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**metalepsis seminar / season 4 / 2 metalepsis seminar / WAAC-PSU / 29 September 2014**

## how to build internal resilience into thesis proposals by developing your own "three critiques"

### METALEPSIS SEMINARIANS, 9-ERS, AUXILIARY MEMBERS, and OCCASIONAL GUESTS

*In this transitional modality of the metalepsis seminar, periodic messages will appear to radiate from Planet Occulted Signifier that amount to unsolicited advice about graduate study. Naturally you can opt out of the list that puts these in your in-box, but in case you file them away for later use, the model of the relationship is that of legal advice on how to avoid intellectual liability. In other words, how do you speculate when freedom of thought is challenged by the ideology of the university, to say nothing of the ideologies of culture and national politics? If freedom means anything, it involves tricks to spot ideology, get around it without becoming trapped in its false arguments, and move on to something more important — critical thinking. In this work-around, there will be no "thesis" to prove or disprove; rather it will be an open-ended inquiry that solves problems without having to think about it. You will produce more than you had thought to produce, while at the same time you will be a model to others (but not the Other, if you know what I mean).*



Kelsey Wood's admirable guide to Žižek's writings (excluding the Hegel book)

### \* getting around ideology

You know the symptoms all too well. A trusted advisor recommends a book, a diagram on a chalkboard has way too many arrows and labels, a lecturer gets special attention ... the fix is in. A school becomes what Lacan said was the function of the university — a discourse to support the discourse of the master, namely Late Capitalism in all its

glory. The master (S1) behind knowledge (S2) is the wizard behind the curtain who, unlike the nice man from Kansas in *The Wizard of Oz*, refuses to give way on the matter of who's in power, who continues to ask you to Enjoy! (a) your mis-identity (\$) within the Symbolic, namely to say something nice about the consumerist mentality that creates extreme disparities of wealth and knowledge, throws millions out of work, ravages the landscapes (of mostly helpless nations), and gives us the panopticism by which we volunteer our privacy willingly (Facebook etc.). Interpellation can be fun of course, but in the end we pay, and that payment is free subjectivity whose key possession, *jouissance*, must be reclaimed by going back to the Mirror Stage processing center to ask for our being back.

Ideology is present in a local way whenever we experience someone trying to locate us within a battle waged through the logic of a binary signifier. Where we have to "take a stand" there is almost always the idea of a balance point, a threshold, a "step too far." We are given a red pill or blue pill option. Like Žižek, however, we have to learn how to ask for a "third pill."

This moves us from the linear opposition between two polarized choices ("forced choices") to the vector model favored by Freud, Hegel, and Marx. In Marx, this was the permanent link between exchange value and use value, a link that could be expressed as two vectors joined at a right angle, where one (usually exchange) was "occulted" within the transaction that seemed to be pure utility. "I need a car, what do you have to sell me?" "How about this Lexus?" Well, the Ford would have done fine but we have this thing called fetish that makes exchange value something to be reckoned with but never addressed directly. We can argue about the extra utility of driving the Lexus, but it ultimately boils down to a *remainder* or *residual* of occulted value that is the gap — which always is present — within the amount of money it takes to buy the Lexus. Remember, this amount is always a vector! It combines the occulted thoughts of the buyer and the seller. The buyer must think that the price is just a bit less than what he/she was willing to pay; the seller must think that the price is just a bit more than expected. This +/- is *required* for every economic transaction. It is a scale transformation of use/exchange, occulted at the level of payment.

Once you get used to foiling the binary signifiers of ideology with the vectors of (Hegelian) sublation (*Aufhebung*), you are on your way. In some lucky cases you can look to the metonymic procedures of occultation and discern the distinctive strategies of isolation (the separation of the subject from the symbolic order) and strategies of anxiety (internal exile of the subject within the symbolic order). These are not abstract — we see them in popular culture, in hiring practices and labor relations, in newspaper articles, everywhere!

Once you find the motifs of separation and anxiety, you can reconnect them to the elements of the Symbolic (chains of signifiers that constitute our presence within networks of symbolic relationships) with the idea of the anamorph. This is a *material site with material elements!* Look for the ways in which the "standard reading" of subjective position is doubled, written over, clouded, by an anamorphic imaginary whose point of view lies outside of the Symbolic. Then you will need metonymy to draw where this point of view lies and how it functions.

## \* can you do this without mentioning Lacan?

University committees have a nearly universal response to the very mention of the name Jacques Lacan: revulsion, disgust, hostility to you and your kind. The general advice is to avoid letting anyone know you have been interested at any point in Lacanian theory. If they do not understand it, they generally hate and fear it, so maintaining a "Lacanian position" will deeply compromise any graduate career unless you happen to be enrolled at the European Graduate School in Saas-Fee, or at an enlightened university in, say, Louvain, Belgium.

The point is that you don't need to mention Lacan to use his ideas at the structural level, where ideology attempts to structure your research. By attending to the metaphor/metonymy logic of the binary signifier you can find new terms for your own version of critical theory. In doing this you will discover that many scholars and fiction writers seem to "use Lacan without saying so." This secret club includes those, such as Nabokov, who outwardly scorned Freud and all he stood for. Do not be caught up in defending a cause at the barricades; you will be canon fodder. Rather, structure your thesis so that ideology is shown the way out and critical theory is allowed to bloom in a new way, in the climate and soil you create.

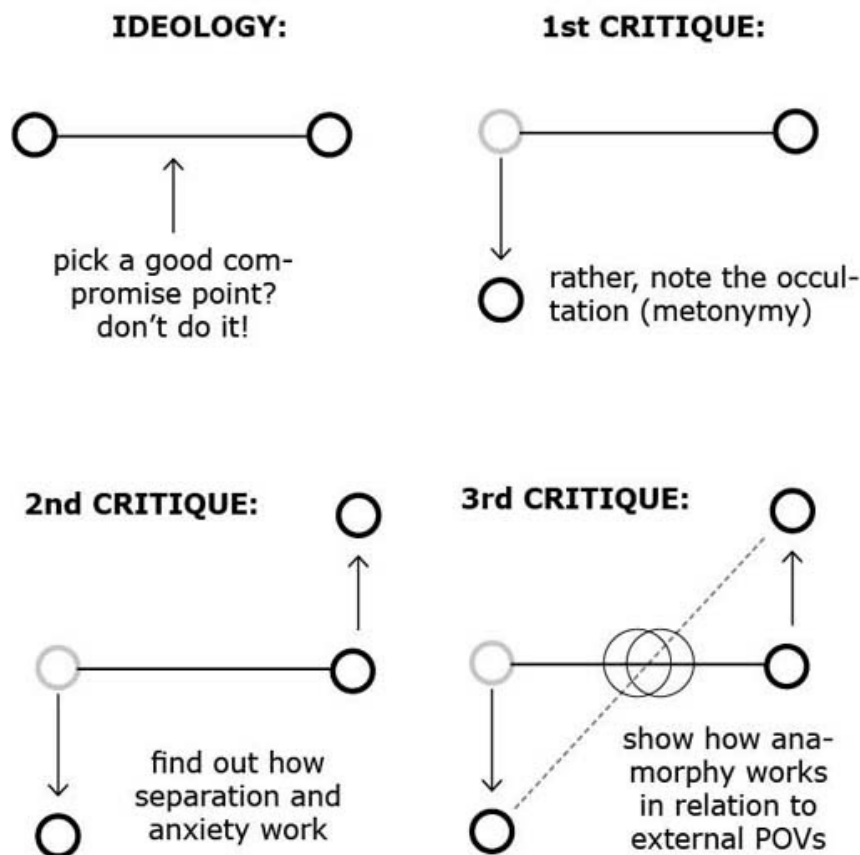
## \* the point is discovery

Although the university would prefer that you write a thesis that supports something they already know, in a way that excludes you from the underlying way this knowledge supports ideology (S2 for S1), you must focus in the element, *jouissance*, to see how this plays out in conditions of free subjectivity — namely, the reconstruction of

joy at the level of the act, away from constructions within the Symbolic. You must move beyond the obligation to footnotes and proofs based on authority, you must think for yourself by means of speculation and imagination. This is not "imagination as the (Lacanian) Imaginary." That of course is fantasy, and fantasy is employed by ideology at the level of *jouissance* to keep you happy with your interpellated situation.

Rather, this is the Vichian imagination, *fantasia* (apologies for the Italian word's resemblance to the English translation of Lacanian "fantasy" — they are really the opposite). In *fantasia*, Vico was talking about two things: the imaginative universal (*universale fantastico*) whereby the first humans occulted their own nature in order to give rise to a universe that appeared to be filled with demonic/divine presences. This led directly to the practice of divination and, unavoidable, the ideology of the auspices, the absolute laws that resulted from predicting the future through techniques. However, this ideological result led to the self-refining of culture, its evolution of less absolute domination by religion: secularization.

When Vico discovered the secret of the imaginative universal, he explained how metonymy worked in relation to (ideological) metaphor. This is an account that is not limited to ancient mentality. It is something that happens continually, every time the world appears to us, there is metonymy of an occulted signifier. Every time. Aristotle, even, understood how, in the operation of Efficient Cause, chance elements were suppressed only to echo, later on, as the signifying chain went through its stages of Final and Formal cause. Basically, all the "smart guys" (Aristotle, Plato, Parmenides ... Vico, Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer ... Merleau-Ponty, Lacan, Žižek) know about metonymy's role, but they realize a certain public resistance to the idea and exchange notes in a less-than-public way. You have to look closely, say, at Merleau-Ponty's idea of *flesh of the world* to find the metonymy, but it's there. AND, it's not that far away from Marx's vectors of exchange and use!



You, like Kant, can have your own "three critiques" based on resistance to ideology! Use metonymy to reveal ideology's cover-up of the "occulted signifier" in its pretended command to pick a blue pill or red pill along a linear line of logical opposition. Develop this to see how separation (Bloom's term: *askesis*) and anxiety (demon) work "outside the system" both literally outside and internally, and then identify the sites where anamorphosis is used to refer to these external POVs, metonymies that act on the signifying chain "at a distance." Thanks to Aparna Parikh for instigating this line of critique by developing her own Kantian resistance to ideology in her study of call-center workers in India and the Philippines.

Once on the inside, you will develop your own immunity to ideology that will allow you to discover, invent, and use your own terminology. You will be free of the jargon of both the smart guys and the not-so-smart guys because you will see the game in its full operation. You will see that there is life after ideology, i.e. a place for your thesis to develop its "free subjectivity." Your sources need not be philosophical or even academic. Popular culture will tell you the same thing, often in very sophisticated terms. Basically, the arts hold the important cards you need to win this game, but they keep them to themselves in order to construct works where the suspension of disbelief still works for most audiences. Look closely into the use of the "detached virtualities" of the double, travel through time, story in the story, and the contamination of reality by the work or dream to see how this strategy is put to use. It is like a blueprint of metonymy — you will be amazed!

## \* next week (meaning "sometime later")

A few systems develop independently of each other and the discourses mentioned above, but they nonetheless find all they need by focusing on the need for completion. Wanting to find out all the parts and how they work is a powerful motivation for repeating Lacan's "experiments on subjectivity" in laboratories where there is no Lacan. Two such cases will be the subject of future newsletters: Harold Bloom's six key terms in his *Anxiety of Influence* (askesis, demon, tesseract, clinamen, apophrades, kenosis) and Henry Johnstone's eight or so "categories of travel," focusing on the situation of separation through the narrative of the Homeric Odysseus. You will find some alternative vocabulary here, to say nothing of different strategies where ideology and occultation appear in different, non-Lacanian costumes. You will have much to choose from, but there will be reliable correlations that you can use to "corroborate" your results.

**Two remainders.** There are two important remainders that serve as resources for the thoughtful writer. Ideology completely eclipses subjectivity ... almost. There is, according to Mladen Dolar, a slight left-over, the "error of the soul" that comes out as the symptom that is the center of psychoanalysis's project. But, then, also according to Dolar, there is another remainder after this, something psychoanalysis cannot account for. This is the *jouissance* that takes us back to the act, to the status of being that we thought we had forfeited at the Mirror Stage, the choice not taken when we were asked to choose between Being and Speaking. This *jouissance* is the key to open semiosis, our ability to discover an art of topics (*ars topica* of the Middle Ages) and, in that art, a free subjectivity. The invitation to enjoin the art of topics is forever open, it is always an option; ideology cannot shut it down, nor can psychoanalysis pretend to account for it. It is a matter for art, not just for those who make it but also those who need it.

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cheers,  
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