

Surfaces



SUBLIME REPETITION

The Sublime Object of Ideology by Slavoj Žižek (London and New York: Verso Press, 1989), 240 pp. (Distributed by Routledge)

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SUBLIME REPETITION

A BOOK REVIEW

Diane Elam

Review of The Sublime Object of Ideology by Slavoj Zizek (London and New York: Verso Press, 1989), 240pp. (Distributed by Routledge).

Slavoj Zizek's **The Sublime Object of Ideology** produces the same effect as the chemical cloud in Don DeLillo's novel **White Noise**: recurrent feelings of déjà vu. Like the side effects of DeLillo's staged industrial accident, Zizek's elaborate meditations on everything from psychoanalysis to the sinking of the Titanic leave one with the sense that, however absurd it might seem, one has heard Zizek's points elsewhere.

This almost uncanny sense of déjà vu occurs as early as the first chapter when Zizek rightfully argues that the Freudian dream structure contains three elements -- the manifest dream-text, the dream-content, and the often forgotten "unconscious desire articulated in a dream" (13). Here it's difficult not to think of Jean-François Lyotard's similar point in "The Dream Work Does Not Think" (**Discours, Figure**). That Zizek makes this observation in order to draw specific parallels between Marx and Freud (Zizek entitles the chapter "How Did Marx Invent the Symptom?") is itself a very Lyotardian move, reminiscent of **Économie Libidinale**.

Zizek's next chapter produces a similar effect when he insists that the meaning of past historical events, like the meaning of symptoms, is "not discovered, excavated from the hidden depth of the past, but constructed retroactively" (56). That is to say, one does not discover the meaning of the past, one constructs it retroactively from the movement of its trace. Although his psychoanalytic concern with the trace separates this from conventional arguments about the "construction" of history, such as

Dominick LaCapra's, we are not yet out of the woods where old ghosts lurk. In this instance, Žižek, in the name of a Lacanian analysis, seems to be reinventing the wheel on which this particular butterfly has already been broken: Jacques Derrida's point in **Of Grammatology** and "Différance" about the structure of the trace: an understanding of temporality which takes off from the Freudian notion of **Nachträglichkeit**.

Examples of this sort are numerous, and one could even posit a more extreme case of extended déjà vu by arguing that when Žižek explains Lacan's desire graphs he sounds almost more like Lacan than Lacan, just as his final chapter is almost more Hegelian than Hegel. Such fidelity is hardly a flaw when it provides for clear analysis, and to suggest that one has heard it all before in Žižek's case is not to say that his book is insignificant, dull, or simply a fancy theoretical rip-off. Rather, it is the very force of Žižek's repetitions that form the strength and the thesis (if there could be said to be one) of his project. As Žižek himself argues, repetition is the only way that we understand the force/meaning of historical events whose character is always, in the first instance, misrecognized:

[H]istorical necessity itself is constituted through misrecognition, through the initial failure of 'opinion' to recognize its true character -- that is, the way truth itself arises from misrecognition. The crucial point here is the changed symbolic status of an event: when it erupts for the first time it is experienced as a contingent trauma, as an intrusion of a certain non-symbolized Real; only through repetition is this event recognized in its symbolic necessity. (61)

Applying this argument to Žižek's own work, it would be fair to say that the strength of **The Sublime Object of Ideology** is to make us understand the "true character" -- the historical and political force -- of the events constituted by the work of such as Hegel, Marx, Lacan, Derrida, and Lyotard. That is to say, Žižek's repetitions have a similar status to Freud's joke about the man going to Cracow (which Žižek cites): if the man lied by telling the truth, and vice versa, Žižek is nothing if not critical when he repeats, yet is too often merely faithful in his criticisms.

The way in which this déjà vu effect works could be compared, on a more simplistic level, to the importance of the numerous jokes and anecdotes which fill the text. In general, jokes and anecdotes hold interpretative power precisely because they are not told for the first time. It is through the repetition of the seemingly familiar tale, the interpretative resituation of the event, that we actually come to see the importance of what we experience as the already seen. Déjà vu par excellence.

Following this line of inquiry, it would be fair to go so far as to say that the most repetitious moments in **The Sublime Object of Ideology** are also the best. Weaving together a series of (needless to say, repeated) theoretical tales, Žižek readdresses prevailing notions of both ideology and the subject.

He argues that "ideology is not a dreamlike illusion that we build to escape insupportable reality; in its basic dimension it is a fantasy-construction which serves as a support for our "reality" itself" (45). But he does not stop here. Žižek later elaborates on this point after a patient and extremely lucid explication of Lacan's graphs of desire. For him, what a close reading of these graphs will reveal is the crucial flaw in theories of ideology which then leads to Žižek's formulation:

the crucial weakness of hitherto '(post-)structuralist' essays in the theory of ideology descending from the Althusserian theory of interpellation was to limit themselves to the lower level, to the lower square of Lacan's graph of desire -- to aim at grasping the efficiency of an ideology exclusively through the mechanisms of imaginary and symbolic identification. The dimension 'beyond interpellation' which was thus left out has nothing to do with some kind of irreducible dispersion and plurality of the signifying process ... 'Beyond interpellation' is the square of desire, fantasy, lack in the Other and drive pulsating around some unbearable surplus enjoyment. (124)

By emphasizing here that "fantasy is a means for an ideology to take its own failure into account in advance" (126), Žižek moves beyond the political dead-end of thinking of ideology as either false consciousness or escape, moves to a complex understanding of the role of social fantasy, the political force of which is especially felt in Žižek's insightful analysis of the role played by anti-Semitism in Fascism (124-129). Thus, Žižek's most pertinent and resonant question is posed to all analysis, the question of how far we can understand ideology as the trap of and for a subject, or as DeLillo puts it: "Is a symptom a sign or a thing?" (WN, 126) To answer this question too quickly is to end up practicing either semiotic Althusserianism or psychiatric drug therapy. In returning the incurable pulsation of the drives and the unanswerable question of desire to the analysis of the subject, Žižek does us all a great service, revealing as he does the importance of Lacanian psychoanalysis for politics.

That the repetitious portions of Žižek's text are its most compelling leads to a rather odd turn: the book is weakest when it tries to be most original, when it attempts to take its distance from some of its own theoretical sites. In effect, Žižek's book fails when it ceases to recognize the implication, the enfoldedness, of its own argument. This is especially evident at the beginning of the last section, "The Subject." Here Žižek takes great pains to separate both his own work, as well as Lacan's, from "post-structuralism." But in order to make this distinction, he plays fast and loose, setting up a gang called "the post-structuralists," with Derrida as its ring leader, a monolithic group interested in privileging metonymy over metaphor and in indulging in "poetic" writing that disguises a "clearly defined theoretical position which can be articulated without difficulty in a pure and simple metalanguage." All of which brings about the gang's downfall when they finally succumb to a position which "is too 'theoretical'" in order to exclude the truth-dimension (153-55). What's more, Žižek makes this argument without ever citing a single text and mentioning by name only Nietzsche and Derrida. To list the objections I have to these claims would certainly take

more than the space of a single book review, and an argument made with such haste and lack of supporting materials hardly warrants such a detailed reply. Suffice it to say that Nietzsche does not ignore either the truth-dimension or metaphor when he writes in "On Truth and Lies in an Extra-Moral Sense": "What, then is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms." Nor does Derrida simply privilege metonymy in essays like "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy" or ignore the truth dimension in **Spurs**. It would also be difficult to argue that his "poetic" texts like **Glas** or "Envois" are reducible to a simple metalinguistic statement.

Such crude name-calling is unusual in Zizek's otherwise subtle and sinuous (at the risk of metonymy) argument. Indeed, Zizek himself shies away from any simple metalinguistic statement or controlling metaphor at the end of his book, which seems pointedly to issue a metonymic command. **The Sublime Object of Ideology** self-consciously lacks any formal conclusion; such is the structural condition of the book that Ernesto Laclau feels compelled to call attention to in his preface. As Laclau puts it, Zizek's text "reaches a point of interruption rather than conclusion, thus inviting the reader to continue for him-- or herself the discursive proliferation in which the author has been engaged" (xii).

In this "write your own" section of **The Sublime Object of Ideology**, I am tempted to conclude that perhaps the sense of déjà vu for which I have been arguing is the guiding trope of Zizek's latest book is itself the product of Zizek's writing. To return to the parallel with DeLillo's novel, I am tempted to ask: "Is there a true déjà-vu and a false déjà vu?" (WN, 126) Have I, the reader, been led to feel a sense of déjà vu because Zizek's arguments have, through the power of suggestion, created the illusion that one has heard these things before? How can I tell that his masterly repudiation of the illusion of "originality" is not itself an illusion? After all, as Zizek points out, the lesson of Lacanian psychoanalysis for therapy is that the "real" condition is the self-created one, the terrifying political moment of the sublime object of ideology. And as DeLillo asks "which [is] worse, the real condition or the self-created one, and did it matter?" (WN, 126). Zizek's account of the political force of fantasy is salutary, but it seems to leave him just as unable to answer DeLillo's question as he claims the post-structuralists are. For Zizek, there is no difference, the real conditions are the self-created ones. Hence the sublime, the condition in which a real appears for which no self-created representation is adequate is the ideological (for instance, the wreck of the Titanic), since the sublime (at least chez Kant) implies a thing-in-itself beyond representation, "a positive, material object elevated to the status of the impossible Thing" (71).

The value of Zizek's book is that it is undoubtedly one of the most serious attempts we have to work out what the terms of engagement are between representation and the subject (who stand in that order). Its weakness is its desire to name what is left out of the patiently traced dialectic of representation as nothing less, or nothing more, than the subject itself:

We could say, paradoxically, that the subject is substance precisely in so far as it experiences itself as substance (as some alien, given, external, positive Entity, existing in itself): 'subject' is nothing but the name for this inner distance of 'substance' towards itself, the name for this empty place from which the substance can perceive itself as something alien. (226)

This seems fine and persuasive: the problem is that it is unaccompanied by any analysis of what it means for the subject to name this inner distance, this self-difference. That is to say, by a recognition that to give a name is itself to open a difference, to encounter a sublime aporia between a thing-representation that is in some sense singular and an extended network or system of linguistic signification, between a proper name and a noun. In what Žižek calls "the radical contingency of naming" (92), substance is once more divided from itself, but the problem of naming belongs to the order of sublime error rather than of necessary illusion (the level at which Žižek wishes to remain). If Žižek's attempt to restrain the sublime to the level of the ideological finally fails, it is because the attempt itself comes to seem more ideologically motivated than sublime, a strange sentiment that itself testifies to an unthinkable breach between the two terms.

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