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# Notes Towards Practicing Žižekian Ideology Critique as an Art Historical Methodology

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## Abstract

This article argues that an engagement with the powerful critical insights of Žižek's theory of ideology and practice of cultural critique is a necessary step for any art historical methodology which aims to fully account for a work of art's function within the society of its creation and reception, and to explain how it came to play such a role. However, any attempt to situate cultural artefacts within historically contingent networks of social relations requires an account of historical change incompatible with any formalist or transcendentalist methodology. Moreover, if it is to be of any use as an academic discourse, art history must be able to account for the specificities of 'art' as a distinct—but not autonomous—sphere of human activity. It is precisely these two issues that a wholesale importation of Žižek's writing into the domain of art history encounters. A solution must be found whereby the critical lessons of Žižek are not 'lost in translation'. In this vein, the present article begins by outlining Žižek's conception of ideology and elucidating the problematic consequences of any straightforward application of its parameters as an art historical methodology. It then reads the interventions of Jacques Rancière and Judith Butler as providing the necessary theoretical tools by which one can construct the possibility of a powerful 'Žižekian art history'.

## Introduction

Recently, in this journal, the following question was posed: 'Can We (Still) Be Žižekians and Rancièreans?' (Bolman and Hodgman 2011) Through a comparative reading of Slavoj Žižek's and Jacques Rancièrè's politics, Bolman and Hodgman concluded that there is more shared ground between the two authors than either of them seem to realize, and that Rancièrè's politics adds to, rather than refutes, Žižek's. In my own efforts to construct the theoretical terrain upon which it becomes possible to practice Žižekian art history, I have found myself asking similar questions. Although, in my reading, it is less a case of 'can' than 'must': as I will argue, the clear analytical and hermeneutic power of Žižek's theory of ideology and practice of cultural critique *qua* methodology for reading art objects and practice comes under threat in the encounter with historical contingency. It is Rancièrè's politicization of the visible as such, his conceptualization of the aesthetic experience as potentially active and emancipatory, that enables us to reconcile Žižekian cultural critique with art history proper.

This article will first elucidate Žižek's theory of ideology, and outline the powerful insights it can provide for the discipline of art history. This process is not, however, without certain points of tension: Žižek's fundamental reliance on a minimal ahistorical formal framework sits uneasily with the art historical need to accommodate contingency and historicity; moreover, Žižek's treatment of the artistic domain as a repository of illustrative examples of his methodology of ideology critique in action assigns it a reactive function incompatible with any art historical methodology that aspires to be more than history with pictures. This article will then go on to consider how the interventions of Judith Butler and Jacques Rancièrè into these moments of tension and seeming untranslatability provide the critical tools for a powerful and practical Žižekian art historical methodology. Žižek's relocation of the site of the functioning of ideology to the unconscious, and his assertion of the significant role played by the regulation of enjoyment within ideology, when read alongside Judith Butler's healthy scepticism towards certain transcendental categories within Lacanian psychoanalysis, and Rancièrè's notion of the *partage du sensible*, allow for a nuanced reading of cultural artefacts which balances an understanding of the work of art's social and psychic function within its social reality,

that is, in relation to the regulatory action of ideological fantasy, with an awareness of its—historically contingent—transformative and emancipatory potential.

### **Žižek's theory of ideology**

Žižek broached the subject of ideology in his first English-language book, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*; he developed the themes of his earlier book later in works including *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor*, *Tarrying with the Negative. Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology*, and 'The Spectre of Ideology', the introduction to an edited volume entitled *Mapping Ideology*. (Žižek 2008c, Žižek 2008a, Žižek 1993, Žižek 1994) The issues raised in these pieces continue to be reworked by Žižek across his *œuvre*, as well as in secondary literature from the increasingly expanding field of Žižek studies.<sup>1</sup> Žižek conceptualizes ideology as a set of representations which constitute social subjectivity. These representations exist in conjunction with communal rituals and an unconscious social fantasy which conditions the enjoyment of subjects' participation in their political community. By regulating the relationship between the visible and the invisible, ideology structures the social reality. (Žižek 1994: 1, García and Sánchez 2008, Kay 2003: 134) Ideological fantasy provides the subject's experience of its reality as a coherent entity untroubled by socio-economic antagonisms, and effaces the exclusions and foreclosures inherent in the constitution of any society.

The positive symbolic contents of an ideology, the level on which it produces meaning, provides the symbolic coordinates for the desire staged in fantasy, consist of what Žižek terms 'floating signifiers', which acquire consistency by being 'quilted' through a certain master-signifier. (Žižek 1994: 10, Žižek 2008c: 95, 113) The master-signifier ossifies them into a specific formation, the differential relationships within which allow the subject to infer meaning, as Žižek says, "every element of a given ideological field is part of a series of equivalences". (Žižek 2008c: 96) It is what Lacan terms the *point de capiton*—the quilting point—"by [means of] which the signifier stops the otherwise indefinite sliding of signification". (Lacan 2007: 681) Lacan conceptualizes the *point de capiton* as a necessary moment of fixity between the signifier and the signified which produces the illusion of stable meaning, and prevents the subject from slipping into psychosis. (Lacan 1997: 268-269) Žižek's intervention is to transpose the notion of the 'quilting point' from the clinical domain

into the political: for Žižek, the quilting point functions as a master-signifier which, in the process of totalizing a symbolic field, recedes from view, such that it appears 'natural', rather than contingent. Consequently, naturalization (the insistence that a particular social meaning is eternal, universal, or natural, rather than particular, contingent) is the ideological move *par excellence*. A crucial step in ideology critique is thus to unmask the performative operation of the quilting point/master-signifier, which ideology works to conceal, by means of an "anamorphic reading" which "enables us to discern the structural inconsistency of an ideological edifice". (Žižek 2008c: 109-110, Žižek 2008b: 97) This, however, is by no means sufficient. Drawing from Freud's methodology of dream-analysis, as well as Marx's critique of political economy, Žižek insists that what is really at stake in ideology is form, not content, paving the way for a non-representational, anti-descriptivist theory of ideology and a disengagement from an exclusive focus on symbolizing activity.

In contrast to the classic Marxist identification of ideology as an illusion producing a false consciousness, Žižek follows Louis Althusser in relocating the functioning of ideology to the realm of the unconscious. Žižek argues that ideology functions only in so far as it regulates the libidinal investments of its subjects, justifying this move by pointing to the clear insufficiency of the notion of false consciousness for dealing with contemporary society. Žižek argues that although postmodern individuals maintain a cynical distance towards ideologies, they nevertheless behave as if they believe in them. Žižek reformulates the classic Marxist, '*they do not know it, but they are doing it*', into "they know that, in their activity, they are following an illusion, but still, they are doing it". (Žižek 2008c: 30) It is precisely the previously unaccounted for role of enjoyment that accounts for this seeming discrepancy.

For Žižek, every ideology attaches itself to some kernel of *jouissance*, the regulation and organization of which is central to its functioning. (Žižek 2008b: 63, Žižek 2005: 1, Žižek 2008c: 140) Following Lacan, Žižek reads *jouissance* as a Real, the paradoxical emergence of pleasure through pain which is always constituted as a surplus. Being of the Real, *jouissance* is radically incompatible with the entry into language: it is necessarily foreclosed and displaced from the symbolic in order for it to constitute itself. (Lacan 2007: 696-700) Consequently, *jouissance* returns symptomatically in the form of distortions and disturbances, which can be read in the process of ideology critique. Desire, for Lacan, is always the desire of the Other, and

it thus has a radically intersubjective character; indeed one of the meanings of Lacan's famous '*il n'y a pas de rapport sexuel*' is that there are no universal parameters for desire, but rather each subject must find its own way in learning to desire from without. (Lacan 1998: 185, 235, Lacan 2007: 148, 222, 525, 690, Lacan 1999: 5, note 19, 12, Lacan 1991: 211)

It is precisely fantasy which constitutes this 'without': fantasy "literally 'teaches us how to desire'". (Žižek 2008b: 7) Where for Lacan fantasy functions as a screen against various lacks, for Žižek ideological fantasy works to disavow the traumatic impossibility of any harmonious social organization (the Real of class struggle, the constitution of a totality can only be achieved by a particular exclusion, that antagonism between internal elements is characteristic of any economic modality). (Žižek 2008c: 138, Žižek 1994: 22, 184) The desire to cover over this traumatic lack is the very motor of ideology. In the same way that Lacanian fantasy enables the subject to indulge in a sense of wholeness, so Žižekian ideological fantasy produces (the experience of) a rational, totalized ideological system in which the subject can invest his enjoyment: through fantasy, "instead of a full rendering of the antagonisms which traverse our society, we indulge in the notion of society as an organic Whole". (Žižek 2008b: 5) Thus, fantasy is not a hallucination or an illusion, or a potential avenue of escape from reality, but the very stuff of our social reality, "there is no reality without its fantasmatic support". (Žižek 1993: 90) The most important goal of Žižekian ideology critique is therefore to determine the ways in which cultural objects stage the enjoyment of ideological subjects, and yet potentially expose them to the real of *jouissance*.

These two domains of ideology, its positive symbolic contents, and underlying phantasmic structure, never meet in the course of its normal functioning. The fantasy can never be directly elucidated within the ideology's symbolic coordinates without dispelling its effect. It is precisely by introducing a short-circuit between the explicit and implicit layers of ideology that Žižek conceptualizes a way out of ideology: the performance of a too-literal identification with the symbolic Law, a parodic and literal obedience which functions to reveal how ineffective the explicit Law becomes when no longer supported by fantasy. (Žižek 2008b: 29, Kay 2003: 136) As Žižek says, "stick to this letter against the fantasy which sustains it". (Žižek 2008b: 38) Such a behaviour correlates to the Lacanian notion of 'traversing the fantasy', the end goal of Lacan's clinical practice whereby the subject's relationship to desire is

fundamentally reoriented: less of a 'stepping out' than a recalibration of the ways in which the ideological subject experiences enjoyment from his or her participation in their political community. (Lacan 1998: 273, Kay 2003: 54, Žižek 1993: 60) Having outlined how Žižek would have us think about ideology—as a multi-layered structure that exercises regulating control over the processes through which (political) meaning is produced and understood, and over the invested enjoyment of it subjects—I will now turn to the conceptual and methodological value this notion provides for art history, and the concomitant problems involved in extracting this value.

### **The (Hidden) Value of a Žižekian Art History**

Žižek's theory of ideology impresses upon the art historian the need to look beyond the surface-symbolic, the ostensible 'meaning' of the art work, how its positive symbolic contents were understood in its various historical moments, by means of an 'anamorphic reading', to the structurally separate level upon which it stages the libidinal investments of ideological subjects. Moreover, it provides a mechanism for comprehending how the regulation of these libidinal investments via the mechanisms of ideological fantasy, the space for which is provided within the frame(s) of the art work, can sustain a certain political economy and hierarchical socio-economic edifice. Ideology, conceptualized in this way is, therefore, an essential conceptual tool for an art history which attempts to fully account for a work of art's, inherently and eminently political, socio-psychic functioning within the social reality of those who created and consumed it. However, if we wish to follow Žižek closely, access to the critical insights promised by the concept of ideology necessarily comes at a certain price: the capacity of the artistic sphere to actively operate as more than just a reflecting pool for battles fought elsewhere.

The aesthetic dimension of cultural artefacts (his preferred example typically being narrative Hollywood cinema) functions as the ground for Žižek's practice of ideology critique. In providing the screen upon which ideological fantasy plays out, films, paintings, and photographs thus provide material evidence for its functioning. In treating culture as a politically charged superstructure which frames subjectivity in line with strictures of the prevailing ideology, Žižek seemingly assigns it a rather conservative function: culture becomes the passive site onto and through which the

phantasmic visions which bolster the status quo are projected and experienced. Žižek's conception of revolutionary art and revolutionary politics as two sides of the same coin (connected, and yet separated by the structural impossibility of their meeting) confirms this suspicion: he goes as far as to state that "revolutionary politics and revolutionary art move in different temporalities".<sup>2</sup> (Žižek 2004b: x) In a thoroughly Lacanian manner, Žižekian ideology critique acts upon the cultural object, revealing how it is structured by Lacanian categories, how it performatively enacts the ideologico-political processes set in motion by the subject's desire for wholeness in Self and Other. Nowhere this methodology best exemplified than in Žižek's 'translation' of René Magritte's *La Lunette d'approche* (1963) into "Lacanes". (Žižek 1993: 103) Despite the fact that Žižek advocates an attentiveness to how cultural objects function in social struggles, Žižek's insistence on transcendental, universal Lacanian categories seemingly closes off both the possibility for a transformative artistic practice with regard to modalities of ideological subjectivity, and an art historical methodology which assigns artistic practice a central role in the processes of historical change.<sup>3</sup>

Žižek's conception of class struggle, central to his definition of ideology, provides a relevant illustration of the problems potentially posed by such a 'Lacanian' art historical method. Žižek's treatment of class is intimately related to his application of the notion of antagonism. As we have seen, Žižek conceptualizes antagonism as the Real of the social, a constitutional and incessant disruption which makes harmonious and transparent social organizations impossible, and stimulates the drive for a fantasy of wholeness. In line with Laclau, Žižek argues that antagonism is a universal condition of disarray which characterizes every identity. (Žižek 2000: 91) As a result of the fact that there is no stable identity position, Žižek argues that "there is no class relationship"; there is no 'normal' way of organizing class relations, all class structures will ultimately fail to fix these antagonistic modalities of interclass relations. (Žižek 2009c: 295) Each particular class structure or class antagonism is a defensive mechanism, designed to cope with the Real of the universal class antagonism. Thus, class is not a positively existing entity, but rather a modality of the Real.<sup>4</sup> In this way, class is the negative whose exclusion is the condition for the establishment of a positive order.

Such a definition of class antagonism as the real (in a triple sense: Lacanian Real, authentic, True) risks falling into the old Marxist trap of essentializing class struggle, and dismissing a spectrum of other (gender, sexuality, racial, nationalist, and so on) struggles as merely symptomatic epiphenomena of the universal class struggle. In his stance against the “[t]heoretical retreat from the problems of domination within capitalism”, this seems to be a risk Žižek is willing to take. (Wendy Brown quoted in Žižek 2000: 97) He argues that to not posit a universal struggle, to declare every universal to be false and thus to argue that there is not one, single, totalizing struggle is “precisely not political enough, in so far as it silently pre-supposes a non-thematized, ‘naturalized’ framework of economic relations”. (Žižek 2000: 108) Since to dispense with a concept of universality is to secretly privilege some and disavow others, Žižek draws from Laclau and Hegel to posit a ‘concrete universality’ whereby the universal is reflexively and dialectically determined by its particular contents. This theoretical position is indebted to the Gramscian notion of hegemony, inherited in modified from Laclau and Mouffe. (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: xii, Mouffe 1979, Sharpe 2004: 7) In this model, universality as such is an empty structural component which, when ‘filled out’ by a particular element (one that comes to ‘stand in’ for the universal) totalizes the social field such that the constellation of signifiers which constitute the social reality acquire meaning in relation to the new universal: as Laclau says, “The universal is an empty place, a void which can be filled only by the particular”. (Laclau 2000: 58) Following this, Žižek and Laclau both agree that politics is the struggle for hegemony, the battle to have a specific particular fulfil the function of a universal: the (hegemonic) universal is the site of struggle, always at war with itself, and thus, as such, characterized by blockages and fissures. The gaps in the universal, that is, universality proper, can be viewed from the position of truth from the perspective of the ‘part of no part’ (the particular element within the universality that remains outside it).<sup>5</sup> Even given this nuanced and reflexive understanding of universality, and the role of class as a universal antagonism driving ideology, the question of how to integrate variously articulated regimes of difference (gender, sexuality, race, etc.) into a methodology of Žižekian ideology critique without dismissing them as symptoms of an underlying blockage in the class or sexual relationship, that is, maintaining a semblance of historicism vital to art history as a discipline, remains.

## Addressing Žižek's 'formalism'

Judith Butler has identified this very weakness of Žižek's approach. (Butler 2011: 140-159) Butler argues that Žižek's problematic formalism, his insistence that historicism must always rely on a minimal ahistorical formal frame, clearly evident in his analysis of class, emerges from the primacy, the "quasi-transcendental" status, he, via Lacan, attributes to sexual difference. (Butler 2000a: 143) The most troubling consequence of Žižek's position, for Butler, is that it makes sexual difference radically incontestable, unsymbolizable, immune from critical examination, and, as such, a bulwark of normativity. (Butler 2000a: 147) Fundamental, transcendental sexual difference does not 'keep to its place', but rather intrudes onto the social, and functions actively and normatively to constrain horizons: "The inevitable vacillation between the transcendental and social functioning of the term makes its prescriptive function inevitable". (Butler 2000a: 148) The delineation of the outside of discourse by means of an ahistorical, invariable, and prediscursive law, and to "make that law function to secure a sexual differential that ontologizes subordination, is an 'ideological' move in a more ancient sense [i.e., a falsity sustaining a particular power interest]". (Butler 2011: 155) She continues,

That there is always an 'outside' and, indeed, a 'constitutive antagonism' seems right, but to supply the character and content to a law that secures the borders between the 'inside' and the 'outside' of symbolic intelligibility is to preempt the specific social and historical analysis that is required, to conflate into 'one' law the effect of a convergence of many, and to preclude the very possibility of a future rearticulation of that boundary which is central to the democratic project that Žižek, Laclau, and Mouffe promote. (Butler 2011: 155-156)

Žižek's insistence on the Lacanian Real as the limit-point of the social, and of the subject, is the means by which he is able to safeguard sexual difference from resignification. (Butler 2011: 150-154) As she quite rightly points out, if the subject always meets its limit in the same place, there is no historicity to the subject. (Butler 2000b: 13)

In attempting to resolve this tension, one is tempted to read Žižek back to himself; if, as he says, the "de-politicized naturalization" of a particular postulate is the very form of ideology, how are we to productively engage in ideology critique attentive to both its social and psychic dimensions, if the very methodology employed engages in the self-same 'de-politicized naturalization' of a certain antagonism? (Žižek 2010: unpaginated) The solution, I argue, is not to dispense with

psychoanalysis in favour of a strictly Foucauldian focus on discourse—on this point I am in agreement with both Žižek and Butler—but rather to comprehend the psychic domain as one in which the specific and historical formations of the social persist.<sup>6</sup> In this way, Butler sees the unconscious as “a certain mode in which the unspeakably social endures”. (Butler 2000a: 153) She continues

The unconscious is also an ongoing psychic condition in which norms are registered in both normalizing and non-normalizing ways, the postulated site of their fortification, their undoing and their perversion, the unpredictable trajectory of their appropriation in identifications and disavowals that are not always consciously or deliberately performed. (Butler 2000a: 153)

Investing the unconscious with a social dimension, an active relationship to social norms, retains the great analytical insight Žižek’s understanding of ideology offers, without relying on an ahistorical conception of the human psyche which, as Butler rightly points out, fails to account for a multitude of contemporary family formations. (Butler 2000a: 142)

As a consequence of his ‘formalism’, Butler takes issue with Žižek’s methodology of cultural critique, specifically his deployment of examples from popular culture which “serve to illustrate various principles of psychic reality without ever clarifying the relation between the social example and the psychic example”. (Butler 2000a: 157) An example of this remarked upon by Butler is Žižek’s use of the motion picture *Jaws* (1975) to illustrate the action of the *point de capiton* in *Tarrying with the Negative*. (Žižek 1993: 149) Žižek thus falls back on employing popular culture to illustrate a formal point of theory which is true prior to its exemplification, and is exemplified only to illustrate an already accomplished truth. On this note, Butler accuses Žižek of a misreading of Hegelian universality, which she reads as opposed to Kantian formalism in its insistence that universal categories are transformed in their particularization. (Butler 2000b: 26) As remarked upon above, such a position lacks the explanatory power necessary to account for artistic practice which eludes the narrow confines of illustration (the very minimum aim for art history, as opposed to history with pictures), and exists in a variable and transformative relationship with the politico-ideological world from which it emerged, and within which it is consumed.

Is not Žižek’s notion of the ‘dimension in-between-the-two-frames’, introduced in *The Fright of Real Tears* in 2009, but subsequently oft-repeated, the clearest example of the above outlined problem? When approaching Žižek’s position that the

pivotal content of a painting resides in the 'dimension in-between-the-two-frames' (the gap between its physical frame and the invisible frame, implied by the structure of the painting), the first thing to consider is how Žižek himself would have us read him. As he recounts in *The Fright of Real Tears*, Žižek first elucidated the notion as a "bluff", a cover for his ignorance of a painting upon which he was asked to comment. (Žižek 2009a: 5) His subsequent disappointment that he was taken seriously, that his bluff was "[elevated] into a term", which he found as evidence for a wider apathy within contemporary cultural studies, should be contrasted with the—ostensibly quite serious—restaging of his 'bluff' later in the very same volume. (Žižek 2009a: 6, 130) For one who, as a recently published volume on the subject attests, places so much theoretical and methodological importance on the joke, with its inherent slippages and reversals between the serious and the comic, such a move is surely more than a simple oversight (its re-emergence in other works confirms this thought). (Žižek 2014, Žižek 2009d: 29)

It is tempting, therefore, to think of this transition as a joke at the expense of the reader, the precise content of which is less significant than the character of its enumeration. In staging his ostensible intervention into the field of art history in the form of a joke, Žižek, intentionally or not, emphasises the formalism of his methodology with respect to both. In an identical manner to the way in which he approaches cultural artefacts as particular manifestations of a more universal formal frame, evidence for an argument articulated independently, Žižek consistently identifies in the form of jokes the categories which structure the Lacanian psyche. A joke about Shakespeare can, for example, illustrate the decentred Lacanian subject. (Žižek 2014: 42) Thus, it is less the specificity of the artwork itself (its positive symbolic contents) that is of significance, but rather how it is positioned in relation to the invisible frame of ideological fantasy (the frame which enframes reality itself). In accounting for the historically specific enunciation of artists articulated within the physical frame of the work, Žižek thus relies on its distance from a second, ahistorical frame, which enframes this very enunciation. We have thus returned to the stultifying notion that ideological fantasy is merely staged in the passive domain of culture. Judith Butler's critique of Lacanian formalism has provided us with the terms to articulate the critical distance between the two components in the 'Žižekian art history' whose possibility we are here attempting to construct. In bridging this gap, the political and aesthetic interventions of Jacques Rancière will be crucial.

Rancière's notion of the *partage du sensible* (the division or distribution of the sensible) will allow us to reconfigure this thorny relationship between art and ideology as multi-faceted and multi-directional.

### **Why we must be Žižekians and Rancièreans**

Rancière's work on political theory—beginning in the 1990s—emerged out of this early historical work, and developed a number of its key themes. In texts such as *La Méésentente* and 'Ten Theses on Politics' Rancière outlined his critique of social forms and the parameters of his emancipatory political project. (Rancière 1999, Rancière 2001) Central to Rancière's conception of the function of politics is the governance of visibility.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, in recent years, aesthetics has become central to Rancière's project; in texts such as *Le Partage du sensible: Esthétique et politique*, *Le Destin des Images*, *Malaise dans l'esthétique*, *Le spectateur émancipé*, and *Aisthesis: Scènes du régime esthétique de l'art* Rancière has outlined a theory of emancipatory aesthetics, as well as a historical framework for the development of art across its different 'regimes'. (Rancière 2004, Rancière 2007, Rancière 2009a, Rancière 2009b, Rancière 2013) I am primarily concerned here with Rancière's conception of politics and the police in so far as it implies an aesthetic dimension to both the logic of domination and the politics of emancipation, and the fundamental structural points of connection he identifies between artistic practice and the sphere of politics/policing, captured by his notion of the *partage du sensible*.

In many ways, Rancière's expansive notion of the 'police' is correlative to the role ideology plays in Žižek's thought. Rancière's police is not limited to the repressive arm of the state responsible for enforcing laws, but includes the governing and administrative machinery responsible for the classification of individuals, and their apportionment into the various roles within the social edifice, as well as the legitimization of these distributions: police orders are the hierarchical social formations we encounter every day. The logic of the police is one which counts, classifies, distributes, and names bodies; it is less the disciplining of bodies than the regulation of their appearing. (Rancière 1999: 28-29) The police order exercises control over the domain of perception, regulating who can be legitimately seen, and heard, as a political actor (invested with *logos*), and who is excluded, invisible and

inaudible. (Rancière 1999: 1-2) As such, the police is a “symbolic constitution of the social”. (Rancière 2001: paragraph 27)

Politics then, is that which disrupts the smooth functioning of the police machine. It is a sudden, surprising democratic explosion in which those excluded from the prevailing police order dramatically demonstrate their equality (and by consequence the fundamental ‘wrong’ of their exclusion from society), and come into being as political subjects.<sup>8</sup> (Rancière 1999: ix, 30-31) Politics takes the form of a polemical and disputatious disagreement (an enactment of dissensus) upon and from within the police, which renegotiates and reconfigures the existing the police order into a new form, breaking its tangible configuration. (Rancière 1999: 29, 33, 61) Thus, what Rancière termed ‘the poor’ in his early historical work, and later came to call ‘the-part-of-no-part’ (the *sans-part*), is brought into being by politics, and functions by introducing what Rancière terms a miscount. (Rancière 2001: paragraphs 16-17, Rancière 1999: 10-11) The police order, like Žižekian ideological fantasy, is characterized by constituting itself as without void or supplement: in symbolically constituting the social it erects a (seemingly) self-sufficient and enclosed network of meaning and schema of parts (roles, occupations). (Rancière 2001: paragraphs 27-29) Rancière then, like Žižek, identifies that every social order constitutes itself negatively, by means of a specific exclusion which must necessarily remain both ‘outside’ and invisible if the illusory wholeness of the social edifice is to survive. Indeed, Žižek himself has made mention of Rancière’s notion of the ‘part-of-no-part’ numerous times. (Žižek 2009b: 54-55, Žižek 2009c: 116, Žižek 2011: 199, Žižek 2008d: 221) With the reintroduction of the supplementary *sans-part* whose exclusion from the social forms the condition of possibility for the police, politics disrupts the police through the “power of the *one more*, the power of *anyone*, which confuses the right ordering of policy”. (Rancière 1992: 59) In this precise way, the *sans-part* is excessive.

As we have seen, control over the aesthetic realm of sense-perception characterizes the function of Rancière’s police; likewise, politics disrupts the police by introducing the principle of equality and making “visible what has no business being seen”, that is, the *sans-part*. (Rancière 1999: 30) As Rancière says, “[p]olitics is first and foremost an intervention upon the visible and the sayable”, a question of whether those who are excluded from the existing socio-political order (the *sans-part*) can be seen and heard as political subjects voicing meaningful grievances

when they seek to contest the order of their domination. (Rancière 2001: paragraph 29) Thus, a key component of politics is the aesthetic; indeed “politics is aesthetic in principle”. (Rancière 1999: 58) Rancière highlights the aesthetic interconnections between politics and the police through his complex and multivalent hinge-concept, the *partage du sensible* (the division or distribution of the sensible).

Rancière understands the *partage du sensible* as a specific configuration of the parameters of sense-perception which governs the domain of visibility, and the relations within this domain between perception and meaning. The *partage* defines whose voices ‘count’ and who is relegated to the structural position of the *sans-part*: “it defines what is visible or not in a common space”. (Rancière 2004: 12-13) Since Rancière defines the police order as a particular *partage*, politics, in so far as it consists of introducing the supplementary *sans-part* into the domain of visibility by the declaration of the universal principle of equality, has aesthetics at its core.

The police *partage* can thus be undone by means of a certain aesthetic politics, a progressive art which can activate slippages between ontological categories, and puts forward alternative configurations of the visible. In Rancière’s writing, a certain work of art will be said to have, or express, a ‘politics’, in that it implies a particular vision of how the world should be, that it proposes a particular distribution of the sensible. Rancière remains open to the subjective multiplicity of the aesthetic encounter in that he gives no single account of how an encounter with an artwork can effect this shift. Thus, depending on the particular interpretative formula(e) by which an art work is understood within any prevailing police *partage*, the work of art can give rise or not to a progressive reconfiguration of the distribution of the sensible. (Rancière 1999: 32) More than simply offering an alternative distribution of parts, politically active works of art exploit the tension between a specific act of perception and its implicit reliance on preconstituted objects deemed worthy of perception, in order to expose the arbitrary basis upon which the prevailing relations of domination are constituted. This breaking of the *partage* is thus correlative to the Lacanian ‘traversing the fantasy’, in that it does not imply the subject’s inhabitation of an ontological outside, but rather a renegotiation from within.

His erroneous characterization of Rancière as a partisan of ‘pure politics’ notwithstanding, Žižek has advanced a valuable response to Rancière’s political and aesthetic theory. (C.f. Žižek 2004a: 73-75, Rancière 2009c: 116, Rancière 1999: 61) The key moment in Žižek’s reading of Rancière’s politics is the short-circuit between

the Particular and the Universal: “the paradox of a singular which appears as a stand-in for the Universal, destabilizing the ‘natural’ functional order of relations in the social body”. (Žižek 2004a: 70) The identification of the non-part with the Whole, according to Žižek, is the “elementary gesture of politicization, discernable in all great democratic events from the French Revolution [...] to the demise of ex-European Socialism”. (Žižek 2008d: 221) Here it is possible to discern the strong parallels between this reading, and the ‘concrete universality’ Žižek draws from Laclau and Hegel. One can therefore read Rancière’s account of the *sans-part*’s destabilization of the specific *partage* known as the police order by means of its demonstration of the arbitrary basis of its self-constitution as a mechanism of undoing of the hegemonic action of Žižek’s ideological Master-Signifier, a reformulation of the symbolic coordinates of meaning-making. However, in asserting *contra* Žižek that class struggle is not the motor of politics without providing a viable alternative, Rancière fails to explain what drives the *sans-part* to assert themselves as political actors, beyond the implicit and optimistic assertion that the axiomatic principle of equality will inevitably assert itself. (Rancière 1999: 18) Rancière neglects the processes by which politics is reabsorbed into a police order which they reconfigure, and is blind to one of the most fundamental obstacles to emancipatory politics: the desire of people to be policed. Žižek’s insistence on the governance of enjoyment as the means by which an ideology conditions its subjects to consent is a powerful solution to this problem. Although Rancière’s early historical work indicates that he is not blind to the political importance of enjoyment, Žižek is correct to point out that Rancière’s hesitance to avail himself of the lessons of psychoanalysis means his later understandings of mechanisms of domination, and the motor of emancipation, are necessarily limited.<sup>9</sup>

Žižek’s unwillingness to accept Rancière’s fundamental point regarding the multidirectional and constitutionally intertwined character of the relations between emancipatory politics, orders of domination, and aesthetics, is at odds with his own insistence that ideology functions, in part, to control the horizons of visibility in symbolic space. (Žižek 2009c: 418) It is also at the root of the problems, identified by Judith Butler, his theory of ideology encounters when attempting to explain the cultural domain as anything but mere epiphenomena. The key point to be drawn from Rancière, therefore, is that any particular ideology necessarily exercises a degree of control over the domain of sense-perception and its relations to meaning,

and can be understood as a specific *partage*. Therefore, the aesthetic must be understood as more than the ground for ideology-critique, but the very ground of ideology's symbolic operation. Rancière's refusal to provide an ontological basis for his theoretical interventions provides a healthy counterpoint to Žižek's reliance on an, admittedly minimal, ahistorical formal framework. Following Butler's insistence that the unconscious is the domain of the 'unspeakably social', and Rancière's assertions that the police *partage* is the 'symbolic constitution of the social' (correlative in this respect to the symbolic level of ideology identified by Žižek) and that political emancipation emerges at the moment of its reconfiguration, one must remain attentive to the historically contingent character specific ideological fantasies assume, their relationship to the relations between aesthetic visibility and meaning, and open to the possibility for artistic practice to engineer a reorientation of the (viewing) subject's conscious and unconscious relationship to a particular ideology.

## **Conclusion**

Žižek's continuing and prodigious output ensures that his thought is always evolving and resistant to any straightforward or static systemization. Again, much like Rancière, who explicitly rejects any notion that he is crafting a philosophical system and instead conceptualizes his work as 'interventions' into various discourses and traditions, Žižek's thinking is most powerfully utilized as a critical language that can be brought to bear upon specific problems. Making use of the insights of Žižekian ideology critique within the realm of art history, as we have seen, however creates moments of tension that must be resolved: namely, the incompatibility in how the directionality and character of art's relationship to ideology is conceived; and in how Žižek's primarily synchronic formalism relates to the diachronic, historical demands of art history. I have argued that, each at specific moments, the critical interventions of Judith Butler and Jacques Rancière offer the means to resolve these tensions and reconcile the seeming split in the phrase 'Žižekian art history'.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In 2004 Matthew Sharpe commented upon the “comparative dearth of secondary material on Žižek”, especially in relation to Žižek’s own prodigious output. (Sharpe 2004: 16) The International Journal of Žižek Studies, launched in 2007, is going some way to correct this, as is the increase in number of critical introductions to Žižek, and the publication in 2014 of a Žižek dictionary edited by the art historian and Žižek scholar Rex Butler. (Parker 2004, Pound 2008, Khader and Rothenberg 2013, Vighi and Feldner 2007, Butler 2014)

<sup>2</sup> See also his critique of the art journal *October*, which, in his view, only tenuously justifies its (implicitly useless in political terms) “jargonistic analyses of modern art” by a reference to “*that October [...], the radical revolutionary past*”. (Žižek 2002: 172)

<sup>3</sup> “[W]e should be especially careful *not to confuse the ruling ideology with ideology which seems to dominate*. More than ever, we should bear in mind Walter Benjamin’s reminder that it is not enough to ask how a certain theory (or art) positions itself with regard to social struggles—we should also ask how it actually functions in these very struggles”. (Žižek 2002: 169)

<sup>4</sup> Such an understanding of class bears an obvious relation of Lacan’s theory of sexual difference, that is, that one’s sexual position is defined by one’s relation (having/being) to the phallus and is thus functional within the Symbolic. However, as there is no signifier of sexual difference as such, the subject’s inhabitation of a sexual position is always precarious and, as such, there can be no harmonious sexual relationship. See, (Lacan 1997: 170, 177, Lacan 1999: 35, 78-81, Lacan 1991: 263)

<sup>5</sup> For more on Žižek’s deployment of this Rancièrian notion, see below.

<sup>6</sup> “The specificity of the psyche does not imply its autonomy [from the social]” (Butler 2000: 154)

<sup>7</sup> C.f. “One can categorically assert that existence of ideology *qua* generative matrix that regulates the relationship between visible and non-visible”. (Žižek 1994: 1)

<sup>8</sup> The principle of equality is the central and explicit kernel of Rancièrian’s *œuvre*. Rancièrian developed his notion of equality after an engagement with the radical pedagogy of Joseph Jacotot, elucidated in his *Le Maître ignorant: Cinq leçons sur l’émancipation intellectuelle*. (Rancièrian 1991) For Rancièrian, equality is “a universal that must be supposed, verified, and demonstrated in each case”, but one that “only takes effect in a singularized form”. (Rancièrian 1992: 60, Rancièrian and Rockhill 2004: 52) As such, it is not a founding ontological principle: Rancièrian’s equality is active and declarative, it is not conferred upon people, but rather created by them. Rancièrian terms the communal coming into being of political subjects which occurs within politics ‘political subjectification’. In ‘Politics, Identification, and Subjectivization’ Rancièrian argued that political subjects can adhere to an identity configuration only ‘between’ existing ones, in a fissure opened up by the disruptive consequences of politics, and enabled by an ‘impossible identification’. (Rancièrian 1992: 61) By the time of *La Mésentente* Rancièrian had come to view subjectification as the transformation of existing identities. (Rancièrian 1999: 35-36)

<sup>9</sup> In an essay on The People’s Theatre published in the journal *Les Revoltes Logiques*, Rancièrian correctly identified that “[t]o moralize meant creating manners. But manners are not created by lessons, rather by identification and imitation, in other words by learning a certain *jouissance*. And they only take hold of the social body insofar as they are held in common. To moralize the people thus meant providing them with some enjoyment in common with the aristocratic classes”. (Rancièrian 2012: 4) The argument that Rancièrian is too rationalistic and fails to adequately account for the affective dimensions of politics and of the aesthetic has been advanced by other scholars including Oliver Davis and Joseph Tanke. (Davis 2010: 97, Tanke 2013: 124)

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