

Cindy Lee Zeiber

Tracking an Authority of Ideology: Žižek and Film Theory

A review of

Flisfeder, Matthew. 2012. *The Symbolic, the Sublime and Slavoj Žižek's Theory of Film*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Matthew Flisfeder's *The Symbolic, the Sublime and Slavoj Žižek's Theory of Film* provides a most important contribution to film theory not only by reinvigorating our understanding of the viewing subject as integral to film theory, but also by insisting that Žižek's return to and theory of ideology can play a crucial role in contemporary film analysis. Flisfeder's book is skilfully and eloquently written for a diverse audience that includes students of film, society and culture, as well as scholars of Lacanian psychoanalysis and particularly of Žižek himself. It offers nuanced conceptual distinctions of significance to those working across the fields of Žižek studies and Lacanian psychoanalysis, as well as insights into the development of film theory, including those key debates between notable film scholars which track film theory onwards towards film post-theory. Post-theory is situated alongside poststructuralism and employs scholarship that critiques those doctrines that have secured film theory within such orthodox fields as semiotics, literary theory, psychoanalysis and Marxism, just to name a few. Flisfeder best characterizes the tension between theory and post-theory as arising from distinctive yet related ontological projects, asserting that it is a "debate indicative of the divide between criticism of ideology (or ideological hegemony—ideology in general) and the rational, empirical study of (particular) ideologies" (36). Given this conceptual "suturing" of post-theory and theory (36), Flisfeder asserts that post-theory is primed to enhance contemporary bourgeois conditions and can be considered a "gesture *par excellence*" (36).

It is at this conjuncture that Flisfeder offers a unique and significant contribution through his reading of Žižek and film: the claim that film analysis has the potential to offer wide opportunities for an engagement with and critique of the ideological conditions in which we live. Flisfeder's claim is that film theory can be a political tool that contributes to a modern theory of ideology. He examines a variety of classic and contemporary films (notably from David Lynch and Alfred Hitchcock) to conceptualize how the subject is captured and regulated by the fantasy space film provides. He maintains that it is within such fantasies that ideology

operates and regulates the subject, thereby interpellating “individuals as subjects” (33). For Flisfeder, theorizing ideology is integral to the practice of contemporary film theorization and criticism. This represents a unique and refreshing approach to film analysis, and is one that departs from traditional and formal approaches that espouse authorship, spectatorship and genre as the primary locations from which film may be theorized and understood.

Specifically, Flisfeder offers an excellent appraisal of Sophie Fiennes’s 2006 documentary on Žižek, *The Pervert’s Guide to Cinema*, as an interlude in his discussion of the more nuanced varieties of film content and form. He suggests that cinematic interpretation provides the potential for extracting knowledge and meanings that might otherwise remain hidden or be excluded from circulating within dominant ideologies. In his discussion of this documentary, Flisfeder conveys the theoretical content of particular films while analyzing how Žižek uses film to reveal the ideological conditions structuring the marriage between ideology and Lacanian psychoanalysis. In this way, Flisfeder’s analytical process operates like a film by marking a poignant juncture at which the reader, like the film viewer, can take a breath to ponder the theoretical discussions through which he or she has been led. This chapter is particularly enticing as Flisfeder’s “review” of *The Pervert’s Guide* provides a most interesting engagement with Žižek’s return to ideology. Flisfeder handles his appraisal with fluidity, considered thought and ease, while nevertheless always insisting on the centrality of subjective spectatorship to the understanding of cinema, and more importantly on the viewing subject as ideologically constituted. Flisfeder’s analysis certainly prompts one to return to a viewing of this documentary, regardless of how many times it has already been seen.

Cinema is both imbued with and constructed from ideologies that give rise to and reveal the conditions of subjectivity. According to Flisfeder, Žižek approaches film as an apparatus through which he may investigate the “social and psychic functions of *ideology and subjectivity*” via attention to film spectatorship (11). Flisfeder highlights the necessity of this convergence when he states in agreement with Žižek that film theory

adds significantly to the theory of ideology—but not only for intellectuals. Film is of interest because it speaks in a popular language. Therefore, if theorists could speak in the language of cinema, perhaps, I claim, it could be possible to relate that which is necessary to understand in theory. (11)

Flisfeder does not gloss over the precise terms of the relationship between film, ideology and subjectivity. He grapples with and invokes complexities, and he refuses any idea of fixity to the relationship between these interconnected domains. Influenced by Žižek’s use of film as a way to explore ideologies that are invisible in daily life, Flisfeder is able to explain the operation of social and political ideologies in films such as *The Matrix*, *Blue Velvet* and *Psycho*. In his analysis of these films, Flisfeder insists that attention paid to the formation of spectatorial subjectivity is

crucial to revealing the ideology hidden within appearances, thus providing firm ground for both subjective and social revolution—a most Žižekian interpretative move. Flisfeder crafts what many scholars of Žižek have also attempted: the portrayal of the Žižekian subject as appearing to enjoy ideology (both within the cinematic space and in everyday life), even when not necessarily doing so. Ideology is a way of staging desire within a symbolic fiction that facilitates the subject's enjoyment. As Flisfeder asserts, cinema enacts in a unique way its staging of the conditions for enjoyment, desire and ideology.

Ideologies that underlie the formation of the Žižekian subject occur in several domains—for example, those of belief, the production of knowledge and class struggle. Flisfeder approaches these domains while at the same time maintaining that the field of post-theory is “representative of the reigning ideology” (92). Flisfeder's lucid engagement with current political trends (such as the reluctance of the academy to engage ideology as a form of critique, which he examines through the lens of film theory and post-theory) offers a poignant critique of the current conditions and challenges facing the academy at a time in which restrictive ideologies structure the acquisition and distribution of knowledge. At this point one cannot help but reflect on the current global economic crisis and its effect on universities. Flisfeder makes a compelling case that both antagonizes and interrogates certain tendencies within the production of knowledge in universities today, one with implications for our understanding of academic fields such as cultural studies. He criticizes the global university system for having become politically and institutionally compliant rather than a site of resistance supporting class struggle and organizing antagonism toward capitalist hegemony. Flisfeder's insistence that the viewing subject is ideological and political implicitly critiques today's somewhat reluctant surrender by the academy to the capitalist discourse insofar as ideologies of class struggle are excluded at a macro level from the analysis of knowledge production. It is at this juncture, Flisfeder contends, that the importance of ideological critique is evaded within the ontology of post-theory. A return to theory, and more specifically to the tensions and debates between theory and post-theory, is imperative if scholarship is to remain current, political and critical.

Flisfeder engages the tension between film theory and post-theory throughout his analysis by insisting that a return to psychoanalysis (the field rejected by post-theorists) is necessary. He provides many pertinent cinematic examples showing where post-theory can be considered to operate as a counter-ideology to postmodernity. Given that Žižek employs Lacanian theory as a method for film analysis, Flisfeder is cogent when insisting that Lacanian psychoanalysis is the missing link between theory and post-theory. In advancing this point he returns to Žižek's ideological conundrum and highlights *The Sublime Object of Ideology* as a key text from which to explore different forms of ideology as constituted in specific films. Such a return to the particularities of this earlier text is interesting since Žižek has explicitly distanced himself from this writing. However, because of Žižek's claim

that ideology structures, manipulates and distorts the coordinates of everyday life, Flisfeder employs this text in his chapter on cinema, ideology and form and provides a tantalizing overview of Žižek's method of film theory. More specifically, Flisfeder maintains in his concluding chapter that "[t]heory makes enjoyment the very *raison d'être* of radical change. We are ethical subjects not because of some objective-neutral sense of what we ought to do but because of our attachment to an impossible *jouissance* for which we cannot do anything but act" (166–67). Flisfeder argues that, for Žižek, film suggests a way in which to act through its engagement with and critique of ideology. He goes on to claim that form plays a central role in the critique of ideology, maintaining that the relationship between authority (the Master-Signifier) and the unattainable object of desire (the *objet petit a*) is crucial, and that the tension between desire and authority reveals much about the subject's relationship to fantasy, perversion, *jouissance* and love as politically constituted categories. He states that the

relationship between the Master-Signifier, the *objet petit a* and the subject is important at two different levels. On the one hand, analytically, they represent the three main characters in Oedipal analysis: the authority, desire, and the Subject. Ideology takes a particular form, depending on the resolution of the relationship between Authority and desire. For the critique of ideology it is necessary to demonstrate how the ideological resolution of this relationship is pathological and can be interpreted as either a perverse, psychotic or neurotic text. On the other hand, the relationship between the Master-Signifier and the *objet petit a* is important for locating the subject in between the Symbolic texture of the cinema (or "reality") and the supplemental fantasy that structures the subject's relation to the text. (128)

Flisfeder builds on Žižek's critical return to ideology by acknowledging that the production of spectatorial enjoyment is located within ideology itself. He argues that ideology reproduces pleasure and enjoyment in the same way that cinema does, thus suggesting an explicit connection between fantasy and reality, the former supporting the latter. Although Flisfeder attributes to Žižek (alongside other important scholars such as Laura Mulvey, Joan Copjec and Christian Metz) the bringing of life to Lacanian psychoanalysis through its reconfiguration as a social-analytic intervention in film theory, he also highlights what has been missing in film theory, namely an insistence of the role played by ideology in interpellating the subject-as-spectator. In his response to this absence, Flisfeder offers many possibilities for both critical theory and the subject of ideology, considered simultaneously as independent and intersecting fields. Ideology is a political and politicized category to which desire and enjoyment are intrinsically attached. Its study thus offers a unique opportunity to critique the conditions from which subjectivity is constituted without necessarily defaulting to cynicism. Flisfeder compels us to listen to *how* Žižek is interpreting film and contributing to the reinvention of film theory. He attributes to Žižek the development of a new kind of film theory from

the perspective of which social forms, ideas and conditions can be explored within the (hidden) ideological frameworks and nuances that govern everyday activities and choices. Žižek's privileging of the *content* (what is said and done) over the *form* of a film is a specifically Lacanian interpretive act. The various subject positions occupied are dependent on the ideological signifiers encountered by the subject. Flisfeder focuses upon the relation between the Master-Signifier (which renders authority in social life through institutions, systems of belief and behaviour, and so on) and the *objet petit a* (which speaks for the unattainable truth of one's desires) as being the sublime object of ideology in this return to theory integrated with the everyday act of watching a film.

Flisfeder considers Žižek's conception of ideology to be like a film theory that not only grapples with abstract ideas but also examines how we live our daily lives, particularly in the face of great economic and environmental challenges that sometimes appear insurmountable. Via its elaboration of film theory, *The Symbolic, the Sublime and Slavoj Žižek's Theory of Film* invites us to explore our own subject positions and the possibilities they offer for challenging repressive social conditions. It invites us to critique those ideologies which play a role in structuring and governing our ideas, choices and actions.

Marcus Breen

The War in India: Arundhati Roy's Walk in the Development Forest

A review of

Roy, Arundhati. 2011. *Walking with the Comrades*. Toronto: Penguin Group.

This is a book about failure: the failure of consumerism within a globally intensified consumerist society and the failure of formal Left political parties. Curious bedfellows at the best of times, these two failures are thrown into stark relief by Indian novelist and essayist Arundhati Roy in a scathing exposition based on her experiences camping and walking with Maoist resistance fighters in the forests of Orissa (near West Bengal). As a result of this experience, Roy has come to believe