

Notes on Zizek, *How to Read Lacan*

Metaphysics/Hermeneutics of Suspicion

That which determines what we perceive and think is essentially hidden: Marx, Nietzsche, Freud (Althusser, Levi-Strauss, Lacan) — Heidegger. There is also a structural similarity in the natural sciences, esp. physics. Here, even in the realm of explicit forms of causal explanation, events and objects are understood in terms of formal, mathematical structures and equations. Reality is given as a code.

How is This Relevant?

Our understanding of **cinema** can provide insight into that which is hidden and, as a result, the nature of our experience in the modern world. Cf. Heidegger's view of **art**—operating at the level of experience and skill (being-in-the-world).

Structuralism and Semiotics

We looked for links between **visual elements** and **meanings**. But how do we know what something means?

Diesel—narcissism and super ego

Psychoanalytic Concepts

- Id
- Ego
- Superego
- Imaginary—ego & “images” (sensation)
- Symbolic—codes, empirical concepts, language
- Real—that which escapes symbolization
- Mirror Stage (signifier/signified)
- The big Other (Ego-Ideal)
- Fantasy
- Desire
- The Gaze

Excerpts from *How to Read Lacan*

8-11 The big Other & the Symbolic Order—the big Other exists only to the extent that we act **as if it exists**. Cf. ideological causes.

This is how the symbolic order is sustained. Cf. Heidegger's *Das Man* = the They (expressed as “One says that...”, or “One doesn't do such things”, etc.)

This leads to the next point below.

29-31 Subject supposed to believe and the Symbolic Order (the fetishist **disavowal**, or **objectification**, of belief) ~ “Culture”

46-49 How do I know what I desire?
Desire is the desire of the other.

51-53 [starts at the bottom of 51] “Unknown knows” ~ Freudian Unconscious (disavowed beliefs).

“The status of the “fundamental fantasy” (also 59).

79 Jouissance and the Inherent Transgression
Command to enjoy—ethical duty.

Ideal Ego	Ego-Ideal	Super-Ego
projected self image	agency whose gaze I seek to impress	sadistic agent
Imaginary	Symbolic	Real

The balance is maintained by the Ego-Ideal (big Other) and the Super-Ego (anti-ethical, obscene, sadistic).

According to Lacan, one should follow a fourth aspect = “the law of desire”. [80]

Zizek’s Guide to Lacan via Cinema

Multiple interpretations allowed once you drop the applicability of rational constraints and the assumption that interpretations should converge.

Cf. Zizek’s reading of the scene in Dorothy’s apartment with Jeffrey in closet.

- primal scene
- Oedipal transfer of male figure
- Dorothy’s fantasy

McGowan on the Value of Lacanian Film Theory

[This analysis draws from Todd McGowan, “Looking for the Gaze: Lacanian Film Theory and Its Vicissitudes”, *Cinema Journal* 42, No. 3 (Spring 2003).]

Mirror Stage [27f]

Relies on the comparison of the child and the spectator as similarly positioned, and the standard interpretation of Lacan’s early conception of the gaze as subjective mastery over the Imaginary realm and investment of the viewer in the screen image. For example: “The spectator is absent from the screen *as perceived*, but also (the

two things inevitably go together) present there and even 'all-present' as *perceiver*." [McGowan quoting Metz, 28]

McGowan continues: "Being absent as perceived and present as perceiver affords the spectator an almost unqualified sense of mastery over the filmic experience. In this sense, the filmic experience provides a wholly imaginary pleasure, repeating the experience that Lacan sees occurring in the mirror stage."

Analogy: Viewer is in the position of those in Plato's Cave. Identification with the gaze of the camera. Cf. Panopticon—the viewer sees all without being seen.

The Gaze in Later Lacan [28f]

The gaze becomes **objective** rather than subjective—the point from which the object looks back. There is a radical shift in the conception of the spectator as all perceiving and unperceived. [Cf. late Merleau-Ponty as an influence on this aspect of Lacan's concept of the gaze.] This shift enables a better understanding of the spectator's encounter with the Real and the necessary failure of complete mastery.



In *Seminar XI*, Lacan's example of the gaze is Hans Holbein's *The Ambassadors* (1533). This painting depicts two world travelers and the riches they have accumulated during their journeys. But at the bottom of the painting, a distorted, seemingly unrecognizable figure disrupts the portrait. The figure is anamorphic: looking directly at it, one sees nothing discernible, but looking at the figure downward and from the left, one sees a skull. Not only does the skull indicate the hidden, spectral presence of death haunting the two wealthy ambassadors—a *memento mori*—but, even more important for

Lacan, it marks the site of the gaze. The figure is a blank spot in the image, the point at which the spectator loses her/his distance from the painting and becomes involved in what she/he sees, because the very form of the figure changes on the basis of the spectator's position. The gaze exists in the way that the spectator's perspective distorts the field of the visible, thereby indicating the spectator's involvement in a scene from which she/he seems excluded. The skull says to the spectator, "You think that you are looking at the painting from a safe distance, but the painting sees you—takes into account your presence as a

spectator.” Hence, the existence of the gaze as a stain in the picture—an objective gaze—means that spectators never look at the picture from a safe distance; they are in the picture in the form of this stain. [31]

The Fantasy Screen between Spectator and the Real [36]

The alternative to sustaining the gaze is to impose a fantasy screen **between** the gaze and the spectator, which enables one to avoid the trauma of desire.

Here, the question of desire—“What does the other want?”—is replaced by a relative but unstable sense of clarity about the desire of the other and the possibility of satisfaction on the level of the **Imaginary**. The **Real** in the object is temporarily avoided.

Paradoxically, perhaps, it’s when the deadlock of desire is **not** entirely resolved by the film fantasy, that film retains a powerful attraction. [37]

The problem, according to Žižek, is that the first wave of Lacanian film theory emphasized the relation between fantasy and the **Symbolic** (ideology) rather than the relation between fantasy and the **Real** (gaze), which is central to the later thinking of Lacan. [39]

Žižek: “In the opposition between fantasy and reality, the Real is on the side of fantasy.” [40]

McGowan: “It is in the very turn to fantasy that it becomes possible to experience a traumatic encounter with the gaze—to experience the Real. Whereas desire always keeps the gaze at a distance, fantasy can act as the vehicle to lead the subject to an encounter with the gaze. Fantasy, unlike our sense of ‘reality’, is always incomplete; it breaks down and loses its consistency at its edges. Even though it screens the gaze, because of the constitutive incompleteness of fantasy, it also allows for an experience of the gaze that would otherwise be impossible to come by. When film employs fantasy but at the same time reveals the limit that fantasy comes up against, it takes us to an encounter with the traumatic Real.” [40]

By keeping desire and fantasy **distinct** in films such as *Blue Velvet*, *Wild at Heart*, *Lost Highway*, and *Mulholland Drive*, Lynch shows how the Real (gaze) momentarily emerges when desire and fantasy **briefly intersect**. [41] Cf. the way, in *Blue Velvet*, Lynch constructs two distinct fantasy worlds—everyday Lumberton, on the one hand, and the underworld inhabited by Frank Booth on the other. Between these two worlds is another realm of desire without the screen of fantasy—Dorothy’s apartment. This is where Jeffrey confronts the gaze in the form of Dorothy and her unfathomable desires, which are unknown even to her.

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