

Reading the Dialectical Ontology of *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou* Against the Ontological Monism of *Adaptation*

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'Postmodern' is a concept now deposited in the word banks of both highbrow cinephiles and lowbrow arbiters of popular filmic taste. How these two groups of critics deploy the term, however, widely differs. Critiquing Wes Anderson's *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou* (2004), for instance, *Entertainment Weekly's* Owen Gleiberman writes: 'Once again, [Anderson] creates a hermetic, glassed-in movie world of postmodern anachronisms that charms and distances in equal measure' (2004). Characteristic of most reviewers of *Life Aquatic*, Gleiberman uses 'postmodern' in a purely aesthetic sense. Although this apolitical use of the term is endemic to the business of popular film criticism, part of the reason critics deployed 'postmodern' bereft of all cultural and political connotations in the case of *Life Aquatic* can be chalked up to the film itself. Any overtly political meaning in the film is mediated by what Todd Gilchrist (2004) calls the film's 'fantastic, just-left-of-reality universe.' Anderson's idiosyncratic filmmaking style – his penchant for what Josh Bell calls 'empty collections of quirks' and 'irrelevant eccentricities' which prize 'false cleverness over story and content' – exacerbates the problem of politicizing *Life Aquatic's* postmodernism (2004). A growing cult of the author (and his artifacts) begets the facile dismissal or deification of *Life Aquatic* based on tenuously apolitical criteria.

Interestingly, critics praised Spike Jonze and Charlie Kaufman's *Adaptation* (2003) for being postmodern and post-postmodern. Jough Dempsey's article for *Cinema Review*, titled "*Adaptation: Beyond Postmodernism*" (2004), informs discerning cineastes that the film's 'ironic take on ironic postmodernism results in a sincere look at writer's block, human

passions, and flowers.' Where critics chastised *Life Aquatic* for propagating the 'bad' version of postmodernism – the ludic, sealed-off variety – *Adaptation* was declared a success for its bona fide postmodernism, or heralded by commentators like Dempsey for its ability to sincerely comment on the world outside of a postmodern diegesis. Either way, *Adaptation* met with nearly unanimous critical acclaim while the popular response to *Life Aquatic* was lukewarm at best.¹

Based on Slavoj Žižek's and Fredric Jameson's theorisations of postmodernism as the ideology or cultural logic of late capitalism, my readings of *Life Aquatic* and *Adaptation* reverse their common reception. I sympathise with critics' aesthetic concerns about certain aspects of Anderson's postmodern antics; a plot that at once parodies the nature documentaries of Jacques Cousteau and the science fiction adventure stories of Jules Verne, while starring a simulacrum of Captain Ahab, runs the risk of deteriorating into a kind of meta-kitsch production solely reliant on its formalist trappings for any semblance of substance.² Although both films participate in postmodern chicanery, I argue that *Life Aquatic* authentically engages cultural and political theory – regardless of its maker and subcultural following – whereas, to paraphrase Glieberman, it is *Adaptation* that engenders a sealed off, hermetically closed movie world, a filmic universe that aligns with the global interests of contemporary capitalism.

The structure of this article follows the distinction between negative (ideological) and positive (utopian) hermeneutics established by Jameson in *The Political Unconscious*. My initial negative *Ideologiekritik* of *Adaptation* establishes the criteria for reexamining *Life Aquatic* through the joint perspectives of Lacanian psychoanalysis and dialectical materialism. Careful not to replace the common reductions and assumptions of popular reception with the cookie-cutter criticism of less popular – but nonetheless problematic – intellectual approaches, I then explore *Life Aquatic's* ambivalent ideological and utopian impulses. My critical treatment considers the (dialectical) ontology, (psychoanalytic) ethics, and (political) class antagonism presented in the baroque world of Anderson's film. I conclude that by creatively 'transfunctionalising' postmodern aesthetics, *Life Aquatic*

¹ While not a definitive indicator, *Rotten Tomatoes*, an online database that compiles 'the critical reaction on movies from the nation's top print and online film critics,' registers *Adaptation's* approval rating as a fresh 90% compared to *Life Aquatic's* rotten 51%. <www.rottentomatoes.com>.

² Reviewers like David Edlestein and Jim Lane find Anderson's fourth film a substance-less citation of Melville's *Moby Dick*. Just before referring to its 'skeletal, postmodern *Moby Dick* framework,' Lane disdainfully writes, 'The *Life Aquatic* is a sluggish, lifeless, monumental disappointment – annoying, smirking and self-satisfied about its own cleverness and ironic detachment' (2004).

offers a diagnostic tool for sifting through the contemporary ethical and political confusions proliferated by films like *Adaptation*.

***Adaptation*: Nothing Beyond Postmodernism**

Formally speaking, *Adaptation* employs well-established postmodern aesthetic techniques. The film arguably pushes intertextuality to its cinematic limit. The screenwriter, Charlie Kaufman – not the real writer but the protagonist of the film³ – attempts to adapt Susan Orlean’s book, *The Orchid Thief*, while Orlean attempts to adapt the story of John Laroche’s orchid heist in Florida’s Fakahatchee Strand State Preserve. This structure produces a triple-leveled *Kunstlerfilm* with Charlie narrating the story of Orlean narrating the story of LaRoche, who narrates his own story. The *mise en abyme* effect of textuality leads to a seemingly infinite regress of adaptation – the film is an adaptation of an adaptation of an adaptation, *ad infinitum*.

We should respond to this complicated structure with a series of related questions. To what end does this *mise en abyme* frame serve? What are we left with when we whittle away the intertextuality? What content remains in works of art that take a deconstructive form? If the film is simply a deconstructive allegory of the de Manian notion that translation is impossible, it remains in the confines of formalism.⁴ If we whittle away the film’s formalism to focus on Charlie’s struggles as a writer, however, we do not discover a sincere look at writer’s block, human passions, or flowers. We discover postmodernism – and its inherent cynical distancing-effect - as the ideological edifice of late capitalism.

Lacanian psychoanalysis offers us a theoretical approach to connect Charlie’s central problem of adapting Orlean’s book to *Adaptation*’s ideological ‘content.’ In the key scene, Charlie reads from Orlean’s book:

There are too many ideas and things and people, too many directions to go. I was starting to believe the reason it matters to care passionately about something is that it whittles the world down to a more manageable size.

In colloquial terms, Orlean describes Lacan’s formula for fantasy. The something that the barred subject cares passionately about is the *objet petit a*, the object-cause of desire. For

³ To distinguish between these two different ‘Charlie Kaufmans’, the character will be referred to as ‘Charlie’, whilst ‘Charlie Kaufman’ will be referred to as ‘Kaufman’.

⁴ See Paul de Man (1986) “Conclusions: Walter Benjamin’s ‘The Task of the Translator.’” *The Resistance to Theory*. Minneapolis: Minnesota, 73-105.

Lacan, *objet petit a* also embodies the fundamental constitutive lack that fantasy covers over. As Žižek explains, fantasy ‘functions as a construction, as an imaginary scenario filling out the void...’ (1989, 114). Psychoanalytically speaking, fantasy does not oppose reality: fantasy is ‘the support that gives consistency to what we call “reality”’ (Žižek 1989, 44). When Orlean writes about the passionate attachment that whittles the world down to a more manageable size, in Lacanian terms, she argues that one must ‘construct reality’ through a fantasy. The question that follows is: why does Charlie struggle to construct a consistent, manageable reality that will allow him to finish his adaptation? When Orlean fantastically speaks from her book jacket photo to advise Charlie to ‘find that one thing that you care passionately about, and then write about that,’ he flounders. Why does he suffer from a proverbial writer’s block?

One reason Charlie is unable to adapt her book involves his tarrying with the idea of totality. Charlie believes that to adapt *The Orchid Thief*, he will need to represent the totality of ideas, things, people, and directions, which of course is an impossible feat since we are historically and spatially located beings. It would require the position of the ‘bad’ idealist Hegelian philosopher standing in the impossible position of the purveyor of Truth at the end of history, a position Charlie flirts with when he attempts to include everything, from prehistory to his own story, in his adaptation. Charlie’s response to Orlean’s rejection of totality – ‘Such sweet, sad insights. So true’ – reflects his reluctance to accept the ‘fallen’ state of fantasy.

When Charlie attempts to whittle totality down through a passionate attachment, he chooses flowers as the ‘one thing’ to write about. He says to the film executive, Valerie:

I want to let the movie exist rather than be artificially plot driven... I just don’t want to ruin it by making it a Hollywood thing... Why can’t there be a movie simply about flowers?

In his agent Marty’s office, he reiterates this point: ‘It’s about flowers...I wanted to do something simple. Show people how amazing flowers are.’ Finally, in a bar with screenwriting seminar guru, Robert McKee, Charlie admits: ‘I wanted to present it simply without big character arcs or sensationalising the story. I wanted to show flowers as God’s miracles.’ The repetition of this desire to create a film purely about naturally occurring objects, flowers, reveals Charlie’s irresolvable predicament – he wishes to create a nature documentary in the guise of a fictional movie. To be even more precise, he desires to write a genre-less script, a work of pure art about the Platonic form of flowers.

In order to avoid totality and resolve his Platonic predicament, Charlie simply reinterprets *The Orchid Thief*. Instead of being, or perhaps in addition to being, a book about flowers, Charlie tells McKee, 'I wanted to show that Orlean never saw the blooming ghost orchid. It was about disappointment.' *Adaptation's* absolutely self-referential form is a consequence of Charlie's choice to remain faithful to this new interpretation. When, in an abrupt ontological shift two-thirds of the way into the film, the 'real' world is displaced by the fictional one of an action genre, replete with sex, drugs, car chases, and violence, Charlie paradoxically succeeds in his disappointing failure to write an unconventional (Hollywood-free) screenplay about flowers. Essentially, Charlie shifts from (straw man versions of) Hegel to Plato to Kant: after flirting with the concept of totality and the Platonic form of flowers, Charlie's screenplay argues that we only succeed when we come to terms with the fact that the thing-in-itself is inaccessible (the thing-in-itself being the orchid for Orlean, Orlean's book for Charlie, and the completed set of *X* currently collected by LaRoche).

This Kantian theme corresponds with the deconstructive thesis that translation fails, but it is better read as a symptom of obsessional narcissism. In Charlie's case, the thing-in-itself is not necessarily inaccessible. Rather, Charlie structures his desire around avoiding it. Instead of faithfully adapting Orlean's book ('the thing'), he resorts to asking the prototypical questions of the obsessional neurotic: 'Why am I here? How did I get here?' He narcissistically answers these ontological questions by including the history of evolution, beginning in 'Hollywood, ca four billion and forty years earlier,' in the narrative of his current writer's block. Charlie even becomes self-conscious of his symptoms: 'I'm insane. I'm Ourobouros... I've written myself into my screenplay... It's self-indulgent. It's narcissistic. It's solipsistic. It's pathetic. I'm pathetic. I'm fat and pathetic.' This self-consciousness underlies the film's baleful ideological content. Although he knows that he is failing to adapt Orlean's book, Charlie ultimately affirms this failure by ending the film within the fantasy-scenario of the Hollywood action genre. By writing a screenplay about his failure to write an anti-Hollywood film, Charlie does not only succeed in his adaptation. He succeeds in becoming subjectivised by the ideological state apparatus (ISA) of the Hollywood dream factory.⁵ Charlie's choice to be interpellated – as opposed to traversing

⁵ In Hegelese, Charlie represents the solipsistic 'Beautiful Soul,' the character-type who believes he is too good for the fallen world he lives in. In *The Plague of Fantasies*, Žižek writes: 'the wicked world about which the Beautiful Soul complains is the inherent condition of its own subjective position' (1997, 77). We should not be fooled by the ruses of Charlie's self-deprecating humor or his endearing

his fantasy, in its various instantiations: 'immanent disappointment,' 'Amelia,' 'his pathetic ego,' etc. - reflects the cynical position that we are condemned to reify the reigning ideology.⁶

In his *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, Žižek critiques the not-so-innocuous Dreamworks animated blockbuster, *Shrek* (Andrew Adamson and Vicky Jensen, 2001). About this film 'clothed in jokingly Brechtian "extraneations,"' he writes:

through all these displacements, the same old story is being told. In short, the true function of these displacements and subversions is precisely to make the traditional story relevant to our 'postmodern' age – and thus to prevent us from replacing it with a new narrative... this is how we are believers today – we make fun of our beliefs, while continuing to practice them, that is, to rely on them as the underlying structure of our daily practices. (2002b, 70-71)

Adaptation likewise promotes this structure of belief, this ideology of cynical laughter that enables us to continue the daily practices of late capitalism, whether they be watching or writing Hollywood blockbusters. Although we know Charlie has sold out and become his doppelgänger brother/alter-ego hack, we laugh anyway – 'that's the whole point of the film!' We should not be afraid to hold the 'real' Charlie Kaufman culpable for this stance of 'enlightened false consciousness.' Has not Kaufman written the script on how 'ideology works today, in our self-proclaimed postideological universe: we perform our symbolic mandates without assuming them and "taking them seriously"?' (Žižek 2002b, 70)?⁷ *Adaptation* offers no counter-narrative, no outside to Charlie's fantasy-world; it is the product of a screenwriter who assumes his symbolic mandate to adapt a book into a Hollywood script without taking the endeavor seriously.

lack of confidence with women; Charlie proceeds *as if* he is not implicated in that which he despises – i.e., the culture industry and ISA of Hollywood – although in the end his actions speak otherwise.

⁶ At one point, Charlie admits his intentions are ideological. He asks McKee at the screenwriters' conference: 'What if a writer is attempting to create a story where nothing much happens, where people don't change, they don't have epiphanies. They struggle and are frustrated and nothing is resolved. More a reflection of the real world.' Charlie's real world is the 'real world' of late capitalism where precisely no events occur that fundamentally alter the coordinates of the symbolic order. This stasis is nicely represented by the film's final (dialectical) image, the time-lapse sequence of the potted (Amelia) flowers opening and closing, day and night, while the out-of-focused world of late capitalist traffic stops-and-goes at intersections surrounded by skyscrapers. Are we not supposed to identify with these flowers isolated in the middle of a busy thoroughway on a concrete island? Do they not represent our daily lives of mere survival in the jungle of late capitalism?

⁷ Or, as Žižek puts it in *The Parallax View*: 'the spontaneous ideology of today's capitalist mobilization is *already* that of "Euro-Taoism," of playing the game with an inner distance, being aware that it is just a game of ultimately insignificant appearances. What is more and more unthinkable today, in our constant mobility, is the concept of radical *engagement* itself' (2006, 418).

The Ideological Ooze of *Adaptation's* Ontological Monism

Recall the quote from Orlean that 'there are too many ideas and things and people, too many directions to go... the reason it matters to care passionately about something is that it whittles the world down to a more manageable size.' What if, in addition to Charlie finding a sweet, sad truth in the impossibility of the romantic version of Hegelian idealism, we read this scene as a *misrecognition* of truth, as an acceptance of a partial truth? Of course, we cannot represent totality *tout court*. Yet that does not mean we should fetishistically disavow its existence, which is precisely what Charlie's character does. In fact, this disavowal of totality consequently leads to the film's inability to escape the vicious cycle of ideological interpellation. The previous section examined this interpellation subjectively, as a consequence of the fantasy structuring Charlie's (and Kaufman's) desire and the cynical structure of belief the film engenders in its audience. This section criticises the film's 'objective' interpellation, if you will, which results from the film's ontology. In an emblematic postmodern gesture, Kaufman forecloses the possibility of the film to conceptualise what Jameson refers to as totality, or History proper, by collapsing the essential distinction between human history and natural history.⁸ Where dialectical ontology accounts for this distinction, ontological monism – the diegetic *Weltanschauung* advanced by *Adaptation* – conflates the two.⁹

⁸ Jameson uses History (with a capital 'H') and a chain of equivalent terms – the world system, capitalism, the absent cause, the Lacanian Real, etc. – to capture the concept of totality. The multiplicity of terms signals a paradox: it is necessary to represent totality but ultimately impossible. Jameson never tires of reminding us that we must affirm the existence of History rather than deny it on the basis that it evades our representational powers. He explains: 'history is *not* a text...[but] history is inaccessible to us except in textual form' (1981, 82). Consequently, 'History can be apprehended only through its effects, and never directly as some reified force' (1981, 102). In my opinion, the best concept to express totality's mediatory quality is found in Jameson's discussion of Adorno's "'theories" of late capitalism': the 'totality-effect' in which the 'world-totality,' the universal, can only express itself through particularities (1990, 31). 'Totality-effect' and 'absent cause' serve as two sides of the totality coin: *History is the absent cause that appears to or is experienced by humans in its totality-effect*. Or, to put it as Žižek does: 'what Hegel draws attention to is the fact that actual Universality is not only the abstract content common to all particular cases, but also the "negative" power [*read*: 'absent cause'] disrupting each particular content' (1997, 222). We discover totality/universality in the totality-effect of each particular.

⁹ My use of the concept 'ontological monism' may be misleading. In no way does arguing against ontological monism imply the existence of a dualistic (metaphysical) ontology. What I refer to as 'dialectical ontology,' a concept I take from Alexandre Kojève, is related to what is known in existentialism as 'ontological difference,' the acknowledged gap between the ontic and the ontological. One of the major strains of Žižek's *The Parallax View* is devoted to defending this gap against the dominant contemporary theoretical constellation which assumes its nonexistence. Žižek

The token scene that illustrates the conceptual confusion promoted by ontological monism occurs when Charlie's Platonic desire to write a film only about a flower shifts to a Darwinian one. His voice-over narrates:

To write about a flower, to dramatise a flower, I have to show the flower's arc. And the flower's arc stretches back to the beginning of life. How did this flower get here? What was its journey?

At this point, Charlie strictly deals with the natural history of evolution. To trace the flower's arc back to the origin of life in the puddle of primordial soup leads him into Darwinian territory. Appropriately, the scene cuts to 'England, one hundred thirty nine years earlier,' with Darwin writing and coughing at his desk. Darwin's voice-over dictates, 'therefore I should infer from analogy that probably all the organic beings which have ever lived on this earth have descended from some one primordial form, into which life was first breathed.' The conceptual confusion occurs when Charlie infers from his reading of Darwin that he must tie all of history together – natural and historical - in order to adapt Orlean's book to the screen. He says:

It is the journey of evolution, of adaptation, the journey we all take, the journey that unites each and every one of us. Darwin writes that we all come from the very first single cell organism. Yet here I am, and there's Laroche, there's Orlean, and there's the ghost orchid. All trapped in our own bodies in moments in history. That's it. That's what I need to do. Tie all of history together.

Although life evolved from the initial single-celled organism, it is not true that Charlie, Laroche, and Orlean – individual human beings - are equivalent to the ghost orchid flower. Charlie makes this short-circuit by equating human bodies with the 'body' of the orchid. Furthermore, he claims that each of them embody 'moments in history,' but this usage of the term 'history' fails to distinguish the natural from the human. When Charlie decides that what he needs to do is to 'tie all of history together,' we are thus perplexed. Does he intend to construct a 19th century natural philosophy, a theory of everything, that will include humans within some larger evolutionary metanarrative, perhaps a metaphysical natural theology? What does 'tying all of history together' entail?

does not use the phrase ontological monism, however. Instead he contrasts the ontological gap, the non-all of reality (what I'm calling dialectical ontology), with 'the standard, pre-modern, "cosmological" notion of reality as a positive order of being... a fully constituted positive "chain of being"' (what I'm calling ontological monism) (2006, 241). See also Žižek 2006, 24, 168, 199, 231, 237, & 241-242.

When the above voice-over ends, Charlie begins maniacally narrating the natural history of evolution into his tape recorder, or at least the representative scenes of this incommensurable temporality. In the next scene, when Charlie listens to the tape recorder play back his own narration, we witness him become less and less thrilled about his idea to move from inhuman to human history. As he becomes more dejected while facing his reflection in a window, his recorded voice narrates the birth of civilization up to the moment where Susan Orlean sits in her *New Yorker* office. At this point, we realise that Charlie's tape-recorded brainstorming session already appeared in the actual film near the beginning (yet another loop), but with a significant difference. The version of the 'history of everything' included in the film ends with the bloody birth of a boy. Taking into account the shot prior to this 'history of everything' sequence where Charlie obsesses over his origin, and the shot following which depicts him sweating profusely, it is safe to assume that the history of the world in *Adaptation* is the teleological story of Charlie's individual existence from birth to current existential angst. Only after the dining scene between Valerie and the sweating Charlie does the camera pan a shot of skyscrapers before zooming in on Orlean writing in her office (the audio-recorded version concludes with this shot and excludes Charlie's birth).

So what is the significance of this difference between plan and execution? The significance, I argue, involves a proper versus an improper approach to Hegelian totality, or to put it differently, a film that is materialist versus one that is idealist. With the inclusion of Charlie's birth in the history of evolution, and in spite of Charlie's obvious doubt in conflating human history (Orlean's included) with natural history, Kaufman, the real screenwriter, cops out of making a properly Hegelian film, and instead produces what Žižek would surely identify as a New Age, neo-pagan, ontological monist film perniciously in cahoots with the 'all that is solid melts into air' exchange-value flows of postmodern late capitalism.

This reading is difficult to diagnose, however. Moments in the film that suggest an ontological monism are always already mediated by its ironic framing device. So, for instance, when Laroche waxes poetic about the sexual relationship between insects and orchids, we are unsure how to read his words.¹⁰ Do we play along with his metaphorical

¹⁰ In rhetoric reminiscent of Linnaeus, Laroche explains to Orlean: 'The point is what's wonderful is that every one of these flowers has a specific relationship with the insect that pollinates it. There's a certain orchid that looks exactly like a certain insect. So the insect drawn to this flower, its double, its soul mate. It wants nothing more than to make love to it. After the insect flies off, it spots another soul

anthropomorphising, or do we ironically distance ourselves from this egregious case of the pathetic fallacy? Also complicating matters is Charlie's sense of his own subjectivity. In the beginning faceless monologue he offers an indefinite explanation of his depression: 'Maybe it's my brain chemistry. Maybe that's what's wrong with me, bad chemistry. All my problems and anxiety can be reduced to a chemical imbalance or some kind of misfiring synapses.' The 'maybes' in this passage prevent us from concluding that he believes all phenomena can be explained by (cognitive) science.¹¹ Finally, there is a scene that directly suggests the film is against ontological monism. In this scene, Laroche and Orlean discuss the status of how we are to read the concept of 'adaptation' within the world of the film. Is its status purely metaphorical and therefore transposable from what is natural to what is human, or will this leap in logic be denied?¹² Whereas Orlean allows Laroche to collapse the necessary ontological difference between the natural and human in the prior scene discussed above, while driving in Laroche's truck at night she contradicts him. Laroche rhetorically asks: 'Do you know why I like plants? 'Cause they're so mutable. Adaptation's a profound process. It means you figure out how to thrive in the world.' Orlean picks up on the ambiguous status of 'you' in this statement to complicate Laroche's use of Darwin as self-help material (recall the initial scene of Laroche in his truck listening to Darwin on tape). She rebuts: 'Yeah, but it's easier for plants. I mean, they have no memory. They just move on to whatever's next. But for a person, adapting is almost shameful. It's like running away.' This last line becomes impeccably ironic when we consider that running away from this shame is precisely what *Adaptation* is guilty of. *Adaptation's* ironic self-referentiality adapts all too 'naturally' to the contemporary logic of late capitalism and its cynical form of ideology.

mate flower and makes love to it, thus pollinating it. And neither the flower nor the insect will ever understand the significance of their lovemaking. How could they know that because of their little dance the world lives? It does. By simply doing what they're designed to do something large and magnificent happens. In this sense, they show us how to live, how the only barometer you have is your heart. How when you spot your flower, you can't let anything get in your way.'

¹¹ These 'maybes' also provide the key for unlocking the framework of Kaufman's next scripted film, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Michel Gondry, 2004), which oscillates between cognitive science and psychoanalysis in its exploration of the concept of love.

¹² Essentially, Orlean and Laroche's discussion reenacts the argument made by Alain Badiou, and reiterated by Žižek, against Deleuze and Guattari's ontological monism. We should not follow the leveling path of the Deleuzo-Guattarian wasp/orchid assemblage (to take a pertinent example) in which all becomes a code in an immanent dance of deterritorialization and reterritorialization. The veritable 'becoming-wasp of the orchid and a becoming-orchid of the wasp' represents a highly poetic and metaphoric explanation of natural processes (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 10). However, the leap to a 'becoming-orchid of the human' requires a short-circuit; it is a leap that effaces the unbridgeable gap between two analytic levels, that of the subject-less discourse of science and the subjective discourse of history. See Badiou (1999) and Žižek (2004).

Despite these scenes that suggest a counter-argument, *Adaptation* seals its fate as an ontological monistic film at the conclusion of its final credits. A quote from Donald's thriller screenplay appears. It reads:

We're all one thing, Lieutenant. That's what I've come to realise. Like cells in a body. 'Cept we can't see the body. The way fish can't see the ocean. And so we envy each other. Hurt each other. Hate each other. How silly is that? A heart cell hating a lung cell. - Cassie from *The 3*

The belief that we are all one thing echoes the (romantic) organicism of Spinozist-Deleuzian philosophy. It forecloses the film from representing Hegel's dialectical ontology, which is significant considering the fact that achieving the proper sphere of politics requires a conception of totality that is antagonistically split. As Žižek writes in *The Ticklish Subject*: 'In the leftist perspective, accepting the radically antagonistic - that is, *political* - character of social life, accepting the necessity of "taking sides," is the only way to be effectively *universal*' (2000, 223). In disavowing the antagonistic by calling it 'silly,' for instance, we reify the "'false" concrete universality that legitimises the existing division of the Whole into functional parts' (Žižek 2000, 223). In other words, according to Žižek, we risk subscribing to a capitalist version of arche-politics: "'communitarian" attempts to define a traditional close, organically structured homogenous social space that allows for no void in which the political moment-event can emerge' (2000, 190). This corporatization of the social sphere, quite effectively grasped by Donald's image of our connectivity like cells in a singular body, reduces the role of politics to the administration of a smoothly running society (what Lacan calls 'the servicing of goods'). In a globalised world of *laissez-faire* multinational capital, the 'false' concrete universal of our historical epoch, it is not difficult to imagine what this vision of politics translates to – unfettered 'free' trade. By positing Donald's organicism as the final word of the film, Kaufman forecloses *Adaptation* from the realm of politics, which is precisely the move made by ideologues who dismiss the existence of all things – like class antagonism – as economically fettering.

Just because Hegel succumbed to his own version of arche-politics, does not mean we should abandon his logic of a dialectical ontology. In his *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, Alexandre Kojève describes the notion of dialectical ontology:

Hegel's reasoning is certainly correct: if the real Totality implies Man, and if Man is dialectical, the Totality itself is dialectical... The classic argument: everything that *is*, is in one and the same manner, should not have obliged Hegel to apply one and the same ontology (which, for him, is a dialectical ontology) to Man and Nature, for

he himself says (in the *Phenomenology*) that 'the true being of man is his *action*.' Now, Action (=Negativity) *acts* otherwise than Being (=Identity) *is*. And in any case there is an essential difference between Nature on the one hand, which is revealed only by Man's Discourse – i.e., by *another* reality than that which it is itself – and Man on the other hand, who *himself* reveals the reality which he is, as well as the (natural) reality which he is not. Therefore it seems necessary to distinguish, within the dialectical ontology of revealed Being or Spirit (dominated by Totality), a nondialectical ontology (of Greek and traditional inspiration) of Nature (dominated by Identity), and a dialectical ontology (of Hegelian inspiration, but modified accordingly) of Man and History (dominated by Negativity). (1969, 213)

I quote this passage at length to emphasise the difference that *Adaptation* fails to grasp. Because the film does not ultimately distinguish Nature from Man and History, or a nondialectical from a dialectical ontology, it is unable to conceive of a proper dialectical totality. Instead of addressing totality, the film slips into an expression of the interconnectivity of being. No doubt there is an epistemological and environmental truth to biodiversity; however, such ontological monism finds itself impotent to account for why 'heart cells hate lung cells.' Without the dialectic we have little explanatory power to comprehend the contradictions of late capitalism. With no recourse to dialectics, *Adaptation* glosses over the antagonism of the 'class struggle' with the social fantasy of ontological monism.¹³

Ironically, *Adaptation's* writer, the 'real' Charlie Kaufman, seems to have sensed this inconsistency. In an earlier draft of the screenplay (dated November 21, 2000) Kaufmann includes references to Hegel's dialectical ontology. In a scene where Charlie eats at a romantic restaurant with Margaret (a much more witty and smart character than the violinist/romantic love-object, Amelia, whom she will become in the film), Margaret discusses a conversation she recently had with her new boyfriend, David. She says:

Like the other day we were in bed discussing Hegel. Hegel! In bed! After really hot sex! Like my dream come true. I mean, in this goddamn town?... David and I were

¹³ In *The Plague of Fantasies*, Žižek explains that antagonism 'is not the ultimate referent which anchors and limits the unending drift of the signifiers ("the ultimate meaning of all social phenomena is determined by their position in class struggle"), but the very force of their constant displacement – that on account of which socio-ideological phenomena never mean what they seem/purport to mean – for example, "class struggle" is that on account of which every direct reference to universality (of "humanity," of "our nation," etc.) is, always in a specific way, "biased," dislocated with regard to its literal meaning. "Class struggle" is the Marxist name for this basic "operator of dislocation"; as such, "class struggle" means that there is no neutral metalanguage allowing us to grasp society as a given "objective" totality, since we always-already "take sides" (1997, 216). In interpreting totality as ontologically monistic, *Adaptation* either refuses to take sides and essentially disavows the class struggle; or, what amounts to the same thing, it allies with Hollywood in spite of its apparent criticism of this particular culture industry's operations.

joking about the *Philosophy of History*. So I was lying there... kind of post-coital dreamy... and I was suddenly struck by how profound the notion is that *history is a human construct... that nature doesn't exist historically, but rather cyclically. So, whereas human history spirals forward, building upon itself, nature...*' (Kaufman 2000, 12-13, my italics)

Margaret rightfully recognises the difference between the ontology of natural history and the dialectical ontology of human history. Consequently, she also recognises that human history is constructed and dialectically built ('human history spirals forward, building upon itself'). During this conversation Charlie pretends to understand what she is talking about, but he really has no clue, thus suggesting that Kaufman eliminated the (Bakhtinian) dialogical possibility offered by an evolving relationship between Margaret and Charlie in favor of exploring Charlie's monological confusion. Because Kaufman substitutes Darwin for Hegel, we can only imagine what kind of film *Adaptation* could have been.¹⁴ Instead of the dunce Donald punctuating the film, perhaps Margaret the Hegelian would challenge Charlie to traverse his fantasy and politicise his screenplay.¹⁵

As I have argued above, Charlie's self-image of Ourobouros, the serpent eating its own tail, symbol of cyclicity and primordial unity, mirrors the image of the serpentine flows of global capitalism – today's 'concrete universal.' Although it overdetermines non-economic strata of social life, what appears as universal is always split by an antagonism. In the case of globalisation, the coordinates of our social fantasy/reality fictionalise the constitutive antagonism of class struggle. *Adaptation's* uncritical complicity with the logic of late capitalism results from its participation in this ideological fictionalisation.

Welcome to the Sea of the Real

The postmodern aesthetic techniques of *Adaptation* – its meta-textual structure, ironic self-referentiality, collapsed difference between reality and fantasy, and narcissistic protagonist – exist in the *Life Aquatic* as well, but we should not succumb to the temptation, like so many critics have, to reduce *Life Aquatic* to a series of contemporary formalisms. Despite appearances – the film-about-making-a-film structure, obvious

¹⁴ In this earlier draft, Charlie has both a portable edition of a Darwin book and a copy of Hegel's *Philosophy of History*. At one point, Charlie reads this small passage from the latter: 'Each being is, because posited, an opposed, a conditional and conditioning, the Understanding completes these its limitations by positing the opposite...' (Kaufman 2000, 20).

¹⁵ A film faithful to the spirit of the 2000 script would face the formal problems posed in Raymond Williams's claim that 'socialism will not be simpler than capitalism' (quoted in Jameson 1991, 336).

artificial settings, self-absorbed central character, etc. – *Life Aquatic* is not a film relishing in its own deconstruction, and to claim so places me in the unlikely company of conservative critic Terry Teachout, who views *Life Aquatic* as ‘a deeply serious film disguised as a parody’ (2005).¹⁶ Teachout ‘loathes’ postmodernism, but he differentiates Anderson’s film because it ‘enlist[s] postmodern irony in the service of underscoring a quintessentially postmodern problem: the way in which postmodern man uses irony to insulate himself from feeling’ (2005). I agree with Teachout’s formulation that *Life Aquatic*’s aesthetic postmodernism is only a means to a different end without subscribing to the content of his Catholic-humanist interpretation of this end. *Life Aquatic* avoids the conservative hall-of-mirrors postmodernism that cynically wallows in its protagonist’s ideological isolation. Its postmodern techniques do not circumscribe the world of the film (as they do in *Adaptation*); rather, Anderson’s deliberate self-reflexivity provides us with a vantage point to see how fantasy structures our social reality, and how we might, through the desire called utopia, structure it differently.

Two aspects of *Life Aquatic* distinguish it from Anderson’s other (more strictly aesthetic postmodernist) work. At first glance, its meta-structure – a *Kunstlerfilm* about filmmakers – and the completely fantastic natural world that these filmmakers explore would seem to hermetically seal off the filmic world of *Life Aquatic* from the world at large. Rather, I argue that recursivity and artifice expand the world of the film. Counter to *Adaptation*’s postmodern form and content, *Life Aquatic*’s formal means achieve substantive psychoanalytic ends.¹⁷

Life Aquatic’s artificially constructed wildlife exemplifies how Anderson moves beyond the notorious realism/postmodernism deadlock to illustrate psychoanalytically how fantasy structures our social reality. A realist sensibility understandably struggles with how to connect the film’s ‘cartoonish’ qualities with ‘real world’ sociopolitical issues. As Žižek writes:

¹⁶ A post on the *IMDB* also captures how the film needs to appear differently than it is: ‘Absolutely brilliant movie cleverly disguised as a mediocre movie.’

¹⁷ Such a belief also puts me in the camp of critics who claim *Life Aquatic* is Anderson’s best film to date. Mike D’Angelo’s thoughtful review in *Esquire*, in my view, correctly places *Life Aquatic* beyond Anderson’s ‘ramshackle’ debut, *Bottle Rocket* (1996), the ‘brilliant... but... intensely personal’ *Rushmore* (1998), and the ambitious but ‘constricted’ *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001). He makes an interesting (Freudian) point about the film exceeding the limitations of ‘adolescent sensibility’ to arrive at ‘something approximating adult life,’ before concluding that *Life Aquatic* ‘points the way toward a long, fruitful career in which Wes Anderson will make movies that speak as fervently to the rest of us as they do to him’ (2005, 22-3). Let’s hope they avoid speaking to us about American Express credit cards.

the difference between Lacan and 'naïve realism' is that for Lacan, the only point at which we approach [the] hard kernel of the Real is indeed the dream... the only way to break the power of our ideological dream is to confront the Real of our desire which announces itself in this dream. (1989, 47-8)

Where naïve realism assumes an unmediated route to the Real, aesthetic postmodernism for aesthetic postmodernism's sake proves equally ineffectual by disavowing the hard kernel of the Real. Instead of a sociopolitical space, the film's surreal universe becomes a fictional construction of reality. In a Kantian fashion (recall Charlie's pursuit of his Platonic flower), the thing-in-itself – the Fluorescent Snapper, Crayon Pony-fish, Hermes Eel, etc. – instantiates what is ultimately unknowable, what forces us to resort to the feeble trappings of narrative and anthropomorphic metaphors to familiarise (and poeticise) the unfamiliar and inhuman.

Instead of these limited options – one restrained by its insistence on direct links to recognizable referents, and the other skipping like a scratched record on the assumption that access to referents is futile – a more fruitful (and Hegelian) interpretation of Anderson's use of stop-motion animation resides in the way subtle exaggerations in the reality of the natural world privilege a dialectical ontology over an ontological monism. Recall *Adaptation's* conflation of the sociopolitical human world with the natural world, and how this characteristically postmodern gesture ideologically accompanies the naturalisation of capitalism on a global scale. From an ontologically monist perspective, as found in *Adaptation*, a constitutive antagonism like 'class struggle' that splits the sociopolitical realm is simply unthinkable. *Life Aquatic's* artificial universe allows for the ontological difference introduced by the specifically human dimension of experience. *Life Aquatic* addresses the sexual and class antagonisms of our capitalist society (to varying degrees of success), but it does not follow that a film accounting for ontological difference will be psychoanalytic or Marxist. Theoretical positions as varied as Heidegger's and monotheistic humanism conceptualise this difference. *Life Aquatic's* dialectical ontology takes on a specifically psychoanalytic quality when this overt split between a recognisable reality and one obviously fantastic serves to highlight the relationship between reality and fiction. Žižek states:

Usually we say that we should not mistake fiction for reality - remember the postmodern doxa according to which 'reality' is a discursive product, a symbolic fiction which we misperceive as a substantial entity. The lesson of psychoanalysis here is the opposite one: *we should not mistake reality for fiction* - we should be able to discern, in what we experience as fiction, the hard kernel of the Real which

we are able to sustain only if we fictionalize it. In short, we should distinguish which part of reality is 'transfunctionalized' through fantasy, so that, although it is part of reality, it is perceived in a fictional mode. Much more difficult than to denounce/unmask (what appears as) reality as fiction is to recognize the part of fiction in 'real' reality. (2002b, 19)

Realism unmasks the appearance of reality as fictional (the task of traditional *Ideologiekritik*), while 'postmodern doxa' denounces reality as fiction. For psychoanalysis, the distinction lies between the Real and reality, not reality and fantasy. Fantasy supports reality, but it does so by repressing the Real. In other words, the Real, which cannot be integrated into reality, must be fictionalised by fantasy.

Life Aquatic's 'just-left-of-reality' universe quite literally foregrounds how fantasy constitutes reality by fictionalizing the Real. In a representative scene, Team Zissou deep-sea dives in their yellow submarine, *Deep Search*, to confront the jaguar shark. As the submarine descends, the film intersperses shots of individual characters peering out portholes with shots of the artificial sea creatures they witness. The suture of subject to object suggests that what the character sees is part of his or her specific fantasy; however, the creatures that each of them perceive, although different in degree, are not different in kind. Each is a product of the same stop-motion animation process, and each swims through the same fantastic reality. These interspersed shots nicely represent the 'objectively subjective' fantasy that constitutes the social reality of, in this case, a motley crew of artist-scientists. Fantasy is neither purely objective (existing out there) nor simply subjective (existing solely within the subject's consciousness), but serves as a sort of "objective" illusion, an illusion inscribed into facts (social reality) themselves' (Žižek 2006, 170). The fact that this 'objectively subjective' fantasy is social is given further support in that Anderson includes characters not part of Team Zissou's exploration crew. 'Extrinsic' characters like Alistair Hennessy, Steve's rival scientist-documentarian, and Oseary Drakoulis, Steve's business-clad producer (his garb alluding to his usual position behind-the-scenes), see the same kind of creatures; they share in the 'collective fantasy' of the *Belafonte's* crew.

Life Aquatic's imaginary seascapes explicitly divide the human and the natural, but more importantly this fictionalised 'sea of the Real' provides a space for the film to represent fantasy. It is with the self-reflexive inclusion of a group of filmmakers, however, that the film drives home the psychoanalytic lesson that we should not mistake fiction for reality. Where *Adaptation* uses self-reflexivity to hermetically seal us within Charlie's

solipsistic fantasy (recall the film's failure to complete the psychoanalytic process by reifying this fantasy – i.e., by having Charlie give way to his desire and become further interpellated in the ISA of Hollywood); *Life Aquatic* employs this characteristically postmodern device 'to establish the part of fiction in "real" reality.'¹⁸

Several times Steve uses the directorial commands of 'Action!' and 'Cut!' to signal that what we are about to witness is also being filmed for Team Zissou's next documentary. A pertinent example of how these commands help *Life Aquatic* establish the part of fiction in 'real' reality occurs on the set of the stagey cross-sectioned *Belafonte*. Fueled by their competing interests to woo the embedded reporter, Jane Winslett-Richardson, the tension between Steve and his alleged son, Ned, boils over. As they move from room to room, they run into various members of the crew, one of whom is Vikram, Team Zissou's cameraman. Steve says, 'Give me that camera. I'm gonna smash it over your head. Cut!' This 'Cut!' marks a significant departure from previous scenes where Steve purposely starts the cameras rolling to capture the development of Steve and Ned's 'relationship subplot.' At this moment, however, Steve stops the action from being recorded for his public audience, presumably because it exposes him for competing with his son for a woman half his age and admitting a desire to be unfaithful to his wife, Eleanor. Ned recognises Steve's selfish intentions when he states, 'I misread you, man. I'm gonna have to rethink some shit. You don't know me. You never wanted to know me. I'm just a character in your film.' What follows is one of the most important pieces of dialogue in *Life Aquatic*. Steve says, 'It's a documentary. It's all really happening'; to which Ned replies, 'Well, damn you for that.' Ned's response explains *in nuce* why the film is psychoanalytic and not postmodern: Ned exhibits an awareness of the psychoanalytic lesson not to mistake fiction for reality when he essentially calls Steve out for his 'postmodern' inconsistency. Ned's broad reference to 'that' specifically refers to Steve's mistaking the fictional relationship they have on camera for their actual relationship. Their relationship is obviously more than an emotional

¹⁸ At the risk of repetition, we should outright reject any postmodernist reading of *Life Aquatic*. Team Zissou's filming crew does not exist solely as a device to comment on the nature of filmmaking. We should also not be tempted by the existential interpretation that the film is about artists who courageously create, in a post-Nietzschean state of nihilism, their own world. Finally, we should dismiss the romantic interpretation of the film as an argument for maintaining a child's innocent, idiosyncratic and awestruck perspective to counter the inanity of adulthood; we should not succumb to the temptation to find the whole meaning of the film in Steve's admission, in the submarine scene, that 11 ½ was his favorite age. Freudian psychoanalysis, although it harkens back to childhood, concerns itself entirely with the world of adults, and I resolutely maintain that *Life Aquatic* is a thoroughly psychoanalytic film (one that contains a thread of Marxism that can be teased out with a close and slightly speculative reading).

subplot meant to enhance Steve's films, regardless of whether or not Steve is really Ned's biological father. As a result of the meta-structure of the film, Ned's damning of Steve doubles as Anderson's own disassociation from his embedded filmmaker. With *Life Aquatic*, Anderson refuses to commit Steve's unethical fictionalisation of reality. Put differently, his film remains faithful to the existence of the hard kernel of the Real, 'the irrepresentable X on whose "repression" reality itself is founded' (Žižek 1999, 74).

The next section explores how the Real, this irrepresentable psychic trauma or social antagonism, structures *Life Aquatic*, but since the Real can never be isolated from Lacan's other two experiential orders or registers – the imaginary and the symbolic – I first wish to take a brief look at how they materialise in the film. For coherency's sake, we will use the development of Steve and Ned's relationship as an example, but the role of titles and nicknames,¹⁹ Steve's constant obsession with his reputation, and Jane's alternating position in relation to Steve,²⁰ could just as easily be used to exemplify the interplay of the imaginary and symbolic.

Steve refuses to accept the responsibility of performing the role of father in reality – with all that entails: imaginary projections, symbolic mandates, responsibility for accepting the trauma of his son's life as trauma in his own – until the scene where he falls down the stairs of the Hotel Citroën. Up to this point in the film, Steve desires an imaginary relationship with Ned. As he tells Eleanor on Port-au-Patois, 'I mean, I know I want him to think of me as a father. But the fact that there's an outside chance that he could really be my actual, biological son is very difficult for me.' Ned's biological status functions as an excuse to hide the fact that what Steve really wants is for Ned to imaginatively identify with the position of being his son without Steve having to reciprocate by identifying himself as a father.

Psychoanalytically speaking, Steve's tumble down the stairs marks a significant shift in his libidinal position. The camera captures the fallen Steve upside down and on his back.

¹⁹ On the different functions of nicknames, see Žižek 1989, 107-10.

²⁰ Jane is at once reporter (the mediating figure between the symbolic representation and imaginary reception of Steve); potential lover (at least from Steve's perspective); friend (in the Kantian sense of 'the one who will help us to correct our judgment when it is mistaken'); and even daughter. In many respects, Steve's relationship with Jane parallels the one he develops with Ned. In an earlier scene where Steve takes Jane up in his hot air balloon to woo her, she admits to him, 'I had this exact image of you tacked up on the wall above my aquarium all through primary school.' This image is from the official Zissou Society photograph of Steve pointing to the horizon and it represents Jane's previous idealisation of him, an idealisation whose validity she has arguably come onboard to test. Steve responds, 'Well, maybe it's just me, but I don't feel like that person. I never did,' thus foreshadowing how he will eventually come to accept fully the implications of his castration.

When Vikram assures him the camera recorded his fall, Steve says, 'Good. We'll give them the reality this time. A washed-up old man with no friends, no distribution deal, wife on the rocks, people laughin' at him, feelin' sorry for himself.' Throughout the movie Steve is in the position of the Master: his is the 'discourse of the master' that directs and assigns, both on and off the set, the ultimate meaning of the crew's actions. Like the primordial father, his access to *jouissance* is seemingly unimpeded (he takes priority over potential sexual conquests, the unpaid interns are at his beck and call to fix him drinks, etc.). When Steve says, 'Good. We'll give them the reality this time,' he acknowledges that he accepts what Lacan would call his castration.²¹ He publicly concedes that his position as master is strictly performative, that he does not wield the unlimited powers of the phallus (no one does). (Charlie's development, by contrast, heads in the opposite direction: instead of giving us the reality, he buys into the fiction to wield the phallus and reaps the rewards provided by ideological irony.)²² Steve's proverbial mid-life crisis is better read as his coming to dis-identify with the persona, the ideal-ego, of 'Steve Zissou' as displayed in his films. In other words, he stops pretending there is no difference between the two Steves and accepts the fallen stature of his split subjectivity.

It makes perfect sense, then, that Steve follows by asking for a private word with his son, thus also publicly accepting Ned as his progeny for the first time. The fantasy space between Ned and Steve collapses: Steve no longer has to sustain the distance inherent in playing the idealised Capt. Steve Zissou of Ned's childhood. Steve tells Ned:

I'm sorry I never acknowledged your existence all those years. It won't happen again. I mean it. You are my son to me. Almost more so. See, for me to meet a guy like you at this time in my life – I don't know. Uh, it's just - I want to communicate my feelings to you... but... I think I might start to cry.

Here, with the lines 'almost more so' and 'for me to meet a guy like you at this time in my life', we find Steve adopting not just his symbolic mandate (to be a father), but also taking

²¹ Several images in the film can be read as symbolic of Steve's castration: the dilapidated condition of the *Belafonte*; the leeches that only attach to Steve; Cody, the three-legged dog; and, of course, 'Zissou shoots blanks.'

²² At the conclusion of *Adaptation*, Charlie wins both ways: he gets the girl and completes his screenplay – but at what price? Are we, as the audience, not like the rest of the characters in the film who pay the expense for Charlie's successful failure? Have we not been cut out of the 'bigger picture,' like LaRoche who gets eaten by a crocodile, Donald who flies through a car windshield, and Orlean who simply disappears (in an earlier version of the script, she commits suicide by shooting herself)? In order to sustain Charlie's solipsistic fantasy and the ISA of Hollywood, we become excised from the picture; we fall victim to 'the deconstructionist,' the literature professor serial killer Charlie sarcastically offers to Donald for his thriller screenplay. In short, we are reduced to ironic laughter.

responsibility for his absence in the past in order to affirm his *present* bond with Ned. This bond is beyond the symbolic and imaginary identifications children and parents foist upon one another; it's something new and entirely different.

Each in their own way, Steve and Ned traverse their fantasies about one another to achieve a bond that 'touches on the Real.' Yet if we fail to account for the Real as a social antagonism instead of a more 'purely' psychic trauma, we risk confining our analysis to a filmic clinic. In other words, we relegate ourselves to analysing the particular subjects within the film's diegetic world with little reference to the antagonisms undergirding (and the fantasies plaguing) our own society. To be more specific, several irruptions of the Real occur in the film – the jaguar shark's ingestion of Esteban, Ned's arrival on the ship, Jane's arrival at the Zissou island-compound, the pirate attack, the helicopter crash, and the final encounter with the jaguar shark. Whichever one of these events we make the focal point of our analysis will determine the analysis's ultimate limitations. If we emphasise the loss of Esteban, the arrival of Ned, and Ned's sudden death, for example, we will derive a cogent analysis of Steve's passing through the psychoanalytic process (his development as a character, to put it in formalist terms). On the other hand, if we target the pirate attack as the central evental site, we globalise the film's diegetic space and open it to a Marxist analysis. Before exploring the pirate attack, I wish to examine how the jaguar shark – as the 'objectively subjective' fantasy object (*objet petit a*) of Team Zissou – structurally represents the hard kernel of the Real in the diegesis of *Life Aquatic*.

Team Zissou's Psychoanalytic-Marxism?

At first glance, the jaguar shark stands out from the other instances of the Real because its diegetic irruption structures the reality of *both* Steve's and Anderson's films. For Steve, the loss of Esteban at the jaws of the jaguar shark restructures his desire. *The Life Aquatic, Adventure No. 13: The Jaguar Shark (Part 2)* will be a film that documents one man's revenge, not just wildlife. Perhaps this shift in focus explains why Jane's character finds the first jaguar film 'slightly fake' and why the detractor in the festival crowd accuses Steve of killing Esteban on purpose. (Then there is crowd's confused reception at the screening: is not Esteban's death the stuff of fiction? is Steve making a generic jump into the world of 'reality television'?). For Anderson, the jaguar shark sets in motion the dramatic action of *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou* as a film that 'documents' what is on and behind the

scenes of the second jaguar shark adventure (unlike *Adaptation*, *Life Aquatic* is not perfectly recursive; there are several 'impossible' shots that could never have been caught by Team Zissou's camera). The jaguar shark as the Real, therefore, takes precedence over Ned's sudden appearance in Steve's life; Anderson's film is about more than just the development of this father and son relationship, but is Steve's? A closer look shows that the diegesis of each film is structured differently.

In both films, the pirate fiasco disrupts the search for the jaguar shark and resigns Steve to retire and head home. Steve even questions the shark's existence: 'Ned, I don't know if I ever even saw the bastard.' It is Ned who convinces him that the proverbial show must go on (the film's second collective 'Ho!' signals the adventure restarting). This second adventure is almost immediately interrupted by Ned's abrupt death. Formally speaking, Ned's death signifies the climax or the crisis, and the falling action of Ned's funeral that follows suggests a tragic dénouement, but this is only the case for Steve's film. In *The Jaguar Shark (Part 2)* the encounter with the jaguar shark serves as the dénouement. As the descent begins, Steve inserts an audio tape that begins with a voice saying, "'Ned's Theme": Take One,' followed by a Casio keyboard composition characteristic of the musical scores of Steve's films. After the encounter with the jaguar shark, Anderson cuts to a meta-shot of the screening of the final scenes in *The Jaguar Shark (Part 2)*. These scenes pay homage to Ned and affirm his status as Steve's son, thus framing Steve's latest documentary as the tragedy of a son regained only to be lost forever.

Anderson's *Life Aquatic* is framed differently. In *Life Aquatic*, Ned's death is one more *nouement*, or complication, in the adventure plot that climaxes in the encounter with the jaguar shark. From this perspective, we could claim that the Real operative in structuring *The Jaguar Shark (Part 2)* is not the jaguar shark at all, as it was in Part 1, but the helicopter crash that results in Ned's death. Steve and Ned's relationship is therefore only a subplot in Anderson's film; *it is the plot* of Steve's film. Our previous analysis of Steve and Ned's relationship is only complete within the diegetic space of Steve's film.

This reading begs the question: what reality does the Real of the jaguar shark structure? Herein lies my oscillating opinion about the political import of *Life Aquatic*. The status of the jaguar shark signifies a fundamental political ambivalence in Anderson's film. The jaguar shark is not explicitly equivalent to the shark from *Jaws* or the creature from *Alien* that Jameson and Žižek have poignantly analyzed as charged with political

significance.²³ Like these other instantiations of the Real, the jaguar shark can be interpreted in multiple ways. This previously undiscovered species can represent the Real of the natural world always beyond the grasp of science; or, equally unsatisfactory, an existential Real reminding us of the tenuousness of all symbolic orders. I am also unsatisfied with the jaguar shark as *Life Aquatic's* white whale, the film's version of the inexplicable *X* everyone is searching for to give meaning to his or her individual life (the metaphor for metaphor itself). Although the latter interpretation, alluded to by Anderson in the DVD extras, points in the direction of psychoanalysis – the jaguar shark as symbolic of *objet petit a* – it destines the film to an apolitical humanism.

If we consider our previous psychoanalytic reading of the artificial underwater universe as symbolic of Team Zissou's fantasy, then the jaguar shark is the Real that structures their collective desire. I hesitate to fully endorse this reading for the simple reason that the film never offers a different structure of desire based in this surreal world. In other words, the world of Porcupine and Hummingbird fishes remains as artificial in the end of the film as it does in the beginning; it is actually most pronounced in the film's climatic deep-sea dive to encounter the infamous jaguar shark. One would expect an alteration to this fantasy world in the film's resolution to symbolise the restructuring of Team Zissou's desire. What this world would look like is beyond me. If it shifted to real footage from Cousteau's documentaries, Anderson would fall victim to the same problems plaguing naïve realism. Such a move would also posit psychoanalysis as a normative praxis, one that attempts to bring aberrant analysands back into the fold of what the rest of us 'normal' people experience as reality – a politically conservative form of psychoanalysis, to say the least.

What if, somewhat ironically, Steve's individual psychoanalytic development provides the film with its most poignant sociopolitical significance?²⁴ Beyond Steve's ego-splitting acceptance of Ned, what if the encounter with the jaguar shark signals the climatic moment where Steve traverses his fantasy, passes through the 'night of the world,' and descends into the realm of subjective destitution?²⁵ As a creature the jaguar shark is only distinguished from how the others look by its size, but it is transformed into a symbol of the Real by the extra-diegetic and quasi-transcendental accompaniment music of Sigur

²³ See Jameson (2000) "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture." *The Jameson Reader*, 139-143; Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies*, 199 and *The Parallax View*, 118.

²⁴ Todd McGowan (2004) constructs a similar argument about the politics of an individual's act with regard to the film *Dark City*.

²⁵ See Žižek 2000, 29-30, 33-5; and Part III, "From Subjection to Subjective Destitution", 245-399.

Rós. Faced with this sublimity, Steve breaks down crying for the first time in the film. The film never stoops to the level of sentimentality by including Steve crying with or over Ned. Steve only cries after saying, in reference to the shark, 'I wonder if it remembers me.' Steve's absurd curiosity derives from him coming face-to-face, not just with his existential mortality but with what Lacan calls his 'second death.' Throughout the film, we learn that what sustains Steve's desire, the fantasy that provides his reality with consistency, is his public image as a nature documentarian. That is to say, he identifies himself with his symbolic identity; there is no Steve beyond Capt. Steve Zissou, star of the *Belafonte's* adventures and hero to kids the world over. If this image of himself disintegrates, Steve essentially vanishes with it. 'Second death' is the name for one's symbolic death, and this death can occur either before or after one's Real, biological death. When Steve says, 'I wonder if he remembers me,' the obvious reply is 'no,' and when this unvoiced reply hits Steve he breaks down crying, thus signifying that Steve recognises the inevitability of his second death – that one day, dead or alive, he will be completely forgotten.

The dénouement of *Life Aquatic* supports this reading. Instead of narcissistically viewing his new film and fielding questions from his public audience, Steve sits outside of the theater, film festival trophy at his side. He smokes in a pose of reflection until Klaus's young nephew, Werner, sits next to him. This meeting allows Steve to repeat a missed encounter with Ned: he personally delivers Ned's old Team Zissou member ring to Werner as opposed to the typical business procedure of mailing it with an accompanying boilerplate letter. When the crowd comes out of the theater, Steve picks up Werner instead of the trophy and dignifiedly descends the stairs. The adventure begins yet a third time when Werner and Steve say 'Ho!' and the 'curtain call' scene reunites the crew on board the *Belafonte*. The effect of this affirmative dénouement, contrary to the one in Steve's film, is thoroughly comedic. Not only are things set straight in this 'all's well that ends well' conclusion, but, more importantly, Steve's symbolic 'mask,' his untouchable status as Capt. Zissou has been revealed to be his true human weakness. In this reading, Steve's traversing the fantasy equals his deliverance from the hubris of identifying with this symbolic position of the Master. The satisfaction of this reading lies in how it juxtaposes Steve to *Adaptation's* Charlie. Whereas Charlie becomes subjectivised – sham ironic resistance included – when he identifies with his role in Hollywood, Steve comes to welcome the disintegration of his symbolic status. The encounter with the jaguar shark, the sublime object of the Real, desublimates the ideological objects that once defined

Steve's reality – his stature, the press, publicity, fame, awards, club memberships, and the like. As Mike D'Angelo states: 'Beneath its whimsical surface, *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou* quietly contemplates the sobering possibility of *The Life Aquatic* without Steve Zissou' (2005, 22).

This reading, however psychoanalytically cogent, ultimately leaves something to be desired. Is one man who nixes the fantasy structure of his desire satisfactorily subversive? Are Zissou's actions at the end of the film significantly political? Doesn't the inclusion of Werner upstage the effacement of self signified by the empty theater seat and abandoned trophy? In sum, does not comedy trump ideological resistance? I would go a step further to claim that any ideological resistance is problematised by the nostalgic representation of the institution Steve supposedly renounces. Steve does not 'flip the bird' at the ISA of Hollywood. His ideological apparatus is not Hollywood at all, but an anachronistic one-man production company bolstered by an opera-housed European film festival that smacks of Old World high society.

Combined with the dated effect produced by the instruments and film stock used in Steve's films, these attributes are classic symptoms of what Jameson calls the nostalgia for the present. Nostalgia films, as Jameson refers to them

blur [their] official contemporaneity and make it possible for the viewer to receive the narrative as though it were in some eternal thirties [or in the present case seventies], beyond real historical time. (1991, 21)

For Jameson, these films promote a loss of historicity as they fashionably cite the era as a commodity to be consumed. I do not think *Life Aquatic* is a nostalgia film, *per se*, but it does nostalgically displace the political efficacy of Steve's actions. *Life Aquatic* fails to historicise the real culprit of Steve's ideological fantasy: the branding apparatus of the contemporary corporation. Instead it offers an imaginary solution to a real social contradiction; it harkens back a few decades ago when small, independent, transnational productions could supposedly be made largely free from the corrupt machinations of multinational capitalism. This 'backward glance' is extremely ironic when we consider that Anderson's film was produced with a budget of over twenty-five million dollars by Touchstone Pictures, a film division of one of the world's largest media conglomerates, The Walt Disney Company. There might be something relatively 'indie' about Steve's films, but considering this corporate backing, there is nothing independent in Anderson's.

This brute material fact, however, does not preclude the possibility of reading the film against the grain to discover implicit political implications. We require a counter-reading to the more explicit interpretations of an aesthetic object because the social totality of today's globalised world of capitalism is 'increasingly irreconcilable with the possibilities of aesthetic expression or articulation available to us' (Jameson 2000, 305). In his 'Class and Allegory in Contemporary Mass Culture: *Dog Day Afternoon* as a Political Film,' Jameson resuscitates allegory on the premise that, in order to become figurable, classes have to become characters. *Life Aquatic* lends itself to this kind of class-based allegorical reading, although we must be careful not to mistake Team Zissou for a group of under-class anti-capitalists. Team Zissou is best understood in contrast to the high-tech, grant hogging Operation Hennessy. Although Hennessy, like Steve, supports the kind of theoretical science that might wonder if there is life on Mars, he runs his techno-scientific operation instrumentally and with an authoritarian flair. He is also a cut-throat capitalist. When Steve informs Hennessy that his boat is totaled, Hennessy says: 'Perhaps, but we're extremely well insured. I'll probably come out ahead in the end. Although we'll obviously have to crew up from scratch next time.' Hennessy's response comes awfully close to reducing his murdered crew to lost capital. By contrast, when Steve endangers his crew by plotting their course through unprotected waters, he comes to their rescue (although he does ask if the cameras are still rolling).

The point of my comparison is to show that Operation Hennessy stands for the corporate model of late capitalism while Team Zissou represents a form of capitalism at once residual and utopian. Steve's financial woes – addressed three times in the first fifteen minutes – signal changes in the industry that threaten to sink his business. The outdated Zissou brand – replete with a companion series of books, a line of Adidas shoes, red caps, Speedos, action figures, pinball machines, etc. – combined with the fact that Team Zissou has not produced a hit documentary in nine years, implies that the market for everything Zissou exists in a bygone era. As Klaus nostalgically reminisces while watching an earlier Zissou film, 'That's the way it used to be.'

Steve's mid-life crisis should be read against this economic background. The wreckage of Steve's personal life surfaces as the underbelly of his finances is exposed. The money to make Steve's films comes from odd sources and is funneled through possibly illegal channels. We are introduced to Drakoulis, for instance, as he attempts to draw funding for Steve's next film from Larry Amin, chairman of Saudifilm. We later discover that

Drakoulis must go into exile because his passport status has turned him into a legal fugitive. Although his passport status is never explained, we assume it has something to do with his economic ties to the coffers of kings in the Middle East. The fact that Steve relies on his wife's rich parents for money also evokes an aristocratic element in Team Zissou's assets. Nor should we forget that a significant part of the funding for the second jaguar shark film comes from Ned's inheritance via Katherine Plimpton's death. Steve essentially accepts money from his dead ex-lover whom he once abandoned with child. Finally, he is not above seizing resources to supplement these shoddy investments, as we discover in the scene where Team Zissou guts Operation Hennessy's Underwater Sea Laboratory.²⁶

We should avoid reducing Steve's credit record to one more contributing factor of his existential crisis. Rather, through the concept of allegory, Jameson's undervalued 'instrument of analysis and notion of structure,' (2006, 366) we can cognitively map Steve's financial resume/rap sheet in relation to the social totality. In this reading, Team Zissou's desperate actions represent last ditch efforts to sustain an outmoded economic way of life amongst the increasing incorporation of the world's economy. In addition to wrestling with his ramshackle personal life, Steve struggles to maintain the utopia of Team Zissou's moving island, a utopia dependent on a passé onshore economy.

Team Zissou's utopia is represented by the architecture of the *Belafonte* and its 'we are the world, we are the children' crew. How we are first introduced to the *Belafonte* indicates its status as a construction of fantasy, as an instantiation of the desire called utopia. The scene begins with a shot of Steve's upper torso, his hands holding a small model of the *Belafonte*.²⁷ Behind Steve a semi-transparent screen sports a painting of the ship. Steve walks off as stage lights turn on and the curtain unveils the actual ship in cross-section. Steve's voice-over narration then proceeds to accompany the camera as it moves from room to room. This virtual tour not only cites the theatrical Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* (alienation effect) to foreground the material reality of the film – by exposing the objects of the film as props, the setting as staged, etc. – but more

²⁶ This scene also contributes to our allegorical reading of Operation Hennessy. Steve half-jokingly says, 'It's a scientific community, man,' to justify trespassing on the facility to 'borrow' its high-tech gear. When Team Zissou breaks in, an alarm sounds: 'This is Captain Hennessy. You have trespassed on a private facility. The coast guard is being alerted via satellite....' Steve's motives veer far from playing the Robin Hood of the international scientific community, and the overall effect of this scene is comedic. Still, Hennessy's State-protected private property provides a nice dialectical image of how science as a universal knowledge is constrained by political forces.

²⁷ An alternate movie poster also captures *Life Aquatic* as an adventure comedy into Steve's world. See <<http://www.empiremovies.com/posters.php?id=1247&thelifeaquaticwithstevezissou.htm>>.

importantly, it serves as a portrait of the fantasy world that really exists for Steve and Team Zissou, the fantasy world which he invites Ned (and us) to join. The movement of this scene from the model of the ship and Steve's head into the unveiled and 'cut-open' *Belafonte* is intended to capture the 'objectively subjective' status of fantasy.

Team Zissou's particular, libidinal investment in this utopian fantasy is universalised by the fact that the ship is a global object: the revamped WWII long-range sub hunter purchased from the US Navy contains a sauna engineered by the Chinese space program and staffed by a Swedish masseuse (I believe Anderson scratched the idea of including a chef because it would have tipped the scales of the *Belafonte* lifestyle from bohemian to bourgeois). Pelé's Portuguese renditions of Davie Bowie songs provides the ship with a global soundtrack. A utopian impulse also exists in how the *Belafonte* collapses the disciplinary divide between the arts and sciences with rooms devoted to laboratory experimentation, research, and the various art forms of filmmaking. The 'pack of strays' who do science and create art on board includes former bus drivers and ex-substitute high school teachers who hail from places around the globe. The beanie caps they wear signify the crew's unified diversity; each cap is red but individualised to suit its particular member. Finally, Team Zissou does not discriminate based on race, class, creed, nationality, age, or ethnicity, although their utopian community has yet to resolve the predicaments of sexual antagonism.²⁸

²⁸ The only woman on the crew besides Eleanor is the topless script girl, Anne-Marie Sakowitz, who Steve constantly refers to as 'honey.' I find the fact that she is topless a form of desexualisation; Anne-Marie's consistently exposed breasts no longer threaten to divide the all male crew. Instead, she becomes 'one of the guys.' Anne-Marie is not defeminised, however. She significantly resists Steve's charted course through unprotected waters. When her predictions are proved correct, she leads the mutiny and eventually, along with the uninjured, unpaid interns, takes leave of the *Belafonte*. A DVD extra anticipates the possible feminist critique of the film. In a mock interview on the fictional Mondo Monda Italian television show, the host (played by NYU professor, Antonio Monda, who also stars as the movie's film festival director) asks Anderson and Baumbach, 'Don't you feel that the film is extremely antifeminist and somehow misogynist?' Baumbach says, 'I think your question is misogynist.' Monda: 'My question is misogynist? Why do you think my question is misogynist?' Baumbaugh: 'Cause it's antifeminist.' The tautological structure of this staged exchange brings to mind the dialectic between harassment and identity politics: once we find ourselves caught in this game of tolerance we foreclose the realm of real politics. Yet there is something to be said about D'Angelo's claim that 'the women in Anderson's movies are recognizably adults, but they're always viewed from a distance; rarely are we encouraged to identify with them' (2005, 22). I would counter a feminist critique of *Life Aquatic* on four fronts: 1) The meta-structure of the film allows its protagonist, Steve, to be misogynist without committing the film to the same position. 2) The character of Jane, who could perhaps be made more central in the film, is equally important to the film as Ned. 3) The intelligence of the female characters, especially Eleanor's, far exceeds their male counterparts, who tend to tarry with the imaginary too long for their own good. 4) Finally, in contradistinction to *Adaptation*, *Life Aquatic* remains faithful to Lacan's dictum that there is no sexual relationship, which is to say there exists a fundamental sexual antagonism in human society. I do not think that making

An exclusionary element defines the limitations of Zissou's universality, however. Compounded by Steve's increasing desperation, the contradictions of Team Zissou's utopia catch up with them in the film's second 'return of the repressed' – the pirate attack (the first being Ned's arrival). The timing in the attack scene shifts from the saturated warm colors of the rest of the film to a cool blue to formally signal this irruption of the Real. The Filipino pirates who attack the ship (originally written as Indonesian), serve as a constitutionally exclusionary element of Team Zissou's utopia. (Ironically, the only person who can speak their language is someone from the economic sector, the bond company stooge, a mandated addition to the crew to ensure their fiscal and legal responsibility.) We discover that the attack is premeditated in a quick flashback that depicts thirteen Filipino restaurant workers crowded around a portable TV. They watch a subtitled clip from a Zissou film that documents Steve's vault full of international currencies. Incidentally, this is the same amount of people crammed into the *Deep Search* submarine who watch the jaguar shark through its small, front viewing window. Although this parallel may have been coincidental, it nicely embodies the global antagonism between the 'symbolic' class of Team Zissou – the class affluent enough to consume and create media for a living; cultural capitalists, if you will – and an international proletarian class. Perhaps the most utopian aspect of the film lies in the fact that Team Zissou is utopian enough to welcome Hennessy on board despite his will to fiscally destroy them, but the threat of South Asian pirates – hijackers, as Ned, a Kentucky Air pilot, notably refers to them – is a terrorist one that must be repelled.

In centralising the pirates as the Real, the most political scene involves a shot of a makeshift graveyard for Hennessy's sailors, all of whom have been executed. Klaus says, 'Jesus. These pirates are monsters,' to which Steve replies, 'Well, yeah, but remember I shot one of their guys in the neck last week and killed him, so I think we're okay too.' Steve's response identifies Team Zissou with *both* Hennessy *and* the pirates. The ambiguous status of the pronoun 'we' can either mean that Team Zissou is not fundamentally different than the hyper-capitalist Operation Hennessy (the only difference being one of scale), a Marxist point; or, the more Hegelian point, that in a world of global capitalism, a 'reflexive determination' or 'speculative identity of opposites' dialectically unifies the violence of

this claim, however, forecloses the possibility of a 'radically feminist' utopian symbolic order. Team Zissou's utopia is not radically feminist, so it poses the problem of this possible society rather than solving it.

the system with the violence of those outside or on the fringe of the system. As Žižek writes:

The fact that global capitalism is a totality means that it is the dialectical unity of itself and of its other – of the forces which resist it on ‘fundamentalist’ ideological grounds. (2002a, 244)

The pirates in *Life Aquatic* do not serve as a commentary on the contemporary ‘War on Terror’ since their crime is motivated purely by money. Yet Steve’s acknowledgement that the pirates are as ‘okay’ as Team Zissou suggests not simply an advocacy of eye-for-eye ethics, but the film’s cognisance of a dialectical totality where pirates are capitalists and capitalists are pirates.

We open up the diegetic space of the film to the universal world of globalization when we posit the pirate attack as the film’s central irruption of the Real, which returns from spaces like unprotected international waters and former post-colonial islands whose monsoon-destroyed four star hotels serve as pirate hideouts. Although occupying an imagined geography within the world of the film, through our allegorising utopia *and* its discontents, we can fill-in the really existing places. It is only when read in this against-the-grain manner that *Life Aquatic* eclipses the horizon of its psychoanalytic ethics to achieve a properly collective political significance.

To Conclude: La Bella Confusione

Both *Adaptation* and *Life Aquatic* reference Federico Fellini’s *8 ½* (1963), and in many respects retell its story.²⁹ But where *Adaptation* mimes the self-referential form of *8 ½*, *Life Aquatic* does not shy away from its content – the psychic traumas of its protagonist filmmaker and the social contradictions of filmmaking. I wish to conclude with four quotes from *8 ½*, each corresponding to a section of my argument, which summarise my position on how, for the most part, critics were confused in their evaluation of these two films. The first two quotes come from *8 ½*’s embedded critic, Daumier. In the first, he chastises Guido: ‘Such a monstrous presumption to think that others could benefit from the squalid catalogue of your mistakes.’ Kaufman’s successful attempt to make a film completely about

²⁹ In *Adaptation*, Donald returns from a screenwriter’s conference to inform Charlie that ‘...there hasn’t been a new genre since Fellini invented the mockumentary!’ In the DVD commentary to *Life Aquatic*, Anderson’s co-writer, Noah Baumbach, mentions the surreal universe of *8 ½* as an influence for the opening festival scene.

failure involves this kind of monstrous presumption. As if to compensate for the shortcomings of its postmodern self-referentiality, *Adaptation* smoothes over the contradictions of capitalism with a closed and homogenous monist ontology. In the same scene from *8 ½*, Daumier says: 'This life is so full of confusion already, that there's no need to add chaos to chaos.' The postmodern romance with the chaotic infinite differentiability of the One not only obscures our ability to logically work through these said contradictions, but it serves as an ideology that naturalises capitalism as an ontology in its own right.

On the other hand, the dialectical ontology of *Life Aquatic* provides us with a perspective to sift through this manmade madness. Luisa, Guido's wife in *8 ½*, complains:

He drives me crazy. He pretends he is telling the truth. He acts honest. As if he's the one who's right... It's not right living this way, not letting others know what's true and what's false.

Luisa refers to Guido, but she could just as easily be criticizing Steve's own fictionalisation of reality and proliferation of epistemological confusion. Yet since we are not meant to mistake Anderson for Steve, *Life Aquatic* remains aligned with the ethics of psychoanalysis and not the aesthetics of postmodernism. Focusing on the ethics of the Real of psychic trauma, however, leaves an explicitly political horizon lacking in Anderson's fourth film. For those familiar with Anderson's work, it is perhaps surprising that upon closer inspection of *Life Aquatic*, we discover a meditation on film's precarious status in a world of globalisation. Conversing with Guido, a cleric in *8 ½* portends, 'Yours is a great responsibility. You can either corrupt or educate thousands of souls.' A great responsibility burdens those who make films in Hollywood, 'the nerve centre of the American ideology which exerts a worldwide hegemonic role' (Žižek 2002a, 240). Although we may have to read it against the grain to elucidate its political contribution, *Life Aquatic* contains a pedagogical impulse while *Adaptation* ingeniously (although perhaps unwittingly) reproduces the coordinates of today's corrupt ideologico-political constellation.

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