

Reading Awry

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An invitation to respond to a short text from Slavoj Žižek's forthcoming book, presented a quandary. How to go about such a thing? One of the most prolific and influential thinkers of our time, Žižek has produced scores of thick, densely argued books filled with philosophical reflections on ages-old controversies that became entangled with analyses of political events, evolving social trends, and cinemas old and new. The sheer volume of his output, added to his beguiling grasshopper approach — leaping from one point to another, one level of discourse to another, thinking rapidly on his feet — had together shielded him, it suddenly occurred to me, from good old-fashioned close readings of the sort I imagined would be most appropriate for the task. A moment's pause incited a different idea: perhaps it would be more appropriate to say that Žižek's work exposes such readings as old-fashioned. It was with this in mind that I decided to assume my now self-assigned task.

The practice of close reading, in which many of us were first schooled and then adopted as the gold standard for reading as such, seemed radical at the time it came onto the stage in large part because it positioned itself as a principled rejection of psychological readings of literary texts. It cautioned us to mind the difference between the empirical author — who was no more an authority on the question of the meaning of what she wrote than any other reader — and the "implied" narrator of the text. The task of the reader was to permit this implied narrator, this nobody who was nowhere locatable other than in the general, over-all workings of the text, to speak for itself. One of the founders of the close reading doctrine, Cleanth Brooks, summarized the elemental belief propping up the whole enterprise in one pithy phrase: "the poem says what the poem says." (Brooks 1947) If this pronouncement makes the practice of reading seem as if it were taking place in an echo chamber or hall of mirrors, or, better — as Francis Ferguson perceptively characterized it — as if functioned as a "literary hailing," it is because it does (Ferguson 2015). For, it was generally assumed that close readings would result, at the end of the day, in a consensus among most of readers. The distinguishing trait of close readers resided in their willingness to surrender all personal traits in order to attain the status of an anybody. According to this unexamined logic, readers were less interpreters of the text, than interpellated — or, as Ferguson suggests, "branded" —

by the process in which they participated. This is not to say that the close reader was “branded with an identity,” but that she allowed herself to become “identified with a brand”¹. The aim of close reading was not merely the elimination of the psychological subject, as has become apparent, but the elimination of the subject tout court.

In a bid to disperse the pompous authority of his predecessors, who undoubtedly first taught him how to read, the American literary scholar, D. A. Miller, crafted his own blatantly eccentric reading strategy, which he called “too-close reading,” and applied it in analyses of the films of Alfred Hitchcock generally and to the film, *Rope* at length². The choice of Hitchcock is not arbitrary. Miller, an avid fan of the director, justifiably accords him the status of Shakespeare. This raises the first question: how can we account for the near unanimity regarding the elevated status of these two authors over decades – even centuries – and across disparate cultures? What resources are left to us, once the operation of interpellation deployed (if not by name) by the New Critics has finally been noted and discredited? While Miller delivers a brilliant reading of *Rope* — enviable, even, by close reading standards — he does not do so from a dispassionate distance. He inserts himself, instead, into the filmic space, rewinding the film, slowing it down, zooming into a close-up in an attempt to catch continuity errors, or determine whether the spot on a chair is a shadow or an accidental stain, wondering at another point if Hitchcock was addressing him personally by giving one of his characters his own surname, “Miller.” This is, obviously, the “too close” part of the strategy. But what is the point of it, beyond getting under the skin of the New Critics?

Rather than exclude the subject from the pleasurable task of reading, Miller wants to include her, although the subject he wishes to install is not the psychological subject his predecessors wanted to oust. That literature and film require readers for their existence, is an implicit point made by the film, *Rope*: two men want to commit a perfect murder, but once the deed is done, they realize that its perfection is not automatically assured, for it requires an audience capable of appreciating its perfection for it to be so. It is, however, not

¹I owe this distinction to (Schuster 2023, pp. 161–250).

²See especially (Miller 2021). See also (Miller 2010).

the case that anybody will do. The murderers, who regard themselves as artists, have no interest in revealing their crime to a general audience, to the gossipy nobodies whom they gather for a party while their victim lies in a caisson in the middle of the room, unseen by them. The murderers are intent on catching the attention of their professor, Rupert, but it is not clear that he is right for the job. He is a codifier of rules and backs away from any involvement with his students on whom he calls the police. What is needed is someone quirkier, someone like D.A. Miller, who does not back away but steps into the picture. He is less interested, however, in the murderous duo than in Hitchcock, the “master of suspense.” In order to pay homage to his mastery, Miller has to expose the points where it fails. What he detects are ellipses, stains, blurs, temporal disparities: errors of language, visual and linguistic. These errors are not dismissible as mere mistakes, evidence of the ineptitude of their author. They are bonuses, air bubbles within language that alert us to the fact that not all is able to be said. Masters of language do not try to force words to say merely what they say. They encourage their lack of mastery to reveal itself. To take an author at his word is to fall into the trap of “knowing too much.” This is why all the real masters of language are masters of suspense. They delay the closure of the field they open and in doing so, render it more capacious. It is for this reason that they are able to “hail” a wider, more diverse range of readers.

It is useful to note that the “too-close reading” technique Miller invents is inspired by his study of free-indirect discourse, a form of narration that emerged around the same time as psychoanalysis. Free-indirect discourse marks the point where the general or implied narrator surrenders her distance and intrudes into the narrative not as another, separate character, but as an excess attached to one of them. It would be appropriate to mention the unconscious at this point, for the extimate relation found in free-indirect speech is as close as the unconscious is to conscious thought. The point is not that the free-indirect narrator divulges what a character unconsciously thinks or feels. The point lies elsewhere, in the question of identification, specifically that form of it Freud referred to as “hysterical.” His example: girls in a boarding school – upon witnessing the breakdown of one of them, who has just received a letter from her boyfriend ending their relationship – all suddenly fall prey to rejected

girl's symptoms. Freud, convinced that the narcissistic rivalry among girls at this age renders their identification curious, avoids a lazy explanation of what happens. Rather than surrendering their own narcissistic identity in favor of another's, he reasons that the identification must not have been with any of the rejected girl's actual attributes, but with that point where her identity was placed into question, the point at which she was no longer identifiable.

Explicitly or implicitly, psychoanalysis and free-indirect discourse rebut the assumptions of the close reading doctrine, at least as it concerns "master" texts. If the latter have a wider appeal, if they hail or collect diverse readers, it is not by eliminating the empirical subject in order to generalize it, but by introducing the slit subject of the unconscious. The unconscious collects, not in the way Jung suggested, but as it did in the girls' boarding school. It is nothing to be shared. It is a hole in what surrounds it.

My point: close reading is imperative; this much remains true. But it must be performed at a slant. The text does not just say what it says; it also remains mute and this must not be neglected. I have belabored this point not simply to justify my approach to Žižek's very short, three-page, essay, "The Freeze of Eternity," but also because the justification enlightens something about the way Žižek himself reads – I think we can call him a "too-close" reader – and also because many of the points made above resonate with arguments in his essay. The essay – if it's long enough to count as such – concerns a monstrosity of an actual historical event: the holocaust, and very big ideas: Equality and Freedom. The essay's purpose: to critique the latter. The outsized nature of the event and the ideas clashes with the brevity of the critique. Whether or not this is a conscious strategy is not the right question. What matters is the effect it has. It causes the ideas to appear bloated, as if they were too full of themselves. And yet they are dismissed quickly, once air had been let out of them. A text this brief is not long enough to win over readers with longheld opposing views. Its intent is to disabuse readers of a few liberal ideas to which they might still cling or not yet realize they have. The essay opens with a brief discussion of *The Zone of Interest* ("The Zone of Interest" 2023), which Žižek describes as a film about not wanting to know something. The film centers on Rudolf Hoss, commandant of the Auschwitz concentration camp, who lives a quiet, pastoral

life with his family on the edge of the concentration camp, apparently oblivious to what is going on the other side of his garden wall. You get the point – or at least you think you do. While Žižek does not say so outright, this is a bit of a red herring in terms of the argument he will finally make.

Were we to try to correct the problem of the German family's blindness by making a film of what is actually going on outside the frame – that is, in the camps, we would be sorely disappointed. For, it too, would fail to open our eyes to the ultimate truth of the situation. And this is not simply because we might catch sight of desperate mothers stealing food from their own children. For, this, too, harbors a red herring.

In both films, the actual one and the one Žižek imagines on the basis of reports he has read about a concentration camp on the island of Rab, the error into which we fall is our spontaneous belief in equality. It is not just that the characters in both do not themselves cherish this belief, but that the strategy of the counter-shot does not correct the problem of the first.

Or so it seems to me. Žižek then registers his surprise that two of his Marxist colleagues – Étienne Balibar, who coined the term *egaliberte* and Alain Badiou, who stated his preference for equality over freedom – had recently begun to try to revive the concept of equality. The surprise stems from the fact that Marx had himself fervently dismissed this noxious notion. While he does not mention him here, Žižek most surely had Freud in mind, as well. In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud condemns harshly the brothers who, after killing their priapic father, set down the following rule: "Everyone must be the same and have the same."

In an essay as brief as this, Žižek does not have the luxury of setting out a long theoretical argument. He thus improvises by taking details from a scene found in a witness report about Jews in Buchenwald, reshaping it slightly, and patching it into Glazer's Zone of Interest. The scene he snitches is one in which two young children, stand side-by-side, hands clasped, as they are being eaten by dogs. In other words, Žižek inserts himself as outrageously as D. A. Miller does and in doing so produces something fabulous, in the best sense of the term. He fabulates. The fact Žižek analyzes a film that he himself makes up must be counted as part of

his argument. For, the intent of the essay is to make room for what does not exist.

I began by characterizing the targets of Žižek's essay as bloated liberal concepts. The adjective implies that these concepts rely on a saturation of the subject and the world she inhabits. It would be a capital error were we to remain content with the characterization of the problem with Rudolf Hoss and his self-satisfied family as their blindness to what is happening on the other side of wall.

For Žižek's ultimate point is that they see too much. What they remain blind to is the incompleteness of the world in which they dwell and blind, as well, to the cracks in their self-fortified, egoistic selves. It is this intransigent willingness not to know that permits them to remain content with their world and committed to the idea that the same begets the same. Where does Žižek say this? At the end of the essay when he introduces what he refers to as a "partial object," which is for him the clasped hands of the children. The image of these hands is aberrant, at odds with everything else in the picture. It is for this reason that it throws everything else into question. The "freeze of eternity" interrupts clock time, the relentless process of "one damn thing after another," as someone once characterized inferior nineteenth-century novels.

The best-known partial object is the gaze, fundamental to many film theorists, many of whom miss the point of it. Lacan borrows the gaze from Jean-Paul Sartre, while altering it considerably. Each defines the gaze as inapprehensible, not something one actually sees, but a disturbance whose source is unlocatable. Lacan phrases this in a revelatory way, "the world is all seeing, but it is not exhibitionist"³. The point is not that the world hides part of itself, but that it does not yet exist. There is therefore a blot on every horizon. To ignore this blot – the uncertainty of the future – is to ignore contingency. I risk here a cheap but irresistible witticism: to ignore the blot is to surrender to bloated ideas. The same is not destined to give birth to the same.

Where does this leave the subject? Simply vulnerable to an unpredictable future?

³(Lacan 1977, p. 75)

No. Lacan refers to the gaze as the vanishing point of consciousness. We have a peculiar kind of knowledge – unconscious knowledge – of our lack of knowledge.

We have knowledge that we are irreducible to objects (this is where Lacan parted ways with Sartre, who did not believe in the unconscious) object. We have knowledge that we are distinct from our empirical individuality. The subject is for psychoanalysis unsaturated. Ego is intimately linked to the unconscious.

Let us return to the short, wily essay we are trying to unpack. The remaining question is the following: what does this have to do with the specific bloated concept of equality? Why is it the “rotten idea” Žižek – like Marx and Freud – would have us believe? We left out earlier an important point made by Freud in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*: the murdering horde of brothers, out of guilt, elevate the father, attribute to him powers he never had when he was alive. The condition for the formation of the community is that all its members should be loved in the same way by the same person. That is, the community is held together by an ideal figure that binds them as a whole. This makes the same point I mentioned earlier – everyone must be the same and have the same – slightly differently. Both forbid what Lacan calls *jouissance*, a distinct form of pleasure unique to each subject. Now, we know that Jeremy Bentham is notorious for his conception of distributive justice. He believed that pleasure could be distributed evenly throughout any given group. If this idea is laughable, it is because it assumes that we all desire the same thing. That a multitude can be made happy as long as they receive their piece of the pie, is a “wisdom” that ignores the fact that some people do not like pie; in fact, it makes them sick. Along comes John Rawls, one of liberals Žižek no doubt has in mind, to try to save equality by wrenching it from Bentham’s hands. Rawls is even smart enough to know that he has to deal not only with Bentham but also with the argument Freud makes against distributive justice. He understands that people do not all find pleasure in the same things, or in the same way of life. But in the end, he, too, makes a fatal error: he insists that different people – like children of the same parents – simply want their differences to be acknowledged and appreciated by their parents. Rawls’ desperate fiction of incommensurable pleasures submitting themselves to some “Big Other,” as we Lacanians are wont to

say, is simply absurd. For *jouissance* flourishes only because there is no final arbiter, No Big Other. This is what makes campaigns for a “shared Jerusalem” the problem it is. There can be no shared Jerusalem⁴.

I want to make only one more point. I believe Žižek would have given Badiou’s attempt to salvage some notion of equality more attention and perhaps ceded some points, had he written a longer essay. What Badiou tries to do is distinguish a “program of equality” – how to distribute pleasure or acknowledge differences as equal – from what he calls an “axiom of equality.” The latter disengages equality from its “economist connotations” and restores it to its “subjective trenchancy.” Liberal theories of equality believe we can reach some infinite point (Badiou 2008). This is the liberal dream in a nutshell. We cannot reach an infinite point in a finite space from which infinity has been subtracted no matter how much time passes. This program of equality must be scrapped, on this point Badiou and Žižek agree completely. What does Badiou mean by “an axiom of equality.” He means that we must put infinity back into the world. Let us call this the axiom of unbloating. Desaturation.

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⁴I borrow here from my longer argument (Copjec 2002).

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