

Metalepsis Seminar • Virtual Session 15

[metalepsis seminar](#) / WAAC•PSU / 9 April 2014

Žižek's idea of theory • catalepsis • humanism vs. the Real of the sinthome

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



Slavoj Žižek

* correcting the flight path

The Žižekstudies Conference offered several learning experiences for our attempt to export metalepsis to the general critical philosophy public. The three sessions became two, the first sparsely attended but with interesting conversations, the second well attended with some precisely aimed critiques: namely, that the historicity of Lacan's thinking should be respected in any "mix and match" appropriations. The breaks in Lacan's thinking, as Žižek and others have noted, follows roughly the itinerary defined by the Imaginary (mirror state), Symbolic (language; discourse), and Real (sinthome, perversion, sexuation). While this evolutionary structure is a key to the meaning of the system, Lacan himself emphasized that his legacy was the experimental attitude, a readiness to reformulate everything at any moment. Lacan is not content; he is "act." His manner of speaking is also a method: "*mi-dire*" or the use of prosopopoeia (speaking through another character or object) and aposiopoeia (incompleteness) rather than definitive argumentation.

The second Big Lesson is that too many complex diagrams can destroy the public trust, while narratives and stories build it. Lacan worked with diagrams, Žižek doesn't, but tells stories where the diagram structure is obvious. Thank you, Carolina, for finally proving this point.

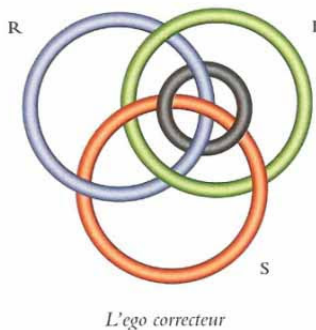
Is metalepsis still useful as a critical theory strategy? The "project" at this point involves looking at cathexis (an investment of interest, beginning in a "fetishistic" concern for objects of desire, anxiety, and fear within perceptual experience). Cathexis attracts interest that moves closer to pleasure and retreats from danger, but at some points the scale of cathexis's "inventory" of desires and fears can give way to a sudden change. Desirable objects can become volatile, dangerous (e.g. the Champagne in *Notorious*). The ugly can become beautiful. These radical reversals involve a switch between "symptomatic" relations to "sinthomatic" ones — where signifiers become "permeated with *jouissance* — which, in Lacanian terms can be either pleasant or awful — but they are almost always revelational. In this transition we see how desire confronts the death drive's logic of return to the void. In the boom shot of *Notorious* we actually get an

account of Freud's shift from the pleasure principle to the death drive!

The saturation of signifiers is what art, poetry, and architecture are all about, eh? This is our “mana,” our reason for theorizing and hoping that theory can contribute something positive to practice. And, since dissertations and theses are fundamentally signifying chains, we ourselves look for “sinthomatic” opportunities to saturate signifiers with a kind of theoretic *jouissance*.

This general model was confirmed by Žižek’s own description of theory as “radically bifurcating” — something that is neither descriptive nor proscriptive but *active* — an “act” that, in its originality retroactively constructs its own antecedent conditions. Marx’s idea of commodity could be regarded as such an “act,” in that before Marx articulated it, the idea and all of its contributing concepts did not exist, or were not noticed in their original form. Theory is a vortex around which meaning is “super-cathected,” super-saturated, over-determined. We do not need to trace ideas back along a hypothetical line of history; theory, strong theory, constitutes a “new beginning.”

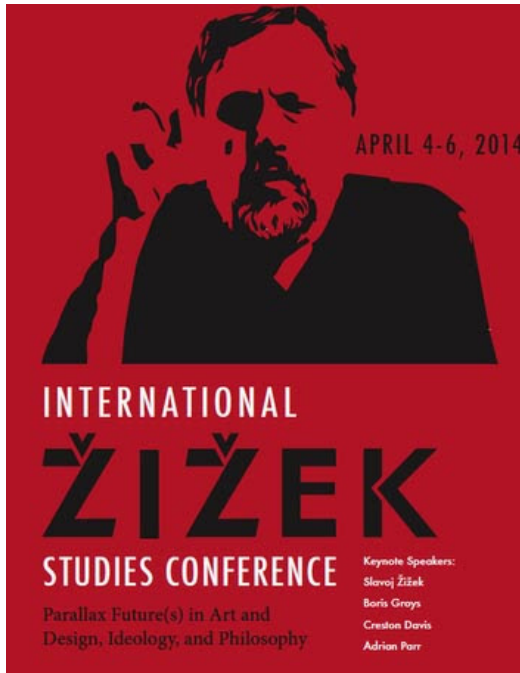
In this sense, theory parallels the originality of artistic/architectural “acts” that, once they appear, seem to have “been there all along.” (This is the famous “hapax” structure of literature.) We see things in history we had not noticed before, and we restructure those things we had noticed. Theory, lacking and even resisting content, addresses the “defect” that has de-linked the Symbolic with the Real; this means that, like the sinthome, it is a supplementary repair ring that restores the topology of the Borromeo knot.



In this sense, theory lies *beyond psychoanalysis* — in the territory of the sinthome. The historicity of Lacan’s thinking in fact runs out with the discourse of Analysis, where the symptom, the defect in the signifying chain, is addressed by “traversing the fantasy” that has, in the subject, provided the false illusion of continuity. With the defects revealed, Analysis is done, but is there nothing more? Lacan himself says “yes,” and this extension of his thinking past analysis is the “unfinished work” on Joyce and the sinthome. Here, Joyce is said to have redirected his relations with his drunkard, defective father to the construction of a “new father,” which we know is the construction of a new Name of the Father. This “père version” is perverse in that it is a BRIDGE BETWEEN BEING AND SPEAKING. It overcomes the *impasse* of the forced choice, that we either embrace being or speaking. Joyce, clearly, constructed just such a bridge in *Finnegans Wake*, in its overdetermined meanings and structures. In this sense, Joyce = poetry and poetics combined. In other words, it “contains instructions on how to read it.” Scarpa’s Brion Cemetery could be regarded as another such overdetermined “text.” Feel free to add our ideas of “unlimited semiosis” and “overdetermination.” Now we’re talking ARCHITECTURE!

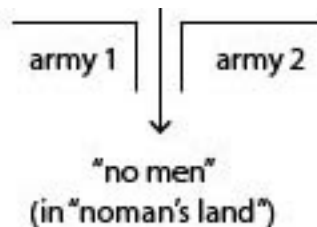
Despite warnings against the perils of historicity and the limitations of graphic supports, the Žižekstudies experience was very productive, thanks to Carolina Dayer and Berrin Terim. Profitable encounters with other participants (David Denny, Rex Butler) made for some light at the end of the tunnel, so it’s not exactly time to close down shop. The idea that theory is resistance to

ideology, an act that lacks content but retains the ability to divide itself infinitely, is given new energy.



* žižek's reversed predication

In an instructive example drawn from history, Žižek recounted a story from World War I, where the two opposing armies were in a stale-mate, a group of men appeared who hid in the zone in between. Taking shelter in the bomb craters and abandoned trenches, these Germans, French, Croats, Belgians, and other nationalities creates the ideal “dissensus” of no one dominant political identity or ideal; all were focused on simple survival; all sought to escape the war. We tend to think of war in terms of reversed predication without a middle. One side is beating the other, then the other side beats the one. But this apparently true story not only shows how the double frame Lacan insists on not only exists, but that the middle — which “must be interrogated” — lives a life outside the ideology of the either-or. This is the zone of theory, where there is no “nationality” or determinative being, only the splitting of the split.



You can recognize right away the metaleptic heart of this insight, that "no-man's land" actualizes a Real, turning the "impossibility" into reality — hey, sinthome! Putting Žižek into the terms of reversed metalepsis reveals how the gap opens the way to move from symptom to sinthome (*père version*).



George Romero's 1968 film *Night of the Living Dead* popularized the idea of zombies as, basically, low-wage workers.

* a new line of thinking about the body

When Claudio Sgarbi suggested that "cataleptis" would be a good follow-up to the "metaleptis" seminar, it sounded capricious. But, Žižek (again) has provided a way of thinking about this. Citing some evidence about how the brain and body interact that has been circulated recently, it seems that if you want to, say, reach for your coffee cup, your muscles are already doing the job BEFORE your brain thinks "I want some coffee." That is, the apparant "response" comes before the apparant "command." There is no more idea of the brain as a "decision center" that sends out orders based on rational processes that are carried out by the body. Rather, something happens in a dislocated or emergent way that acts, and the brain responds to rationalize the situation AFTERWARDS. This reminds me of the joke: "In Texas, what do they call someone who shoots first and asks questions later? — An intellectual." It seems that the brain's consciousness is an ego-function that, after the fact of the act has occurred, tries to rationalize why it happened and give the ego-subject a way of explaining it.

If we put this in the context of what we were saying in the supplementary seminar after the last Confabulations event about the blood's laminar flow being a communications channel for the body to communicate with itself — kidneys to liver, liver to toes, toes to nose, etc. — using turbulence as a kind of code or language, then the idea of "thinking with your hands," or feet, or heart, or eyes, makes perfect sense because, in reality, "scientific reality," the whole body is thinking. AND, because the hands, eyes, feet, nose, etc. are not just machines but connections out into the external world, the body is thinking IN a world and also THROUGH a world. AND, because the bilateral symmetry of the body, its chirality, is the geometry if this projection, the world's left-right aspect is incorporated.

This is not a metaphor, this is "a verifiable reality." That is to say, that what humanists used to say was poetically true (but of course they actually believed that reality was in fact neurally based, and that the "reality out there" was a materialist reductionistic basis for what was real) is actually "truer than they believed it possible to say." The scientists are in fact "more humanists than the humanists." The humanist position which promotes a positive fantasy of poetry but relies on a "dirty fantasy" about positivistic science and authoritarian knowledge, has been exposed as being a "crude materialism."

So, the worst nightmare for humanists is to find out that their "dream has actually come true." The body is actually as they said, the body-world, and the body "thinks" both with itself and with this world constituted through the senses but also the virtual extensions made to anticipate what is coming but not yet there, and to remember what happened but is now lost. In other words, we live in the humanist utopia, but the only ones opposing it are humanists who stick to a Positivist model of a crude materialism based on a Real that is imagined to exist in external objects! Let's think

about this some. Humanism sees the human as "animal+plus," while psychoanalysis sees the animal as the preservation of the void within the human, a void that is, in the strongest philosophical sense, "the animal," the being of the death drive, which of course is not a drive toward death but a *resisting* death through the symptom.

If the body acts before the brain becomes aware, and our intentions are actually excuses added "after the fact," then we are in effect **cataleptic**. Our bodies are animated by ... what? There must be some "automaton functions" that make us appear to our excuse-making function as zombies ("I don't know why I did that!"), but these automaton functions can be trained (think of dancers, skilled workers, etc.) and influenced (i.e. walking every day, looking at beautiful scenery, talking with friends, studying etc.) to do things better, more imaginatively, more effectively. In other words, contrary to popular culture images, the zombies are the good guys, it is the vampires that are bad. How? Both zombies and vampires occupy that interval Lacan identified as "between the two deaths." They are dead but have forgotten about it. They have died "actually" but refuse to face or cannot find their symbolic death.

In the course of our original discussion about this, one seminar person noted how blood needs gravity to function; that astronauts who have been weightless for a period are in danger of dying very shortly after landing on earth. Add to this the connections between blood being "shed" and "falling," and the "spilling" of blood on earth as related to politics, namely patriotism. Gravity is our blood's own sense of belonging to a place. Vampires interrupt this vertical relationship with a horizontal relationship — they "walk among" ordinary mortals but sustain their immortality by borrowing blood. Once borrowed, it becomes disconnected from the earth, liberated gravitationally. Most folk stories about vampires involve the ability to fly, to climb walls, to make long voyages packed in earth-filled coffins. Just as some cultures believe that migration can be justified as long as some earth of the homeland is carried along to the new location, vampires extend this principle to become the first "jet-set." They originate the idea of the "Club Med," where like-minded bodies glowing with eternal youth gather at points around the world to experience uniform offerings of food, drink, sex, and nights of wild dancing.



Bela Lugosi, possibly the best example of the aristocratic ruling-class vampire.

In short, the vampires are corporations (= "in-corporatings") who have broken blood's relation to gravity. Now you see how the zombies come in. They are the Mexicans working in the back of the California fusion-menu restaurant. They, like all "undocumented workers," *have to* act first, realize later. They are caught up in the corporate mandate; they are Marx's alienated workers. Now there is comedy in what seems to be a tragedy here. Žižek points out that comedy is the only way to approach the current unacceptable political world, its sexism, racism, etc. because in tragedy

there is some minimum degree of dignity preserved at the ending. We say "the hero had to die, but how courageous, how noble!" In comedy we see someone who persists in trying to maintain dignity when the hope of doing so has vanished completely. The effort is still there, but there no longer is any support from reality. The automaton is funny, because it causes the act EVEN WHEN THE ACTOR DISAGREES and accepts that there is no hope. You see? We have a "zombie" condition that in fact has neurological evidence!

Let's say that the standard academic humanist is a tragedian, who holds out hope for "better times." This was the position of Adrian Parr (Associate Professor Department of Sociology & School of Architecture and Interior Design, Chair of Taft Faculty and Director of The Charles Phelps Taft Research Center, UNESCO Co-Chair of Water Accessibility and Sustainability) in her address to the Žižek audience. As a keynote speaker, Parr, a Deleuzian, was introduced with the list of her impressive set of credentials. No one actually mentioned that she, through the University of Cincinnati, is sponsored by Kroger, that flying around the world to fight global warming her airline flights add countless tons of carbon to the atmosphere, thanks to Kroger's support, which of course benefits the corporate-university partnership model that is now the predominant US model. (First, reduce or remove public support by showing how taxes are "too much" to support ridiculous university courses in philosophy, women's studies, interdisciplinary programs, etc. Then, second, show how corporate support is the only answer to keep tuition from skyrocketing. Of course there is a THIRD, which is high student debt in the face of declining employment opportunity, in effect "zombifying" graduates who must now ACT or ELSE!) Once you catch on to this you see how clever it is. Adrian Parr, who kept reminding us about her parents' far-left credentials (her father consulted with the Hungarian government but was detained by Stalinists at the border, where she learned the meaning of true communism at the age of 9, etc.), is the critical link the chain. An "academic" (according to sources, she was not chosen by faculty review but a spousal hire) who argues popular "leftist" causes (environmentalism, sustainability, equal rights) but in fact seals the deals that consolidate the corporate-university power structure at the global level. It is not the "cause" that is important (except for popular media) but the networks created that allow the flow of capital to enter into vulnerable 3rd world nationalities, "getting there first" to explore the potential of what Naomi Klein called the "shock sites," where destabilized governments become less vigilant of corporate exploitation.



Coffee cup consolation, Starbucks cup notice.

So ... if the "humanistic vision" of the act (recycle! conserve power! use your imagination!) is the public side of the materialist doctrine (belief in reality that is materially determined but only in the strictest positivistic terms), what is the alternative? If even sober-minded scientist show that the act precedes the concept, then "using your imagination" is only a variation of "follow our examples of how to use your imagination to believe what we are making happen is really a *good thing*." We are in an upside-down world. "Imagination ... is funny ... it makes a cloudy day sunny" are lyrics to the song that turn out to be the truth of ideology. We must take back the ACT, as act. We must,

to counter the corporation model of doing good (the nice message about fair trade on the Starbucks coffee cup) with a REAL THEORY OF IMAGINATION.

— A theory about **CATALEPSIS**.

If we think about the actuality of the action preceding the thought-justification, there actually is some kind of hope. How does Zizek's story about the international band of peace-niks hiding out in the "no-man's land" turn out to be a fable about the act? First, these "zombies" are in effect true Lacanians. They "disavow" their patronymics, their names, their national identities. Yet, away from their homelands in a radical way, they establish a new gravitational effect. Instead of spilling blood for their super-ego countries, they risk spilling blood for the sake of the earth beneath their feet. They survive without ideology, they are "nobodies," but they have to use ingenuity to survive, to keep their bodies alive. Their skill subsists in understanding the in-between nature of the in-between. Possibly they would have been grateful to have gone to the Metalepsis Seminar, where the in-between and "interrogating the gap" were everyday practice! Catalepsis means that, like subjects after analysis, they have come to terms with the desire of the Other. They no longer accept that the desire of the Other animates their own imagined local desire. They have "traversed" their fantasy about desire. But, then what?

The next step, Lacan speculates, lies in the *sinthome*, where the signifiers in the signifying chain becomes "saturated with *jouissance*," but this is not simply enjoying the hell out of talking, but rather converting *jouissance* to *j'oui-sense* — remember [Youngjin Park's excellent essay](#)? This is the "sense" or "meaning" of of the signifier as such AND THE TRUE HOME OF THE IMAGINATION. The *sinthome* is what James Joyce used to "turn to the father" — not his real one but an imagined one — to write *Finnegans Wake*. Perversion is not just Zizek's funny metaphor for his DVD "guides," it is direct advice about how we "choose being AND speaking" (as against the forced choice of the father, between being or speaking and hence symbolic castration) by packing the signifiers with pleasure and meaning simultaneously. The "Pervert's Guide to ____" is really the "*sinthomatic* guide to ____." We must learn all about the *sinthome*, and I suggest that catalepsis is a good place to start: sleepwalking, dreaming, death dreams, automatons and automatisms, ideology as an animating machine, etc. WE MUST TURN THE TABLES ON CORPORATIST IDEOLOGY!!!! If in architecture, humanists have been crying "back to the imagination!" then we must respond: but we ARE going back! We ARE reclaiming the imagination, but we reclaim it from ideology and positivism, the very things you mandate in your advocacy of the "forced choice" of scholarship-as-authority. There are no authorities. There are stories; there are exemplars and guides; there is "the true." The legacy of the university discourse is the S1, the master pulling the strings behind the scenes, forcing us to "Enjoy!" *via* the symptom that bars our subjectivity by giving us pretense of mastery in exchange for a lifetime of debt to corporations. Let's not further enslave the world, however. Let's exchange our symptoms for *sinthomes*.

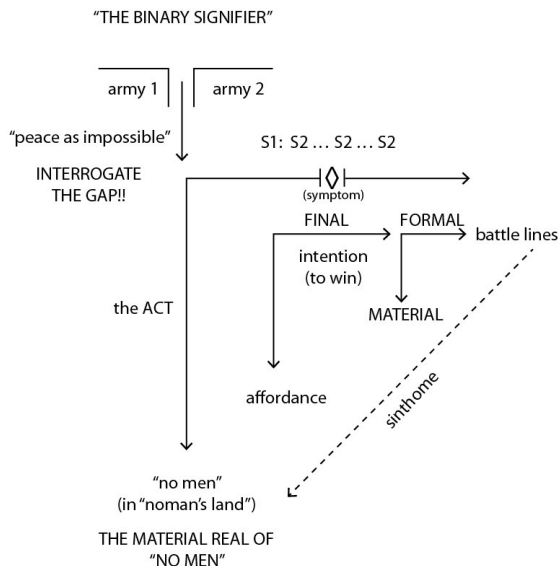
After all, isn't this what happens when chirality "opens up the world" by declaring that there are parts that, in matching, never collapse on to each other? This idea of loft space (void) is the body of imagination — not a figure of speech but body-automaton that comes about through cathexis/investment — our *act* that initiates the thinking machine that "constructs the world" by packing signifiers full of ... *j'oui-sense*.

Youngjin Park:

“Never give up on the possible while holding onto the impossible by keeping the void.”
— Now, THAT's starting to make some (*j'oui*) sense!

*** no man's land**

Go back to Žižek's example of the "noman's land," where there were actually "no-men" during World War I's stalemates at the battle lines. We can see how the simple act of "interrogating the gap" between the binary signifiers formed by every war (us against them) results in an act! of defining the impossible-Real of the no-man's land. We can see that occupying that zone with Real "no-men" is the work of the sinthome. First there is the *énoncé* of content, the S2's, the laminar flow of signifiers streamlined by the master signifier (the idiocy of the war, accepted by both parties). Keep fighting! ... we can hear those signifiers shout. At the point where formal cause creates the gap in the battlefield, we have the materiality of that gap, offering pockets and hiding places where, thanks to AFFORDANCE, the by-product of intentionality (final cause) that has framed the formal cause of the battlefield, leads us back to the original ACT where the "impossible" was already foreshadowed. Now, you can explain to your friends how the binary signifier (which humanists want to focus on — the project of peace so to speak) is always-already there, thanks to the middle, which we must interrogate by looking at (1) material cause, a remainder function, (2) the affordance of final cause, also a remainder, and (3) the sinthome function that now saturates the signifiers by showing how the negative (Noman's land) turns out to be the only Real of the war. This is the whole cycle of Lacan's thinking, from symptom to sinthome, in one readily explainable example. Apologies, however, for YET ANOTHER COMPLICATED DIAGRAM (Carolina is going to kill me) ...



* housekeeping notes

In the not too distant future, we will be planning a summer symposium based on some topic hatched out between Todd McGowan, Guna Nadarajan, and YOU, the metalepsarians. Be thinking of what you might like to talk about for 2-3 days in the rolling hills of central Pennsylvania. Late summer seems the best prospect, possibly early August as we did last year. IF YOUR TOPIC IS CHOSEN, YOU ARE OBLIGED TO COME AND LEAD THE DISCUSSION!

The Frascari Confabulations Conference gave us a good chance to renew our conversations and follow up with Claudio. If you need more of this at some point, just call. A nice coffee conversation is only 3.8 hours away.

Movie advice. You may have already seen the season's gentlest movie, *The Great Beauty*, about the end of the era of liberal optimism among cosmopolitan Romans of a certain generation. Wipe away the tears of joy and melancholy and get a good laugh from [The Grand Budapest](#)

Hotel, played with restraint and wit by a long list of Very Good Actors, familiar and new. With "great" and "grand" in the air, maybe the next seminar should be *The Glorious Catalepsis*.

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