

BOOK REVIEW

Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. x + 434 pp. Hbk. \$26.95. ISBN-10: 0-262-24051-3.

Slavoj Žižek has referred to *The Parallax View* as his magnum opus. It is hard to know just what the greatest showman of contemporary theory might mean by that phrase. Perhaps he means only that, at the time of publication, it was his longest book yet. It was. Or perhaps he means to boost sales by differentiating the book from the flood of other books, articles, lectures, films, and action figures that bear his name. It *is* of a different order, in part because Žižek has named it as such. Or maybe Žižek means to signal that this book gathers the brightest flashes of his work from many years, assembles them into even more luminous constellations, and concentrates their light in new directions. It does all of that, and more. Or perhaps Žižek means to say that *The Parallax View* is his great work, one that will take its place among the classics. Time will tell.

All of these possibilities reveal some truth about the book, but none of them is sufficiently perverse. We should also ask if Žižek means to juxtapose our concept of—and desire for, and resentment of—a magnum opus with his kinetic, profane, conversational engagements with figures ranging from Søren Kierkegaard to Lucille Ball. We should wonder if he means to short-circuit the very idea of a great work. After all, *The Parallax View* shares its title with a middling 1974 film that uses pop psychology to lend gravitas to car chases, bar fights, and Warren Beatty.

Like a proper magnum opus, Žižek's book opens with a big idea: parallax. Žižek recalls the ordinary sense of parallax as the apparent shift in an object's position relative to some background caused by a shift in the position of the observer. But he gives this ordinary sense a Hegelian twist: because subject and object are "mediated," the gap between the two positions of the object is not only in the experience of the subject, but also in the object itself (17). If epistemology and ontology can be distinguished, they cannot be separated. Žižek then gives this Hegelian twist a negative charge: the parallax gap is not a limit to be overcome, but that which is most real.

The idea of parallax flits in and out of view, as if Žižek kept forgetting and remembering that it was supposed to be the great idea of a great book. And the stock characters suggested by parallax—a first perspective, a second perspective, and the gap between them—are played by a huge and shifting cast. At its best, parallax functions less like a concept, and more like a Master-Signifier. "The Master adds no new positive content," Žižek writes, "he merely adds a signifier which, all of a sudden, turns disorder into order..." (37). As a Master-Signifier, parallax never takes on definitive meaning—or, rather, it takes on so many meanings that none of them can be definitive. But exactly in this overfull emptiness,

“parallax” can come out of nowhere to transform a mess of allusions into deep patterns of argument.

The significance of Žižek’s parallax view comes into sharper focus in contrast with three schools of thought that feature prominently in most maps of contemporary theory. Unlike what Žižek calls “postmodern relativism,” which allows for nothing but an irreducible pluralism of cultures, narratives, or perspectives, Žižek insists on something he calls the Real. But—unlike what often gets called critical realism—Žižek argues that the Real is not an inaccessible Truth behind the play of appearances, but “the *gap* which prevents our access to [that Truth]... There is a truth, everything is not relative—but this truth is the truth of the perspectival distortion *as such*, not the truth distorted by the partial view from a one-sided perspective” (281; original emphasis). And, unlike at least some accounts of thinkers such as Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida, Žižek argues that the Real is not endlessly deferred, but present as prescription (232). Žižek’s way of thinking is not entirely new. It shares much with the perspective of Alain Badiou, who is a constant presence in the book, the fraternal twin from whom Žižek must always differentiate himself. Žižek’s *Parallax View* also shares much with the *Negative Dialectics* and *Aesthetic Theory* of Theodor Adorno, two books which are scarcely considered. But if Žižek’s perspective is not without precedent, it is still a distinct and significant contribution to contemporary debates.

The full potential of Žižek’s notion of the parallax Real becomes apparent in use. Žižek organizes his excursions into three main sections, each of which has its highest density of thought around a pair of terms that offer total but competing accounts of reality. Žižek explores the gaps between materialism and theology, brain and mind, and the economic sphere and the sphere of politics, ideology, and culture. Without slipping into system, and without erasing disciplinary boundaries, Žižek brings together long-separated conversations about theology, psychology, and political economy. The book’s ability to think these fields together, without reducing any of them to another, is one of its most significant contributions. It is also one of the book’s strongest claims to the status of magnum opus.

Žižek deploys parallax to good effect in the first part of the book, which culminates in what he calls “building blocks for a materialist theology.” Like an astronomer making use of the stellar parallax, Žižek measures the distance to the stars without ever leaving the ground. He proceeds by taking materialism more seriously than one who would claim, as if from a perspective above material existence, that all reality is material. Instead, Žižek argues, materialism means that the subject herself is included in material existence. Thus her perspective is never of the whole, all at once. It is marked instead by shifting limits of perception—by parallax gaps. These parallax gaps are not only perceived, but in material reality itself. And so materialism, precisely in the incompleteness that arises from its totality, points beyond itself. “Being cuts from within beings,” Žižek argues, and “ontological difference is not the ‘mega-difference’ between the All of beings and something more fundamental, it is always also that which makes the domain of beings itself ‘non-all’ ” (24). If this opening to materialist theology is provocative and full of potential, Žižek has less success, in my view, in developing the details.

But perhaps the somewhat shopworn qualities of Žižek's building blocks only underscore the potential of the ground he has opened up. There is interesting work to do here.

Readers of *Political Theology* might be tempted to skip the second large section of the book, which raises questions about the relationship between brain and mind, and so between cognitive sciences and psychoanalysis. But readers interested in political theology should take special care with this middle section of the book. It is not just that it drifts into topics within theology and ethics—Jürgen Habermas and John Paul II on biological engineering, the emergence of the ethical with the constitution of the subject, the relationship between Event and Being, the critical notion of truth apart from meaning—but also that this section offers some of the clearest and most accessible thinking in the whole book. Perhaps because Žižek himself seems to be learning the material as he writes, this section offers slower, more careful engagements with other thinkers (like Thomas Metzinger, Antonio Damasio, and Daniel Dennett). It also offers more careful expositions of Žižek's own arguments. More than this, though, Žižek puts the question of cognitive sciences back on the agenda for theologians and political theorists. The theological disciplines have absorbed themselves in dialogue in recent decades with cultural studies, literary theory, philosophy, and, more rarely, the natural sciences. But the cognitive sciences are now rapidly expanding their explanatory power and cultural significance. They demand anew the attention of the other disciplines, especially those concerned with theology and politics. *The Parallax View* opens up a wide and deep pathway into this next generation of conversations.

Žižek presses towards an account of consciousness that is thoroughly materialist without appealing to some kind of “consciousness stuff” (168). He links cognitive sciences and psychoanalysis neither by reducing one to the other, nor by making them parallel but complementary perspectives, but rather by taking the materialism of cognitive science to an extreme—and then encountering a gap that a simple story of adaptation for survival cannot explain (175). Žižek names the gap the “loop of freedom” that distinguishes conscious mind from gray matter. And he argues that this gap is torn open by the death drive, an “automatism” by which we uncouple ourselves from the natural order of adaptation by turning the means and markers of survival—like sex—into ends in themselves (231). The death drive unhooks the human subject from the order of survival, and so creates the minimal difference that constitutes human freedom and self-consciousness. The Real of consciousness does not arise to explain away or fill up a hole in materialist accounts, like some anthropological analogue to the “god of the gaps” from debates in theology and the natural sciences. The Real of consciousness *is* the gap—the void, the tear—within the material order.

Žižek's account of subjectivity connects directly with his work on political economy in the third main section of the book. He names the “post-Oedipal” quality of the present moment. In contrast to fascism and communism, which demanded that subjects defer pleasure for the sake of social goods, the present political and economic orders make individual pleasure compulsory. “Enjoy yourself!” is the new commandment that animates the political and economic levels

and the subjects who move within and across them. Understanding that commandment illumines the relationship between biopolitical regulation and narcissistic drives for self-realization—and so between the political “level,” which generates excess domination, and the economic “level,” which generates surplus value that leads pleasure-seeking selves to perpetual change as we integrate more and new stuff into our lifestyles. Both biopolitics and narcissism have promised to offer comprehensive accounts of late modern life. But the two appear to be contradictory. How can there be too much discipline *and* too much narcissism? How can Michel Foucault and Christopher Lasch both be right? Žižek does not split the difference between these views, but arranges them as a parallax shift. They are, he writes, “two sides of the same coin” (297). And that coin is the Real of mandatory *jouissance*. Narcissism leads people to seek health, happiness, and long life—and so to the popular embrace of regulatory systems ranging from Pilates classes to marriage seminars to airport security. Narcissism ends in biopolitical regulation. At the same time, biopolitical regulation now takes individual happiness as its goal. The late modern consumer-welfare state derives whatever legitimacy it has from its ability to make its citizens healthy, wealthy, and happy—whether we like it or not.

Žižek’s analysis has tremendous explanatory power. And he is right to work towards a theory that can relate the political and economic levels, and to criticize Badiou’s exclusive focus on the political. But Žižek associates narcissistic projects of self-fulfillment and regulatory systems of domination too neatly with the political and economic levels, respectively. Such associations miss the projects for self-realization carried out on the political level, especially in demands for recognition of identity. And, in focusing primarily on consumption, Žižek’s associations of self-realization and the economic level miss the intense biopolitical domination that is often involved in the production of consumer goods in global sweatshops. Žižek’s declaration of a post-Oedipal complex would be stronger if he unhooked it from an attempt to relate political and economic levels, and simply let it illumine all that it can illumine. Žižek’s argument would also be stronger if he noted its limits. A post-Oedipal complex might dominate much of Europe and North America, but it does not fit as readily with whatever is emerging in China—a matter of no small significance for theories of political economy at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

If Žižek’s description of the political and economic orders is powerful but limited, his prescriptions are necessarily elusive. He is especially savvy in naming the power of the post-Oedipal order to co-opt what looks like radical dissent. “The deadlock of ‘resistance’ brings us back to the topic of parallax,” Žižek writes of Simon Critchley’s proposal for a politics of impossible demands. “All that is needed is a slight shift in our perspective, and all the activity of ‘resistance,’ of bombarding those in power with impossible ‘subversive’ (ecological, feminist, antiracist, antiglobalist...) demands, looks like an internal process of feeding the machine of power, providing the material to keep it in motion” (335). Such forms of resistance miss their deep symbiosis with the hegemonic order they oppose. The dominant order provides acts of resistance with meaning and direction, and

their presence—loud but ineffectual—provides the dominant order with a safe form of legitimacy. On a deeper level, acts of resistance conform to the post-Oedipal order's mandate for pleasure. It can feel good to smash the window of a Starbucks or get arrested at the School of the Americas. And these pleasures, Žižek implies, are not so different from other transgressive pleasures that promise self-realization.

Žižek calls for a politics that does not just “say no to Empire,” but also refuses to enjoy “the *rumspringa* of resistance, all the forms of resisting which help the system to reproduce itself by ensuring our participation in it...” (383). The icon of this refusal is Herman Melville's *Bartleby*, the scrivener who says, “I would prefer not to.” *Bartleby* does not say, “I do not want to”—he does not simply negate dominant desires, for then his action would become dependent on those dominant desires for its meaning and direction. *Bartleby* rather articulates an active preference for the negative, a desire that lives without reference to any object. Žižek's *Bartleby* does not offer a preliminary, ground-clearing refusal, like the *Bartleby* of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. In Žižek's voice, “I would prefer not to” is not a prelude to properly political resistance. It is instead the negative content of that resistance.

What would be the shape of a politics of “the *Bartleby* parallax”? Žižek acknowledges the challenge: “The difficulty of imagining the New is the difficulty of imagining *Bartleby* in power” (382). Žižek gives no legislative agenda for a *Bartleby* administration. The Real of his politics—like the Real of his theology and psychology—is a void. But perhaps Žižek still helps the reader imagine *Bartleby* in power, indirectly, by writing something that looks for all the world like *Bartleby*'s book. In an interview for a film about his life Žižek expressed his fear that he is “nothing who pretends all the time to be somebody, and has to be hyperactive all the time just to fascinate people enough so that they don't notice that there is nothing.” Žižek's worry about himself is at once the harshest judgment on *The Parallax View* and the clearest statement of its power. It is not his magnum opus, nor even his refusal to write one. It is rather the long, brilliant, compulsive embodiment of his preference for the negative.

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