

WARD BLANTON
Luther College

APOCALYPTIC MATERIALITY: RETURN(S) OF
EARLY CHRISTIAN MOTIFS IN SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK'S
DEPICTION OF THE MATERIALIST SUBJECT

IS THERE A VIABLE MATERIALIST APPROACH to the subject today, and how is such a materiality, or such a subject, to be thought? Moreover, is it possible to consider how contemporary communicative technologies or new media work to establish basic models for such thinking? This essay interacts with these questions in two respects. First, it considers some of Slavoj Žižek's writings as examples of a surprising trend that extends itself well beyond the limits of Žižek's own body of work. This trend is the attempt to negotiate the question of the subject and its materiality by way of a philosophical re-deployment of an early Christian (and, quite frequently, a Pauline) articulation of universality as founded on the exceptional event. Second, the essay explores the connection between Žižek's materialist subject and his use of early Christian idiom by way of a retroactive sketch of one of Žižek's precursors, Franz Overbeck, in the tinkering together of early Christian *topoi* and a specifically modern attempt to negotiate the mediated materiality of the subject. This comparative glance at Overbeck illuminates some of the functions and associations constituting the material/Pauline subject of Žižek.

Throughout many of his writings, Žižek sets up a homology between a materialist subjectivity and a newly minted or newly resurrected Pauline subjectivity. At the beginning of *The Puppet and the Dwarf* (subtitle: *The Perverse Core of Christianity*), for example, Žižek makes this remarkable pronouncement:

My claim is not merely that I am a materialist through and through, and that the subversive kernel of Christianity is accessible also to a materialist approach; my thesis is much stronger: this kernel is accessible *only* to a materialist approach—and vice versa: to become a true dialectical materialist, one should go through the Christian experience.¹

¹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2003), 6.

From here, Žižek spends the rest of the book explicating this statement, an explication that has consistent and significant intersections with his discussions of Pauline Christianity. To return to our initial question, why are we seeing this resurgence of early Christian *topoi* in cultural theory today? And why are these *topoi* all tricked out as attempts to think in a contemporary mode the materiality of the subject? To put it differently, why is the Pauline subject being peddled as the subject of our time, and why precisely as one that functions as a potential revelation of materiality?²

Just as this initial, naïve question seems to impose itself on us, an obstacle against its unpacking is immediately at hand in Žižek's own justification of his level of interest in Christianity. He suggests, automatically enough, that the Left must vie for the Christian legacy lest it be left to the uncontested appropriation of "the fundamentalist freaks."³ This is undoubtedly correct: without a contestatory renegotiation of the Christian legacy, its critical potentials are left to be siphoned off by the regnant religious establishments and their (frequently) less than promising political commitments. One can see, however, that such a pragmatic rationale likewise functions as a predictable resistance against a form of analysis to which we might otherwise subject Žižek's writings, using some of Žižek's own tricks of interrogation. With this deferral to the "fundamentalist freaks," for example, our analysis leaves the fundamentalist as the one-who-believes, and Žižek's (or our own) negotiation of the proposed connection between "the Christian experience" and a materialist subject remains largely unclarified or merely parasitic upon the imagined faith of a proxy, namely, that of the fundamentalist.⁴

If we refuse to defer to the fundamentalist, however, Žižek's own gamble, dialectical speculation, or (to shift registers more dramatically) his act of faith in comparing dialectical materialism to "the Christian experience," comes to the fore. By the same token, without the fundamentalist as a guarantor of Žižek's comparative discourse and its hinge between early Christian motifs and a contemporary thinking of materiality, the boundaries delimiting or separating the identities in

² My considerations of Christian motifs in Žižek's writings in this essay, therefore, are more narrowly circumscribed than they might be. Žižek also treats Pauline writings as an indication of differences between "Judaism" and "Christianity," something that does not concern me here, and not only because this is (as Žižek occasionally points out) a problematic distinction to make in reference to Pauline writings.

³ Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute-- or, Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (London: Verso, 2000), 2.

⁴ The gesture would, in short, follow the liberal democratic mode of describing "belief" or commitment, a mode that Žižek attempts to resist in many of his writings. In this mode, we are told, it is always the "other" who believes on one's behalf, leaving the tolerant liberal multi-culturalist to take up the position of detached and ironic reaction. This disinterestedness, of course, is yet another indication that the autonomy of the ironically detached observer has been ceded to the processes of capitalism, leaving her to lament the violence of the "other" from the standpoint of the "beautiful soul." For such discussions, see Slavoj Žižek, *On Belief* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

play here begin to blur. The blurring threatens even to unhinge altogether the fundamental comparative difference between early Christian “experience” and Žižek’s thinking of materiality. To pose the question without recourse to the faith of the fundamentalist (who is, by definition, always ready to believe in place of the detached or merely pragmatic observer), is to repeat our initial question in a decidedly early Christian or apocalyptic tone: why this isomorphism between Žižek’s early Christian legacy and a contemporary thinking of materiality—why *now*? What has arrived or is about to arrive to establish this economy in which the mutual leap of faith between “Christian experience” and “dialectical materialism” appears as a worthwhile gamble? This question must be asked even (or perhaps especially) if the goal is to transform retroactively the economic conditions of this gamble’s possibility. What apocalyptic event, in short, has thus inverted the hierarchy of these identities and re-inscribed Žižek, the self-proclaimed atheist and materialist, as a kind of *Paulus redivivus*?

It is worth pointing out that Žižek himself poses such a question, and with such a tone, when he inaugurates a kind of contemporary eschatological speculation about what might be described as the “times and seasons” in which materiality has begun to stand in for (earliest) Christianity, and vice versa. Agreeing to some degree with Giorgio Agamben “that Saint Paul became readable only in the twentieth century...” Žižek continues:

In some sense, we can in fact argue that, today, we are approaching a kind of “end of time:” the self-propelling explosive spiral of global capitalism does seem to point toward a moment of (social, ecological, even subjective) collapse, in which total dynamism, frantic activity, will coincide with a deeper immobility. History will be abolished in the eternal present of multiple narrativization; nature will be abolished when it becomes subject to biogenetic manipulation; the very permanent transgression of the norm will assert itself as the unconditional norm.⁵

As was the case with Marshall McLuhan’s post-industrial or “electric” age (and its production of a neo-primitivism and a return of the religious) or Jean Baudrillard’s end of history (and its evocation of a neo-Gnosticism), for Žižek the alleged triumph of capitalism and the apparent collapse of traditional revolutionary alternatives yields a situation in which Pauline metaphors become prescient, *as if they were waiting* for late capitalism to make sense of them all along.⁶ We are promised, then, something very contemporary—a contemporary thinking of ma-

⁵ Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 134.

⁶ One of the many intimate similarities between these thinkers is their shared, quasi-eschatological pronouncement of religion’s return in the emergence of new technological forms of communicativity. While the motifs of religion’s mediated return are common enough in their writings, I am thinking above all of Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: Signet Books, 1964); and Jean Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime* (London: Verso, 1996).

teriality, among other things—in Žižek’s re-deployment of the Pauline or, as he calls it elsewhere, the “Christian” experience.⁷

The exemplarity of Pauline Christianity here (not to mention the promise of its final unveiling or unsealing in the epoch of “late capitalism”) is enticing, even if only because it might disclose the function of “late capitalism,” the “end of history,” or the newness of virtualizing or re-narrativizing trends within Žižek’s cultural analysis. Moreover, the political-cultural significance of this exemplarity of Paulinism and of its “Christian experience” can hardly be overestimated.

After all, Žižek’s Paulinisms tend to stand in for a kind of opening onto what he sometimes calls the “substance” or “excess” of life that by definition eludes the calculable territories of the present world order of global capitalism and the post-historical (or, as he sometimes calls it, post-metaphysical) liberalism that has accompanied this order.⁸ Žižek looks to the “Christian experience,” in this respect, as the source of a potentially revolutionary “swerve” that might be injected into this otherwise self-perpetuating order, a swerve whose de-stabilizing force makes possible another form of virtualization than that being generated by the system of global capitalism.

Contesting Virtualizations: Paulinism Against Capital

In one of the variations of this eschatological struggle between competing forms of virtualization, Žižek looks to a formalized Paulinism to combat the otherwise completely administered and predictable “last man” for whom the good is (we are told) only the maintenance of socially pre-fabricated desires, norms, and hierarchies, for whom the good is, in short, “his” own existence within the unquestionable regime of late capitalism. Within this self-perpetuating economy of subjects and objects, the subjective disposition of the “last man” is mirrored in a host of commodities that have been “deprived” of the “substance” that might other-

⁷ I am particularly interested in the way we might narrate the history of religious thought along the lines of Marx’s epochal history of capital, in which new economic formations evoke the ghosts of—or wear the masks of—those that preceded. The question here is not, therefore, about the “correctness” of this serial return of religion; the orientation of the historian cannot clarify entirely what is at stake here. One must begin in a more hermeneutical mode that is open to the way rhythms or self-organizing refrains from a modern or contemporary field of forces can organize or stage a “return” of an ancient religion that, in some ways, does not exist (or exists only virtually) before this “return.” By the same token, some of the homogenizing topoi of the theorists of hermeneutics are too general and vague to allow us to consider the temporalizing and indeed, religion-producing effects of modern communicative technologies in relation to these “returns.”

⁸ See Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, 96.

wise make them “dangerous.”⁹ Ironically, the objects in this case, safely appropriated by the determinate or regulated symbolic order by having been safely deprived of their “dangerous” substance, parade themselves as icons of a continual revolution of desires and norms. As Žižek points out, however, the revolutions for which these objects stand are those that never really change anything fundamental. This genuinely revolutionary possibility is foreclosed by the fact that these commodities (like their late capitalist consumers, we are told) have been carefully deprived of any “substance” that could evoke an unconditional demand (of whatever sort) that would itself short-circuit the smooth operation of the determinate mechanisms of market expansion.¹⁰ The self-preservation of the late capitalist status quo repeats itself, therefore, in the form of subjects for whom self-preservation is the absolute. This subjective orientation is mirrored at the level of the substance-less or virtualized commodity. Žižek’s favorite examples of this sort of commodity are virtual sex, caffeine-free coffee, alcohol-free beer, or—now the end is upon us—warfare without war.

Within the context of this description of the subjects and objects of global capitalism, Žižek leans on Paulinist *topoi* in an effort to re-insert the dangerous “substance” of enjoyment back “into” the “objects” of contemporary affection. In the process, the attempt to salvage the “dangerous” potential of “things” by way of the early Christian *topos* articulates itself as a kind of struggle between competing forms of virtuality. Comparing his own frequent jeremiads about sex without sex, coffee without caffeine, or (in a multi-culturalist vein) cultural diversity without the traumatic difference of the “neighbor” who hystericizes me, Žižek echoes a Paulinist subjectivity in which the *mē onta* (or things that are not) are called into being at that same moment in which the structures of everyday existence are placed under erasure (or, in the Pauline idiom, *hōs me*, as if they were not). Formally speaking, this double displacement erupts in the form of an exceptional and, therefore, incalculable event.

Comparing this formalized Paulinist subjectivity to that of someone who has fallen in love, Žižek writes:

To paraphrase Paul, when we are in love, “we buy as though we have no possessions, we deal with the world as though we have no dealings with it,” since all

⁹ Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, 96.

¹⁰ One hears echoes here of the way he is opposed to versions of cultural analysis that do not see “capitalism” as the primordial dimension of the contemporary production of the social. In this repetition of a base-superstructure model, much of contemporary identity politics appears as epiphenomenal to the negotiation of “capitalism.” This basic point is of central importance to Žižek’s deployment of the “Christian experience,” as he finds himself hoping for Christian motifs to inspire a social action that strikes against “capitalism” itself and that identity politics or multi-culturalist liberalism will not inspire.

that ultimately matters is love itself. Perhaps the gap which separates pleasure and jouissance is nowhere more palpable than in the situation when, after a long period of calm and complaisant life, with its little pleasures, one all of a sudden falls passionately in love: love shatters our daily life as a heavy duty whose performance demands heavy sacrifices on the level of the “pleasure principle”—how many things must a man renounce? “Freedom,” drinks with friends, card evenings.¹¹

Thus Paul becomes significant for Žižek’s political and philosophical project as a thinker of the exceptional calling into existence of “things which are not” (*ta mē onta*, according to the Pauline idiom of 1 Corinthians) and of a time that has been (therewith) “shortened” or collapsed upon itself in a way that spectralizes the present. The agents within this “shortened” temporality are those for whom the objects and experiences of this world have become “as if they were not,” (*hōs me*), crossed out or placed under erasure by a cross-shaped X. In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul describes these objects and experiences in terms of the market, family structures, and ethnic distinctions.

Moreover, these two moments of the Pauline/late capitalist ontology are related: the things that are, and also the schema of the world that sustains them, are crossed out and considered to be passing into non-existence *in that same moment of kairos* in which “the things which are not” (above all the believers themselves, many of whom were of no account socially) find themselves called into existence as a community to whom belongs the all. In the striking and (to take another turn around our ambiguously ancient/modern axes) curiously Marxist language of 1 Corinthians, this apocalyptic inversion occurs when the nothing (*ta mē onta*) claims for itself the hegemony of a re-organized totality (as Paul does for the Corinthian believers). After all, “Everything belongs to you” (1 Cor. 3:22) is one of the Hellenistic philosophical slogans Paul appropriates for the untrained, common, or not-so-philosophical believers in Corinth.¹²

To follow Žižek in placing this formalized Paulinism onto a Lacanian register, Paul presents us with a subjectivating event that evokes an action from the subject. This action is unconstrained by the implicit rules of the symbolic order and therefore shatters the determinable calculations of the pleasure principle in a revolutionary re-orientation of the fundamental structures of the social. The unconditional duty emerging from the exceptional (properly speaking incalculable) event may likewise be described as the emergence of the “death drive,” in which the late capitalist subject might be compelled to press toward a goal higher than

¹¹ Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, 113.

¹² Other co-opted slogans in 1 Corinthians include, “Everything is permissible for you” (6:12; 10:23; see also 8:6) and “The wise man judges everything and yet is not susceptible to the judgments of common opinion” (2:15).

that of self-maintenance. Žižek hopes, therefore, that a formalized Paulinism and its subjective logic of the resurrection/exceptional event, could found a politics that can do what a liberal, multi-culturalist politics (we are told) will not do. This politics would ground an apparently impossible intervention into the unquestionable right of contemporary globalizing capital, and it would do this at the very moment of capitalism's apparent triumph and of the seeming impossibility of revolutionary alternatives. He is dreaming, in short, of an eschatological scenario in which those who save their lives will lose them and, through the subjectivating logic of the exceptional event, those who lose their lives will find them.

“If one is permitted to indulge in a sacrilegious parallel...”
Žižek With Overbeck:¹³

Already this brief delineation of some of the stakes of Žižek's gamble on an isomorphism between a contemporary thinking of materiality and a formalized early Christian subjectivity may have evoked echoes of some of Žižek's favorite philosophical interlocutors. In relation to the modern history of biblical interpretation, moreover, it is clear that Žižek's use of early Christianity as an icon of exit from an otherwise totally administered society is a well-worn path. While I do not in any way intend the bare fact of such a repetition to be a criticism of Žižek's own re-deployment of the *tableau*, a consideration of some of these parallels does help to situate the particular directions in which Žižek tends to move in his attempt to resurrect a “Christian experience” that is likewise a “materialist approach” to the subject.

Among several possible examples, it is worth mentioning Franz Overbeck's “On the Christianity of our Contemporary Theology” (1873).¹⁴ In this remarkable, and very influential, essay, Overbeck condemns the complacent contentment of bourgeois culture (with the biblical scholar and would-be literary critic, David Friedrich Strauss, bearing the brunt of this criticism). Overbeck describes the cultural trend in historico-religious terms as a tragic failure of modern Christen-

¹³ Slavoj Žižek, *On Belief*, 131. If there is sacrilege or offense in the present analysis, it may emerge from two aspects of the following discussion. First, Žižek's writings are compared to an earlier thinker with whom he may not wish to identify. Second, the discussion concludes with a comparison of Žižek's theoretical writings and his writings about the aesthetics of Kieślowski's films, crossing the boundary that Žižek sometimes wants to maintain between high theory and his occasional writings.

¹⁴ Franz Overbeck, *Über die Christlichkeit unserer heutiger Theologie* (Leipzig: E. W. Fritzsche, 1873). In this essay, I cite from the English translation by John Elbert Wilson, in *Franz Overbeck, On the Christianity of Theology*, trans. John Elbert Wilson (San Jose: Pickwick, 2002).

dom's ability to recognize the critical potential of early Christianity and its "world-denying" essence. In an effort to reclaim some of this critical potential, Overbeck opposes the "inner freedom" of early Christian religion to a kind of totalitarian closure of culture he imagines to be characteristic of *both* the Roman empire *and* its modern repetition in the form of a complacent bourgeois sensibility.

Many of Overbeck's concerns are summed up in a paragraph that criticizes Strauss' *Old Faith and the New*, in which Strauss attempts to draw on his authority as a biblical scholar and would-be critic of modern literature to declare that Europe is no longer Christian and that it that it must invent for itself a new, evolutionary religious identity. As one particular paragraph of Overbeck's criticism of Strauss summarizes many of Overbeck's feelings on the matter, it is worth quoting at length:

There can be nothing more foreign to Christianity and its feeling of compassion [*Mitleidsempfindung*] than the ideal of culture Strauss unfolds in answer to the question about how we are to live without Christianity. But where does it [Strauss' ideal of culture] place us? Approximately on the standpoint of the narrow-minded citizen of imperial Rome, who had his religion in the "mysterium" of the chief of state. In the tranquil enjoyment of his wealth, he had the army to protect him from enemies outside Rome and the severity of the law to protect him from enemies within. He whiled away the gloomy hours with a dead art, which the order of the state could not keep from him. Insofar as he had the possibility of becoming a Christian and refused, he is perhaps the most anti-Christian figure history shows us. This standpoint is so base that we hardly need to call on Christianity to prove its meanness, nor even pre-Christian Greco-Roman paganism, which would truly provide only the most shaming parallel to Strauss' ideal of life. The pagans of imperial Rome suffice, for they, or at least the thinkers among them, sensed the bitter fruit of every state that has arrived at its goal: uncontested and unconditional rule...Strauss seems to be of the opinion that *nothing is lacking* in the happiness of a people that has let itself be locked in the cage of such a "finished" state.¹⁵

When Žižek looks to early Christianity as an exemplary indication of the "fragile absolute" whose subjectivating potential shatters the constraints of a totally administered culture and the complacency of its docile consumers, he is very close to Overbeck. Lacking the lack that keeps subjects from being "locked in the cage" of a "finished" state, Strauss the neo-Roman subject essentially hands over the potential for creative transformation of culture to a state whose "mysterium" is all the more mysterious for being the embodiment of a freedom from which the individual has been expelled. In this context, the conversion to Christianity (which the ancient Roman and/or Strauss has refused) would have afforded a rupture within the otherwise totalitarian closure of society. In Overbeck's terms, Christi-

anity offers one of those “powers” in the world that can “found, transfigure, and uplift the state,” precisely because it re-injects a “lack” into its otherwise “finished” state of affairs.¹⁶

Despite his occasional suggestions that he is doing a decidedly post-Hegelian form of historical analysis, there are in Overbeck’s critiques strong echoes of Hegel’s narration of the history of religion from “Roman” religion (of a determined or organized pragmatism) to the emergence of Christianity (that re-inserts an abyssal subjective “swerve” back into the organized totality of Roman religion).¹⁷ For Hegel, the Roman “religion of expediency” was one in which the authority of the Roman empire had organized and extended itself to such a remarkable degree that it may be said to have provided all of humanity with a purposive “bond” in which the “unification of [all] human beings” began to appear a distinct possibility or object of thought.¹⁸ In fact, the very success of this communicative “bond” that the empire effected resulted (according to Hegel) in a sense that there was no distinction between the determined possibilities of “the world” and the nature of those gods who increasingly came to stand in for that imperial world’s determined, purposive links. The immanent presence of the organized imperial totality, in other words, swallowed even the gods in its power of making-things-determinate.

In Hegel’s terminology, therefore, the economy of gods and governors here is “not yet a rational organization internally,” or *not yet aware of itself*.¹⁹ Without the reflexive motion of consciousness, the entire religio-disciplinary complex becomes for Hegel the simulacrum of divine presence or freedom. The complex has been evacuated of its *potential for self-transformation*. The very immanence of Roman religion and its statically determinate, reified, or (in Overbeck’s terms) “finished” state of affairs offers only the false sheen of a choreographed sham. One catches an indication of this, Hegel tells us, in the fact that the individual within this complex loses her sense of self, her sense of ownership, or her sense of divinity, within this economy.

Hegel summarizes, “The power [of the Roman state and *cultus*] is only abstract, it

¹⁵ Overbeck, *On the Christianity of Theology*, 108ff. [italics added].

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 109.

¹⁷ Žižek uses the language of the “swerve of the real” in Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, 58-91. In this respect, it is interesting to note that Alain Badiou uses Paul to describe a vision of ontological openness that is not entirely dissimilar to the one he finds in Lucretius. See Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003).

¹⁸ For the purposes of this essay, I will cite from the standard English edition, with the references to the standard German text in parentheses. G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 2: *Determinate Religion* (Berkeley: University of California, 1995), 690 (592).

¹⁹ Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, 690 (582).

is only power; it is not a rational organization, or a *self-contained* totality."²⁰ Without reflexivity and its concomitant sense of self, without the realization that the whole complex is a subjectively produced state of affairs and thus capable of being otherwise, the individual in the "Roman" religious complex represents only the simulacrum of subjectivity, a *subjectivity without genuine indeterminacy* or the potential of being otherwise. For Hegel, this form of subjectivity is one that has become, like its gods, a technical apparatus in a "machinery devoid of sense," consigned to dwell only among the determinate sphere of the understanding with no real access to the substantial force of the imagination.²¹

Here, once more, we are very close to the way Žižek sets up the revelation of a "Christian experience" that is likewise the subversive "kernel" of "dialectical materialism." For Žižek, the neo-Roman (or "late capitalist") system of objects is one in which the indeterminacies of individual choice are carefully shunted off to the realm of the inconsequential or "merely personal." As Hegel said in reference to individual preferences within Roman imperialism, they are "wholly and prosaically private matters."²² It is, therefore, a decidedly "Roman" economy of religion and subjectivity that structures the possibility of a "late capitalist" state of affairs in which, as Žižek prophesies, "total dynamism" and "frantic activity" might soon "coincide with a deeper immobility." The only difference separating these repetitions of the "Roman" or "late capitalist" regime of truth, perhaps, is that with Žižek's "late capitalism," there is an obsession with staging the *appearance* of self-determination in spectacles of indeterminacy and freedom, whereas, according to Hegel, the gladiatorial spectacles of Rome were thought to represent just the opposite, the sense that individuality was itself meaningless.²³ The "Roman" spectacle is, in this respect, a more honest representation of the underlying cultural economy than is the "late capitalist" simulation of perpetual revolution.

In light of the comparison with Overbeck, it is also interesting that Žižek frequently frames his discussions of the miraculous, gratuitous, or contingent event

²⁰ Ibid., 692f. (584).

²¹ Ibid., 693 (585).

²² Ibid., 694 (586).

²³ Hegel writes:

Roman virtue or *virtus* is that cold patriotism [which dictates] that the individual must serve the interest of the state or the sovereign authority completely. The Romans themselves even made this negativity, this submergence of the individual in the universal, into a spectacle; it is what constitutes an essential feature in their religious plays. The religious dramas of the Romans consist of the shedding of torrents of blood. There is no ethical interest, or a misfortune that might be connected with ethical characteristics: instead the picture is that of the dry, cold conversion of death. Hundreds and thousands had to slay one another. This cold-blooded murder was a delight to their eyes; in it they beheld the nullity of human individuality, the worthlessness of the individual (because individuality has no ethical life within it). It was the spectacle of the hollow, empty destiny that relates to human beings as a contingency, as blind caprice. [Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, 697f. (589).]

of the “fragile absolute” (as an appearance that affords the possibility of re-inserting the dangerous substance of revolutionary demand back into the calculated form of self-maintenance) as the event that would redeem the “the last man.” After all, Overbeck formulated his critique of the complacent bourgeoisie as a community without lack in a Basel apartment next to that of Overbeck’s friend and erstwhile conversational partner, the young Nietzsche. The pair even had a copy of the *Untimely Meditations* bound with a copy of *On the Christianity of Today’s Theology* as a gesture of their critical solidarity.

Mediating the Isomorphisms: Nietzsche/Overbeck’s Newspaper and the Virtualizing Technologies of Žižek’s “Last Man.”

The solidarity of these two works presents us with yet another turn of the ancient/modern screw, as the critiques of David Friedrich Strauss in both Nietzsche and Overbeck are consistently intertwined with a critique of modern mass media and their allegedly degenerative effects on its middle class consumers. Overbeck’s criticisms of Strauss in *On the Christianity of Contemporary Theology* are, in this respect, very similar to the excoriations of Strauss the “newspaper man” in Nietzsche’s generally overlooked rumination on religion and media, “David Friedrich Strauss, Author and Confessor,” the (second) essay in the *Untimely Meditations* series. Deploying a tactic one likewise observes throughout Nietzsche’s essay, Overbeck declares that Strauss’ critical destruction of Christianity (as the secularizing biblical scholar of *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*) and his attempt to construct a new religion on the ruins of the old (as a would-be reconstructive theologian in *The Old Faith and the New*) remain fragmentary and schizophrenic. Echoing many of Nietzsche’s denunciations of Strauss as middle class producer and consumer of newspaper articles, Overbeck writes that Strauss’ project is marred by a desire “to paint Christianity in terms of current trends and events” that “only scrape that surface of human activity that newspapers write about.”²⁴ The medium, Overbeck argues, has become the message of Strauss’ new religion.

Overbeck and Nietzsche are not *simply* being unkind to Strauss on this point. From the very start of Strauss’ *Old Faith and the New*, the biblical scholar become cultural-theological guide manifests a near obsession with newspaper articles and the common opinions he believes to be both embodied and produced therein. Likewise, Strauss consistently addresses his cultural-theological manifesto to a middle class “we” that functions like a kind of eschatological gathering

²⁴ Overbeck, *On the Christianity of Theology*, 110.

of the bearers of the new evolutionary religion Strauss hopes to herald.

At one point in *The Old Faith and the New*, for example, Strauss juxtaposes his secularizing and destructive labors as a biblical critic (in which he attempted to convince his audience that the Bible must be disavowed as a foreign medium that cannot provide the form of participation necessary for a free and modern community-to-come) with his constructive labors as an exponent of a “new” religion. His destructive labor he disseminated through biblical scholarship, his constructive *evangelion* through the newspaper: “It is through this latter medium that I now try to communicate with the rest of my ‘We.’ The medium is quite sufficient for all those purposes which we at present have in view.”²⁵

For a new formation (*ein Neubildung*) (not of a church, but, after the latter’s ultimate decay, a new organization of the ideal elements in the life of the people [*im Völkerleben*]), the time seems to us not yet to have arrived. But neither do we wish to repair or prop up the old structures, for we discern in these a hindrance to the process of reorganization. We would only exert our influence so that a new growth should in the future develop of itself from the inevitable dissolution of the old. For this end—communication without formal organization (*eine Verständigung ohne Verein*)—an inspiring through the free word will suffice.²⁶

Fluent in the Pauline metaphor that doubles as the newness of the *Neuzeit*, Strauss suggests that the liberating word is not far away, sealed and separated in an allegedly heavenly book, but rather is near Strauss’ “we,” on their lips—and in their newspapers. By means of this inspiring medium, modernity finds itself in the presence of a kind of eschatological talking cure that will elude the dead-ends of previous societal formations: “We” have the inspiring power of free speech; above all, Strauss tells us, “We have the newspaper.”²⁷

The intertwining of eschatological, secularizing, and media metaphors are not lost on Overbeck or the young Nietzsche. For them, the medium of Strauss’ noble “We” has become the message of his new, modern religion. Nietzsche describes its eschatologically “inspiring” power, for example, in terms of the physiological effects of the mass print market as it imprints its rhythms and forms of information packaging on the bodies of the middle class. For Overbeck, in place of a religious questioning involving a “definite view of life,” Strauss’ either-or between Christianity and a new religion offers only a choice between *ad hoc* assemblages of disconnected or free-floating pieces of data with which the individual

²⁵ David Friedrich Strauss, *Die Alte und der Neue Glaube: Ein Bekenntnis* (Bonn: Verlag von Emil Strauss, 1873), 8. See David Friedrich Strauss, *The Old Faith and the New* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1997), 8. In the following citations I will use the German edition and include the English page number in parentheses.

²⁶ Strauss, *Die Alte und der Neue Glaube: Ein Bekenntnis*, 8 (7).

²⁷ *Ibid.*

either does or does not identify. As such, the “choice” involved here remains limited, in the language of Hegel, to “wholly and prosaically private matters.”²⁸ In short, the “Roman” attitude that Overbeck finds in Strauss’ new religion is likewise *a mode of information processing and consumption* that the historian links to the subjectivity engendered by the newspapers. It is the inconsequential or substanceless “privacy” of Strauss’ religious discourse, a theological version of the atomistic reader/responder of neatly packaged newspaper stories, that Overbeck rejects as a “return” of “Roman” religion.

Likewise, this “return” of the “Roman” in the guise of a modern subjective economy organizing itself along the arterial circulations of the newspaper is imagined (by Strauss and Overbeck alike) as a decidedly middle class affair.²⁹ Dazed by the barrage of disconnected and pre-packaged data, the subjectivity of Strauss’ neo-Roman religion can no longer re-collect itself in terms of a “deep” or “unified” view of life.³⁰ The result of this informational dispersal of self is an “empty” form of subjectivity that cannot provide (Overbeck believes) the communicative ground for authentic community. For Overbeck (like Žižek), the neo-Roman form of subjectivity is a modern economy of information in which middle class readers make “choices” about superficial chunks of information, without the power to organize these discrete packets in a community-forming vision of the world. Hegel illustrated the vacuity of religious subjectivity under Roman religion by pointing to Plutarch’s assertion that the Pythic oracle was no longer asked anything except what was useful only for “common questions of no consequence.” In Overbeck (and, by proxy, Nietzsche), the neo-“Roman” religion was best exemplified by the turn from classical books to the mass-marketed periodical.

To bring this line of thought back to Žižek’s recent repetition of early Christian motifs against the “late capitalist” or post-metaphysical state of affairs, is it not the case that almost everything Overbeck says about the complacent bourgeoisie amidst the allegedly stifling function of the newspaper economy and the popular print market could stand in for Žižek’s pronouncements about the virtualizing movement of “late capitalism” and its complacent “last man”? Are MUD’s, MOO’s, Cyberspace, and Tiny Sex in Žižek’s analyses anything but the “newspaper” of Overbeck and Nietzsche? If so, how will this non-differentiation of modern communicative or informational techniques and the forms of subjectivity they call into being affect our understanding of the return of early Christian religion and the revelation of contemporary materiality it promises to unveil?

²⁸ Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, 690 (582).

²⁹ See Overbeck, *On the Christianity of Theology*, 111.

³⁰ See Overbeck, *On the Christianity of Theology*, 110.

From Film Aesthetics to Earliest Christianity and Back Again:
Of Materialism, Pauline Subjectivity,
and the Special Effects Linking the Two.

There are undoubtedly many similar lines of questioning about the shaping function of communicative technologies and techniques that could be pursued in relation to Žižek's richly stocked writings and their re-deployment of a formalized early Christian "experience." For the moment I will focus on the way Žižek's "materialism" and his "Christian experience" overlap, once again, in the discussion of Krzysztof Kieślowski's films in Žižek's *The Fright of Real Tears*. This instance of overlapping makes clear the way Žižek's "materialist" ontology of the event and his re-deployment of early Christian "experience" intertwine around the "special effect," the exceptional event that founds subjectivity.³¹

While he does not often reflect on the way new media function as the enabling models for (or quasi-transcendental conditions of the possibility of) his own thinking, Žižek describes the contemporary "return" of an early Christian Gnosticism as an almost automatic response to the emergence of contemporary communicative technologies and the economies of information that accompany them. In his discussion of the films of Kieślowski (and, significantly, of Kieślowski's exploration of the Decalog), Žižek suggests that the technologies and communicative practices making up "cyberspace" have carried with them a revival of this "Gnostic imagination."³²

The prospect of the digital global network not only gave rise to a renewed Gnostic New Age spirituality...but this spirituality even actively sustained the digital technological development—the notion of "TechGnosis" is fully justified as the designation of what Louis Althusser would have called the 'spontaneous ideology' of the cyber-scientists.³³

It is automatic really, the "return" of the ancient religious subject position as a spontaneous mode of existence that both enables and is enabled by the rise of digital tele-communications. Žižek does not explore the spontaneity or automaticity of his own re-deployment of Christian motifs, though it seems their necessity has been similarly conjured by the present reign of digital technologies. Elsewhere, for example, in an exhortation that is by no means an isolated occur-

³¹ Hent de Vries provides a sketch of a genealogy "Of Miracles and Special Effects" in the article by this name, published in the *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 50 (December 2001), 41-56. Some of this material has made its way into de Vries' introduction to Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber, eds., *Religion and Media* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2002).

³² Slavoj Žižek, *The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieślowski Between Theory and Post-Theory* (London: British Film Institute, 2001), 121.

³³ Ibid.

rence in Žižek's writings, he suggests, "Against today's onslaught of New Age neo-paganism, it thus seems both theoretically productive and politically salient to stick to Judaeo-Christian logic."³⁴ Linking the Judaeo-Christian legacy to an experience in which subjectivity emerges from an encounter with a contingent, exterior, or properly non-sensible alterity, Žižek writes:

What is arguably the ultimate scene of religious-ideological interpellation—the pronouncement of the Decalogue of Mount Sinai—is the very opposite of something that emerges 'organically' as the outcome of the path of self-knowing and self-realization. The Judaeo-Christian tradition is thus to be strictly opposed to the New Age Gnostic problematic of self-realization or self-fulfillment; when the Old Testament enjoins you to love and respect your neighbor, this refers not to your imaginary *semblable*/double, but to the neighbor qua traumatic Thing.³⁵

If the digital network emerged in the same moment as the spectral return of Gnosticism, Žižek likewise finds himself looking for an alternative "Christian experience" among the new media-- or, at least, the new movies. In light of Žižek's comments about the Decalog, therefore, one of the questions implicitly at stake in the discussion of Kieślowski's films is whether or not Kieślowski remains faithful to the "Judaeo-Christian" tradition (thought to be exemplified above all in the Decalogue itself), or whether his art falls into the trap of re-presenting this legacy through a neo-Gnostic or neo-pagan lens.

On several occasions, this consideration of Kieślowski's cinematic legacy (and, with it, the legacy Žižek alternately describes as "Judaeo-Christian" or "Western") boils down to a judgment about how Kieślowski's narratives deal with contingency. Žižek is careful to reject, for example, interpretations of these films that would see their frequent narrative depiction of unexpected events and unpredictable overlapping of causes and effects as representations of the secret guiding hand of some hidden spiritual (or signifying) force or some sort of personalized (or meaningful) holism. Against such interpretations, Žižek wants to preserve the "materialism" of Kieślowski's work, and he proposes instead that these uncanny concurrences should be read as "empty" of signifying force or without determinate coordinates or place within an interpretable whole. In short, they are to remain contingent, simply exterior to the subject's sense of meaning, or traumatic. By claiming that Kieślowski's unpredictable overlapping of random causes and

³⁴ Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute*, 107.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 109. One need not comment on the susceptibility of such a comment to the charge of misreading. Certainly, the proverbial "Canaanite, Hittites, Jebusites," etc., of the biblical stories, the frequent objects of slaughter and colonization by the Israelites, might claim that the *semblable* double is precisely what "the Old Testament" has enjoined its adherents to love! More importantly at the moment, however, it is interesting to note that Althusser's image of "religious-ideological interpellation" has begun to function as a privileged exemplar of "materialist" (or contingently founded) subjectivity as such rather than as an image of a specifically "ideological" subject position. Žižek has made this point in relation to the work of Alain Badiou.

effects cannot be placed within a totalizable or sensible context, Kieślowski is preserved from what Žižek refers to as a “Gnostic” interpretation: “The subterranean pattern of links and reverberations of visual and other motifs which underlies the narrative of Kieślowski’s fiction films has nothing to do with any spiritualist mysticism: it is, on the contrary, the ultimate proof of his *materialism*.”³⁶ The brute imposition of these truly exterior or non-sensible events in Kieślowski’s films—a kind of faithful repetition of the founding event of the “Judaeo-Christian” legacy at the burning, cloud-covered mountain of Sinai—can be coped with only through an hysterical address to the absent (or only virtually present) explanatory field, *Che Vuoi?*, what do you want from me?

Thus saved from a fall into a neo-Gnostic or neo-pagan localization of contingency within a totality capable of delimitation, the accident-oriented narratives of Kieślowski are freed to stand in for what “one is tempted to call the minimum or the basic level of cinematic materialism: this inertia of a pre-symbolic motif that insists and returns as the Real in different symbolic contexts.”³⁷ For the materialist/Judaeo-Christian legacy, therefore, the traumatic subjectivating encounter does indeed emerge from a “subterranean pattern of links and reverberations of visual and other motifs,” but these cannot be placed or negotiated according to a logic of sets capable of completely delimitation. Indeed, our awareness of them can only appear as a chaotic irruption of a monstrously unplaceable presence within our would-be determinate horizon. Sensing the in-sensible, a “materialist analysis should thus discern an intermediate domain of transversal links, associations, echoes, which are not yet properly signifying in the precise sense of a differential symbolic network that generates meaning.”³⁸

Significantly, Žižek describes the successful presentation of this “cinematic materialism” (or cinematic “Judaeo-Christianity” as the case may be) by describing various kinds of special effects or cinematic techniques, from the repeated “extreme close-up” of a burning match in David Lynch’s *Wild at Heart* to the manipulation of lighting in *Lost Highway* that makes characters appear “swallowed” in either darkness or light. Žižek also mentions the use of greenish lens filters in Kieślowski’s *A Short Film About Killing*, in this respect, calling it a “special effect” that produces a sense that the world is “as if the pre-ontological primordial Chaos is still able to penetrate the cracks of the imperfectly constituted/formed reality.”³⁹

With these statements we are returned by way of a passage through the cine-

³⁶ Žižek, *The Frigate of Real Tears*, 76.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 96.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 93-97.

matic looking glass and its various apparatuses of the “special effect” to the formalized Paulinism that has found its elective affinity with Žižek’s “late capitalist” deployment of “dialectical materialism.” In both Žižek’s formalized Paulinism and his “dialectical materialism” we have the eternal lack and unclosable rift in the Symbolic and its determinate forms of meaning-production, leaving the materialist/Paulinist to sense an openness to being-otherwise. In short, the Paulinism or materialism of Žižek’s “late capitalist” epoch is one that remains attuned to the irruptions of revolutionary potential within the otherwise self-perpetuating repetition of social and signifying structures. In both cases, the eschatological awareness that grips the materialist or Paulinist occurs in the moment of the “special effect,” which Žižek describes in *The Fright of Real Tears* in terms of the extreme close-up, the use of lens filters, and the presentation of multiple and mutually exclusive outcomes to a narrative. These “special effects” are the ontologico-aesthetic tricks of the trade that Žižek alternately labels “materialist,” “Judaean-Christian,” and “Pauline.”

Like the writings of Overbeck and Nietzsche, therefore, Žižek’s analysis of the “return” of religion doubles, as we should expect, as a mode of categorizing and contesting various contemporary modes of the dissemination of information. In Žižek’s case, the “return” of a formalized early Christian religious idiom doubles as the elusive question of the subject’s materiality, founded on the encounter with a traumatizing exteriority whose unsoundable depths burn like Mount Sinai aflame—or like a match whose “extreme close-up” swallows the entire screen—its repeated splicing into our otherwise straightforward existences marking the contemporary nexus of materialism, early Christian religion, and a thinking of subjectivity through the apparatus of the “special effect.”

By definition, there is no stable grammar of an effective “special effect” that might orient our thinking in relation to an effective *return* of earliest Christian religiosity as a crucial *contemporary* mode in which to think. After the fact, perhaps, once we have fallen into the compelling grip of this “return,” or once we have been caught up in its effectiveness as a “special effect,” we can begin to sketch some of the associations and links that—from this vantage point—seem to have been a network that could have promised this particular event of religion’s return. Never assuming such an *après-coup* rendering of this network could dispel or “explain” the inaugural event in question, I have attempted to contribute to our negotiation of the apparent “return” of a formalized Pauline subjectivity by highlighting several levels at which the exceptionalities heralded in the writings of the apostle Paul and the cinematic aesthetic of David Lynch or Krzysztof Kieślowski find themselves within a family resemblance in the writings of Žižek. While I cannot conjure away the special effect involved in this ancient/contemporary repetition—and why would I want to?—my comparative

articulation of Žižek, Nietzsche, Overbeck, and Hegel has offered several hints about that suggestive glimmer of acquaintance, the peculiar “special effect,” that tells us (of Paul, Žižek, and the aesthetic of “cinematic materialism”) “we have seen this one before.”

WARD BLANTON researches ancient and modern constructions of Christian origins. Since graduating from Yale University in 2004, he has been revising his dissertation under the title, *Reason's Apocalypse: Modern Descriptions of Christian Origins Between History and Philosophy*. As a Visiting Assistant Professor in the Department of Religion and Philosophy at Luther College, he is spending his time thinking about ancient and contemporary relationships between discourses of religion and the materialities of communication.

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