scene in David Lynch's *Wild at Heart* (1990). This is a particularly unpleasant scene in the film that incorporates elements of irony



and violence in depicting—if not physical rape—what Žižek refers to as “rape in fantasy.” Žižek describes the scene in the following terms:

In a lonely motel room, Willem Dafoe [Bobby Peru] exerts a rude pressure on Laura Dern: he touches and squeezes her, invading the space of her intimacy and repeating in a threatening way “Say fuck me!” that is, extorting from her a word that would signal her consent to a sexual act. The ugly, unpleasant scene drags itself on, and when, finally, the exhausted Laura Dern utters a barely audible “Fuck me!,” Dafoe abruptly steps away, assumes a nice, friendly smile and cheerfully retorts: “No thanks, I don’t have time today but on another occasion I would do it gladly.”<sup>50</sup>

Žižek claims that, in this scene, Bobby Peru—the hyper-ugly character played by Willem Dafoe—has actually attained what he was *really* after. Not the sexual act itself but rather Dern’s consent—that is, her “symbolic humiliation.” Žižek argues, in other words, that what Bobby Peru wanted was for Dern to “register” her consent to the Symbolic order, to the big Other, to publicly avow some obscene, supplemental fantasy. Žižek claims that “the shock of Dafoe’s final rejection of Dern’s forcibly extorted offer gives the final pitch to him: his very unexpected rejection is his ultimate triumph and, in a way, humiliates her more than her direct rape. He has attained what he really wanted: not the act itself, just her consent to it, her symbolic humiliation. What we have here is rape in fantasy which refuses its realization in reality, and thus further humiliates its victim—the fantasy is forced out, aroused, and then abandoned, thrown upon the victim.”

Žižek adds that there is evidence of Dern’s willful submission to Dafoe: “[I]t is clear that Laura Dern is not simply disgusted by Dafoe’s (Bobby Peru’s) brutal intrusion into her intimacy: just prior to her ‘Fuck me!’, the camera focuses on her right hand, which she slowly spreads out—the sign of her acquiescence, the proof that he has stirred up her fantasy.”

Here, Žižek suggests that the scene should be read as an inversion of the “standard scene of seduction,” “in which the gentle approach is followed by the brutal sexual act, after the woman, the target of the seducer’s efforts, finally says ‘Yes!’”: “Bobby Peru’s friendly negative answer to Dern’s extorted ‘Yes!’ owes its traumatic impact to the fact that it makes public the paradoxical structure of the empty gesture as constitutive of the symbolic order: after brutally wrenching out of her the consent to the sexual act, Peru treats this ‘Yes!’ as an empty gesture to be politely rejected, and thus brutally confronts her own underlying phantasmatic investment in it.”<sup>51</sup>

In other words, by treating Dern’s “Yes!” as an empty gesture, rejecting it politely, Bobby Peru manages to humiliate Dern by exposing her own supplemental, obscene fantasy to the order of the big Other.

I want to argue that this scene from *Wild at Heart* should be read as the exact obverse of the three-and-a-half-second shot of the airport tower from *Casablanca*. The scene from *Casablanca* functions as a fetish that stands in to supplement the Real of desire—the fantasy that supports the ideological framework of the film, while the scene from *Wild at Heart* is presented as a “return of the Real,” an obscene fantasy brought to the surface. This is what makes it so unpleasant for the spectator; it forces an encounter with the ugliness of the Real. It is this ugliness—like the ugliness of Bobby Peru—that needs to be domesticated, brought back within the realm of the Symbolic order. It presents, in a way, the fantasy-object that sticks out, that has no place in the Symbolic order. Here as well, I claim, we have a possible definition of the difference between modern and postmodern cinema: in modern cinema, the Master-Signifier as fetish still functions as the content *added* to the order of the big Other, as the avowed supplement, expressing the form of the prohibition, whereas, in postmodern cinema, there is a certain foreclosure of the Master-Signifier. Everything can be expressed, we can see “it” all—obscenities, violence, and so on. What is foreclosed, however, is the agency of the Master-Signifier in the form itself.

This is, perhaps, why Žižek refers to Lynch's films as “the art of the ridiculous sublime.” By “showing it all,” Lynch's films bring to the surface the obscene supplemental underside of fantasy—the “sublime object”; however, the question we should ask is, are these instances of the sublime resurfacing meant to be taken seriously? It is in the “ridiculous” presentation of the “sublime object” in Lynch's films that we find the agency of the Master-Signifier. It is the form itself, not the content that is not meant to be taken seriously. In this way, Lynch's films are close to pornography.

Pornography is, perhaps, *the* example of uncensored content. In pornography, we can “see it all.” Žižek argues, however, that there is still an element of censorship in the very form of pornography. Although it shows real sex, “the narrative which provided the frame for repeated sexual encounters [is] as a rule ridiculously non-realistic, stereotypical, stupidly comical.”<sup>52</sup> Thus he argues that “this strange compulsion to make the narrative ridiculous [is] a kind of negative gesture of respect: [in pornography] yes, we do show everything, but precisely for that reason we want to make it clear that it's all a joke.”<sup>53</sup> And the same goes for Lynch's films. As Žižek puts it, “Lynch's universe is effectively the universe of the ‘ridiculous sublime’: the most ridiculously pathetic scenes . . . are to be taken seriously”—that is, as instances worthy of interpretation; it is the form, however, which is not to be taken seriously.<sup>54</sup> But this is precisely the point of Žižek's critique of ideology. In order to truly

critique the force of ideology it is necessary to examine its disavowed form—at the level of content, there is no censorship; however, the trick is to locate a particular element in the content that signals the “hook” onto the form.

### The Fetishism of the Cinema

The three-and-a-half-second shot of the light tower in *Casablanca* demonstrates perfectly how fetishism functions in the cinema. Here we have an example of a particular content added to the series—a shot added to the series of other shots—which has the function of disavowal, a disavowal of whatever dirty fantasies sustain the enjoyment of the spectator. He or she is free to fantasize on the condition that the fantasy is disavowed by some content that is fully presented to the Symbolic order—this content is added in order to sustain the gap in the Symbolic, which is precisely the “objectively subjective” place of the subject. What Lacan calls the *objet petit a*, the “object-cause” of desire or the fantasy object, is the element within the subject that allows it to first displace the Void of subjectivity—which sustains it as X in the Symbolic order—and then to assume a particular content that allows it to disavow this sublime underside of subjectivity. It is the traumatic aspect of fantasy that, needing to be disavowed, attaches the subject to some perfectly permitted content in the form of a fetish.

The “Say fuck me!” scene from *Wild at Heart*, however, appears to perform the exact opposite of the fetish function. Here, it would seem that disavowed content is, in fact, being brought to the surface of the Symbolic order. In this scene, the obscene underside of subjectivity is fully assumed at the level of the Symbolic, something of which is akin to the process of psychoanalytic treatment whereby the subject must fully assume the subjective aspect of the disavowed fantasy. But what I want to ask is whether this works the same way in cinema. Does the Symbolic construction of this obscene example allow the subject-spectator to fully assume the underside of fantasy that sustains the subjective attachment to the fetish?

The answer to this question indicates what is truly important about cinema at the level of ideology. The cinema, *as such*, is a fetish. What is significant about the cinema is that it is capable of presenting us with the Symbolic texture of our everyday practical reality but in a form that allows us to disavow this Symbolic texture itself. In the *admission* of appearance, the cinema is, in a way, more real than reality itself; we fully assume the level of appearance in cinematic reality. However, it is more difficult to do so at the level of practical reality. We admit with cinema that which

is true of our everyday reality, while disavowing the constitutive level of appearance in the everyday. *Cinema functions, in this sense, as a fetish for the everyday level of practical, Symbolic, reality.* We affirm in cinema what is true of the everyday.

While the scene from *Wild at Heart* presents us with the obscene underside of Symbolic reality, its very Symbolic form gives us cause toward its disavowal. Perhaps this is because the form of the cinema does not, in fact, give us cause to take it seriously. There is an implied distrust in the form of cinema, and it is one that provides for a certain degree of “distanciation” between the spectator/subject and the implied meaning. While the content itself may be taken quite seriously, it is the form that is not; not unlike the form of pornography that is, inherently, designed to mock sexuality. The form itself is its own censorship.

The point I want to emphasize is the necessity of a *fetishistic* critique of ideology. A fetishistic critique requires locating the fetish that sustains the subject's relationship to the ideological text. It is the fetish that is responsible for the disavowal of the fantasy object, or desire, which I claim, following Žižek, is what “subjectivizes”—that is, interpellates—the subject in ideology.

### Interface and the Interpellation of the Subject through Desire

Having now investigated elements of the theories of subjectivity and ideology and the way in which these play out in cinema, I want to discuss how Žižek's notion of “interface” relates to film theory. “Interface” differs from screen theory's notion of “suture” by way of his inclusion of the *objet petit a* in its connection to the Master-Signifier.<sup>55</sup> In a way, theorists such as Laura Mulvey and Christian Metz were on the right track with their own conceptions of spectatorship; however, they were overly deterministic and too simplistic in assigning too much power to the cinema toward the interpellation of the subject/spectator.<sup>56</sup> Mulvey, on the one hand, gave too much significance to the formation of Ego ideals in the cinema through the power of the star and the male protagonist. For her, spectatorship resembles the “mirror stage,” and the spectator identifies with the image of the male protagonist, who produces a “male gaze” in his objectification of the female characters on the screen.<sup>57</sup> Metz, on the other hand, is more thorough in noting that the subject enters the cinema having already developed the ego in the Imaginary through the process of the “mirror stage,” and therefore the cinema does not reproduce the “mirror stage” effect. However, he forfeits too much knowledge to the spectator, who, according to him, identifies with the cinema by identifying with him or herself

through the self-knowledge of the fantasy invested in the cinema.<sup>58</sup> “Interface” corrects these misconceptions about subjectivity and spectatorship.

I conceive interface as a relation between the *objet petit a* and the Master-Signifier passing through the subject. Interface, in other words, positions the subject between the Symbolic level of the text and the sublime level of fantasy. In interface, the three Lacanian levels of Imaginary (fantasy), Symbolic (Master-Signifier), and Real (subject) come together to form the necessary link of subjectivization. Film theorists focused on the relationship between either the Imaginary and the Real (following Althusser) or the Imaginary and the Symbolic, never taking into account the relation between all three. The point about interface is that it conceives the subjectivization of the subject/spectator by way of the link between the obscene supplemental underside of the fantasy object and the Symbolic appearance of the cinema as signifier (not an “imaginary signifier” as Metz claims).

The standard “suture” effect functions, according to Žižek, in the following manner:

First, the spectator is confronted with a shot, finds pleasure in it in an immediate, imaginary way, and is absorbed by it. . . . Then, this full immersion is undermined by the awareness of the frame as such: what I see is only a part, and I do not master what I see. I am in a passive position, the show is run by the Absent One (or, rather, Other) who manipulates images behind my back. . . . What then follows is a complementary shot which renders the place from which the Absent One is looking, allocating this place to its fictional owner, one of the protagonists. In short, one passes thereby from imaginary to symbolic, to a sign: the second shot does not simply follow the first one, it is *signified* by it.<sup>59</sup>

In order to avoid the gap opened up in the second phase of the “suture” effect, the previous shot must, according to Žižek, be reinscribed into the texture of the film as a point-of-view shot of one of the characters within diegetic space. That is, all subjective shots must be assigned to one of the characters through an objective shot conveying the point of view to that particular character.

Interface, according to Žižek, is what accounts for the functioning of cinema when we absent the standard reversal of subjective and objective shots. As in Metz’s problematic, whereby the cinema makes possible an entirely objective representation without the representation of the subjectivizing shot of the protagonist, interface accounts for the way the cinema still functions in the absence of some subjectivized perspective.<sup>60</sup> Interface takes place when the standard suturing effect no longer functions.<sup>61</sup> As Žižek puts it, when the gap of the Real can no longer be filled by an

additional (Master-)Signifier (such as the shot of the light tower at night in *Casablanca*), it is filled in by the spectral element of the fantasy object (such as in the "Say fuck me!" scene in *Wild at Heart*). Here, again, it is necessary to emphasize the relevance of Žižek's notion of the "sublime object" of ideology.

The "sublime object of ideology" accounts for the subject's "passionate attachment" to the Symbolic level of ideological appearances at a point that may be said to be "postideological." That is, the question that Žižek asks is, how can we account for the functioning of ideology when ideology no longer relies on the operation of mystification, or false/naïve consciousness? His thesis is that there is an objective element within the subject—an element that is "objectively subjective"—that attaches the subject to the Symbolic order. It is the subject's attachment to the Symbolic that displaces, or allows it to disavow, some supplemental fantasy object that remains unknown to it. This underside, the "sublime object," is that which is formed in the Imaginary as the subject's fundamental fantasy, which is itself constitutive of the subject. The fundamental fantasy is the original symptom of subjectivity, the *sinthome*.

As I have noted, *objet petit a*, the "sublime object," the fantasy object, is the object in the subject that is directly the subject itself. It is that part of the subject with which it cannot identify, which remains primordially repressed. This is where Metz errs with his conception of spectatorship. In order for subjectivization to occur, the subject definitely cannot identify with the fantasy that sustains its own existence. As well, this is where Althusser is mistaken, since ideology does not represent the subject's imaginary relationship to its real conditions of existence (a link between the Imaginary and the Real); rather, ideology constitutes a Symbolic relation of the subject to the Real, *which is sustained by the supplemental underside of fantasy*. The notion of interface describes the subject's attachment to the Symbolic supported by some disavowed supplemental underside. Subjectivization only works if this relation is concealed. The cinema does not induce this effect in the subject, and therefore we should be careful not to suggest that films somehow subjectivize the spectator. However, the cinema, I argue, does function in accordance with this notion of subjectivity, and in doing so it develops a *degree* of enjoyment for the spectator.

Cinema operates by constantly postponing the satisfaction of desire in enjoyment (in the psychoanalytic sense). The cinema activates desire; it produces a degree of surplus-enjoyment by denying actual enjoyment. In this, it is no different than the Symbolic order itself. Though, the difference between the two develops only to the extent that one is taken seriously—as "reality"—while the other is not. Spectatorship differs from subjectivity

in the degree to which we create a *distance* between ourselves and the cinematic text. Desire, however, emerges as the constant attempt to actually get full enjoyment. This is what produces the surplus of enjoyment, and cinema interpellates the subject in this way: by activating desire, *not* by producing subject positions.

## Conclusion

# Theory as Realism Set in Drive

Is Slavoj Žižek a theorist of film? If we are speaking about film theory as one that deals with the formal aspects of the cinematic medium, then the definitive answer to this question is undoubtedly no! However, as I hope is evident from the preceding, this does not necessarily mean that he is not a *film theorist*. The two positions, I claim, are distinct and speak to completely different objects. Although, at times, Žižek takes up examples in cinema and popular culture in order to more fully elaborate a point that he is trying to make about Lacanian psychoanalysis or Hegelian dialectics, much of his work on cinema is taken up in order to produce a profoundly original critique of ideology, one that centers on the underlying fantasies that give structure to our everyday submission to Symbolic order itself. Furthermore, his theory of subjectivity makes possible a renewed theory of cinematic spectatorship that accomplishes that which early “screen theorists” were only so eager but failed to do: Žižek helps us to see that spectatorship itself is a model of ideological interpellation in the everyday.

The fact that Žižek has brought new life to Lacanian psychoanalysis, especially for film theorists, demonstrates a kind of solidarity with the earlier project of “screen theory.” However, Žižek’s Lacan is certainly not the Lacan of the film theory of the 1970s and 1980s. His Lacan is not that of the “mirror stage,” the Imaginary and the Symbolic; it is that of the *objet petit a*, the *sinthome*, *jouissance*, the drive, and the Real. Significantly, then, from a Žižekian perspective, the point of film theory is not necessarily to demonstrate the way in which the cinema interpellates spectators as subjects—that is, of showing how cinematic ideology is inscribed in the subject—but of showing how the cinema, like ideology, interpellates subjects as spectators, and here, enjoyment is a key factor: both cinema and ideology are engaged in a project to organize the enjoyment of the subject in a certain way. What possibilities exist, then, for the subject to deal with its own enjoyment in a way that makes possible its separation or subtraction from the reigning ideology?



Screen theory responded to this question by proposing a cinematic solution—that is, the possibility of an alternative, revolutionary cinema that might interpellate the spectator toward an emancipatory political engagement with reality. Laura Mulvey, for example, proposed using psychoanalysis as a political weapon for feminist filmmakers. Technological innovations, such as the popular use of 16mm film—and one can imagine that today she would want to include digital filmmaking—according to Mulvey changed the economic conditions of film production so that the cinema could be artisanal as well as capitalist. Alternative cinema, for her, “provides a space for a cinema to be born that is radical in both a political and an aesthetic sense and challenges the basic assumptions of mainstream film.” Because the formal elements of mainstream, Hollywood cinema, according to Mulvey, “reflect the psychological obsessions of the society that produced it” (i.e., phallogentrism), alternative cinema operates by “reacting against these obsessions and assumptions.”<sup>1</sup> This, of course, is the theoretical motivation behind her own film collaboration with Peter Wollen on *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1979).

Similar arguments were made by Colin MacCabe, who, while proposing that revolutionary filmmakers are capable of practicing strategies of subversion of the dominant ideology, emphasized the potential of a “progressive realist text.” MacCabe proposes the possibility of a cinema capable of “displacing” the subject in ideology, or of differently constituting the subject away from the reigning ideology. Drawing on Althusser (particularly the latter’s anti-Hegelian bent), he suggests that, while it is impossible for the subject to fully escape ideology, there is the possibility of changing the subject’s position *within* ideology, perhaps by changing the very form of ideology along the lines of a Brechtian “rupture.” For him, film examples, such as Brecht’s own *Kuhle Wampe* (Slatan Dudow, 1932) and Jean-Luc Goddard’s *Tout va bien* (1972), demonstrate the potential of film form to alternatively interpellate a politicized spectator.<sup>2</sup> These rather formalist solutions to political subjectivization in the cinema, however, are nothing more than the underlying negative conscience of post-Theory formalism.

In the history of critical theory in the twentieth century, one of the most central debates concerning the revolutionary potential of art is that which has been dubbed by Fredric Jameson as “the realism-modernism” debate between Georg Lukács and Bertolt Brecht. On the one hand, Lukács argued against the subversive potentials of modernist aesthetics, particularly Expressionism, with a forceful critique of Ernst Bloch. Against modernist aesthetics, Lukács argued in favor of a realist aesthetic. As Jameson puts it, “[t]he originality of the concept of realism . . . lies in its claim to cognitive as well as aesthetic status . . . the ideal of realism presupposes a form of aesthetic experience that yet lays claim to a binding relationship to

the real itself, that is to say, to those realms of knowledge and praxis that had traditionally been differentiated from the realm of the aesthetic, with its disinterested judgments and its constitution as sheer appearance.<sup>33</sup>

Realism, in this sense, provides a representation of the “cognitive” reality behind the illusion of false aesthetic appearances. Lukács’s notion of “realism” rests on his conceptions of “totality” and the “typical.” The typical character in the realist novel speaks to the totality of the social reality, so that he or she may present to the reader the (true) essence behind the false appearances in the immanence of social reality. On the other hand, it was this very methodology that, for Brecht, spoke to Lukács’s own formalism.

In defense of modernism, Brecht, along with Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno, contends that—while it does not necessarily represent the underlying social content of existing reality (class antagonism)—modernism holds the potential to frame displaced social content in existing reality. As Adorno puts it, “[a]rt is the negative knowledge of the actual world.”<sup>34</sup> He adds that “[a]rt does not provide knowledge of reality by reflecting it photographically or ‘from a particular perspective’ but by revealing whatever is veiled by the empirical form assumed by reality, and this is possible only by virtue of art’s own autonomous status.”<sup>35</sup> The latter must be thought, as well, in terms of Žižek’s critique of *The Wrong Man* (see Chapter 2). Is this not the very point that Žižek makes apropos of Hitchcock’s failed attempt at “realism?” The problem with *The Wrong Man*, as we have seen, is that it directly confronts the spectator with the fact of its own “realism,” betraying the very terms of the Hitchcockian allegory. With realism, as evinced by the latter, one does not need to follow the rabbit down the rabbit hole only to end up on the other side of the Möbius band, which ultimately puts the subject back at its starting point, however viewed from an entirely new perspective. Realism potentially leaves room only for the subject’s interpassive relationship to the text, without itself becoming politically subjectivized. As Todd McGowan puts it, “[o]ne first becomes a politicized subject not out of some neutral concern for larger political questions or some universal desire to eliminate injustice but because of a singular desire that bears only on one’s own subjectivity.”<sup>36</sup>

The Brechtian solution to political subjectivization is one that “screen theorists” such as MacCabe adopt in their own formalist version of alternative, political cinema. The aim here is to produce an experience of rupture in the subject-spectator, like that developed in Brecht’s “epic theatre.” The objective of the “rupture,” or what Jameson refers to as the “estrangement effect,” is to stage events “in such a way that what had seemed natural and immutable in them is now tangibly revealed to be historical, and thus the object of revolutionary change.”<sup>37</sup> In defense of Brecht, we might agree that

an aesthetic (or even an ethic) of realism leaves open the possible threat of its assimilation into the ruling ideology.

Yet here I am forced to agree with Lukács that, at the same time, the problem with modernism is, in fact, the latter's decadence and appeal that is often limited to bourgeois audiences with a rather high level of "cultural capital." This point is not intended to discount the significance of modern art and alternative/avant-garde cinema but, rather, to point out the latter's limited capabilities in interpellating a political subject among the exploited classes. In addition, as we come to understand ideological interpellation via Žižek as having to do with the organization of the subject's enjoyment, we cannot discount the fact that subjectivization in modernism still relies on a particular way of organizing the "surplus-enjoyment" of a (knowledgeable) audience. Alternative cinema, I claim, still positions the subject in relation to its desire, which still attaches it ever more aggressively to ideology, the effect of which is not to change the subject's position *within* ideology but to maintain and reinforce its preexisting relationship to ideology. So how then might we deal with the dilemma of applying too much realism while still avoiding the formalist trap of alternative cinema and its enjoyment?

Jameson's half-satisfactory solution to the "realism-modernism debate" is to claim that, with the rise of postmodernism, the debate itself is sublated by the very form of this newly emerging historical moment. In the dialectical movement of modernism, especially its vocation to not be drowned in mass culture—that is, its vocation to not become commodity—the ever expanding search for the new in modernism has developed into the emergence of the postmodern. Under conditions such as these, the renewal of modernism, according to Jameson, might in fact be found in realism. To put things differently, postmodernism, according to Jameson, can be thought of as a moment when the modernist principles of rupture and estrangement have themselves become the norm of the dominant style and aesthetic. The question, then, becomes, how might we cause rupture in that which takes rupture as the very basis of the reigning ideology? This is a question not unlike the problem that Žižek proposes regarding the dilemma of conducting a critique of ideology at a time when cynicism and skepticism are, themselves, the reigning form of ideology—that is, how to do a critique of ideology in a (supposedly) postideological era? In conditions such as these, Jameson suggests that it may in fact be Lukács who, although he may have been wrong in the 1930s, ends up being right for us today. However, there is a catch to this claim: the Lukács who is right for us today is not necessarily the advocate of realism but rather the Lukács of an earlier period—the Lukács of *History and Class Consciousness*. Jameson contends that in order for Lukács's realism to be of any relevance for us

today, it must be rethought in terms of the categories proposed in *History and Class Consciousness*. This position is one that comes close to what Jameson has often referred to as “cognitive mapping.”

On the one hand, Jameson notes that what he means by “cognitive mapping” is something close to what Lukács meant when he wrote about “class consciousness.”<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, he has also explained his concept of “cognitive mapping” in Lacanian terms as a return to the level of the Symbolic, which is missing in the Althusserian theory of ideology that, as we have seen, expresses a connection between the Imaginary and the Real.<sup>9</sup> There is a sense in which the condition of a postideological society can be thought along the lines of a “demise of symbolic efficiency” as Žižek puts in *The Ticklish Subject*.<sup>10</sup> Today, it appears as though everyone already knows that “the big Other does not exist”—one of the final moments in concluding the therapeutic process of psychoanalysis. But is this truly the case, or does the latter rely on a kind of fetishistic disavowal of one’s own belief in the Symbolic big Other? It is my contention that the demise of symbolic efficiency must be perceived not necessarily as the demise of the Symbolic, as such. Ideology is still operative both at the level of the Symbolic and on the obverse side of the obscene supplemental fantasy that attaches the subject to the Symbolic order. Rather, what we must think through is the declining power of *interpretation* to posit a transformation in the Real. Here, we are in the midst of a crisis of interpretation in which the subject knows full well how its symptom is formed, yet the symptom persists. “Cognitive mapping” today means trying to regain the Symbolic weight of interpretation—that is, it is necessary to conceive the means by which we might be able to strike at the Real through the medium of the Symbolic . . . and, to cut a long story short, what we need to do today is increasingly to emphasize the role of Theory!

Theory is precisely that which makes possible a Symbolic intervention into the realm of the Real. As Fabio Vighi points out, a (political) “act” today must be captured in “a gesture that can only appear as ‘impossible’ from within the coordinates in which it is conceived”; however, this act must be an *excessive* intervention into the existing order, which “redefines the rules of the game”—and “*this gesture should be applied to theory itself*.”<sup>11</sup> It should now be more apparent why the post-Theory attack on Theory strikes at the heart of the class struggle in film studies. More than his advocacy of realism, it is Lukács’s approach to dialectical materialism in *History and Class Consciousness* that presents for us the “realism” we need today: dialectical materialism. Theory read as dialectical materialism, I claim, is realism set in the mode of drive.

As we have seen, *desire* involves the endless, metonymical search for an (impossible) object that will wrest and satisfy desire itself. But desire is,

by definition, insatiable. It continues to follow along a cycle in which the object attained is never *it*, the thing that is desired. This constant search for the object produces an unconscious satisfaction in being able to reset the coordinates of desire, continuing the search. *Drive* speaks to this other side of insatiable desire. It achieves enjoyment for the subject by *failing* to get the object. With desire, one can never achieve full enjoyment; however, with drive, one is condemned to an unbearable enjoyment. Desire, according to Žižek, attaches the subject to the reigning conditions of domination and exploitation, while drive moves the subject in the direction of emancipation from the constraints of ideology. This is how we must conceive the role of Theory.

A significant distinction between Žižek's film theory and that of the "screen theorists" is that his is an approach that stresses content over form. As I have tried to emphasize, form plays an important role in Žižek's theory of ideology, but we should be sure to note that, for him, form is only, initially, given structure through the addition of—the inclusion of—a certain surplus of content. The content of the Master-Signifier gives structure to the form of ideology. As such, what we are dealing with is not the way in which form determines content; rather, we must emphasize the structuring role of content—a surplus content elevated to the level of the form. At the same time, there is a certain subtraction from the content—a subtraction of an element that must be hidden, below the surface, in order for ideology to operate: the *objet petit a* as the "sublime object of ideology." Ideology here exists between the symbolic and the sublime, and the critique of ideology requires bringing to the surface the disavowed content that makes submission and subjectivization to the reigning ideology possible.

It is precisely because Žižek "does" theory in the language of the cinema that his approach makes possible the conditions for the interpellation of political subjects out of the everyday. Sophie Fiennes is quite correct when she claims that Žižek makes theory cinematic. As seductive as his approach to Theory may be, it is the enjoyment felt in his approach—his discussion of popular cinema from Hitchcock and Lynch to *Star Wars*, *Titanic*, and *Kung-Fu Panda*—that makes him such an appealing figure in critical theory. We are drawn in by Žižek initially, not because of his take on Lacan or Hegel, but because he takes elements of the everyday lifeworld of popular culture and turns them on their head.

Theory as realism set in the mode of drive allows us to take enjoyment as the central factor in the political act. Rather than causing rupture or estrangement—that is, rather than making displeasure the central feature of subversion—Theory makes enjoyment the very *raison d'être* of radical change. We are ethical subjects not because of some objective-neutral sense of what we ought to do but because of our attachment to

an impossible *jouissance* for which we cannot do anything but act. This, then, has to do with a subjective realism that bears on one's own objective position within the existing relations of production, and sticking to the analytical position of drive allows one to subjectivize the Truth of one's objective conditions of existence. It should be no question, then, as to why the evacuation of Theory from film studies is one of the most ideological attempts to rid the discipline of the political.

# Notes

## Introduction

1. Alain Badiou, "Dialectiques de la fable," in *Matrix: Machine philosophique*, ed. Alain Badiou (Paris: Ellipses, 2003), 120. My translation.
2. Ibid.
3. This is not too dissimilar from the way Žižek explains the difference between an "ethics of desire" and an "ethics of drive": "On the one hand, we have an ethics of desire, of 'not giving way as to one's desire' (*ne céder pas sur son désir*)—to put it briefly, yielding to enjoyment (*jouissance*) means compromising our desire, so the authentic ethical attitude involves sacrificing enjoyment for the sake of the purity of our desire. On the other hand, desire itself is conceived as a defense against enjoyment, i.e., as a mode of compromise (we take flight into the endless symbolic metonymy of desire in order to avoid the real of *jouissance*), so that the only true ethics is that of *drive*, of our commitment to the *sinthome* which defines the contours of our relation to enjoyment. This tension between an ethics of desire and an ethics of drive further determines Lacan's shift from distancing to identification. . . . [T]he concluding moment of the psychoanalytic cure is attained when the subject fully assumes his or her identification with the *sinthome*, when he or she unreservedly 'yields' to it, rejoins the place where 'it was,' giving up the false distance which defines our everyday life." Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 60.
4. See Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 1997), 5.
5. Jodi Dean, *Žižek's Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2006), xi.
6. Peter Dews, "Tremor of Reflection: Slavoj Žižek's Lacanian Dialectics," *Radical Philosophy* 72 (1995): 17.
7. Alain Badiou and A. S. Miller, "An Interview with Alain Badiou: Universal Truths and the Question of Religion," *Journal of Philosophy and Scripture* 3, no. 1 (2005): 41.
8. See Slavoj Žižek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* (London: Verso, 2009).
9. Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (London: Verso, 2010), 55.
10. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 49.
11. Dews, "Tremor of Reflection," 17.
12. Terry Eagleton, *Trouble with Strangers: A Study of Ethics* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 139.

13. Adrian Johnston, *Žižek's Ontology: A Transcendental Materialist Theory of Subjectivity* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2008), xiv.
14. Paul Bowman, "Cultural Studies and Slavoj Žižek," in *New Cultural Studies: Adventures in Theory*, eds. Clare Birchall and Gary Hall (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 163.
15. Fabio Vighi, *On Žižek's Dialectics: Surplus, Subtraction, Sublimation* (London: Continuum, 2010), 3.
16. Fabio Vighi, *Sexual Difference in European Cinema: The Curse of Enjoyment* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 1.
17. Fredric Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 2009), 318–19.
18. Colin MacCabe, *Tracking the Signifier—Theoretical Essays: Film, Linguistics, Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 52.
19. See Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 2000).
20. See Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971), 185.
21. Georg Lukács, "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat," in *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), 123.
22. *Ibid.*, 150.
23. See Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 6–10.
24. David Harvey, *The Limits to Capital* (London: Verso, 2006), 111.
25. *Ibid.*, 112.
26. *Ibid.*, 113.
27. David Bordwell, "Contemporary Film Studies and the Vicissitudes of Grand Theory," in *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, eds. David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 6.
28. Bordwell argues that psychoanalytic film Theory, what he refers to as "subject-position theory," is a "Grand Theory" in the sense that it frames cinema within grand schemes, "which seek to describe or explain very broad features of society, history, language, and psyche." *Ibid.*, 3.
29. Althusser argues in *For Marx* that the term "Theory" (capital *T*) should be reserved to designate Marxian philosophy—that is, dialectical materialism. See Louis Althusser, "On the Materialist Dialectic," in *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 2005). In *The Parallax View*, Žižek also aligns himself fully with dialectical materialism. See *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 3–13.
30. Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 1999), 299.
31. *Ibid.*, 299–300.



## Chapter 1

1. Jean-Louis Baudry, "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus," trans. Alan Williams, *Film Quarterly* 28, no. 2: 39–47; Jean-Louis Comolli and Paul Narboni, "Cinema/Ideology/Criticism," in *Movies and Methods*, ed. Bill Nichols, vol. 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976); Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, trans. Ben Brewster et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982); Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Film and Theory: An Anthology*, eds. Toby Miller and Robert Stam (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000); MacCabe, *Tracking the Signifier—Theoretical Essays: Film, Linguistics, Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985); Stephen Heath, "Narrative Space," *Screen* 17, no. 3 (1976): 68–112, and "Notes on Suture," *Screen* 18, no. 4 (1977–78): 48–76.
2. See Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan against the Historicists* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994).
3. Mary Ann Doane, "Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator," in *Film and Theory: An Anthology*, eds. Toby Miller and Robert Stam (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000); Constance Penley, ed., *Feminism and Film Theory* (London: Routledge, 1988); Penley, ed., *The Future of an Illusion: Film, Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1989); Jacqueline Rose, *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (London: Verso, 1986); and Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983).
4. See Jacqueline Rose, "The Imaginary" and "The Cinematic Apparatus—Problems in Current Theory," in *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (London: Verso, 1986).
5. Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose, eds. *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne*, trans. Jacqueline Rose (New York: W. W. Norton, 1982).
6. See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon, 1977).
7. Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006).
8. Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 19. Here, Copjec argues that the "mirror stage" gaze is conflated with the Foucauldian notion of "panopticism." See Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*. See also Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). Friedberg considers the relevance of the Foucauldian "gaze" for film theory.
9. See the special issue on "Žižek and Cinema" in Todd McGowan, ed., *International Journal of Žižek Studies* 1, no. 3 (2007): <http://zizekstudies.org/index.php/ijzs/issue/view/5>.
10. Todd McGowan, "Introduction: Enjoying the Cinema," *International Journal of Žižek Studies* 1, no. 3 (2007): 1–13.
11. Slavoj Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: On Women and Causality* (London: Verso, 1994), 175.

12. McGowan, "Introduction: Enjoying the Cinema."
13. Sophie Fiennes, "The Pervert's Guide to Cinema," *International Journal of Žižek Studies* 1: 1–3, 2.
14. Todd McGowan and Sheila Kunkle, *Lacan and Contemporary Film* (New York: Other Press, 2004), xxi.
15. David Bordwell and Noël, "Introduction" in *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, eds. David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), xiii.
16. David Bordwell, "Slavoj Žižek: Say Anything," *David Bordwell's Website on Cinema*, last modified April 2005, <http://www.davidbordwell.com/essays/zizek.php>.
17. Lee Grieveson and Haidee Wasson, eds., *Inventing Film Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), xi.
18. Here I draw primarily on Robert Stam's book, *Film Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), as well as Dudley Andrew's recent article "The Core and Flow of Film Studies," *Critical Inquiry* 35 (2009): 879–915; Robert Lapsley and Michael Westlake's book, *Film Theory: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006); and two articles in Grieveson and Wasson's anthology *Inventing Film Studies*, "Screen and 1970s Film Theory," by Philip Rosen, and "(Re)Inventing Camera Obscura," by Amelie Hastie, Lynne Joyrich, Patricia White, and Sharon Willis, for a historical overview of film Theory and film studies.
19. Comolli and Narboni, "Cinema/Ideology/Criticism," 24.
20. Rosen, "Screen and Film Theory," 268.
21. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Roy Harris (Chicago: Open Court Press, 1988).
22. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972).
23. Philip Rosen, "Introduction: The Sausurrian Impulse and Cinema Semiotics," in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, ed. Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia University Press), 7.
24. See Comolli and Narboni, "Cinema/Ideology/Criticism."
25. Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 85.
26. Baudry, "Ideological Effects," 46.
27. See Louis Althusser, "Reply to John Lewis," in *On Ideology* (London: Verso, 2008).
28. As Lacan puts it in "Seminar XI," "The unconscious is constituted by the effects of speech on the subject, it is the dimension in which the subject is determined in the development of the effects of speech, consequently the unconscious is structured like a language." In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton, 1981), 149.
29. See Jacques-Alain Miller, "Suture (Elements of the Logic of the Signifier)," *Screen* 18, no. 4 (1977–1978): 24–34; and, Jean-Pierre Oudart, "Cinema and Suture," *Screen* 18, no. 4(1977–78): 35–47.

30. Althusser, "Ideology," 109.
31. Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* I, no. 146 (1984): 53–92, 91–92.
32. Lacan, "The Mirror Stage," 79.
33. See note 28.
34. Miller, "Suture," 25.
35. Kaja Silverman, excerpts from "Suture," originally published in *The Subject of Semiotics*, in *Narrative-Apparatus-Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, ed. Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 219.
36. *Ibid.*, 220.
37. Oudart, "Cinema and Suture," 36.
38. Silverman, "Suture," 224.
39. Heath, "Notes on Suture," 58.
40. Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 483.
41. *Ibid.*
42. *Ibid.*, 484.
43. *Ibid.*, 486.
44. *Ibid.*, 491.
45. Metz, *Imaginary Signifier*, 410–11.
46. *Ibid.*, 419.
47. *Ibid.*, 429.
48. Stephen Prince, "Psychoanalytic Film Theory and the Problem of the Missing Spectator," in *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, eds. David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996): 72.
49. David Bordwell and Noël Carroll, introduction to *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, eds. David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), xiii.
50. Bordwell and Carroll claim that the essays in *Post-Theory* "demonstrate that film research can proceed sans psychoanalysis." *Ibid.*
51. *Ibid.*
52. *Ibid.*, xvi.
53. Noël Carroll, "Prospects for Film Theory," in *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, eds. David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 62.
54. Todd McGowan, *The Real Gaze: Film Theory after Lacan* (Albany: SUNY, 2007), ix.
55. Gregory Currie, "Cognitivism," in *A Companion to Film Theory*, eds. Toby Miller and Robert Stam (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 105.
56. *Ibid.*, 106.
57. David Bordwell, "Vicissitudes of Grand Theory," in *Post-Theory*, 27.
58. Currie, "Cognitivism," 107.
59. See, for example, Sebastian Gardner, *Irrationality and the Philosophy of Psychoanalysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
60. Bordwell, "Vicissitudes of Grand Theory," 6.
61. Prince, "Psychoanalytic Film Theory," 83.

62. McGowan, *Real Gaze*, 4.  
 63. Carroll, "Prospects for Film Theory," 43.

## Chapter 2

1. Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*, Routledge Classics Edition (New York: Routledge, 2008), xi.
2. Jodi Dean, *Žižek's Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 52.
3. Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 17–18.
4. Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, xii.
5. See Boaz Hagin, "Examples in Theory: Interpassive Illusions and Celluloid Fetishism," *Cinema Journal* 48, no. 1 (2008): 3–26.
6. Fabio Vighi, *Sexual Difference and European Cinema: The Curse of Enjoyment* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 66.
7. Slavoj Žižek, "The Limits of the Semiotic Approach to Psychoanalysis," in *Interrogating the Real*, eds. Rex Butler and Scott Stephens (New York: Continuum, 2005).
8. Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 2002), xii; see also Slavoj Žižek, *On Belief* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 81–82.
9. Žižek, *Parallax View*, 37.
10. Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 69.
11. Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 49.
12. *Ibid.*, 156.
13. *Ibid.*, 163.
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*
16. Slavoj Žižek, "Introduction: Alfred Hitchcock, or, The Form and Its Historical Mediation," in *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lacan. . . . (But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock)*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (London: Verso, 1992), 1–2.
17. Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971), 297.
18. The parallels between Žižek and Jameson on film analysis and historicity have recently been criticized by Chris Dumas: "[E]verything that Žižek says about Hitchcock, especially in his earlier essays in *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Hitchcock* [sic], is essentially an adaptation of Jameson's *Signatures of the Visible*. This book [*Everything You Always Wanted to Know*], edited and published right on the cusp of Jameson's adoption of Jean-François Lyotard's postmodernism, exemplifies Jameson's peculiar but effective mixture of resigned Marxism and ersatz psychoanalysis, and it contains almost the entire breadth of Žižek's knowledge about authors and film form. . . . Žižek couples parts of *Signatures of the Visible* with Jameson's model of realism-modernism-postmodernism triad and starts from the idea that there is a series of historical breaks, distinct or indistinct, that separate groups of films from one another."

- Two points need to be made here. First, Dumas's interpretation of Jameson's version of postmodernism is misleading, since he equates it with that of Lyotard. The two, however, are far from similar. While Lyotard rejects the Marxian theory of history, Jameson's interpretation of postmodernism draws precisely on historical materialism, hence the title of his book, *Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Second, I agree with Dumas that much of what Žižek accomplishes in *Everything You Always Wanted to Know* draws on Jameson's own method of film interpretation; however, I see no reason why this should be seen as a flaw in Žižekian film theory. In fact, for me, it gives evidence to the fact that the two share approaches to the deployment of a Marxian critique of ideology in film and cultural studies. See Chris Dumas, "The Žižekian Thing: A Disciplinary Blind Spot," *Critical Inquiry* 37, no. 2 (2011): 245–64, 259.
19. Žižek, "Limits," 133.
  20. Ibid.
  21. Ibid.
  22. Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, 1.
  23. Ibid., 3.
  24. Ibid., 2.
  25. Slavoj Žižek, "In His Bold Gaze My Ruin Is Writ Large," in *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lacan. . . . (But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock)*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (London: Verso, 1992), 211.
  26. Eric Rohmer and Claude Chabrol, *Hitchcock: The First Forty-Four Films* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1979).
  27. It is difficult not to assume here that Žižek is relying on Fredric Jameson's Marxian notion of modern allegory developed in *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981).
  28. Žižek, "In His Bold Gaze," 219.
  29. This is how Žižek views the Stalinist Communist who perceives himself as the object-instrument of History; the Stalinist Communist is a sadistic pervert who sees himself as the means of carrying out the necessity of History. Žižek, "In His Bold Gaze," 220.
  30. Ibid., 223.
  31. Ibid., 226.
  32. Ibid., 229.
  33. See Joan Copjec, "The Orthopsychic Subject: Film Theory and the Reception of Lacan," in *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994).
  34. See Todd McGowan, *The Real Gaze: Film Theory after Lacan* (Albany: SUNY, 2007).
  35. Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: On Woman and Causality* (London: Verso, 1994), 114.
  36. Ibid.
  37. Ibid., 115.

38. *Ibid.*, 117.
39. *Ibid.*, 120–21.
40. *Ibid.*, 121.
41. Slavoj Žižek, *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime: On David Lynch's Lost Highway* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000), 10.
42. *Ibid.*
43. *Ibid.*
44. See Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 12–18.
45. Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. Michael Eldred (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 3, 5.
46. Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (London: Verso, 2008), 2.

### Chapter 3

1. Althusser, “Reply to John Lewis,” in *On Ideology* (London: Verso, 2008), 68–69.
2. Carroll, “Prospects for Film Theory: A Personal Assessment,” in *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, eds. David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 62.
3. See Bordwell, “Slavoj Žižek: Say Anything.” *David Bordwell's Website on cinema*, last modified April 2005, <http://www.davidbordwell.com/essays/zizek.php>.
4. Bordwell and Carroll, introduction to *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, eds. David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), xiii
5. Slavoj Žižek, *The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieslowski between Theory and Post-Theory* (London: BFI, 2001), 2. Subsequent references to this book will be marked as *FRT* within the text.
6. Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism.” *New Left Review* I, no. 146 (1984): 53–92, 53.
7. See Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), especially Chapter 1.
8. Bordwell and Carroll, introduction, xiv.
9. Fredric Jameson, “Class and Allegory,” in *Signatures of the Visible* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 64–65.
10. See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000); Hardt and Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004); and Hardt and Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009). While I find the category of “immaterial labor” useful for a new theory of the revolutionary subject, I am at odds with Hardt and Negri’s notion of “biopolitical production.” They claim that biopolitics concerns the production of a commodified *subject*; however, it is more appropriate to conceive biopolitics as the production of a commodified *object*. Life is becoming increasingly objectified by way of commodification. In this sense, I see no difference

between “biopolitics” in the sense that they use this concept and Lukács’s theory of reification. A revolutionary subject, as opposed to a “biopolitical subject,” must recognize the objectification of life through commodification and reaffirm its position as a subject of history in order to put into effect any kind of social change.

11. Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume One*, trans. Ben Fowkes, Penguin Classics Edition (London: Penguin, 1990), 930, n. 2; see also, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “The Communist Manifesto,” in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. Lawrence H. Simon (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), 167.
12. Slavoj Žižek, “Lenin’s Choice,” in *Revolution at the Gates*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (London: Verso, 2002), 210.
13. Marx, *Capital, Volume One*, 149, n. 22.
14. Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 2002), 21–22.
15. Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 397; see also Slavoj Žižek, *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle* (London: Verso, 2004), 131–57.
16. See Jameson, “Postmodernism”; and Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Helen R. Lane, and Mark Seem (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).
17. See Ernesto Laclau, “Why Do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics?,” in *Emancipation(s)* (London: Verso, 1996).
18. Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (London: Verso, 2008), p. 30.
19. Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 25.
20. *Ibid.*, 26.
21. Carroll, “Prospects for Film Theory,” 57.
22. Here, it should be pointed out that Theory takes sides overtly, while post-Theory does so covertly.
23. All references to Bordwell in this section come from his article “Slavoj Žižek: Say Anything.”
24. Žižek’s position on Hegel culminates in the recent publication of *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2012).
25. Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology*, 6.
26. *Ibid.*, 7.
27. David Bordwell, *Figures Traced in Light: On Cinematic Staging* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 260. Subsequent references to this book will be cited as *FTL* within the text.
28. See also Žižek’s discussion on the displacement of class struggle in *Titanic*, in *Defense of Lost Causes*, 57–58. Žižek’s interpretation of *Titanic* is also discussed in Chapter 3. See also my article “Class Struggle and Displacement,” 299–324.
29. Žižek, *Defense of Lost Causes*, 8.
30. Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 127.
31. *Ibid.*
32. Žižek, *Defense of Lost Causes*, 32–33.
33. *Ibid.*, 33.

34. Slavoj Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?: Five Interventions in the (Mis)use of a Notion* (London: Verso, 2001), 215.
35. *Ibid.*, 216.
36. *Ibid.*
37. *Ibid.*, 219.
38. *Ibid.*
39. *Ibid.*, 221–22.
40. *Ibid.*, 223.
41. Žižek, “Lenin’s Choice,” 177.
42. Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?*, 225.
43. *Ibid.*, 226.
44. Žižek, *Defense of Lost Causes*, 3.
45. Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?*, 228.

### Interlude

1. It will become evident in most of what follows that *The Matrix* serves as an essential reference point for Žižek’s discussions on films, particularly in the relationship between the cinema and the spectator.
2. Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*, Routledge Classics Edition (New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 262; for Žižek’s political interpretation of *The Matrix*, see *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 312–17.
3. Žižek, *Parallax View*, 303.
4. Žižek, *The Frigate of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieslowski between Theory and Post-Theory* (London: BFI, 2001), 5–6.
5. *Ibid.*, 130.
6. Slavoj Žižek, “Afterword: With Defenders Like These, Who Needs Attackers?,” in *The Truth of Žižek*, eds. Paul Bowman and Richard Stamp (London: Continuum, 2007), 199.
7. Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 72.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*, 73.

### Chapter 4

1. Žižek’s approach here is not that dissimilar from that of Fredric Jameson:

What must now be stressed is that at this level ‘form’ is apprehended as content. The study of the ideology of form is no doubt grounded on a technical and formalistic analysis in the narrower sense, even though, unlike much traditional formal analysis, it seeks to reveal the active presence within the text of a number of discontinuous and heterogeneous formal processes. But at the level of analy-



sis in question here, a dialectical reversal has taken place in which it has become possible to grasp such formal processes as sedimented content in their own right, as carrying ideological messages of their own, distinct from the ostensible or manifest content of the works.

Jameson's approach to the ideology of form consists of thinking through "structural causality" as opposed to the "expressive causality" denounced by Althusser in *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 2009). Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), 99.

2. Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), p. 217.
3. Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (London: Verso, 2010), 55.
4. Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology*, 11.
5. See Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 253–54.
6. Žižek, *End Times*, 59.
7. *Ibid.*, 61.
8. Bordwell, "Slavoj Žižek: Say Anything." *David Bordwell's Website on cinema*, last modified April 2005, <http://www.davidbordwell.com/essays/zizek.php>.
9. Greg Oguss, review of *The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieslowski between Theory and Post-Theory*, by Slavoj Žižek, *Film Quarterly* 56, no. 4 (2003): 52–53, 52.
10. Žižek, *The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieslowski between Theory and Post-Theory* (London: BFI, 2001), 27. Subsequent references to this book will be marked as *FRT* within the text. In *Fright of Real Tears*, Žižek actually names *The Trouble with Harry* (1955) as the most exceptional film in Hitchcock's oeuvre, thus moving away from his earlier claim regarding *The Wrong Man*.
11. Žižek develops the following analyses of Hitchcock's films in "Hitchcock," *October* 38 (1986): 99–111.
12. Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 2002), 9.
13. Žižek, *On Belief* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 83.
14. Žižek, *Ticklish Subject*, 28–34.
15. As Žižek puts it, the "Freudian drive designates precisely the paradox of 'wanting unhappiness,' of finding excessive pleasure in suffering itself." *On Belief*, 63.
16. Žižek, *Ticklish Subject*, 35.
17. Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso 1997), 32.
18. Žižek, *Ticklish Subject*, 247.
19. See Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* I, no. 146 (1984): 53–92.
20. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Helen R. Lane, and Mark Seem (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 38–41.
21. Žižek, *Defense of Lost Causes*, 30.

22. Slavoj Žižek, “‘I Hear You with My Eyes’; or, The Invisible Master,” in *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects*, eds. Renata Salecl and Slavoj Žižek (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 90–91.
23. Slavoj Žižek, “The Undergrowth of Enjoyment: How Popular Culture Can Serve as an Introduction to Lacan,” *New Formations* 9 (1989): 7–29.
24. See Pascal Bonitzer, *Le regard et la voix: Essays sur le cinéma* (Paris: Union général d’éditions, 1976); and Michel Chion, *La voix au cinéma* (Paris: Éditions de l’étoile, 1982).
25. Žižek, “Undergrowth of Enjoyment,” 8.
26. Žižek, “‘I Hear You,’” 92.
27. See Žižek, *For They Know Not*, 101.
28. Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology*, 113.
29. See Žižek, *For They Know Not*, 271.
30. Noël Carroll, “Prospects for Film Theory,” in *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, eds. David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 43
31. Žižek, *Parallax View*, 100.
32. *Ibid.*, 101.
33. *Ibid.*
34. *Ibid.*, 103. Emphasis added.
35. Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute—or, Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (London: Verso, 2000), 149–50.
36. See Slavoj Žižek, *Organs without Bodies: Deleuze and Consequences* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 149–50.
37. Fabio Vighi, *Sexual Difference in European Cinema: The Curse of Enjoyment* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 20.
38. *Ibid.*, 31.
39. *Ibid.*, 145.
40. *Ibid.*, 149.
41. *Ibid.*, 150.
42. Todd McGowan, *Out of Time: Desire in Atemporal Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 119.
43. See Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959–1960*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1992), especially Chapter X; and Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1981), especially Chapter 7.
44. Žižek discusses *Children of Men* in one of the special features of the DVD release of the film.
45. Žižek, *Defense of Lost Causes*, 52. Subsequent references to this book will be marked as *IDLC* within the text.
46. Slavoj Žižek, “Return of the Natives,” *New Statesman*, March 4, 2010, accessed March 5, 2010, <http://www.newstatesman.com/film/2010/03/avatar-reality-love-couple-sex>.

47. Fredric Jameson, "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture," in *Signatures of the Visible* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 35–36.
48. Žižek, "Return of the Natives."

## Chapter 5

1. Colin MacCabe, "Realism and Cinema," in *Tracking the Signifier—Theoretical Essays: Film, Linguistics, Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 52.
2. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 164.
3. G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 89.
4. Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology* 193.
5. Žižek, *Organs without Bodies: Deleuze and Consequences* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 150.
6. *Ibid.*, 167.
7. *Ibid.*, 157.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*, 160.
10. *Ibid.*, 161.
11. Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 1997), 74.
12. Žižek, *Organs without Bodies*, 161.
13. Žižek, *Plague of Fantasies*, 111–13.
14. Fredric Jameson, *The Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), xii.
15. See David Bordwell, "A Case for Cognitivism," *Iris* 9 (1989): 11–40, 13.
16. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (1963–64), trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton, 1981), 34.
17. See Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 2002), pp. 146–149; and Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), p. 59.
18. Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology*, 74–75.
19. Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 89.
20. *Ibid.*, 75.
21. Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 1999), 57.
22. *Ibid.*, 60.
23. This is also a perfect example of how some of the best stories in Hollywood maintain a connection to the psychoanalytic narrative.
24. Žižek, *Ticklish Subject*, 213.
25. *Ibid.*, 309.
26. Žižek, *For They Know Not*, 237.
27. *Ibid.*, 264.
28. Žižek, *Defense of Lost Causes* (London: Verso, 2008), 30.

29. On this point, see Renata Salecl, *On Anxiety* (New York: Routledge, 2004), and *The Tyranny of Choice* (London: Profile, 2011).
30. Slavoj Žižek, "The Spectre of Ideology," in *Mapping Ideology*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (London: Verso, 1994), 4.
31. Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology*, 43.
32. See Jacques Lacan, "Logical Time and the Assertion of Anticipated Certainty," in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006).
33. Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative*, 76.
34. *Ibid.*
35. Žižek, *Parallax View*, 26.
36. *Ibid.*, 18.
37. *Ibid.*, 122.
38. *Ibid.*, 213.
39. *Ibid.*, 170–71.
40. This is a question that Žižek poses at the beginning of part two of *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema* (Dir. Sophie Fiennes, 2006).
41. See Žižek, *Parallax View*, 246–50; see also, Geoffrey Miller, *The Mating Mind: How Sexual Choice Shaped the Evolution of Human Nature* (London: Vintage, 2001).
42. Jacques Lacan, *Seminar II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis (1954–1955)*, trans. Sylvania Tomaselli (New York: W. W. Norton, 1988), 164.
43. Richard Maltby, "A Brief Romantic Interlude<sup>2</sup>: Dick and Jane Go to 3 ½ Seconds of the Classical Hollywood Cinema," in *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*. eds. David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 434.
44. *Ibid.*, 436.
45. *Ibid.*, 438.
46. Žižek, *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime: On David Lynch's Lost Highway* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000), 6.
47. *Ibid.*, 5.
48. See Žižek, *Plague of Fantasies*, 18–27.
49. See Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology*, 123.
50. Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: On Women and Causality* (London: Verso, 1994), 101.
51. Žižek, *Plague of Fantasies*, 185.
52. Žižek, *The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieslowski between Theory and Post-Theory* (London: BFI, 2001), 76.
53. *Ibid.*
54. Žižek, *Ridiculous Sublime*, 22.
55. See, for example, Miller, "Suture (Elements of the Logic of the Signifier)," *Screen* 18, no. 4 (1977–78): 23–34; Jean-Pierre Oudart, "Cinema and Suture," *Screen* 18, no. 4(1977–78): 24–47; and Stephen Heath, "Notes on Suture," *Screen* 18, no. 4 (1977–78): 35–76.

56. See Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Film and Theory: An Anthology*, eds. Toby Miller and Robert Stam (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000); and Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, trans. Ben Brewster et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982).
57. Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure," 486–87.
58. Metz, *Imaginary Signifier*, 42–44.
59. Žižek, *Fright of Real Tears*, 32; this follows very closely to how "suture" is outlined by Oudart (see note 55).
60. As Metz puts it in *Imaginary Signifier*, 47, the cinema "often presents us with long sequences that can (literally) be called 'inhuman' . . . sequences in which only inanimate objects, landscapes, etc. appear and which for minutes at a time offer no human form for spectator identification."
61. Žižek, *Fright of Real Tears*, 52.

### Conclusion

1. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Film and Theory: An Anthology*, eds. Toby Miller and Robert Stam (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 484.
2. Colin MacCabe, *Tracking the Signifier—Theoretical Essays: Film, Linguistics, Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 33–57.
3. Fredric Jameson, "Reflections on the Brecht-Lukács Debate," in *The Ideologies of Theory* (London: Verso, 2008), 435–36.
4. Theodor Adorno, "Reconciliation under Duress," in *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso, 2007), 160.
5. *Ibid.*, 162.
6. Todd McGowan, *Out of Time: Desire in Atemporal Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 115.
7. Jameson, "Reflections," 442.
8. Fredric Jameson, "Marxism and Postmodernism," in *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983–1998* (London: Verso, 1998), 49.
9. Jameson, "Postmodernism," 53–92.
10. Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 1999), 322.
11. Fabio Vighi, *On Žižek's Dialectics* (London: Continuum, 2010), 112.

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- . "Contemporary Film Studies and the Vicissitudes of Grand Theory." In *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, edited by David Bordwell and Noël Carroll. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996.
- . *Figures Traced in Light: On Cinematic Staging*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.
- . "Slavoj Žižek: Say Anything." *David Bordwell's Website on Cinema*. Last modified April 2005. <http://www.davidbordwell.com/essays/zizek.php>.
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