

For Example, Opera, For Example . . .

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In an interview published in the last issue of this journal, Slavoj Žižek suggests that it was Soren Kierkegaard who finally clarified the real, as opposed to the fake Hegelian sense of the significance of the paradox of Christ.

“As for the essence of Christianity Kierkegaard got it first. When he emphasized that it is totally wrong to read Christ as a metaphor in the sense that first the truth appears just as a person but then with the Holy Spirit we know that it’s not a person but just a universal notion of love, or whatever. The greatness of Kierkegaard is to show that our only access to eternity is through temporality. Not in this fake Hegelian sense that eternity is just the totality of the movement of the temporal, but this crazy paradox that in a specific historical moment something happened. Only through that passage do you get eternity. That is to say, if you go directly to eternity, you get nothing, you miss eternity itself.”¹

So Kierkegaard, of all people, is the Real Hegelian, the one who most clearly understands the paradoxical relationship between concept and concrete reality, between eternity and time. And Žižek, as many are by now familiar with, is the “Hegelian of the Real,” the thinker who for our time has argued most passionately that Hegel’s Absolute Knowing is not knowledge of an abstract totality, a summation of a whole, but rather the register of an absolute *inability* of each and every object, every event, to resist the

temptation to be more than it is, to be not merely an object, but a Thing. Things in their absolute character insinuate at once a gap in what we took to be a whole and an excess where we thought to find only another part. The absolute truth of things is that the taking-place of things—things in their existence or eventfulness—are both incomplete and excessive with respect to themselves. It is this unhinged or out-of-joint character in things that speaks of a Real that is paradoxically Rational. Žižek’s way of teaching us this (absolute) truth is, famously and infamously, to render again and again a series of uncanny and persistent exemplifications of the Absolute at work in unworking modern times. From anecdotes of Eastern European life under Stalin to the macabre subtexts of Hollywood’s apparently most banal plot lines, to the paradoxes of Wagnerian opera and uncanny objects in David Lynch, Žižek is a master philosophical storyteller, forcing us to look at what Kant said we could not: at things themselves, at their inherently antinomical and self-incomplete character.

But in a recently-written preface to the re-publication of *For They Know No What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor*, Žižek complains about our attachment to his examples—the stories, puns, movies, and memoirs that make his texts such an hilarious, grotesque, and sublime menagerie of modern times. Of *For They Know Not What They Do*, he writes,

*“Although it was overshadowed by the more popular *Sublime Object of Ideology*, my first book in English published two years earlier, I always considered it a more substantial achievement: it is a book of theoretical work, as opposed to the succession of anecdotes and cinema references in *The Sublime Object*.”²*

Apparently Žižek wants us to love him for his attachment to Hegelian dialectics and not for his attachment to the things he

loves. And yet paradoxically, if not in outright self-contradiction, Zizek cannot do so without his favorite exemplars. Opera, for example, as the text in this issue attests, seems indispensable, unforgettable, irreplaceable... undead, even immortal?

Why should Zizek be uncomfortable with the exemplarity that populates his text? Especially when he himself, right in *For They Know Not What They Do*, gives us good Hegelian reasons for insisting on the irreducibility of exemplars and their uncanny mode of “contingent necessity.” If there is always something contingent about an example, a “case in point,” an “illustration,” does not this contingency nevertheless fit precisely the Hegelian project of reading in the apparent accidents of history the “ruse of reason,” the deeper truth? Zizek admits as much when he writes that “truth is not contained in the Universal, as such. Its emergence is strictly a matter of particular conjectures.”³ Are not the particularities of Zizek’s conjectures where the true magic of his discourse lies? Isn’t the power of Zizek’s presence in philosophy precisely the spell-binding power of his exemplars? And isn’t this obsessive exemplarity Zizek’s greatest contribution to the speculative tradition of dialectical materialism, and to philosophy?

Far from making of Zizek a mere rhetor or a sophist, his obsessive exemplarity demonstrates Gilles Deleuze’s notion that the true philosopher has “no ally but paradox.”⁴ The truly realist form of speculation, the thought gripped by real events and the real stakes of common (if unconscious) life is thought *penetrated by the real itself*, concepts split open by their own exemplars—their heroes, their demons, their angels, their friends. Only when this takes place does discourse remain attached to what gave rise to it in the first place.

If Deleuze was right in claiming that we think because we are forced to do so,

the force of thinking is lost when the event that provoked thought no longer interrupts what we thought we had to say. If this is a riddle, it is the riddle of how philosophy can educate. If it is a paradox, it is the paradox that attempts to speak the relationship between communication and that to which our desire to communicate attests. It is the paradox of exemplarity, as such: the paradox of how what gives rise to concepts in experience can be present in the discourse of concepts. As such, exemplars are not the deep origin of a species or a type of event. They are the unconscious surface origin of what interrupts the present in its apparent normalcy.

The often humorous incapacity of speculative dialectics, in Zizek’s discourse, to keep up with the events that precipitate it might thus be the most revolutionary thing, at least philosophically speaking, about what Zizek does. Even if he himself can only misrecognize the way examples are communicating with each other, and wants always to say with Hegel that they are an effect of “the Notion’s self-relation,” should we be surprised? A true hysteric never gives up the ghost—especially if it is his master.

But how would we know Zizek without his *things*? Especially without that thing in question here, that bizarre and excruciating mix of music and melodrama that is the undead ghost of opera, an art form Zizek admits was dead even before it was alive? If, as Zizek himself concludes in this cabalistic exegesis of Wagner’s universe, we are identified most fully by the objects we have loved and lost, what more could we learn from Zizek than of his great attachment to this so very unchic egotist of an artist, villainized by Nietzsche and full of every incorrectness known to our time? Perhaps to truly pass beyond Man to what in humanity is worth saving it is necessary to entertain such

grumbling ghosts as these. Ghosts like Wagner. Ghosts like opera, for example.

Notes

1. *Journal of Philosophy and Scripture*, Spring 2004, Vol. 1, Issue 2.
2. Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor*, (London: Verso, 2002), xi.
3. *For They Know Not What They Do*, 54.
4. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, Trans. Paul Patton, (New York: Columbia, 1994), 132.