
FILM-PHILOSOPHY

Introduction: One More Effort ...

Benjamin Noys

The University of Chichester

In the introduction to his edited collection *Lacan: The Silent Partners* (2006) Slavoj Žižek concludes that:

The ultimate aim of the volume is therefore not, as one usually puts it, to enable readers to approach Lacan in a new way but, rather, to instigate a new wave of Lacanian paranoia: to push readers to engage in work of their own, and to start to discern Lacanian themes everywhere – from politics to trash culture, from obscure ancient philosophers to Franz Kafka. (2006, 3)

We could regard this as simply a throwaway 'blurb' or 'tag-line' (it is reproduced as such on the book's back cover). Whatever the status of this comment it raises some key questions regarding the nature of Lacanian psychoanalysis. When Žižek suggests the creation of a 'new wave of Lacanian paranoia' do we read this as it is presumably intended – as an appeal to paranoia as method, the rigour of reason at its maddest, such as we find in Dali's 'paranoiac-critical method'? Or, do we see it as suggesting the 'madness' of Lacanian psychoanalysis itself, which passes from self-induced psychosis to psychosis itself? Also, what is this discernment that will lead us to see 'Lacanian themes everywhere'? Is this the sign that such themes actually exist in the world or only as the sign of the critic's own skill at reading? In an ironic turn of the bitter bit can we accuse the analyst of projection? In the context of this issue we might well ask is it that the true nature of a film, or film itself, is accounted for by Lacanian theory, or does that theory 'master' film at the expense of the object?

First, we could say that Žižek implicitly reverses Popper's well known accusation against psychoanalysis: what psychoanalysis sees as its theoretical strength, its ability to account for everything or anything through its model, is actually a sign of theoretical weakness. Psychoanalysis can never be disproven and its theoretical mastery is bought at

the cost of scientific vacuity. I don't want to rehearse here the debates concerning Popper's thesis, both within the field of psychoanalysis and in the field of philosophy of science, but I do want to consider Bruno Latour's point that 'Popper invented his whole machinery for no other purpose than to be able to remove Marxism and psychoanalysis from the list of *bona fide* sciences and thus fight the enemies of the Open Society' (2004, 221). Like all epistemologies Popper's is political in the sense of its division between science and politics. That line is drawn specifically to exclude psychoanalysis which is linked to the threat of a 'totalising' explanation that threatens the 'openness' of the open society. What Žižek's proposes is that very 'totalising' extension as the merit of Lacanian psychoanalysis, although as an extension that leaves its political and epistemological status as unclear, except by implication or if we pursue it through Žižek's other work.

Secondly, I want to suggest something problematic that runs within this set-up and the questions it leads to. We are left with what appears as a clear opposition: either Lacanian psychoanalysis is true concerning the object, confirmed or justified in the 'world', or it is only the work of the skill of the analyst who sets out to find his or her confirmations everywhere. Vinciane Despret (2004) proposes, in the context of the study of emotion, that we find such distinctions and the resultant dilemmas as the result of a vision of emotion that imposes a distinction between inside and outside, with emotions to be found on the inside. As a result we constantly turn around questions of whether our emotions colour our perception of the world or are the result of the impact of the world on us? She regards this problem as one posed from within a vision that refuses or occludes any other *versions* of our experience. In one way her book is dedicated to finding these different versions, through ethnopsychology and the work of William James, and by a bravura series of readings of how this dominant vision has been constructed in philosophy and in the laboratory. This 'vision' constitutes emotion as the domain of authenticity, the truth of the subject, and to be located within the body. At the same time the passions are to be mastered in that body through a practice that operates as a politics, with the emotions playing the part of the unruly mob against the wise leader of reason – usually located symbolically in the 'head'. For her psychoanalysis is heir to this vision in its construction of a 'core self', of a baby that must form its own autonomy. She states that: '[t]he intensification of the notion of representation, the support and internal mediator of the connection with the exterior, seems to flow from the same kind of thinking' (2004,

146). Psychoanalysis turns on the question of boundaries and their blurring or failure, in which the normative model is the development of such boundaries.

The refusal to cultivate other versions of emotion that do not follow this vision leaves psychoanalysis fixated on the problems of representation as mediator, and of the problem of connection or lack thereof between the subject and the exterior. The result is the 'intensification of the notion of representation', and so it is not surprising that film plays such a key role for psychoanalytic critics. To use the metaphors exposed by Bruno Latour (2005) the result is a bifurcation between subject and object, society and nature: a river across which we then repeatedly throw bridges. In the case of psychoanalysis we could suggest it has been particularly successful in developing remarkably sophisticated 'bridging' techniques at the expense of leaving this division fundamentally intact. Of course it would be possible to show that this is a rather limited version of psychoanalysis and that other versions are possible, not least in the Lacanian attention both to language, as what troubles this distinction between subject and object, and in his later work to topology, which pays attention to those figures such as the Klein bottle or the moebius strip that problematise the inside/outside distinction. It is also true, before we regard this as a problem confined to psychoanalysis, that Despret identifies this as a general vision to be found as much in the cognitive psychology that has often been promoted as the scientific alternative to Lacanian psychoanalysis, not least in film studies. I do wish to raise this as a problem, and as a problem that finds itself at home in the field of film. This is because that field insistently raises the problem of mediating representations, of what is inside and outside, and as a problem of the cultivation of emotions. To alter the terms of one of Despret's examples: do we go to see a comedy and then find it funny because we are already in a happy mood or do we go to cultivate such a mood? What she suggests is that we can summon an experience of emotion (2004, 55), and, although she does not mention this, film is one of those sites of summoning. Perhaps another way to read Žižek's 'incitement' then would be as the summoning of us as *Lacanians*, being called to cultivate this 'Lacanian paranoia' as a way of taking Lacanian psychoanalysis 'inside'.

That is another way in which to see this issue: as the summoning of Lacan and film again (*encore*). Not simply as a strategy opposed to some truth but as a strategy pursued to cultivate these questions and these emotions. For Lacan himself, we should recall, truth can only ever be 'half-said' (*mi-dit*). Here that 'half-saying' takes place through film and, more particularly, in the impasse of saying. The impasse, for Lacan, takes the designation of

the 'Real'; not as simply the hard 'rock', or the inert 'kernel', but as the impasse of signification and representation in terms of its excess and lack. Then the problem becomes how to cultivate a pass through this impasse, to half-say the truth, rather than to remain in some mute fascination with the 'Real' as the impossible. That problem is at one, I would say, with politics, which is also a way of saying, of cultivating speech, as well as another 'impossible profession'. This involves not leaving the Real as the inert block to signification but taking it as the site of possible *transformation*. In the terms of Alain Badiou, and in the terms of the articles in this issue, the Real is what signals a potential 'evental-site': the edge of the void through which we can recast the terms of the situation in which we currently exist (Badiou 2005). This involves, as Badiou makes clear, not simply the heroics of some touching on the Real but the more or less patient work of fidelity to the impasse signalled by the Real. That fidelity is the work of 'half-saying', which is not simply the event of a perpetual failure in relation to the Real but the work or labour of transformation through aiming at the Real (without hoping to reach 'it').

It is through this aiming, I would suggest, that another version of (Lacanian) psychoanalysis is possible. Such a 'version' does not presume an endless 'bridging' of representation, but instead aligns itself within Lacan's topological elaborations that traverse and problematise the very difference between inside and outside. What are offered here are elements of this version offered through engagement with the Lacanian text and film. The articles that follow, in very different forms, attend to the Real as the site of possible political transformation precisely in regard to the way this is staged in film. They do not, for the reasons suggested above, attend to the Real as such, but always to its link to the Symbolic. Unlike the Lacanian film analysis of the 1970s, although sharing something of its political intent, this work does not simply delimit film as the site of the Imaginary articulation of ideology. Instead film is also the place where the 'link' between Symbolic and Real is articulated. This partially explains the attention to contemporary film, a felicitous coincidence and not the result of editorial insistence. Ranging from the 'art' film to so-called 'popular' cinema these analyses interrogate contemporary film as a site for political thought. This interrogation concerns the existence of, and critique of, contemporary ideological forms. The capillary insinuation of ideology, including into supposedly 'radical' political and aesthetic forms, demands a new attention to the Real as the site of 'resistance' and the possibility of new emancipatory Symbolic articulations. Outright condemnation of film as Imaginary, with a few avant-garde exceptions, is not

adequate; although neither is a symmetrical celebration of the popular as the place of resistance. Instead it is a matter of 'testing' particular ideological forms, as well as offering new emancipatory articulations.

This attention to not only the possibility of ideological analysis but also a thinking of egalitarian transformation also explains the implicit or explicit influence of the work of Alain Badiou on these articles. Only one of many merits of Badiou's work has been how it has permitted or encouraged the process of re-articulating Lacan with emancipatory politics. Despite Lacan's well-known scepticism concerning revolutionary politics, discussed in the article by Benjamin Noys, these essays owe something of the vigour with which they articulate Lacan and politics to Badiou's insistence that Lacan offers elements to the thinking of an engaged political subjectivity, such as that traced in Todd McGowan's essay. All the essays take film seriously as a place in which change can be thought, while also engaging with the aesthetic and political choices of the films and filmmakers they analyse, as well as the constraints of contemporary image production – what Mark Fisher calls 'cyber-capital' in his contribution.

One of the procedures that these articles cultivate is not only the passage through film but also putting Lacan and Lacanian psychoanalysis in relation to other theoretical and philosophical discourses – including Bataille, Heidegger, Bataille, and (of course) Badiou. I take this as an indication of a more confident *use* of Lacan, in which Lacanian psychoanalysis is a field subject to modification. It is all too often forgotten that Lacan displays of mastery should not be taken at face value; instead they incarnate the performative subversion of the 'Master'. In what follows Lacanian psychoanalysis is not treated as a master discourse but as a discourse that itself is engaged with its own processes of transformation. As Dany Nobus suggests we might pursue this as a relation of provocation (a mutual sense of disturbance between psychoanalysis and film) rather than illustration (in which film simply illustrates (Lacanian) psychoanalysis). Therefore to say 'Lacan and film again' is not simply to produce another set of applications of Lacan to film but to repeat of the engagement between Lacan and film as mutual provocation.

In Lorenzo Chiesa's article the political question of the gift is posed in relation to the enigmatic and excessive final sequence of Lars Von Trier's *Dogville* (2003). Chiesa provides a dense articulation of this 'gift of Grace' via a sustained encounter between Lacan's thinking and that of Mauss and Bataille. He draws out a Lacanian ethics of 'controlled destruction' that intervenes against the 'perverse will to accumulate' visible in

the town of Dogville. The 'excess' of Grace's revenge is linked to the difficult question of political violence, with Chiesa at once suggesting the necessity of her gesture and its limits. In a parallel investigation Dany Nobus also treats this question of the 'gift' of violence and the implication of Treir's film, which suggests the 'rotteness' of all regulated and 'stable' social exchange. Does this leave us in a perpetual cycle of envy, hatred, and inequality? Grace, he argues, embodies the provocation of the 'impossible-gift' – a provocation as much to psychoanalysis as it is to us in thinking a new practice of social exchange.

Benjamin Noys probes 'nature' as both the site of the Real and of politics as it is presented in the filmmaking practice of Werner Herzog, and especially in his recent 'documentary' *Grizzly Man* (2005). Tracing a convergence between this practice and the theoretical work of Lacan in the conception of nature as 'rotten', 'corrupted', and 'not-all', Noys argues that Herzog's film poses us the question of a politics of nature when nature constitutively 'unnatural'. Todd McGowan turns to the Real in terms of the possibility of thinking time, and of refusing the ideological conception of time that bars political seizure and engagement. Taking Fernando Meirelles's *The Constant Gardener* (2005) McGowan convincingly reconstructs how the film stages political engagement in contact with the 'enigma' of feminine enjoyment. The film provides a model for the possibility of ideological dis-engagement from the usual temporality of a succession of 'nows' and into the temporality of the Real that lifts the subject out of a concern with mere survival. Finally, Mark Fisher analyses the much mocked *Basic Instinct 2* (2006) not simply as a work of stunning incoherence, but, in this very incoherence, as the model of late-capitalist ideological fantasy. As Fisher delineates in the fantasy space 'reality' is desubstantialised into Baudrillardian 'hyper-reality' – the Real reduced to an infinitely malleable material to be arranged at will. This reading offers a salutary suggestion about the limits of both contemporary emancipatory politics and the political reading of film.

In the articles that follow I have taken an editorial decision not to standardise the capitalisation, or not, of the Lacanian concepts of 'Real, Symbolic, and Imaginary'. Finally I would particularly like to thank Sarah Cooper for her editorial work on this issue, which was a model of stringency, precision, and thoughtfulness.

Bibliography

Badiou, Alain (2005) *Being and Event*. Trans. Oliver Feltham. London and New York: Continuum.

Despret, Vinciane (2004) *Our Emotional Makeup: Ethnopsychology and Selfhood*. Trans. Marjolijn De Jager. New York: Other Press.

Latour, Bruno (2004) 'How to Talk About the Body? The Normative Dimension of Science Studies', *Body & Society* 10 (2 – 3): 205-229.

Latour, Bruno (2005) 'What is the Style of Matters of Concern? Two Lectures in Empirical Philosophy'. <http://www.bruno-latour.fr/articles/article/97-STYLE-MATTERS-CONCERN.pdf>.

Žižek, Slavoj (ed.) (2006) *Lacan: The Silent Partners*. London and New York: Verso.