

## Flash! Pop!

D. Kunze, January 27, 2011

Let's take another idiotic position, a literalization of the idea of the "short-circuit" that has been employed by Žižek and others to describe conditions within culture theory and critical theory where two ideas, developed separately, experience a renewal and redefinition through the sometime destructive but almost always interesting passage of a charge between them. The actual phenomenon of the short-circuit is a part of popular culture imagery. There is a frayed wire, a proximate location of something equally vulnerable, and a spark. There is an electrical hiss, a pop, and a flash. Either the lights go out or, if the short-circuit was a part of the plan, the monster comes to life. Either way, two "circuits" have been joined. What they now experience is a new "economy" in the flows and transformations of energy. Before, the single circuits had worked by means of a design planned in advance. The connected circuits operate like the waters of a river that has overflowed its banks. New channels are quickly found through the mandates of fluid dynamics and gravity. In electrical terms, we have the logic of lightning.

In painting, this effect was captured by Giorgione, *La Tempesta*.



Giorgione, *La Tempesta* (c. 1508). Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice.

There are no fully accepted interpretations of this painting, although its elements appear to be intended to serve in an allegory. The key is the bolt of lightning painted in the back. It is an indication of an optical quality of the scene — that we may have, one second before, been in complete darkness — and that the elements now visible in this short flash are assembled from several possible different sources. Some may have been present in the same pose in the darkness as we now see them; others may have been the quick attempt by our imagination to assemble a scene from whatever combination of phantom and real parts we might assemble. The key is the *time interval of the flash*, which mandates a simultaneity formed through a logic of *bricolage* — whatever “lies at hand.” Thus, this, like so many eye-witness supports, is a composite of reality and what is imagined. It is an interpolation possibly between the two. Not knowing what it is we see and not having time to investigate further, we have “filled in the blanks.” Our new logic, our short-circuit logic, like any river flowing over its banks or lightning bolt seeking a source of electrons, constructs its pathways not according to tree-diagrams based on logical relationships and an orderly separation of like from unlike. Our short-circuit has assembled a scene as a message without a guaranteeing referent, an authentic signified. We see pure effect without cause. The logic here is that of the rebus, a puzzle assembly of parts that function sometimes as metaphors, sometimes as metonymies, sometimes as puns whose letters must be re-arranged. The rule is “there is no rule,” at least no consistent protocol demanding that all of the elements of the painting behave the same way.

Since what dominates is time, in the form of the restrictions of the “instant,” we must look to the  $\emptyset$  phenomenon (some psychologists insist on a more accurate term, the  $\beta$  phenomenon), that interval made famous by the mechanics of film since it is a gap that, itself negative, allows the synthesis of the illusion of motion. Romanticizing a bit, the  $\emptyset$  is the subjective addition of the glue necessary to make sense of two disconnected still photographs, “so close that” the imputation of motion is the most economical way to consume them. Let’s look in detail at this “so close that,” for it is an argument about efficiency. In one way of looking at it, the perceptual apparatus prefers simple answers to complex ones. It sees a circle of light bulbs; one light in succession goes out or changes color. It is “easier” to see something going around the circle than it is to conceive that each light in its turn changes its state and that there is no movement. In a variation of this experiment, dots of one color are seen to change to their complementary color, and that newly colored dot is the one going around the circle.

The short circuit is, then, at least in one sense between the subject and object of perception. The subject quickly rummages around, unconsciously, to throw into the frame what is needed to complete the scene. What does it find to throw in? What is available for such quick and obliging cooperation?

The short circuit in critical theory takes more time than other short circuits. It involves the selection of texts, a reading that imposes or finds a relationship between them, and new

readings considering the implications of the impossible/improbable cross-readings. Slavoj Žižek, the series editor for the "Short Circuits Series" published by MIT press, puts it this way.

A short circuit occurs when there is a wrong connection in the network—wrong, of course, from the standpoint of the smooth functioning of the network. Is therefore the shock of short circuiting not one of the best metaphors for a critical reading? Is not one of the most efficient critical procedures to cross wires that don't usually touch—to take a major classic (text, author, notion) and read it in a short circuiting way, through the lenses of a "minor" author, text, or conceptual apparatus ("minor" in the sense of marginalized, disavowed by the hegemonic ideology, dealing with a "lower," less dignified topic)? The starting premise of this series is that Lacanian psychoanalysis is a privileged instrument of such an approach. This, then, is not a new series of books on psychoanalysis, but a series of "connections of the Freudian field"—of short Lacanian interventions into art, philosophy, theology, and ideology.<sup>1</sup>

The method of critical short-circuiting, though slower, uses the same logic as that of optical short-circuiting. The theme of economy, though it is imposed by a lack of time "to think about it," should be viewed in the same light as "slow food": whatever is near-at-hand, readily available, proximate, contingent. The logic of the immediate and available is metonymy. It is also the function of metonymy in its ability to conceal, within the material/structural particularities of an expression (*énoncé*), a basely material supporting apparatus. Behind the scenes of metaphoric production we see various props and stage-hands, who are not meant to appear on stage. There are the material supports, the pieces of wood that keep the scenery standing up. There are the producers and directors whose intentionality guided the casting, directing, and art direction; the marketing, the financial arrangements, the rentals and union arrangements. There is also the key element, the *desire* that, once concealed, allows the metaphoric products to move forward, towards the goal, the formal appearance of the play, the illusions on stage.

This desire is like the  $\emptyset$  phenomenon, in that it occurs originally but then is distributed throughout, as a means of organizing not the intended elements (set design, alterations to the script, direction of scenes, etc.) but those left-overs that are compounded of natural accidents, what Aristotle called *automata*, and human accidents — unexpected opportunities, encounters, flashes of insight, critical re-evaluations. "Desire" here sounds too consciously known, too intentional. It is rather the contextual missing component by which, ideologically speaking, we produce anything. It is the gap in the process that prevents a satisfactory, full answer to the question of how and why we enjoy. The circularity of the answers to "why did you like that?" demonstrates that we have no satisfactory means of coming to terms with desire/enjoyment, which means that its course is both radically external to us (unknowable, not just unknown) but radically internal, the Other located at the center of subjectivity whose desire is taken on as our own. This spatially illogical location of the radical outside into the radical inside is the

*extimate* (F. *extimité*) that Lacan coined. It is the uncanny element of Lacanian psychoanalysis, its Möbius-band effect.

The question of speed is, however, itself a short-circuit of critical theory. While it would take time to work out the intricacies of the *énoncé* and enunciating, the Big Other (A) cause and the little 'a' effect, subjective objectivity and its twin, objective subjectivity, we can force the issue by looking at the imposed quick dynamics — the efficient cause, in Aristotelian terms — of the instant  $\emptyset$ , the lightning flash. This is the "slow food" solution of critical theory; everything must lie close at hand. This may oblige us to adopt a theory of metonymy as well as a theory that looks at metonymy. Juxtaposition may take the place of step-wise proofs. Examples inserted without rhyme or reason, lacunæ and anachronism, jokes and aphorisms — these may annoy rather than convince. Unavoidably, they challenge the model of the forum, debate, or classroom, where discourse is often viewed in the contemporary degraded form of "fair and balanced" division of all topics into two opposed positions. The Lacanian style moved from treatise to *mi-dire*, the acceptance of truth's obligation to be incomplete. One can say it all and be inconsistent or be consistent and learn when to stop, stop short.

Efficient cause is about efficiency, the idea of an economy, of keeping things simple. It's Occam's Razor, for which there is no logical argument but an esthetic one: when all the visible parts give rise to an unexpected result, we have surprise, epiphany, wit. The short-circuit of Giambattista's "imaginative universal" is a clear case. Here, the Lacanian explanation is effective. Given the effects of the thunder, once the thunder is taken to be a *word* — a word whose meaning is *unintelligible* — the human mind becomes possible. A (cause) and a (effect) are simultaneously co-inscribed, without the necessity of A actually existing ("Jove" is the place-holder for this unknown). Jacques-Alain Miller uses the example of someone who runs into a room and shouts "Bomb!" This is an "enunciating" (*énonciation*) without a real bomb (*énoncé*) to back up the shout's claim, but the effect nonetheless is the same. Everyone rushes out of the room. No one "sticks around" to test the hypothesis. There is no subjectivity to the A, the *Autre*; no subjects sit around the bomb and ask it questions.

Enunciation is pure *act*, pure effect. That we can have effects without causes is the principle of culture. This situation runs counter to the metaphor of the universe as a clockwork and God as the clockmaker who, from outside, reaches in (the "Unseen Hand") to make adjustments. For this kind of Real, a R1 as we have called it elsewhere, we need a boundary around the known universe, a contiguous territory of the human *œcumene*. It is important to regard the inside of this model as contingent, mortal, corruptible, and limited; just as its complementary enclosing paradise be eternal, perfect, and authentic. Lacan Möbianizes this schema in two ways. First, his idea of the subject is to place the A, the Other, into a radically central void inside the subject. Radical centrality brings to mind the scene from Ridley Scott's *Aliens*, where the monster grows out of the astronaut's thoracic cavity. This defies the simplified models of the Freudian id/ego/superego. "Naturalists," making what Žižek calls a "right-swerve" from the

clinical evidence, align the id with the brain-stem's primitive, instinctual, reptilian origins. This is to claim that the subject's inside is inside<sup>2</sup>, so to speak, an inside *of* an inside. The radical exteriority of the Other is what makes the subject a subject: split between the (uninterpretable) demands of the Other, the *énoncé* of language, while able only to experience the *enunciating* effects. The gap of interpretive failure is what makes humans what they are, not the "instinctual" lizard-eat-lizard survivalism that Naturalists prefer, to justify their political philosophies.<sup>2</sup>

The other result of Lacan's Möbianization, his *extimité*, is to make the Freudian partial object portable. This was advanced effectively with his additions of the gaze and the voice, free-floating "radicals" that, able to circulate freely in popular culture, transformed critical theory there. The partial object as gaze appears as a blind spot, a void; the return gaze of the object the subject looks upon. This of course solves the question of the economy of interpellation, Althusser's famous idea of how subjects willingly assimilate and follow the imagined authoritarian orders of unseen masters. The "unseen hand" is not required. Subjects employ a DUI attitude of knowing in advance what the Other expects of them. Despite Foucault's project of reversing the direction of the Lacanian gaze, the facts of the case, abundant in popular culture, allow easy refutations of the Foucault position. Even Foucault's prime example, Bentham's Panopticon, is a clear case of interpellation of the prisoners as victims of a gaze purposefully negated by the guard tower's concealing blinds. And, it is Bentham's insistence, not Foucault's, that we read the situation correctly, as an *economy* of the flow of authority, from *inside the subject* and not from the outside — an(other) 18c. case of *extimité*.

With economy and speed in mind, the at-hand applies also to the Aristotelian causes, which cannot be viewed as categorically independent but structurally and consequentially related. Efficient cause, with its "drop-out" function of the metonymical element of desire, works as the *apieron*, making possible the desire of the subject, formal cause, although this must be metonymically suppressed, as the subject and its desire must be split by the relation of A/a, *énoncé* and enunciating. The subject, so to speak, "passes on the 'A'" through a metaphor that preserves the enunciating within the material particulars of a form. Surplus or lack become the same thing, because they allow us to recover the continuous metonymic line of concealed causes (*a*, desire; the split subject's final cause; the materiality of the form-work) and thus realize a structural relationship between the *automaton* of 'A' and the *tuchē* of the subject's opportunism and contingency. Our evidence is material, however, and we have to extend the metonymic logic of material in a reverse-direction to effect an *analepsis* of these dropped out forces and products.

The lightning flash quality of the short-circuit is a well-known and even famous effect. In Pavel Florensky's *Iconostasis*, we are presented with the common situation in dreams.<sup>3</sup> An external event such as a ringing bell or falling object terminates sleeping, but the sleeper remembers a dream, fully formed, in which this terminal act also terminates a narrative event, often with

highly developed detail. It seems that the dream has been going on for a long time, but the facts of the case show that the dream could not have started without its terminal event! The structure of chiasmus (the dream and external reality "end" at the same point) is radically "temporalized" through the double negation of the retro-construction of the dream. We might generalize: *retroaction* is the logic by which Lacan's "future anterior" was intended to be effective. The first element, the lost, abandoned, suppressed, or missing object, *a*, is precisely the alarm clock that ends/begins the sleeper's dream.

The short-circuit, far from being a metaphor to justify critical blurring of disciplinary/historical boundaries, is an important operator in establishing an economy that allows retroaction its maximum effectiveness. This effectiveness, in turn, allows retroaction to be the primary physics of the  $\emptyset$  phenomenon. The  $\emptyset$  is that which "drops out" of the visual field, the subtraction (-x) that allows the "metaphor" (1/x) to proceed. 1/x in this case has to do with the causal structures (final, formal, material) that create formal (conscious) "utterances" whose artifacts are "silenced" within an "operant" device (which we symbolize as  $\Gamma$ , the "orthogonal/independent" relationship, the "operator," that, in Saussurian theory, stands for the conventional relation of signifier to signified. Thus final cause in relation to the form chosen to "express it" has a range of choices, based on culture and history, and this range means that there can be no 1:1 relationship between intentionality and expression. Similarly, there is no determinate relationship between material and formal cause, although choice of materials and methods of working them certainly has a considerable effect on the formal outcome. The idea is that, even when "influence" is at its greatest, we distinguish between what is "intended to be shown" from the success or failure of the materials and methods to bring it about. As we say, "we know what you *meant* to say."

The operator also structures efficient cause, allowing the suppression/loss of the *a* that initializes and initiates the efficient sequencing of the other causes. Just as any interpretation of a political advertisement requires us to ask who paid for it, the efficient cause is linked to a "backstory" that has some remainder, which serves as a "tell" in comprehending the subsequent results. Backstories can have backstories. Rosalind Krauss's "Sculpture in the Expanded Field" attempts to give its backstory in the Structuralists' model of the Klein four-group and Lacanian L-scheme, but the backstory of this is the project of usurping the authority of New York critics by creating an aggressive "collegiate" front with incontestable academic credentials. There of course can be a backstory to this backstory, and so on.

With every backstory, there is an "unintelligible" component, a kind of half-speak (*mi-dire*) or blurring that operates ideologically. In some societies, kings rely on advisors/prophets who speak a language that only the kings can understand. Alternatively, the king mumbles unintelligibly and an interpreter is required. Authority and ideology require this kind of mumbling, and every efficient cause "mumbles" through its removal of *a* from A, act from utterance. On one hand, this blurring is the basis of formalized "misreadings" that, Harold

Bloom claims, make possible the creation of new works of art. An artist or writer is paralyzed by the master, prolific and wise. To create something in the shadow of this giant, the artist must falsify, betray, misread. Such "misprision" distorts the former work but also uncannily marks the precise spots where genius occurred and, left undistorted, operated both ideologically as well as poetically.

Retraction means that there will be a backstory even if there isn't one, so to speak. Even if a progenitor was inept or ineffective, retroaction creates a "home" by virtue of the realization that "you can't go home again." "— You don't know what you've got 'til it's gone," sang Joni Mitchell. The *moment of loss* is thus the generative moment which revises the past or, if the past has insufficient funds, generates it. This is precisely the character of the Lacanian *objet petit a* — something that cannot be found, because, although lost, it never really existed.

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1. Web reference, <http://mitpress.mit.edu/catalog/browse/browse.asp?btype=6&serid=138>, last accessed January 27, 2011.
  2. It is amusing in this regard to note the recent revisionism of paleontologists who, formerly regarding *Tyrannosaurus Rex* as a warlike, murderous meat-eater, now accept that the giant was probably a meek vegetarian. The key to the rehabilitation of T. Rex was perhaps the political context of the first judgment, the need to find an "ancestor" willing to "stand up for our honor" in the face of German militarism.
  3. Pavel Florensky, *Iconostasis*, trans. Donald Sheehan and Olga Andrejev (Crestwood, NJ: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1996).