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# Slavoj Žižek, "Surplus Enjoyment: A Guide For The Non-Perplexed"

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**Slavoj Žižek.** *Surplus Enjoyment: A Guide for The Non-Perplexed.* Bloomsbury 2022. 400 pp. \$37.95 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781350226258).

In a recent lecture, the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek recounts the strange behaviour of individuals who engage in the activity of retail shopping (i.e., picking out commodities, filling their baskets and making deliberative choices to consume) but who have no intent in completing their transaction of exchange. Rather, they wheel their stacked trolley to the checkout before deliberately leaving empty handed. How can one explain these outwardly subversive actions? For Žižek, this bizarre situation perfectly encapsulates his description of ‘surplus enjoyment’—a term that morphs Marx’s theory of ‘surplus value’ with Freud’s *Lustgewinn* or ‘gain of pleasure.’ To be blunt, ‘surplus enjoyment’ is the notion that what we desire most *is desire itself*. Thus, we derive pleasure *from the attempt* to gain pleasure from ‘shopping’ rather than from its final act: the purchasing of goods.

Yet, as Žižek argues in his newest philosophical offering, *Surplus Enjoyment: A Guide for The Non-Perplexed*, the notion of ‘surplus enjoyment’ becomes an apt characterization of our technocratic, consumer-orientated age. Drawing on his unique (and at times, frustrating) blend of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, Marxist philosophy, and Hegelian dialectics, Žižek examines how the libidinal principal in ‘striving after an empty form of pleasure’ is hard-wired into the trappings of consumption and ideology. In some respects, Žižek walks down a familiar philosophical path to a catalogue of progressive Marxist thinkers (Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, Zero Books 2009; Zigmund Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, Polity Press, 2000; Eric Fromm, *To Have or to Be?* Bloomsbury 1967) in claiming capitalism’s moment of triumph is also its deepest moment of defeat and despair. It’s here that Žižek seeks to examine, ‘how the paradoxes of surplus-enjoyment sustain the topsy-turviness of our time’ (2).

The text opens by suggesting that the modern age (and our idea of teleological progress) has collapsed giving way to ‘disaster patriarchy... where multiple catastrophes—pandemic, global warming, social tensions, the prospect of full digital control over our thinking... compete for primacy’ (31). Žižek’s claim here certainly has currency. Other thinkers on the subject (Fisher; particularly Mark Bould, *The Anthropocene Unconscious*, Verso 2021) have shown how the existential threats posed by climate change have entrenched themselves pervasively into the collective consciousness of contemporary art, literature, and consumption. For Žižek, our appetite to seriously engage with the most pressing social, political and environmental threats has withered; instead, being replaced by banal ‘surplus’ consumption. In a dense and fastmoving introduction to the theoretical mechanics of G.W. Hegel and Karl Marx and their relationship to the political economy, Žižek presents a disarming assessment of global capitalism, showing how the ideology of ‘free choice’ presented to consumers is nothing more than an appendage of ideology designed to keep us in an empty cycle of desire for more. Even with ‘The End of History’ (to borrow from Fukuyama’s landmark thesis) on our doorstep, and the elevation of liberal democracy as the undisputed social-economic model of the modern age, Žižek argues we are now caught in a cycle of ‘catastrophe, apocalypse [and] catastrophe’ (3). Something which he perversely claims, ‘brings its own enjoyment’ (3). One only has to look at the Hollywood disaster genre to see this perverse



enjoyment at large. Later, Žižek brings his theory of ‘surplus enjoyment’ in contact with issues surrounding neoliberalism and its dominance over lived experience: ‘the basic characteristic of today’s subjectivity is the weird combination of the free subject who experiences himself (sic) as ultimately responsible for his fate and the subject who grounds the authority of his speech on his status of a victim of circumstances beyond his control’ (35). We enjoy things for what they represent. For Žižek, neoliberalism invites us to enjoy our own life as a commodity to invest in, which is ultimately used to service the machinery of capitalism. From this theoretical springboard Žižek questions the excesses of PC culture, the loosening of gender identity, and Woke culture. Žižek’s musings on the role of modern science and capitalism are particularly suggestive, since ‘the power of human culture,’ remarks Žižek, ‘is not only to build an autonomous symbolic universe beyond what we experience as nature, but to produce new “unnatural” natural objects which materialize human knowledge’ (52). It seems plausible that these ‘unnatural objects’ are precisely what we are desiring; however, for this reviewer, this could be clearer and perhaps linked to his main thesis more rigorously: as it stands, Žižek’s writing shows how our technological dominance over nature (exemplified through bioengineering and gene-code mapping) has accelerated the ‘de-naturalization’ of nature itself. The steady reification of natural objects, including our own bodies (due to the territorializing forces of capital) now mean the eradication of ‘nature.’

How do we move beyond ‘surplus enjoyment’ asks Žižek? The answer is both obvious and perplexing: ‘We have to move beyond capitalism’ (72) by inviting an accelerationist future. Why is this perplexing? Žižek’s approach is typified by his way of asking useful and intriguing questions but then never really offering satisfying explanations. He never, for example gets to grapple with whether ‘technology [can really] change to serve the people, not profit’ (72). Thus, one is left searching for both the remedy to surplus enjoyment and the ways science and technology might be used for political and social good. Despite Žižek’s admission that as one reads through the text, ‘the style gets crazier and crazier’ (13), it is arguably the latter half of the text that offers the most promise.

Perhaps it is his ability to skilfully fuse pithy observations of pop culture with cutting psychoanalytical analysis that makes for such entertaining reading. Drawing from the series *Vikings* (2019-), the science-fiction film, *Solaris* (2007) and the Icelandic television series, *Katla* (2021), Žižek introduces the concept of the ‘ID Machine’ to show how feelings of oppression drive one to seek a surplus form of enjoyment. Here, a basic understanding of Lacan’s fundamental theories is key to fully realizing the value of Žižek’s commentary. In an illuminating critique of Todd Phillips’ acclaimed anti-establishment film *Joker* (2019) Žižek presents an intriguing psychoanalytical analysis of its central protagonist Arthur Fleck (played by Joaquin Phoenix) to claim that there is ‘no militant Left in the film’s universe, It’s just a world of globalized violence and corruption’ (336). The point Žižek seems to get at is that it’s *through* the depictions of mental illness, excess violence and rebellion presented on film that the audience manages to overcome their own inner madness and revolutionary psychic impulses.

In the last third of the text Žižek warns against unrestrained leftist liberalism, remarking that ‘we should abandon the very ideal of a self-transparent society where full democracy abolishes all alienated structures’ (232), before adding ‘alienation is a condition of our freedom’ (232). It’s with

this paradox in mind that Žižek contends that we find desire in being denied the object(s) of our desire. To rail against ‘the system,’ to take issue with ‘The Other’ in culture or any other prohibition gives us a certain pleasure and surplus enjoyment. While Žižek applies this thinking to examples such as the destruction of art, (think Banksy ceremoniously shredding his art pieces or Damian Hurst’s formaldehyde animals) it is his commentary on the uprising on Capitol Hill in 2020 that proves most interesting: ‘the hedonistic, carnivalesque nature of the storming of the Capitol to “stop the steal” wasn’t merely incidental to the attempted insurrection; insofar as it was all about taking back the enjoyment (supposedly) stolen from them from the nation’s Others’ (239). It would seem then, that our desire for surplus enjoyment almost knows no bounds, political, social, or otherwise. Žižek’s conciliatory tone suggest that the pervasive ideology of desire and surplus enjoyment is here to stay and perplex. Taken together: the omission of narrative signposting, summary arguments, together with an all too often use of ‘stream of consciousness’ style of writing makes the text, at times, particularly hard going. It’s almost as if reading *Surplus Enjoyment* is tantamount to looking through a kaleidoscope: for all its illuminating intellectual insight and comic wit (which it has in spades), the text never really comes together to form a complete thesis. Rather, theoretical ideas and cultural observations tend to refract off one another leaving one searching for ‘that prized idea’. Nonetheless, the book is a useful addition for students, academics and those interested in cultural theory wanting to become more aware and attendant to the growing influence of ideology, while also offering new critical perspectives on contemporary consumer society.

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