For Emil Hrvatin, a.k.a. Janez Janša

Across literary studies, the accepted view is that ideology is not only a specific belief system but also, to borrow from an old favorite, “the very condition of our experience of the world” (Belsey, 4). Since the 1950s, we have moved from regarding ideology as a form of false consciousness to the idea that there is no way out of ideology. Today, we believe that, as another favorite has it, “stepping out of it” is “the very form of our enslavement to” ideology (Žižek 1994, 6). This development follows the predictable paradigm switch from content to form, from interpellation to enunciation, from structuralism to poststructuralism. Still, despite the obvious progression, and despite the fact that there are works that seem to explain ideology in a manner that is all but definitive, I want to return to some basic issues.

The questions I want to revisit concern not ideology as such (as we will see, when we move beyond a certain position with Louis Althusser, there is no ideology as such) but the discourse on ideology. For instance, what exactly is the position from which a claim like the one above (that ideology has no limit or outside) can be made?

Or what happens when we apply the theory of ideology to itself? (If we cannot step outside ideology, can this theory be applied to itself and take itself as what Lacan would call the position of enunciation?)

Or, to ask the same question yet another way, can there be a discursive formation that replicates itself without change ad infinitum?

I am, as you can see, interested in the limit that is constitutive of ideology. My real motivation, however, comes from a rather stubborn personal failure to accept what the theory of ideology has been telling us for the past twenty years, namely, that, in Robert Pfaller’s words, “[i]deology does not have an outside: the void is still an identity, and
a ‘zero-interpellation,’ an ‘interpellation beyond interpellation,’ is still an interpellation” (241). I am not so sure that this is the case. If, with deconstruction, we assume that systems of meaning are open (and not only incomplete), it cannot be the case in a literal sense, since open systems do away with the inside/outside dichotomy. And why not go a step further? It appears equally plausible that after we open the theory of ideology and realize that there is no outside, ideology vanishes into thin air. Given my deconstructive beliefs, I am also skeptical about recent interpretations of Slavoj Žižek’s work—Žižek being, according to widely accepted opinion, the preeminent philosopher of ideology and, along with Judith Butler, the most prominent philosopher of his generation. Even when the interpretations are “pleasingly accurate,” to use Mathew Sharpe’s term (1), they are defined, as is Žižek’s theory, in reference to a specific, Lacanian understanding of signification that relies on the assumption of a closed system with a hole as its model. The same can be said about poststructuralist critiques of Žižek, which affirm the same notion that meaning is structured around an absence.1 (Therefore, when we think about the beyond, outside, or otherwise than ideology, we are looking also for the beyond of a certain understanding of meaning, for a specific relation between theory of ideology and theory of interpretation—a challenge not just for Žižek but also, as it turns out, for one entire theoretical paradigm that holds that interpretation and ideology coincide.)2

I would like to ask, for instance, whether at a certain point emptying out the meaning of the master-signifier (the absence at the heart of this theory of meaning, the void that is identity, and so on) becomes, perhaps, even a form of presence. Must the process through which meaning is created repeat itself on and on, or could our theory of ideology, too, be subject to, well, process, historical changes, and the passing of time? Is outside always an outside? Could it be that the outside is changing, too? Along the same lines, there seems to be a trajectory that obviously follows from Žižek’s theory of ideology—a critique of ideology leading to discourse analysis, leading to a deconstruction of Lacanian psychoanalysis—which ends in a characteristic (for Žižek) dismissal of poststructuralism and not, as we should expect, in the deconstruction of ideology.

In order to explain my complaint and outline what kind of deconstruction Žižek should be subjected to, I will read closely Žižek’s essay
“The Spectre of Ideology,” which introduces his collection *Mapping Ideology*, published in 1994. I choose this work because it is short, contained, and, with respect to his theory of ideology, complete, and it can be reconstructed and analyzed in an essay of the usual length. By “contained” I mean that Žižek wrote it as a kind of summary of the three-hundred-page *Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989), and published it a year after *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (1993) and three years after *For They Know Not What They Do* (1991), all of which dealt extensively with ideology. As a consequence, his argument in “The Spectre of Ideology” does not drift into endless examples but is sustained, we could even say reconstructed or aware of itself, following what seems to be a deliberate plan. Further, in addition to being a summary of the work on ideology he had done prior to 1993, the essay also anticipates the deepening of his interest in universalism and Marxism, more fully developed in works like *The Ticklish Subject* (1999) and *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* (2001).

Focusing on only one short essay will allow me to foreground a dimension of Žižek’s work, the experience of reading it, that is seldom taken as integral to his theory of ideology. Žižek’s commentators, invested in their mastery of his discourse, tend to focus on the most salient ideas, with the unfortunate effect of offering little insight into the actual process of reading and writing through which this theory of ideology is defined. I will make this experience, this performance, of reading “The Spectre of Ideology” our way into Žižek’s theory of ideology under the assumption that this is a proper, Žižekian path of reading. This is because Žižek, as a Hegelian, offers a complete, that is to say, dialectical, theory of ideology, which is at the same time an experience, a theory of ideology, and a history of a theory of ideology. (Most works on ideology combines two discourses, a theory of ideology with a performance of ideology, as in Roland Barthes’s *Mythologies*, or the history of ideology with a theory of ideology, as in Terry Eagleton’s *Criticism and Ideology*.) Now we also see in what terms, as a historical-dialectical process, the completion of ideology takes place in Žižek’s work, as well as why virtually every sentence in this short introductory essay is offered from the perspective of the “we,” which is the subject of the experience of ideology as much as it is the subject of the text. These characteristics make Žižek’s study of ideology unfold as a process in a cyclical, dialectical motion wherein subject and object, analyst and the
thing analyzed, ideology and the theory of ideology, continually exchange places, defining all together a specific order of the signifier that Žižek calls Lacanian.

The chief assumption behind this kind of process-based, or performative, understanding of ideology is that once we move beyond a neo-Marxist understanding of ideology, there are no longer stable viewpoints that would be neutral or nonideological—no places from which a critique of ideology would be just a critique. Beyond critical theory, ideology is not a discourse, not an object, not a belief system, but a name for the very general and very basic practice (or discourse) through which meaning is constructed. And when we can no longer point our finger at the ideologues and ideology, ideology is also nowhere, and so everywhere.

Because I want to let this performance of the theory of ideology unfold step by step from a naïve position, my interpretation will seem underdeveloped, and the point of my reading of Žižek will arrive only gradually. Suffice it to say here that almost twenty years after its publication, “The Spectre of Ideology” appears dated by the Lacanian theory of meaning that Žižek insists on. For instance, it is tethered to the notion of stepping-out-of-ideology and, with it, to a spatial model of ideology that is defined by the difference between an inside and an impossible outside; by a self-sustaining system of meaning; by a belief (that beliefs matter); by an understanding of metalanguage that precludes a radical examination of these discourses, and so on. As I will argue, Žižek’s theory is limited by a certain analytical sense of discourse, a notion of the domain of ideology, even as he tries to ensure that no master-signifier will dominate this realm, that no boundaries are permanently drawn, that there is no outside, and so on.

**HISTORY, BRIEFLY**

To make sure that we are on the same page, here is the condensed version of the history of the theory of ideology since the last paradigm shift that predates Žižek—I can recommend Terry Eagleton’s Ideology, published in 1991, because it is exhaustive and accurate up to the last chapter and its discussion of discourse analysis, with which we will busy ourselves here. It’s easy to understand why the generation of
neo-Marxists after World War II organized their theory of ideology around false consciousness. Not only were they faced with totalitarian systems—communism, Nazism—which, among other things, were obvious deviations from socialist thought; they were also working within the great critical tradition whose assumption was that it could emancipate thinking from all forms of totalitarianism, including the one perpetuated by the reason itself. Following this basic matrix, neo-Marxists assumed that there existed a critical discourse—Theodor Adorno’s “negative dialectics,” Althusser’s “science,” most prominently—that could locate, define, and unmask ideology no matter how insidious it was. The goal of critical theory was to uncover ideological blindness and liberate us piecemeal from the totality that ideology sought to secure. This was the goal even in such sophisticated works as Althusser’s, which identify the phantasmatic aspects of ideology and yet still associate it with a specific center, such as the state.

Then, as the end of the Cold War was approaching and globalization got under way, as Foucault’s and Lacan’s work gained prominence, the critical model no longer seemed adequate to describe what theory had begun to perceive as the diffused and decentered condition of ideology. The criteria that helped separate true from false beliefs, critical from myth-producing discourses, seemed not to hold either; the state was, for instance, challenged by special interest groups ranging from the military-industrial complex to multinational corporations, unions, and so on. In the 1980s, at least three French theorists—two, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, writing together, and Etienne Balibar—revolutionized the theory of ideology by assuming that ideology could be both material and, as Terry Eagleton put it, “essentially concerned with meaning” (1991, 194). Under the new regime, ideology became structural, not only representational, constitutive of meaning and not only manifested in it, discursive, not only critical. Žižek joined the effort by grounding his understanding of ideology in Lacan’s theory of signification.

The reader should bear in mind that this diffusion of ideology, as well as its decoupling from traditional centers of power and from the model proposed by critical theory, is to be seen as following a general trajectory of easing ideology’s grip on the subject as well as making ideology omnipresent. As we move from critical theory to discourse analysis, the “weight of ideology” diminishes (Žižek 1994, 14), because
ideology is no longer concentrated but is distributed over a widening “elusive network of implicit, quasi-‘spontaneous’ presuppositions and attitudes that form an irreducible moment of the reproduction of ‘non-ideological’ (economic, legal, political, sexual . . .) practices” (15). That ideology is diffused means, in short, that there are no more privileged sites from which ideology is either distributed or organized or from which it can be measured. As a consequence, every post–critical theory of ideology must admit that it is ideological.5

In works like V. N. Vološinov’s Marxism and the Philosophy of Language, the theory of ideology is revolutionized through a new understanding of signification to become also a theory of signification. For Vološinov, the sign is a “material segment of . . . reality” (11) and is therefore as ideological as “any physical body, any instrument of production, or any product for consumption” (9).6 Such a sign, like any material object, “reflects and refracts another reality” (9), which “it may distort . . . or be true to” (10). Based on such an understanding, Vološinov claims that “[w]ithout signs, there is no ideology” (9; see also Eagleton, 194), which for him means that ideology is a signifying as well as a material practice. From there it is a small step to Žižek’s version of the theory of ideology, which holds that the field of signification and the field of ideology coincide and that the theory of ideology must therefore also be the theory of interpretation.

**CRITICAL THEORY**

I will organize my close reading around the trope of mastery for three reasons: first, because mastering ideology was historically the goal of theorizing, and it is the goal with which Žižek enters his hermeneutic endeavor; second, because of the obvious reference to the master-slave dialectic (and Hegel), which, as Žižek argues, is the single most important influence on his Lacanian theory of ideology; and third, because of the overwhelming sense of mastery that is a characteristic of Žižek’s writing and that has received ample (though not entirely apt) criticism. For instance, Tim Dean notes,

> Although Žižek repeatedly points out that one can never master one’s “own” symptom (but only enjoy it), his method nonetheless situates the
I cannot fully agree with Dean, because in Žižek’s work mastery is a more complex issue than Dean allows. For instance, there are several levels and kinds of mastery, some of which perform necessary tasks, including working through (what appears as a structural) trauma. In fact, in “The Spectre of Ideology,” the first example of mastery we encounter is actually its opposite, a de-mastering of what we think we know. Right off the bat, Žižek explains how a claim and its opposite can both be ideological. He says that “each pole of the antagonism [between the two chief ideologies of our day, universalist cosmopolitanism and populism-communitarianism] is inherent in its opposite, so that we stumble upon it at the very moment when we endeavor to grasp the opposite pole for itself” (1994, 3). Žižek thus counsels liberal democrats to turn an analytic gaze upon themselves in order to make their critical discourse more effective.

As a result of self-scrutiny, both the concept of ideology and we who are examining it appear dislocated and unmoored from the world of certain political positions that initially offered an easy anchor and thereby an easy identification of all political identities, including the criteria for distinguishing between the so-called dominant ideologies and political activism. Without such a discovery of how our critical approach is limited in defining ideology as well as implicated in it, we would be doomed to endless mirroring confrontation modeled on the Cold War, never getting any further.

Next comes a warning that signals an end to one cycle in the argument. The critique of ideology does not lead us to master ideology, but only to master or unmask certain beliefs. Žižek’s warning comes in the form of a rhetorical question: “are we, the speaking subjects, not always-already engaged in recounting the circumstances that predetermine the space of our activity?” (1994, 5). This it to say that to the subject
assumed by critical theory (a self-constituted subject), Žižek adds the notion of the subject who cannot take full stock of itself and for this reason is not whole.

The key process in the production of this subject is identified as a part of Freud’s dream analysis. As Žižek explains what seems to be one of his essay’s chief ideas, the goal of a psychoanalytic theory of ideology (as opposed to critical theory) is to determine why a given content—both manifest and latent—has assumed a particular form. Only this kind of analysis brings into consideration what is unconscious or excluded from the dream work (and is not merely latent). To critical theory we thus add a step that centers “our attention on . . . the dream-work to which the ‘latent dream-thoughts’ were submitted,” and away from the fascination with the “hidden meaning” of the dream (2008, 7). (Žižek goes on to show that we can find an equivalent theory in Marx’s understanding of commodity fetishism, which also centers on the form and on the transformation, not on the results of these processes or their latent elements.)

An ideology is then defined (in what we can call a second step) as a discourse whose “very logic of legitimizing the relation of domination must remain concealed if it is to be effective” (1994, 8). Ideology functions in a twofold way, not only promulgating a system of values but doing so in ways whose effectiveness depends on the concealment of its content. Ideology defines relations but is not defined in them, requiring a new strategy for its identification so that a theory of ideology has to focus on the “process by means of which the hidden meaning disguised itself” (2008, 8).

Here we can see rather clearly why critical theory, including its critical method, has become insufficient. Critical theory is itself a method for hiding one (unconscious) sense of ideology, while disclosing and analyzing another. We can, for instance, write about ideology in an essay and simultaneously achieve two goals. On the one hand, we reveal critical knowledge about how to identify ideology. On the other, we draw the readers, our students, for instance, into specific practices and mechanisms that legitimate current forms of the distribution of power, a system in which the author of the essay has the role of the master or leader, which is an order to which the reader must consent if she is to learn critical theory. (And we can do it while also proclaiming the death of the author, the university in ruins, and so on.)
After our theory of ideology has identified the duality of ideology, matters get really complicated. Exactly why this complication arises can be deduced from Žižek’s recognition, following Oswald Ducrot’s “theory of argumentation,” that “a successful argumentation presupposes the invisibility of the mechanisms that regulate its efficiency” (1994, 11). This is to say that we are necessarily speaking from the position of a theory of ideology that is also a practice of ideology, a theory whose goal is not only to reveal but also to draw subjects in, since interpellation is the condition of its effectiveness.

In addition, when we move from critical theory to Žižek’s analysis, we are also adding the assumption that ideology is not first a practice or relation of domination but a concept. Now, the presence of ideology is deduced not directly from its presence or from its effects but from the conceptual expectation that we will find ideology. And so what we find when doing discourse analysis is ideology—is ideology by definition. Žižek does not, unfortunately, go right on to explain the mechanisms behind his Lacanian theory, specifically to identify and explain these expectations we have when we look as Lacanians at a scene or a field of signification. Instead, he allows the cyclical process of his argument to start with the history of the deployment of psychoanalysis to understand ideology and its beginnings in Roland Barthes’s work.

With Barthes’s *Mythologies*, Žižek concludes that the representation of nature follows a principle that reifies “the results of discursive procedures into properties of the ‘thing itself.’” With Paul de Man, he speaks of a “denaturalization” that results from deconstruction, to make the general point, with Ducrot, that “one cannot draw a clear line of separation between descriptive and argumentative levels of language.” According to Ducrot, all descriptions are moments “of some argumentative scheme,” which may or may not be conscious (Žižek 1994, 11).

The invisible “mechanisms that regulate” the “efficiency” of Žižek’s own discourse will be identified a bit later, as a system that functions without an essence or kernel (1994, 17), which will also be the final conclusion of Žižek’s theory of ideology. Before we get there, however, the experience of the ideology of theory (I mean this contradictory or double task of analysis) must be completed. We are now building up to the kind of mastery that Tim Dean and others complain about.
The unwillingness to disclose the hidden mechanism or the rule his analysis follows is only one of the rhetorical tricks Žižek employs toward a goal that we can now identify for what it is—not a symptom, but symbolic domination.

Ideology is a systematically distorted communication: a text in which under the influence of unavowed social interests (of domination, etc.), a gap separates its “official,” public meaning from its actual intention—that is to say, in which we are dealing with an unreflected tension between the explicit enunciated content of the text and its pragmatic presuppositions.

(1994, 10)

The more pervasive device in Žižek’s writing is a kind of sleight of hand, what Rex Butler calls a “reversal” (38), which, in “The Spectre of Ideology,” happens most obviously on page 8. There, out of the blue, comes the claim that everything Žižek has explained up to that point, in the previous eight pages, is a kind of “implicit pre-comprehension” of ideology, a description of what we believe ideology to be, not a systematized knowledge about it. This one remark is, of course, all he says about the change from “doxa to truth” (1994, 8), as if the turn from belief to knowledge were not the key to understanding a theory of ideology as well as its history and its practice. After such a betrayal—after such a point de capiton!—Žižek is in a position of total control. His authorial voice is now entirely unmoored from any criteria or system of values or position that the reader can identify independently of the author. As if the reader were in a detective novel, she is reduced to a subject entirely defined by the author. This reduction opens the subject to manipulations and seems to be the condition, from Žižek’s perspective, for experience in general, and for the experience of ideology as a form of symbolization in particular. So we see how the subject of ideology is produced from the outside (of the subject-to-be), through an assumed agreement to participate in a certain symbolic system. We see why the subject’s relation to ideology is defined along the lines of enslavement and mastery—because, again, ideology is in a domain outside the subject-to-be, and the subject can enter this relation only as an object.

**THE EFFECT**

Žižek did not invent this style of writing. He only perfected what was originally called the turnstile effect in Barthes’s *Mythologies*, which is
a kind of exuberant or exorbitant style shared by many French authors of the period. I will go over the basics, which are no longer as obvious as they were when Barthes formulated them. The chief point of Barthes’s discourse analysis is to explain what we take for granted, why in literary studies we see an image (or any other constructed or manufactured object) as a text. To understand an image this way means that we recognize that a pictorial representation was, precisely, manufactured, meaning that it contains “a material which has already been worked on so as to make it suitable for communication” (Barthes, 110). Barthes’s reading of the front page of the weekly Paris Match—an image saying, according to Barthes, that “France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any color discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors” (116)—is not produced as such by the history of French colonialism but through the assumption on the part of the interpreter that what he sees is a narrative, a text, and not a mere image. The first step in the process of interpretation is thus the selection of a way of seeing the image (namely, as a text). Then, in the second step, Barthes offers his description, or a literal rendition, of what we see, to build on the explanation further and to show how ideology distorts and simplifies history (121), the goal of his interpretation being to “restore” the ambiguity of the image (125).

But ambiguity is always relative and never a constant; it can never be restored fully. (We should also bear in mind that Barthes, in the manner of a psychoanalyst, put the literal description together. And so it was Barthes—not Paris Match or the French colonialism it represents—who simplified whatever there was to simplify in the first place. Therefore, it is now Barthes who appears as the author of an ideology he wants to demystify.) Because of what he wants to achieve, Barthes’s interpretation has to become a strategy of ever-changing manipulations. The effects of these subversions are at least two: the sense of the endlessness of interpretation and a disorientation, both captured well in the turnstile metaphor Barthes uses to describe how myth (but also demystification) works—“the signification of the myth is constituted by a sort of constantly moving turnstile which presents alternately the meaning of the signifier and its form, a language object and a metalanguage, a purely signifying and a purely imagining consciousness” (122).
The point of writing is to subvert or challenge the speaking position so that not even the author himself can tell who is speaking or what position the utterance comes from. (This form of subversion should count among the ways in which the author dies.) The confusion should confine the process of interpellation, since we cannot know who is answering either. It should also introduce a sense of indeterminacy, chance, and ambiguity back into the text, which, again, cannot be done as a lasting effect. For Žižek—as opposed to Barthes, whose contribution ends with this disorientation—being aware of this vertigo of interpretation is the moment of transition from doxa into knowledge, which we will call the third step in the process of interpretation.

**DEFINITIONS**

As a sort of culmination of the experience, after we have tangled ourselves into an argument about ideology, learned of the contradictory goals of its theory, and reached the point at which the ideology of theory has this disorienting effect on us, exactly halfway through “The Spectre of Ideology,” we are finally primed for two final conclusions. The first will define ideology; the second, the more important one, will define the theory of ideology. The conclusions are given at this middle point in the essay for strategic reasons, allowing Žižek enough time to set them up, and then, after they are defined, during the dénouement, to put them into perspective. Such additional commentary is necessary because the contradictory move that we have been warned about again and again continues to threaten us—“Here, however, one should be careful to avoid the last trap that makes us slide into ideology under the guise of stepping out of it” (1994, 17).

To highlight the danger, Žižek gives his first conclusion in the form of a question. Having been warned enough, I will proceed with a positive claim: it is indeed inherently impossible to isolate “a reality whose consistency is not maintained by ideological mechanisms, a reality that does not disintegrate the moment we subtract from it its ideological component” (1994, 15–16). The meaning of such a claim is basic for discourse analysis and its view that ideology and reality support each other. As Žižek puts it, the “order of discourse as such is inherently ‘ideological’” (16).
If this is the case, if the reality-ideology structure is continuous (meaning also, if it has no outside), the question becomes how it is put and held together by the theory of ideology that brought the view about. For his explanation, Žižek goes to Lacan and his theory of signification. The idea behind it is that the meaning of the entire system depends on a notion—the empty place, the master-signifier, the “signifier without signified” (17)—whose own meaning cannot be specified. In metaphysical structures, a functionally similar central role is performed by the concept of essence; in a symbolic structure, deity is everything, nothing, and anything at the same time.

Now that we know what ideology is and how the systems or domains of meaning function as structured around an empty place—a whatever, if in this context we can borrow from Giorgio Agamben—we are ready for the second conclusion and the definition of what the theory of ideology (as opposed to ideology) is. The revelation comes as a culmination of the process that brought us gradually closer and closer to the heart of the structure. Žižek says, “it is possible to assume a place that enables us to maintain a distance from” ideology, “but this place from which one can denounce ideology must remain empty, it cannot be occupied by any positively determined reality” (1994, 17). After such an insight, the goal of the theory of ideology is to keep the place of the signifier empty, not fill it with specific content. Because, again, if we “yield to this temptation”—if we find any stable place, or if, say, we believe that our goal is equality, if we construct a new master-signifier—we “are back in ideology” (17).

To determine how this empty place can be protected and how discourse analysis can be maintained, Žižek devotes the rest of the essay to the Lacanian understanding of symbolization (as a key part of his theory of interpretation). As we know, for Lacan, symbolization is an incomplete process, which, as Žižek puts it, “always fails.” As a result, something is always excluded or foreclosed from reality (1994, 21). Once we understand that this is the case, maintaining the void is tantamount to having a certain understanding of how the system of meaning works, namely, as an incomplete structure. We should expect therefore that interpretation is also an incomplete or open process.

But we also immediately encounter a side effect of this theory. If the place of the master-signifier must remain empty, it can also be filled, on a temporary basis, with just about any signifier. And each time there
is a temporary signifier, there is also a temporary completion and its concomitant interpretation. This possibility of an endless number of provisional master-signifiers gives structure to Žižek’s argument (as it did to Barthes’s reading of myth), which unfolds in a predictable additive fashion, moving from one “case” or example to the next in what is now the trademark style that makes his theory into a series of temporary closures.11 Multiplying ideology by alternating between two states, completion and incompletion, Žižek’s theory diffuses the impact of ideology. As Žižek puts it in an often-cited passage from The Ticklish Subject, negativity, a negative gesture of withdrawal, precedes any positive gesture of enthusiastic identification with the Cause: negativity functions as the condition of (im)possibility . . . that is to say, it lays the ground, opens up space for it, but is simultaneously obfuscated by it and undermines it. (154)

The result is the understanding that, in Rex Butler’s words, “the social is essentially divided, antagonistic, unable to be given closure” (3). Such an explanation helps us understand that the field of ideology is fragmented. It also, however, functions as a unifying force in the sense that it makes the shape and the scope of theory thinkable only in terms of the theory of ideology. While, on the one hand, the horizon of meaning is infinitely deferred, on the other, that very deferral follows what is by now a predictable path. The same goes for the emptying out of the meaning of the paternal metaphor (master-signifier), the purpose of which is to conserve dominant place for psychoanalysis as the theory of interpretation—the theory that decides what counts and how. Incidentally, that is how we should understand the chief point of Derrida’s reading of Lacan in “Le facteur de la vérité,” which will serve to recap my reading of Žižek’s theory of ideology.

**THE SIGNIFIER**

Derrida’s “Facteur de la vérité” concerns the materiality of the signifier, which in Lacan is treated in two ways. On the one hand, there is a revolutionary new notion of signification. The signifier is a compound entity that brings together form and content, function and identity, materiality and ideology, subject and object, inside and outside, absence and presence, and is neither one. But, on the other hand, on the level
of theory, the signifier gets quite a different status. Theory itself becomes the law that shapes interpretation, a rule for it. That letter—the letter of Lacan’s theory—always reaches its destination in the closure represented by the incomplete interpretation. One of these letters has a sense (direction, path) that Derrida agrees with, which coincides with his notion of deferral. The other letter reaches its destination in advance, before any scene of writing, any story, any theory, any letter is allowed to unfold—before, in short, any event can take place.

The same happens in Žižek’s work, where the theory of ideology keeps the field of meaning together. The process the empty place makes possible serves not only to displace the master-signifier but also, despite the undermining that goes on, to ensure that a beyond of ideology is unthinkable. Given the context, going beyond ideology is accomplished by refusing to enter this game of theoretical ins and outs and its notion of meaning. I don’t mean to suggest that what seems to be the key claim here—Žižek’s version of Freud’s claim about the importance of form (or ideology) for the unconscious—is wrong, only that it is limited because it assumes the notion of unity on which Freud’s theory of the psyche rests. As a result, psychoanalysis should seek an even less predictable understanding of the mind (and a more heterogeneous understanding of meaning) than the one Žižek proposes, and should approach its subject (including signification) as a series of sometimes unrelated, open processes that escape any unifying rule whatsoever, even that of ideology (or of the unconscious). Such theory would be open in the sense that it is no longer defined as an ideological vortex, in terms of the dichotomies inside/outside, whole/hole, void/content, ideology/sign.12

From that position, a claim like Robert Pfaller’s—“Ideology does not have an outside: the void is still an identity, and a ‘zero-interpellation,’ an ‘interpellation beyond interpellation,’ is still an interpellation” (241)—comes across as wishful thinking. It sees the void the only way it can, in terms of identity and as a marker of an empty place. The void may not be any one thing, and if it were one, it could always be otherwise.

We can say much the same thing about the other two mantras mentioned at the beginning of this article. If our supposition is that ideology is “the very condition of our experience of the world,” as Catherine Belsey says (4), it is no wonder that knowledge is limited by ideology and that we can understand our resistance to it (our “stepping out of
only in its terms. The possibility that interpretation and ideology might not coincide forces ideology to cede the horizon of thinking and meaning to other, new forms of signification (think of biology, of chemistry!) that are not defined in reference to any notion of a whole field or of the continuity. But to add anything else concerning what happens when the domain of signs is no longer “coextensive” with (having the same limits as) ideology would mean to offer yet another general theory and pretend to be able to cover the field of signification in its entirety, which is precisely what cannot be done with any one theory. It is, however, rather easy to predict the direction of further development, since theory will have to concern itself with what are, at present, excluded subjects. Biology and chemistry will have to be related to signification in some fashion. After all, when seen in a certain light, biology and chemistry are but theories of communication. Similarly, nature, which was foreclosed by recent theories of ideology, will, too, have to be brought into conversation in some ways (ways other than those that deal with “the end of nature,” which not by chance is the title of Žižek’s recent attempt to address environmentalism, published as a New York Times op-ed). And, further, signification will have to be related to other humanoid formations to help us understand how diversity (in terms other than multiculturalism, say, genetic diversity) can exist within a species.

To put it another way, a theory of ideology that does not limit its theory of interpretation looks much like a natural science, with the proviso that a natural (or universal) science whose epistemology is a theory of ideology looks much like poststructuralism should.

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**Notes**

This essay is drawn from my book in progress, titled *Beyond Ideology: Revisionist Readings in Poststructuralism*. I wish to thank the anonymous reviewers for their comments and suggestions. Catherine Peebles provided the intellectual companionship that made it possible for me to formulate my ideas.

1. There are surprisingly few poststructuralist responses to Žižek. Notable are Judith Butler’s in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* and Colin Davis’s in *Critical
Butler’s critique of Žižek, however, affirms the dominance of his Lacanian view of signification, where an open system of meaning is equated with one structured around an absence. See, for instance, her long explanation of Linda Zerilli’s reading of Laclau (2000, 32ff.). In Adrian Johnston’s otherwise admirable Žižek’s Ontology, ideology does not even make it into the index of terms, deconstruction is dealt with only in passing, style of writing is reduced to the issue of author’s intention, and so on. A promisingly titled collection, Ideology after Poststructuralism (Malešević and MacKenzie 2002), does not live up to any part of its title.

2. By this I mean that works that focus on particular concepts or particular aspects of Žižek’s theory, fine though they may be, are missing the point. This is because, as we will see, Žižek’s theory of ideology is there to secure a certain notion of totality (in its very explanation of the theory of ideology) that holds all the particulars together. If we choose to change only an aspect of this theory, we are confirming the whole.

3. A notable exception is O’Neill 2001. O’Neill, however, does not take his conclusions about the experience of reading Žižek seriously enough, as integral to Žižek’s theories of interpretation and ideology.

4. Because I will not deal with belief again, I will comment on it here: in On Belief, Žižek argues, for instance, that a certain political position is “authentic in the sense of fully assuming the consequences of [its author’s] choice, i.e., of being fully aware of what it actually means to take power and to exert it” (4). But what it means to take power and to exert it is, in a characteristic Žižekian move, left beyond discussion. The claim thus seems to be merely a declaration of Žižek’s belief in politics as a version of Lacan’s notion of the act. I understand, then, that the fundamental goal of such politics is to maintain Lacan’s notion of the act.

5. The inflation of the term “ideology,” its loss of meaning, is an aspect of this diffusion, as Laclau notes at the beginning of his “Death and Resurrection of the Theory of Ideology.” I would not, however, endorse the rest of that essay, the thesis of which is that the “double movement found in its most extreme form in mysticism—that is, incarnation and deformation of particular contents through the expansion of equivalential logics is at the root of all ideological process—political ideologies included” (315). The most immediate reason for my reservation is that all meaning is based on some form of equivalence. That something means implies that it can be brought into a relation of equivalence with something else, and we don’t need to implicate extreme mysticism to arrive to that insight.

6. Vološinov’s understanding that “an idea is just as sensory as matter” (11) draws on Ernst Cassirer’s Philosophy of Symbolic Forms.

7. For Dean, the problem is that Žižek’s mastery “elides the specificity of art” (23).

8. In Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?, Žižek defines the process as depending on a crucial distinction between latent thought and “the unconscious desire which inscribes itself through the very distortion of the latent thought into the dream’s explicit texture” (191). This play of the three elements or layers of meaning, manifest/latent/desire, is the reason why a critical method (which focuses on the difference
between manifest and latent) has to be supplemented with discourse analysis as a tool to identify and interpret the unconscious grounding of ideology. Žižek makes a similar point in his first essay in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, focusing this time on the precise historical moment at which certain forms emerge (105).

9. The comparable effect of reading Žižek is captured well by Edward O’Neill. O’Neill speaks, unfortunately in frustration, of “a dizzying array of wildly entertaining and often quite maddening rhetorical strategies . . . deployed in order to beguile, browbeat, dumbfound, dazzle, confuse, mislead, overwhelm, and generally subdue the reader into acceptance. Example after example is supplied, but the principle that makes them examples is not itself given. Appeals are implicitly made to Lacan’s authority but the source of that authority is never mentioned. The truth of Lacan’s theories is urged by showing how other people’s theories support that truth but without explaining why these theories have the same object. One concept is defined in terms of another, which is then defined in the same way, *ad infinitum*” (7).

10. Žižek repeats the same phrase several times in the essay, always with the sense of a compulsion behind ideology, “the very gesture of stepping out of ideology pulls us back into it” (1994, 10). On p. 13, the term is “regression”—“What we encounter here again is the ‘regression’ into ideology at the very point where we apparently step out of it.” On p. 17, just after a definition of the theory of ideology is given, the trap is, interestingly, identified as the “last” one.

11. See, for instance, Judith Butler’s presentation of Žižek’s argument in “Restating the Universal,” where she singles out incompleteness as the term of contention between her and Žižek (Butler, Laclau, and Žižek 2000, 12). She goes on to affirm the points of agreement, all stemming from a common source, which is a “Gramscian notion of hegemony” (13), based on the shared spatial model of ideology, with an inside and an outside, an empty place or an absence at its center.

12. On this reading, in a passage like the following one, the word “perhaps” becomes pivotal for Derrida’s understanding of Lacan: “Question of the letter, question of the materiality of the signifier: perhaps it will suffice to change a letter, perhaps even less than a letter, in the expression *manque à sa place* [lack in its place, missing from its place], perhaps it will suffice to introduce into this expression a written *a*, that is, an *a* without an accent mark, in order to make apparent that if the lack has its place [*manque a sa place*] in this atomistic topology of the signifier, if it occupies a determined place with defined contours, then the existing order will not have been upset: the letter will always re-find its proper place, a circumvented lack (certainly not an empirical, but a transcendental one, which is better yet, and more certain), the letter will be where it always will have been, always should have been, intangible and indestructible via the detour of a *proper*, and a properly *circular*, itinerary. But we are not there yet’ (1987, 425).

**Works Cited**


