

# Subject of Desire/Subject of Drive: The Emergence of Žižekian Media Studies

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Jodi Dean. *Blog Theory: Feedback and Capture in the Circuits of Drive*. Polity, 2010. 140 pp.

Paul A. Taylor. *Žižek and the Media*. Polity, 2011. 192 pp.

Fabio Vighi. *Sexual Difference in European Cinema: The Curse of Enjoyment*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. 256 pp.

Those familiar with Slavoj Žižek will know that a great deal of his work is bound up with later theories of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. While Lacan has long been an influential figure in media and cultural theory, the three books reviewed here demonstrate an emerging field of Žižekian media studies that is distinct from the earlier Lacanian media studies. Jodi Dean, Paul Taylor, and Fabio Vighi all respond to key questions that arise in Žižek's theories of ideology, subjectivity, power and politics, with a particular focus on the media. These books suggest two centres of gravity that signal a shift away from familiar Lacanian approaches that a Žižekian media studies might represent: (1) a concerted critical engagement with questions of ideology and emancipatory politics, and (2) a sustained preoccupation with the problem of the demise of symbolic efficiency.

Of course, these two tendencies intersect and fold into each other. The problem of the demise of symbolic efficiency is related to the question: how is it possible to propose a critique of ideology in the (supposedly) post-ideological era? Fredric Jameson addresses this question in his renowned essay, "Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism." In order to explain the postmodern demise of symbolic efficiency, Jameson refers to the Lacanian conception of psychosis as a "breakdown of the signifying chain," which signals a suspension of the operation of 'suture' that ties together the field of floating signifiers. The thesis of a demise of symbolic efficiency posits the experience of a post-ideological condition in the sense that the master narratives of modernity are no longer operative. Master narratives, such as religious narratives, Enlightenment narratives of progress, and emancipatory narratives, such

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as Marxism, no longer function as structures of symbolic cognitive mapping, as Jameson puts it. The condition of postmodernity is one in which all such narratives have been deconstructed to the point of losing their entire symbolic weight in the meaning-making practices of subjects in the social world.

Despite this fact, Žižek argues that ideology is still operative on the obverse side of the demise of symbolic efficiency, but below the surface level of symbolic reality. Postmodernism may signal the suspension of the function of the ‘master-signifier’, but there exists a sublime underside of ideology, which more forcefully attaches the subject to the symbolic surface of ideological propositions. Leaving behind the ‘screen theory’ musings on the ‘mirror stage’, the ‘gaze’, the imaginary, and the symbolic—perhaps the most rehearsed aspects of Lacanian theory found in media studies—Žižek speaks to the *objet petit a* (the ‘object-cause’ of desire), the real (as opposed to the imaginary and the symbolic), the drive, the *sinthome* (as opposed to symptom), and enjoyment. With the demise of symbolic efficiency, and the suspension of the function of the master-signifier, enjoyment plays a much stronger role in interpellating ideological subjects. In opposition to the modernist order of prohibition and authority, postmodernism is marked by the superego injunction: ‘Enjoy!’ In the ‘post-’ conditions of our times, not only are we supposedly free to enjoy; we are increasingly *obligated* to enjoy. Psychoanalysis, for Žižek, offers emancipatory cognitive mapping for the postmodern subject because it is the only discourse in which the subject is allowed to *not* enjoy (which is qualitatively different from ‘not allowed to enjoy’).

The analysand in the psychoanalytic experience learns to transition from a subject of desire towards a subject of drive. Desire involves the endless, metonymical search for the (impossible) object (*objet petit a*) that will wrest, and satisfy desire itself. But desire is self-reflexive and is, by definition, insatiable. It continues to follow along a cycle in which the object attained is never *it*, the thing that is desired. This constant search for the object produces a surplus-enjoyment: there is an unconscious satisfaction in being able to reset the co-ordinates of desire, continuing the search. Drive speaks to this other side of insatiable desire. Drive achieves enjoyment by *failing* to get the object—it is the enjoyment of failure. Desire attaches the subject ever more aggressively to the reigning conditions of domination and exploitation, while drive moves the subject in the direction of emancipation and the ends of analysis.

### **Drive in Social Media**

Jodi Dean’s *Blog Theory* begins by addressing the problem of the demise of symbolic

efficiency. According to her, the changing function of the symbolic is linked to the reflexivity of complex technological societies, which she investigates referring to her own conception of ‘communicative capitalism’.<sup>1</sup> The latter refers to the way that contemporary communications media capture users in networks of enjoyment, production, and surveillance (3-4). Drawing on Žižek’s writings on the demise of symbolic efficiency, Dean argues that the Lacanian conception of drive “expresses the reflexive structure of complex networks” (30). Beyond the symbolic, or prohibitive order of the Law, are the reflexive circuits of drive. Communicative capitalism thrives, not because of insatiable desire, but because of the ‘repetitive intensity of drive’ (Ibid.).

Dean is somewhat at odds with Žižek, who argues repeatedly in favour of an ‘ethics of drive’ over an ‘ethics of desire’. She argues that, “under conditions of the decline of symbolic efficiency, drive is not an act” (31); rather, it is what makes communicative capitalism operative. Politically, the challenge involves “producing the conditions of possibility for breaking out of or redirecting the loop of drive” (31).

Dean discusses the conditions of communicative capitalism by examining the world of social media, ‘blogs’ and the ‘blogosphere’, or the ‘blogipelago’, as she puts it – the former term creates the appearance of community, whereas the latter points towards the actual separation and disconnection between users. Communicative capitalism makes this kind of disconnection operative by engaging users through the repetitive and reflexive circuits of drive, imposing further gaps in older symbolic networks of community. By doing so, blogging and the use of social networks such as MySpace, Facebook, YouTube and Twitter facilitate the integration of users into the matrices of neoliberal capitalism. ‘Communicative capitalism’ is an attractive way to theorize the current configurations of networked media. It allows media theorists to grapple with the conditions of space-based media, where the limits of time are increasingly eroding.

Noting the similarities between early blogs and search engines, Dean points out that both originate in the problem of organizing information online. Filled by the fantasy of abundance, online users had previously been plagued by the problem of locating sought after information. Like the Lacanian theory of the unconscious, Dean points out that in cyberspace ‘the truth is out there’, but difficult to find within the sea of abundance. Dean notes that the first blogs were lists of websites, links and articles, noteworthy to the ‘blogger’. Bloggers also added comments about the links that they posted. Like search engines, blogs emerged in place of the ‘subject supposed to know’

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<sup>1</sup> Dean first introduced the concept of ‘communicative capitalism’ in *Publicity’s Secret: How Technoculture Capitalizes on Democracy* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2002).

(the Lacanian analyst) (42). I would add that the search engine and the online database work in combination to avoid the time lag, the result of which is the ‘spatialization’ time. The latter adds to the difficulty in grasping a conception of prohibition in postmodernity. Everything is available; there are no limits to access (that is, if we ignore the global digital divide). Desire is no longer prohibited by time—the time necessary to locate and achieve satisfaction; everything is present, located in the database. The result is a crisis for the subject of desire—how to save the saturation of desire when its impossibility becomes increasingly apparent. This is how we might return to Dean’s claim that drive makes communicative capitalism operative, and therefore unlikely to work for a political act of resistance and transformation. The disappearance of the limit of time, which made satisfaction of desire appear possible, leaves only the drive on the other side of fantasy.

Since the subjects of communicative capitalism are, according to Dean, already subjects of drive—subjects she refers to as ‘whatever beings’—it certainly appears as though an ethics of drive is off the table for a revolutionary politics. A political ethics of drive depends largely upon the way in which the demise of symbolic efficiency is interpreted and approached. If it is read, in Lacanian terms, as the non-existence of the big Other, pure and simple—the Other of the symbolic order, regulating and organizing symbolic reality—then surely it is necessary to concede Dean’s main argument, that a politics of drive is not possible today. But what if the postmodern subject’s recognition of the non-existence of the big Other is *only* apparent? Here it is necessary to invoke the psychoanalytic notion of fetishism disavowal, best expressed using Octave Manoni’s phrase, “*Je sais bien, mais quand même...*”—I know very well, but nevertheless. I am allowed to *not* believe (in the big Other) on the condition that my belief is invested in a fetish object.

For Žižek, fetishism disavowal expresses the contemporary reigning cynical approach to ideology. Cynicism, as Todd McGowan puts it, “is a mode of keeping alive the dream of successfully attaining the lost object while fetishistically denying one’s investment in this idea” (29). The post-ideological subject can fully recognize the fact that investment in the object of desire is doomed to failure, but nevertheless, she continues to invest herself in the search for this object. Drive is certainly the flipside to the ideological investment in the object of desire. However, it remains an unconscious aspect of this investment. True satisfaction is achieved, not by the successful attainment of the object, but by the enjoyment of returning to the position of loss through failure. Drive is definitely a central aspect of contemporary communicative capitalism; however, we should be hesitant about claiming that the subject of communicative capitalism is one of drive.

On the contrary, it is worth conceiving the demise of symbolic efficiency, not neces-

sarily as the loss of the symbolic order as such (the non-existence of the big Other), but rather as the loss of the symbolic efficiency of interpretation. According to Žižek, postmodernity is marked by a crisis in interpretation, leaving the symptom intact. Žižek refers to the hypothetical example of a neo-Nazi skinhead

who, when he is really pressed to reveal the reasons for his violence, suddenly starts to talk like social workers, sociologists and social psychologists, citing diminished social mobility, rising insecurity, the disintegration of paternal authority, lack of maternal love in his early childhood, etc. (*For They Know Not What They Do* xci)

The problem, then, is how to bring a rupture in the subject's symptomal chain, when she herself already recognizes the interpretive procedure of locating its cause. According to Žižek, the loss of the efficiency of symbolic interpretation is one way to diagnose the postmodern condition of the demise of symbolic efficiency. This, too, is how one should read Fredric Jameson's notion of cognitive mapping—lacking the symbolic weight of interpreting her position in the world, the subject remains lost, trapped in a situation, without any means of making sense of herself and her position in the world.

### **Media Form and the Perversion of the Analyst**

Paul Taylor's *Žižek and the Media* offers an alternative interpretation to the demise of symbolic efficiency. In contrast to Dean's text, *Žižek and the Media* is an introductory text for those less familiar with Žižek. Taylor introduces Žižek, first by discussing him *as* a media image (as the star of two documentaries, and as a regular TV and Youtube 'personality', Žižek is 'hot' in McLuhanese), and then by showing where and how Žižek's theory of ideology is useful for media analysis. The most ambiguous aspect of Taylor's book is the fact that, at times, he uses the terms 'ideology' and 'media' interchangeably. Often, where Taylor claims that Žižek is speaking about 'the media', Žižek scholars will know that Žižek himself rarely refers to 'the media' quite as specifically as Taylor suggests, and actually talks about 'ideology'. Replacing 'ideology' with 'the media' allows Taylor to more easily adapt Žižek's theory of ideology to a theory about the media, where the two are often taken as transferable entities. This, however, forces the reader to consider whether the symbolic of 'the media' occupies a position previously held by the symbolic of the 'objective spirit' in Hegelese. That is to say, at a time when the dissolution of the big Other appears to be an accepted fact, has the media developed into the very ground upon which the symbolic big Other rests, today? This last question opens up an avenue for thinking about the ways in which Taylor's book poses an alternative approach to the claims made in *Blog Theory*.

Throughout the past decade it has become increasingly clear that the perceived non-existence of the big Other, and the demise of symbolic efficiency, is not a fact, pure and simple, but is, rather, ideology at its purest. Žižek suggests that,

[i]t may seem that Lacan's *doxa* 'there is no big Other' has today lost its subversive edge and turned into a globally acknowledged commonplace—everybody seems to know that there is no 'big Other' in the sense of a substantial shared set of customs and values.... However, the example of cyberspace clearly demonstrates how the big Other is present more than ever..." (*In Defense of Lost Causes* 34)

As Taylor puts it, "[w]e engage with media, like cinema and cyberspace not to *escape from*, but rather in order *to escape to* a social reality that protects (mediates) us more effectively from the truly traumatic issues and concerns that belie our 'normal' lives" (78).

The big Other, or the symbolic order, is on par with what we normally refer to as 'reality', as opposed to the Real. 'Reality' makes sense—that is, it assigns meaning, returning potentially traumatic facts to their place in the symbolic order. The Real itself is traumatic and non-sensical. Entering a state of subjective destitution, at the end of analysis, requires some kind of awareness on the part of the subject-analysand that there *is* no guarantee of meaning—that, in fact, the big Other does not exist. Taylor's assertion that we engage with media to *escape to* 'reality', makes sense if we consider the way in which the media helps to regulate our lives by assigning meaning to increasingly traumatic events. Instead of a complete demise of symbolic efficiency, Taylor finds that the symbolic order itself has been colonized by the hyperreal signs of the media (71).

Individual media and their properties, according to Taylor, are part of a larger, overarching 'media system'; and, it is this system that is replacing the older symbolic efficiency of the big Other. He focuses particularly on reality TV and the conflation between mediated reality and lived experience. Rather than merely presenting reality, the media *construct* reality. Within the historical context of the supposed loss of the big Other and its symbolic efficiency, "the media attempts to render social reality in ever more detailed ways via the exponential growth of a range of increasingly intrusive images" (88). The problem with the latter is that it opens itself up to accusations of simply revamping the old Marxian theory of 'false consciousness'.

One of the advantages of Taylor's approach to the media is his emphasis on form, pulling out the way that Žižek, as well, adds an emphasis to ideological form, above content. According to Taylor, "Žižek's media analysis succeeds where others fail in addressing the contemporary conveyance of ideological *effect via form*" (24). It is important to distinguish this emphasis on form from a purely 'formalist' analysis. Here, the

point is not to focus on the formal techniques of conveying ideology, but has more to do with the organizing structure of mediated content. In semiotic terms, we might say that the series of floating signifiers in the content are organized and structured by some absent, empty signifier: the Lacanian master-signifier. Noting Žižek's emphasis on ideological form, Taylor addresses one of the most distinguishing aspects of Žižek's brand of ideology critique. Ideology succeeds, not through its explicit content, but through its 'mode of delivery'.

Ultimately, what the media constructs, according to Taylor, is an ersatz reality, that allows the postmodern subject to compensate for the loss of the big Other of modernity. Unlike an older notion of false consciousness, here the operation of concealment through revelation is in full force. This is how we can account for phenomena such as reality television, in which characters—supposedly 'real people'—are encouraged to reveal everything about their lives, from marital and other family problems, to financial worries, dating and sexual preferences, etc. According to Taylor, the media system is perverse, not only because it enjoins subjects to reveal the most intimate details of their lives, up to and including explicit sex, but also because it is fixated upon the construction of a "symbolically efficient mediated substitute" built around the depiction of *all* social activity (84). Despite the demise of the symbolic efficiency of an overt big Other, the latter continues to exist, but in a less apparent, more benign form.

Taylor calls Žižek's method a 'perverted analysis', by which he means to emphasize the strict psychoanalytic conception of perversion, as "a disproportionate attachment to a particular ordering or structure of desire;" and he notes that "[t]his attachment is typically manifested in the pervert's reliance upon a fetish, of which the sexual variety is only one kind" (7). Taylor points out that Žižek's apparent perversity helps to bring to the surface the "deceptively naturalized forms in which we tend to encounter mediated ideology" (7). Taylor claims that Žižek is an 'old-fashioned' pervert in the sense that his theoretical *raison d'être* is "to turn conventional understandings upside down by the unremitting application of theory" (8). The latter, though, is actually the role played by the analyst.

As Žižek notes, the formula for the Lacanian discourse of perversion and the formula for the discourse of the analyst are identical, split by a 'thin, almost indivisible line' (*The Parallax View* 303). Perversion and analysis are two sides of the same coin. The latter, the position of the analyst, is arrived at, after one has traversed the (ideological) fantasy, entered a state of subjective destitution (a subject position without guarantees—the guarantee of the big Other and the symbolic order), and has performed an act which 'changes the co-ordinates' from which one perceives one's own subjective position. In the context of the demise of symbolic efficiency, perhaps these

two positions—the position of the pervert and the position of the analyst—account for the two sides of ideological recognition/misrecognition. Perversion represents the subject's attachment to the order of the big Other, even after its authority has been deconstructed. The pervert remains attached to the symbolic order *because* it saves the subject's desire from saturation—a desire that the perverted subject wants to keep intact. If we read the Lacanian discourse of the analyst as the discourse of the pervert we find that it represents a social link, the product of which is the master-signifier. The pervert escapes *to* the protective field of mediated, symbolic reality, because it helps to preserve a perverse pleasure. Perversion requires some figure of authority in order to keep afloat its 'inherent transgressions' of authority. Thus, it is possible to agree with Taylor's claim that, "[d]espite the decline of the overt symbolic efficiency of various meta-narratives (the church, etc.), the big Other continues to exist in very practical, albeit submerged forms" (88). The symbolic fiction of the big Other may have been replaced by technologically processed fictions (CGI, etc.), but Žižek's perverted analysis, according to Taylor, "helps us to take more responsibility for the role the media plays in *screening* our social fantasies" (115). Here, it is also possible to agree with Dean, that within a declining symbolic order, the discourse of the analyst no longer represents a radical-revolutionary emancipatory subject (Dean 87), on the condition that we recognize that this is not a subject of drive in the position of the analyst, but still a subject of desire in the position of the pervert.

### **Sexual Difference and the Gaps in the Symbolic**

Fabio Vighi's book, *Sexual Difference in European Cinema: The Curse of Enjoyment*, is grounded less in media studies, and engages more with film theory. Vighi begins by addressing concerns with film studies that Žižek himself takes on in *The Fear of Real Tears* (2001). Like Žižek, Vighi advocates for the importance of Lacanian film theory against so-called post-theorists, such as David Bordwell and Noël Carroll, but he argues that, unlike screen theory, which focused on the subject-positioning of the spectator, a Lacanian perspective should focus on the way in which films master their own symbolic efficiency. For Vighi, cinema—not all cinema, but particular, exemplary cases of cinema—demonstrates the way in which the symbolic itself is structured. Film analysis, according to him, shows how cinema makes sense of itself. Film-sense emerges by negotiating its own symbolic consistency. The latter involves dealing, in one way or another, with the some excess, or excluded surplus.

Vighi's book is Žižekian, rather than Lacanian, to the degree that he distinguishes himself from older screen theory categories, like the imaginary and the symbolic, the mirror stage, and the 'gaze', and focuses on the real and enjoyment. His investigation of cinema's negotiation between symbolic consistency and its excess involves looking



at two interrelated aspects of analysis: the role of enjoyment and the representation of sexual difference. Emphasizing the latter, Vighi shows how film analysis teaches us ways of identifying the emergence of the real within the space of the symbolic. By looking at the interaction between the symbolic consistency of the film text and enjoyment, it is possible, Vighi asserts, to locate that which is central to every political discourse: the relation between that which is represented and that which is excluded from representation. Film analysis must allow us to identify, not necessarily political themes, but the logic of sustaining a social-symbolic space, something of which is important for any hegemonic discourse. Cinema helps us to understand the emergence of social, symbolic reality, and how it is constructed around excessive enjoyment. Like Žižek, Vighi's project is one of understanding how our enjoyment itself is organized by the reigning ideological order. The latter is tied to the psychoanalytic problem of sexual difference in the sense that attempts at its representation ultimately end up on failure, similar to the representation of class antagonism, and give some indication of the place of the Real. The universal status of both rests upon the deadlock of the impossibility of their symbolization. There is, in other words, no neutral position from which antagonism may be represented. Every attempt at their representation ends up in failure—the failure to fully, and adequately, represent the antagonism itself.

Vighi's book is divided into two sections. The first addresses the 'masculine' side of the Lacanian formulas of sexuation—"the ideological process of concealing the wound of sexual difference by displacing it onto woman *qua* sublime and forbidden cause (the logic of courtly love)"—while the second looks at the 'feminine' side, as "correlative to the Real of sexual difference itself" (11).<sup>2</sup> Put simply, the masculine side of the formula represents the symbolic concealment of the Real by way of its exclusion: the universality of phallic signifier operates only on the condition that something remains excluded—the latter is a finite totality. The feminine side, in contrast, affirms the position of the exception by positing an infinite totality, in which not-all elements are submitted to the universal. In political terms, we might say that, on the masculine side, the claim, 'everything is political' affirms an exception that is not political; while on the feminine side, the exception affirms that *there is nothing that is not political* (note, here, that the latter is *not* equivalent to the claim that everything is political). Masculinity, in other words, is operative of symbolic efficiency in its concealment, or exclusion, of its surplus—the 'phallic' is a performance: it stands in to mask the impossibility of representing sexual difference. Femininity returns the excluded to its position in the symbolic, the result of which is the fracturing of the symbolic order itself and the emergence of the Real in the field of the Symbolic. Femininity deprives

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<sup>2</sup> For an excellent interpretation of the Lacanian formulas of sexuation see Joan Copjec, "Sex and the Euthanasia of Reason." In *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994).

the Symbolic “of its founding excess” (149).

Vighi focuses on post-war European cinema because, for him, there is something about the way that these films represent sexual difference that speaks to the way that Lacanian theory conceptualizes the relationship between the Symbolic and the Real. The section on masculinity addresses the problem of courtly love and its relation to sublimation. Libido, according to Freud, is heightened by an obstacle. Sublimation, then, operates by way of an internalized obstacle/prohibition that replaces the impossibility of the (sexual) object. Courtly love, similarly, operates by way of the sublimation of ‘woman’. Federico Fellini’s *La dolce vita* (1959), for example, speaks to the psychoanalytic conception of courtly love. As Vighi indicates, the three women in the film represent three different versions of the sublimated woman: Maddalena is woman as prostitute; Emma opposes the cliché of faithful and maternal wife; and, Sylvia represents a modern version of the Lady in courtly love (20). The key to all three is that they are all elusive figures. Here, Vighi emphasizes a fundamental characteristic of masculine enjoyment: the paradoxical enjoyment of missing the object—which, on the other side of things, satisfies the drive.

Other intriguing examples include Vighi’s interpretation of François Truffaut’s *Jules et Jim* (1962), and David Lean’s *Brief Encounter* (1945). The former is usually thought of as a film about experimenting with alternative love ethics; however, Vighi reads it as a film about the impossibility for the couple to attain full autonomy: the traumatic implication being that  $1+1=3$ . The film, according to Vighi, is not about the failure of the love experiment, but about the fact that there is always a missing third—a third ‘gaze’, perhaps—in every couple. *Jules et Jim* is a film about two friends who share the same woman, *and* remain friends because of the mediating role of the woman as missing third. The missing third, in other words, is “the necessary supplement that sustains the ‘healthy’ functioning of the couple” (31). *Brief Encounter*, conversely, shows how the idealization of the love relationship disavows its own presupposition: “the obstacle to the accomplishment of the illicit affair between Alec and Laura is *its very cause*, its condition of possibility” (145). It is the fantasy of the affair that allows them to avoid the Real of enjoyment. The affair does not take place, not to preserve the sanctity of the institution of marriage, but because, according to Vighi, the two are afraid of losing the fantasy that binds them. Their love relationship is bound by the very impossibility of the sexual relationship, externalized as a fantasy object. As Vighi presents them, all of these examples speak to the masculine side of the formulas of sexualization and the (masculine) desire to keep desiring.

Femininity, in contrast, “undermines the masculine field by abolishing the fracture between the Symbolic and the Real, thus depriving the Symbolic of its founding excess” (149). Man is caught in the metonymic search for the excluded object; wom-

an, however, “has a chance to disengage from the masculine urge to symbolize and, instead, ‘enjoy’ the Real inconsistency of the symbolic field—the fact that ‘the big Other does not exist’” (150). Woman disturbs the symbolic order by removing the exception; or, rather, by returning the exception to its place in the Symbolic—an intervention of the Real in the Symbolic. Vighi highlights the films of Michelangelo Antonioni and Ingmar Bergman as exemplary of the feminine side of the formulas of sexualization. According to Vighi, these filmmakers collapse the fantasy upon which the masculine account of woman as *objet petit a* is based: “The woman at the heart of their cinemas brings about *a loss of reality*, which is deeply connected with *a loss of fantasy*” (155). Both filmmakers demonstrate the Lacanian thesis that the closer one gets to the feminine subject the more we lose our perception of symbolic reality.

Nelly, in Bergman’s *Crisis* (1946), and Clara, in Antonioni’s *The Lady without Camelias* (1953), represent for Vighi ‘woman’ as the ‘absent cause’ of man’s despair and impotence. Both women frustrate the masculine gaze, implying, according to Vighi, that ‘*jouissance féminine*’ is the enjoyment of an insight into the inconsistency of the symbolic order. Such an insight transforms ‘woman’ into a threatening figure for masculine desire, represented by figures like Nelly and Clara. Both characters, in different ways, reveal “the insignificance of our attachment to the socio-symbolic order” (171).

Ultimately, the difference between masculine and feminine enjoyment amounts to the difference between the safety and security of the symbolic order as a protective shield, or the risk of inconsistency. The difference between the two is perhaps thought of as one between desire and drive, or as Žižek puts it in *The Fright of Real Tears*, between the calm life (of the symbolic order) and the ‘mission’ (of the Real) (*The Fright of Real Tears* 137). Vighi’s look at the representation of sexual difference in post-war European cinema adds to the Žižekian thesis that reality itself is split between the contingent meaning of the symbolic order, guaranteed by the figure of the big Other, and the underside of fantasy, which fills in the gaps in the big Other. That being said, in opposition to Vighi’s initial point regarding the usefulness of psychoanalysis to theorize the symbolic efficiency of film itself, it is necessary to insist upon a reading and understanding of spectatorship as well, for it is precisely the enjoyment of the spectator that fills in the gap of the excluded third in cinema’s symbolic consistency. The latter does not necessarily have to reflect the misconceptions of spectatorship found in screen theory.

## Conclusion

The three books reviewed here all draw upon categories of Lacanian psychoanalysis, but they do so in the context of a particularly Žižekian reading of Lacan. By empha-

sizing the Lacanian concept of the real, enjoyment, the *sinthome*, fantasy, the ‘sublime object’ of ideology (the *objet petit a*), and the drive—and by addressing questions related to the critique of ideology, emancipatory politics and the demise of symbolic efficiency, especially as they are connected to questions about the media—these texts all signal the emergence of a distinctly Žižekian approach to media studies. In conclusion, I would like to add a few remarks about the direction of Žižekian media studies by taking up some of the terms of the debate proposed by Dean, Taylor, and Vighi.

Media studies shows that claims regarding the demise of symbolic efficiency and the avowed knowledge regarding the non-existence of the big Other are somewhat exaggerated. The big Other of the media may not take the same form as the older symbolic order of modernity. However, it is evident that the media does provide the settings for the ideological organization of enjoyment. Media studies demonstrates, particularly through digital media, film and television, that symbolic reality—what we regularly refer to as ‘reality’—always already *was* virtual. What is needed is a system of interpretation and ‘cognitive mapping’ adequate for bringing this fact to the surface. The three books reviewed above move in this direction.

In *The Indivisible Remainder* (1996), Žižek makes an intriguing connection between the Lacanian interpretation of courtly love and cyberspace. Courtly love, as we have seen through Vighi, accords the necessity of external obstacles as a condition of possibility of the love object – to create the *illusion* that without these hindrances the subject could have direct access to the object. New media, as noted above, potentially threatens the sublimated object of desire through the instant availability of nearly everything. The absence of prohibition (or the lack of availability of objects of desire) suffocates desire. How one relates to this problem depends largely upon whether one chooses an ethics of desire or an ethics of drive.

The subject, herself, is not conditioned one way or another, either by new or conventional media. The subject’s engagement with the media, like the symbolic order, is split between desire and drive. Both are operative, on different sides of fantasy, and regulate the subject’s approach to her own enjoyment. In the strict psychoanalytic sense, the ethics of the subject depends largely upon the choice of prolonging desire, like the perverse logic of masculinity, or the choice of risking desire in order to engage with and recognize the constitutive subjective position of loss, necessary for breaking free of the repetitive circuits of communicative capitalism. The aim of Žižekian media studies is to move the subject in the direction of the latter.

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