

# POSTMODERN GRIMACES OF THE REAL

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*The article focuses on the concept of the Real and interprets it as a counterpoint to the discursive character of postmodern philosophy. Slavoj Žižek excerpts the concept of the Real from psychoanalysis of Jacques Lacan. Žižek insists that the Real as a traumatic kernel resists symbolization and forms the external limit to discourse. After the critical debates with Judith Butler and Charles Chepherdson on the ambivalent character of the Real, Žižek refined his position and defined the Real as the internal limit of the symbolical order. The article discusses the ambivalent character of the Real and its implications on sexual, ethical and political fields. The main question is does psychoanalysis really provide a ‘third way’ to the ‘antinomy of postmodern reason’, or is it, in an indirect way, ‘the return of the Real’?*

**Keywords:** postmodernism, deconstruction, psychoanalysis, representation, Imaginary, Symbolic, the Real.

## 1. Beyond postmodernism

The concept of the Real, taken from Lacanian psychoanalysis, comes more and more frequently into recent philosophical debates. After the ‘postmodern break’ it is commonly assumed that every identity is discursively constructed, that every phenomenon has no existence beyond its discursive representations. As a reaction to this theory of representation the idea of the limit gains its force. Free play of differences could not be performed in the unlimited horizon – in order to define the differences and to comprehend their meaning, it is necessary to suspend the flow and fix the limits. The concept of the Real performs such a limit and focuses the main ‘antinomy of postmodern reason’: the direct appealing to reality seems

too naïve to be a philosophical solution, whereas the discursive ideology is self-referential and incapable of referring beyond itself. Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek suggests the ‘third way’ to the ‘antinomy of postmodern reason’: referring to Jacques Lacan’s concept of the Real, he insists, that the Real is a ‘hard kernel’, a ‘rock’ or a Thing, which resists representation. The article will focus on the problem of Real and will try to find out its meaning and significance for contemporary theory.

Already in his first book *The Sublime Object of Ideology* Žižek declares “the radical break with post-structuralism”, and makes a lot of efforts to displace post-structuralism from the place it presupposed to take. Referring to post-structuralism, Žižek refers also to deconstruction and postmodernism, – foreign nicknames, invented

to designate contemporary French philosophy, and especially that of Jacques Derrida. “The fundamental gesture of post-structuralism, – Žižek points out, – is to deconstruct every substantial identity, to denounce behind its solid consistency an interplay of symbolic overdetermination – briefly, to dissolve the substantial identity into a network of non-substantial, differential relations” (Žižek 1989: 72). What matters Žižek is not the fact that post-structuralism dissolves any substantial identity, – because psychoanalysis dissolves any identity as well, – but that the ‘signifying interplay’ has no references to extra-discursive reality, no external point, which could limit or interrupt the incessant flow of signifying chain. In another context, speaking about deconstruction, Žižek insists that deconstruction “excludes the truth-dimension”, that is, it “does not affect the place from which it speak” (Žižek 1989: 155). Deconstruction is immersed into discursive ideology in such extent that it doesn’t acknowledge its status as an ideology: “the position from which deconstructivist can always make sure of the fact that “there is no metalanguage”; that no utterance can say precisely what it intended to say; that the process of enunciation always subverts the utterance; *is the position of metalanguage* in its purest, most radical form” (Žižek 1989: 154–55).

Žižek’s counterpoint to this discursive ideology is the notion of the symptom, incarnating the real kernel, resisting symbolization and signification. Symptom as the Real is supposed to reestablish the truth-dimension, which is lacking, and to reveal some enigmatic place, which provides unconscious motivations for our discourse. The Lacanian concept of the Real becomes a *real* argument to displace post-structuralism and deconstruction from its place and to consecrate Lacanian psychoanalysis into this place. “Deconstructionism is a modernist proce-

dure *par excellence*; it presents perhaps the most radical version of the logic of ‘unmasking’ ... It is only with Lacan that the ‘postmodernist’ break occurs, – insists Žižek, – in so far as [Lacan – A. Ž.] thematizes a certain real, traumatic kernel whose status remains deeply ambiguous: the Real resists symbolization, but it is at the same time its own retroactive product. In this sense we could even say that deconstructionists are basically still ‘structuralists’ and that the only ‘poststructuralist’ is Lacan, who affirms enjoyment as ‘the real Thing’, the central impossibility around which every signifying network is structured” (Žižek 1999a: 40–41).

Following this line of arguments, several questions arise. The first interesting point is that the notion of the symptom is seen as a counterpoint to the discourse theory and as the incarnation of the Real. Lacan points out, that the symptom is a meaningful signifier, which substitutes the missing one. Lacan insists that “between the enigmatic signifier of sexual trauma and the term that is substituted for it in an actual signifying chain there passes the spark that fixes in a symptom the signification inaccessible to the conscious subject...” (Lacan 1977: 166). According to this interpretation, it is trauma which takes the place of the Real, thereby the symptom only substitutes for it in the signifying chain and should reveal its meaning in the process of interpretation. So if, as Žižek suggests, the symptom is real, maybe this seeking for the Real is the symptom of something else, fixing some inaccessible signification? To put it in another way, what is the symptom of this symptom? Why post-structuralism, deconstruction or postmodernism are interpreted as something intolerable, which should be refused and displaced? Couldn’t this constant strategy of displacement be interpreted as the trauma of postmodernism? Postmodernism is

experienced as an impossible and traumatic place, which has no meaning and no sufficient explanation. Could it be that postmodernism, refused and displaced in the Symbolic, returns in the Real and *as the Real*?

## 2. Beyond representation: Butler VS Žižek

The first question is, why these two positions are so incompatible, that they need one others exclusion? As I pointed out earlier, the distinction between the two concerns the question of the 'outside': post-structuralism is interpreted as a sovereign interplay of signification, whereas psychoanalysis refers to some enigmatic 'outside' beyond discursive play. My idea is that this appearance of difference is nothing other as a gesture of repetition. The first point is that both positions – post-structuralism and psychoanalysis – presuppose some irreducible deadlock around which meaning and representation are organized. Deconstruction, for example, is involved into insurmountable aporias of appearance and non-appearance, cognition and non-cognition, representation and non-representation. If something – for example, the present (the gift), responsibility, or even democracy, – doesn't exist, it doesn't exist. But if they *appear as such* to our sight or cognition, they do not exist still more, because they deny the unpredictable and unlimited nature of the present, or responsibility, or democracy. In this way deconstruction theory creates some sort of ontological diastheme: we are confronted either with the absence, or with some distorted, illusionary presence, which signals the absence of 'true' meaning. As a consequence, either something doesn't exist, or it exists in some inadequate way.

For Lacanian psychoanalysis the main deadlock is the Real, which resists symbolization and

representation. Lacan makes a distinction between reality (*la réalité*) and the Real (*le réel*), where reality means 'discursive construction', while the concept of the Real refers to pre-discursive, material real. Charles Shepherdson interprets this Lacanian distinction in terms of 'pre-symbolic real' and 'post-symbolic real'. In the first case the Real precedes the Symbolic and 'exists' independently, while in the second case, the Real is a 'product' of the symbolical order, a residue or surplus-effect that 'exists' only as a result of the symbolic operation that excludes it (Shepherdson 1996: 20). When we set apart the reality and try to find out that the Real is, we are involved into the same sliding of meaning. Judith Butler, making references to Žižek, observes that it is unclear whether the Real is to be understood as a pre-discursive, material real, a hard 'kernel' located outside symbolization, or whether it is to be understood as a product of the symbolical order, 'an effect of the law', in which case we would be concerned, not so much with a 'material' real, but rather with a 'lack' (Butler 1993: 198–199). In the first case there *is something* (a 'rock', a 'kernel' or sometimes a 'substance'), although this something is meaningless before the advent of new symbolical network; in the second case we perceive the Real as a 'lack', a 'loss' or 'negativity', as the Real, which is always missing. Here we can detect the same ontological diastheme, as we pointed out talking about the deconstruction theory: the Real doesn't exist, but it persists either as a meaningful absence, or as a presence without meaning.

The concept of the Real, regardless of its ambiguity, is interpreted as an argument to oppose psychoanalysis to the poststructuralist discourse. Butler insists that the Real presents us with a 'limit' to the unlimited theory of discourse: "Žižek begins his critique of what he calls 'post-

structuralism' through the invocation of a certain kind of matter, a 'rock' or 'kernel' that not only resists symbolization and discourse, but is precisely what post-structuralism, in his account, itself resists and endeavors to dissolve" (*ibid.*). Butler agrees, that "the category of the real is needed", and notes, that Žižek is right to be "opposed to poststructuralist accounts of discursivity", because we must provide a more adequate account of what remains 'outside' discourse (Butler 1993: 188–189). At the same time she acknowledges that this 'outside' remains very ambivalent, because it is difficult to say, whether it is a pre-discursive element 'beyond' representation, or an 'effect' of language itself. Shepherdson argues, that the first version of the Real amounts to a 'naïve' appeal to 'pre-discursive reality', while the second one would be very close to certain questions formulated by Michel Foucault and Derrida. This last version would seem to bring Lacan and Žižek closer to the thesis that 'reality' is 'discursively constructed', though with additional complication that the Real implies a 'lack' that remains in some enigmatic way irreducible to the Symbolic (Shepherdson 1996: 28–29).

The question is how *real* the Real is, or is it possible to construct some 'outside', which is 'beyond' symbolization and representation? If post-structuralism is conceived (rightly or wrongly) as a theory of 'discursive construction', some 'outside' should be invented – as suggests Ernesto Laclau, – as a legitimate ground for the critique. The most common reproach, which is constantly directed against post-structuralism, is that it presupposes unsurpassable ideology of discourse. We are always immersed into the text and have no reality outside it, – there are no such things as 'real presence', or 'real sex', because all these things function like discursive supplements for other discursive supplements.

As the most worn-out dictum of Derrida asserts, 'there is no outside-text' – *il n'y a pas de hors-texte*. But isn't this interpretation of interpretation theory somehow too simple? Isn't the most worthless lesson of post-structuralism that it warns us about difficulties and complications, which arise in making references to extra-discursive reality? Doesn't this description sound in the same way as the second version of the Real, which seems to bring Lacan and Žižek closer to the thesis that reality is 'discursively constructed'?

Responding to the criticism against the Real as some enigmatic 'beyond', Žižek invents the new distinction between the Real and 'objective reality' (*sic!*), though without explaining that 'objective reality' should mean. In this precise sense the Real "is inherent to the symbolic (system of differences), not the transcendent Beyond, which the signifying process tries to grasp in vain... And the Real cannot be signified not because of it is outside, external to the symbolic order, but precisely because it is inherent to it, its internal limit: the Real is the internal stumbling block on account of which the symbolic system can never 'become itself', achieve its self-identity" (Žižek 1997: 217). Later Žižek refines his position by saying that "the Real *is* in fact internal / inherent to the Symbolic, not its external limit, but *for that very reason*, it cannot be symbolized. In other words, the paradox is that the Real as external, excluded from the Symbolic, is in fact a symbolic determination – what eludes symbolization is precisely the Real as the *inherent point of failure* of symbolization" (Contingency... 2000: 121). This interpretation of the Real qua internal limit of the symbolical order perfectly conforms the deconstructionist claim that any presence or self-presence is involved into the process of supplementation, and by this reason can never become completed in

itself. Even the attempt to 'explain' the Real is a good example of a 'supplementary logic': at first we have reality problem, then we are introduced with the distinction between reality and the Real, later this distinction dissolves into the gap between the Real and 'objective reality', etc.

### 3. Practicing the Real

The enigmatic complication, which opposes post-structuralism and psychoanalysis, is the question of the body and sexuality. Shepherdson insists, that "if psychoanalysis has taken on an increasing urgency today, it is precisely for this reason, for psychoanalysis has perhaps the clearest conception of the 'real' of the body, as a material dimension of the flash that 'exceeds' representation, yet does not automatically refer us to a 'natural' domain of 'pre-existing reality' (Shepherdson 1996: 29). Shepherdson points out, that the notions of body and sexuality produce the same ambiguity or 'sliding of meaning' from 'biological essentialism' to the assertions of the 'historical construction' of sexuality. In this way they only displace the theoretical difficulty they seek to solve. Butler asserts, that the 'defense' of the Real itself could have psychoanalytical significance, because the Real always refers to a generalized model of trauma, namely, the 'threat' of castration. "If the 'threat' of castration is to be protected, – continues Butler, – what then does the threat of castration *secure*?" (Butler 1993: 197).

The possible answer could be that this 'threat' secures the real difference or antagonism – sexual, ethical, or political, – which is the condition of the possibility of the social. If we examine the example of sexual difference more closely, we should say that for Lacan sexual difference is not socially constructed (as for Butler and Foucault), but is the Real of an antago-

nism / deadlock that the two positions endeavor to symbolize. The Real qua antagonism prevents any sexual position from achieving its full identity. As a consequence, there could be no defined sexual identities and no sexual relationship (as Lacan's dictum *il n'y a pas de rapport sexuel* affirms). In that case the notion of sexual trauma should mean not the sexual encounter, which takes place in the childhood, but the simple fact that there is no sex in the Real [11]. Maybe this is the reason why sex should be invented: even if 'there is no sexual relationship', it should be revealed from its displaced or repressed form. Psychoanalysis invents a new kind of ideology of the body, supposing that this ideology should compensate the lack of the Real in contemporary philosophy. Precisely because of the reason that 'there is no sexual relationship', everything is interpreted in sexual terms, or, to use deconstruction's vocabulary, 'there is no outside-sex', – *il n'y a pas de hors-sex*.

Concerning ethical and political antagonism as the Real, there could be formulated two possible implications. The first implication is, that the ethics of the Real or politics of the Real (a political project, based on the ethics of the Real) in fact do not differ from the deconstructive 'ethics of difference'. In an essay "Melancholy and the Act" Žižek reads Derrida with (or against) Lacan, and asks "is Lacan's ethics of the Real, the ethics that focuses neither on some imaginary good nor on the pure symbolic form of a universal duty, ultimately also another version of this deconstructive-Levinasian ethics of the traumatic encounter with radical otherness to which the subject is infinitely indebted?" (Žižek 2000: 667). This comparison is based on the premise about two opposed ethical ideologies: the first, humanistic ideology, which is involved into the infinite debt to the abyssal Other, and the second, anti-humanistic ideology,

which refers not to the imaginary other or symbolic big Other, but to the “Other qua real, the impossible Thing, the inhuman partner, the Other with whom no symmetrical dialog, mediated by the symbolical Order, is possible” (Žižek 2000: 669). But isn’t this humanistic appeal nothing other as an attempt to give a ‘human face’ to the monstrous presence / absence of the Other? Could not the face as a fetish, presumed by Levinasian ethics, be compared with the Other qua real, the Other-Thing, which makes the ethical relationship impossible? Could it be that both positions – deconstruction and psychoanalysis – presuppose the same ethics of the impossible, where impossibility acquires an imperative tone?

The ethics of the impossible refers to some negative absolute, the irreducible deadlock, which, in some enigmatic way, defines the field of the ethical. According to Žižek, the concept of the Real should also be interpreted in terms of the impossible. “There are thus THREE modalities of the Real, i.e. the triad IRS [Imaginary, Real, Symbolic – A. Ž.] reflects itself within the order of the Real, so that we have the ‘real Real’ (the horrifying Thing, the primordial object), the ‘symbolic Real’ (the signifier reduced to a senseless formula, like the quantum physics formulae which can no longer be translated back into – or related to – everyday experience of our life-world), AND the ‘imaginary Real’ (the mysterious *je ne sais quoi*, the unfathomable ‘something’ that introduces a self division into an ordinary object, so that the sublime dimension shines through it)” (Žižek 2001: 82). The specter of the impossible Real creates the ethics of the Real – the ethics of accepting the Real as a structural impossibility. It is precisely in this point where deconstruction and psychoanalysis interface, because the deconstructionist ethical edifice is

also based on the impossibility of the act: “the act never happens, it is *impossible for it to occur*, it is always deferred, about to come, there is forever the gap that separates the impossible fullness of the Act from the limited dimension of our contingent pragmatic intervention” (Žižek 2001: 83). Deconstruction and psychoanalysis invents the ethics of the impossible and it is precisely this negative mode of ethics, which enables it to proceed and define itself.

The next thing is that the ethics of the impossible anticipates the ‘politics of the impossible’ and in fact blurs the distinction between the ethical and the political. For deconstruction the political is a promising but impossible task, because a political decision is based on the responsibility towards the Other; that means that a political decision is impossible as well as an ethical decision. For example, democracy has the same form of non-appearance as responsibility: if it appears or acts as democracy, it necessarily gains totalitarian forms. The same holds for psychoanalytically grounded political theory (Chantal Mouffe, Laclau, Žižek), which is organized around a certain traumatic impossibility, a certain fissure, which cannot be symbolized, – around the Real. It is the Real of social antagonism, which dissolves the contours of any social or political identity. Following the same logic, the social / the political doesn’t exist; if the social / the political *appears* to our sight or cognition as existing, this could happen only by means of ideological manipulations. Regardless of these arguments, I still have doubts about Žižek’s attempt to add the traumatic Real to the otherwise differential notion of the political. In fact this attempt doesn’t change ‘the order of things’, because there is no specifically political trauma – in spite of its political configurations, it always has an ethical content.

#### 4. The return of the Real: obscene miracles

After having done this procedure of quasi-comparison, we are back to our question: why these two positions are considered as incompatible, why post-structuralism or postmodernism should be displaced from its place? Who takes this place, or who is the subject / object of postmodernism? The 'true' signifier of postmodernism is inaccessible, though we have its symptoms. For Žižek the symptom of postmodernism is the direct object, which is either so proximate, that becomes obscene, or so evident, that becomes a miracle. In an essay "Obscene Object of Postmodernity" Žižek defines postmodernism as a process, which "consists not in demonstrating that the game works without an object, that the play is set in motion by a central absence [as it is in case of modernism – A. Ž], but rather in displaying the object directly, allowing it to make visible its own indifferent and arbitrary character" (Žižek 1999a: 41). This direct proximity of the object is conceived as obscene and nauseous phenomena, which cause anxiety because of being simply too close (Žižek takes as an example Kafka's universe). At the same time this direct object can have an opposite effect of meaning: if it leaves enough space, it is perceived as a miracle (for example, bells in the sky in Lars von Trier's film *Breaking the Waves*). In both cases it is the presence of the object (the object as a present) which introduces the distinction between modernism and postmodernism: "what characterizes postmodernism is precisely that one can return to a pre-modern

'enchanted universe' in which miracles effectively do occur, as an aesthetic spectacle, without 'really believing it', but also without any ironic or cynical distance", – points out Žižek (Žižek 1999b: 219).

In both cases that disgusts and that fascinates is the Real – its presence and evidence. These examples reveal that postmodernism, which was accused for excluding the problem of the Real, *presents itself* as the Real. Interpreting the symptoms of postmodernism, now we can reveal the missing signifier: the trauma of postmodernism consists of this simple fact, that the phenomenon of postmodernism, always escaping any definitions, *is nothing other as the Real*, with all its stupidity, obscenity and everyday miracles. Here we can refer again to the difference between reality and the Real, the 'antinomy of postmodern reason', entitled as postmodern realism. Postmodern realism consists of two contradictory ideologies: ideology of realism, directly appealing to reality, and discursive ideology, insisting that reality is a result of a set of discursive practices. Žižek makes from this contradiction a Hegelian twist: the hard kernel of the Real preserves the character of reality, and *vice versa*: the Real persists against the pressure of reality. But what if this dialectic is even more horrible, what if besides the direct appeal to reality, what resides on the banal evidence of the Real, and the discursively constructed reality, persists the third one, namely, the banality of evidence, which is a result of discursive practices? What if the Real *is* this banality of evidence, which after discursive manipulations appears as an obscene miracle, persisting in every moment of our everydayness?

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## TIKROVĖS POSTMODERNIOS GRIMASOS

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Santrauka

Straipsnyje detaliai analizuojama tikrovės sąvoka, kuri interpretuojama kaip teorinis įrankis, leidžiantis pasipriešinti postmodernioms diskurso teorijoms. Slovėnų filosofas Slavojas Žižekas tikrovės sąvoką pasiskolina iš Jacques'o Lacano psichoanalizės; Žižeko teigimu, tikrovė yra nereprezentuojamas, trauminis branduolys, plytintis „kažkur anapus“ simbolinės tvarkos. Remdamasis šia tikrovės samprata, Žižekas kritikuoja postmodernias diskurso teorijas, negalinčias paaiškinti, kas yra anapus diskurso ir kaip įmanoma apibrėžti paties diskurso ribas. Judith'os Butler ir Charles'o Shepherdsono kritika atskleidė Žižeko pozicijos prieštarumą: net jei teigiame, jog tikrovė sukuria diskurso ribas, šias ribas galime aptikti tik remdamiesi diskursyviomis praktikomis. Atsižvelgdamas į kritiką, Žižekas patikslino savo koncepciją: dabar tikrovė yra ne transcendentinis anapus, kurį veltui bando įvardyti simbolinė

reikšmės struktūra, bet tai, kas priklauso simbolinei tvarkai. Kitaip tariant, tikrovė negali būti įvardijama ne dėl to, kad ji yra išoriška simbolinei tvarkai, bet dėl to, kad ji šiai tvarkai priklauso, yra jos vidinė riba. Tačiau ši tikrovės aiškinimo versija, interpretuojanti tikrovę kaip vidinę simbolinės reikšmės struktūros ribą, darosi paradoksaliai artima postmodernioms diskurso teorijoms. Taigi tikrovės sąvokos apibrėžimai reflektuoja „postmodernaus proto antinomiją“: tiesioginė nuoroda į tikrovę rodosi per daug naivi, jog būtų laikoma filosofiniu problema sprendimu, o postmoderni diskurso ideologija yra autoreferentiška ir nepajėgi nurodyti nieko anapus savęs. Straipsnyje analizuojamos tikrovės sąvokos implikacijos seksualinio, etinio ir politinio diskurso plotmėje, be to, keliamas klausimas, kokias „realias“ reikšmes slepia filosofinio „tikrovės sugrįžimo“ simptomai.

*Įteikta 2002 06 12*