

Failure as the Real
A Review of Slavoj Zizek's *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*

Robert L. Oprisko, Ph.D.

International Studies Program
Butler University

“The point is not so much that we should *not* ignore Hegel, but that we can only afford to ignore him after the long and arduous working-through-Hegel. The time has thus come to *repeat Hegel*.”¹

Slavoj Zizek has penned over fifty books in English beginning with *The Sublime Object of Ideology* with his latest, *Less Than Nothing*, arguably being the magnum opus of this frenetic writing and publication. Zizek is both an attractive source of inspiration and an easy source for criticism, both of which have played an important role in the ongoing popularity and scathing criticism of his works. Book reviews of his works drip with the joyful scorn of scholars who gleefully remind readers that Zizek was removed from his post at Ljubljana University for “not being Marxist enough,” after a mere two years in the post.² They dismiss his prolific writing as “overproduction” and suggest that he is becoming a product of capitalism, reveling as a globally marketed critic of contemporary culture. They make the point that nobody will actually read this massive tome because of its intimidating size.³ What this suggests, more than anything, is that many scholars and critics are less inclined to engage with *Less Than Nothing* than to pen reviews of Zizek, focusing on the presenter over the substance presented.⁴ Both presentation and substance, however, hide hidden gems to delight the socio-politico-cultural theorist in each of us. The overarching structure of the book is provided in four parts with a highly suggestive sexual motif: The Drink Before, The Thing Itself: Hegel, The Thing Itself: Lacan, The Cigarette After. Zizek appears to be toying with us, his readers, to see if we can find the sincerity behind the humor: *Less Than Nothing* is Zizek’s attempt to flesh out a synthesis between Hegel and Lacan through an exhaustive dialectic intercourse (pun likely intended) over ontology.

Zizek’s synthetic ontology is nothing less than an attempt to understand the real as the failed attempt. Failure penetrates the entirety of the text and is reminiscent of Doc Hammer’s take on *The Venture Brothers*, “It’s about the beauty of failure. It’s about the failure that happens to all of us.”⁵ For Zizek, the real is inseparable both from the radicalized material reality that forms everyone and everything from stardust as the heavenly bodies explode and collapse in the creative destruction of our ever expanding universe and the social meanings of our unique presentation as Nancy would say, as being(s) singular plural.

The material realm of Zizek’s ontology is derived from Barad’s take on Bohr’s epistemology. He keys in on radical diffraction, “Diffraction itself is thus diffracted into combining and splitting [much like the universe’s dual process for expansion] into overlapping and spreading.”⁶ Zizek then likens radical diffraction to parallax, “the shift of perspective needed to produce the

effect of the depth of the Real, as if an object acquires the impenetrable density of the Real only when its reality reveals itself to be inconsistent.”⁷ Zizek asserts that there is a price to be paid for something to appear out of nothing; his sexual encounter is explicit:

In Lacanese, the idealist position is “masculine,” it totalizes the universe through the observer as the point of exception, while materialism is “feminine”; that is, it asserts the “non-All” of every measurement. However, it would be too easy to simply privilege the “feminine” non-All and to reduce the “masculine” totalization-through-exception to a secondary illusion – here, more than ever, we should insist on (sexual) difference itself as the primary fact, as the impossible Real with regard to which both positions, “masculine” and “feminine” appear as secondary, as two attempts to resolve its deadlock.⁸

The Real for Zizek is the co-inherited singularity of the idealist-materialist dichotomy. This ontological position is the agential cut or parallax gap from which both classical realism and quantum realism emerge as explanatory construct.

Zizek’s Real issues forth from his theory as a nexus between Barad’s radical entanglement and Weinstein’s radical separation.⁹ Reality is the tension of the void that is nothing, but is capable of holding everything. The nothingness presupposes the sublimation of an emergent something, which will give meaning to the void as the Real that encompasses the somethings and nothings, but IS both of them simultaneously and without contradiction, a pre-ontological proto-reality.¹⁰

The Real is thus an effect of the symbolic, not in the sense of performativity, of the “symbolic construction of reality,” but in the totally different sense of a kind of ontological “collateral damage” of symbolic operations: the process of symbolization is inherently thwarted, doomed to fail, and the Real *is* this immanent failure of the symbolic.¹¹

Tension is the key. What Zizek does not do an adequate job illuminating, however, is that this tension is necessarily between the ontic In-itself (the Void) and the ontological Thing-in-itself which emerge spatio-temporally within the void. The (inter)actions of objects located in space and time are also symbolic gestures with meanings dependent upon the coordinates of the transcendental subject that is critically engaging that interaction and searching for meaning.

Less Than Nothing is a powerful reminder that philosophy is an abstraction of reality and that we philosophers are inherently always-already situated within a web of social networks that affect, effect, and infect us. Progressing Zizek’s sexual metaphor, we can accept the “feminine” objective reality as a void that only has meaning, including what it means to be a void, when it is filled with the totality of objects as subjects that both fill and fail-to-fill it. This philosophical discovery of zero, or the void, is an important addition for political practice, which Zizek helpfully points out in his conclusion: “The Political Suspension of the Ethical” in which he posits that the goal of eliminating class inequality involves the organized politicization of a class to self-negate. Zizek’s proletariat can only find equality with the bourgeoisie by eliminating the relationship and its meaning that renders each distinct; for class equality to emerge, classes themselves must no longer exist or have a meaning perpetuated by a relational identity.¹²

Zizek's political agent is a dignified rebel, an individual who operates outside the logic of appropriateness and focuses instead on the freedom of action proscribed only by what Zhao would call personal talents.¹³ This normal, limited human being is a harbinger of annihilation, "the apocalyptic subject", whose in/action that, in a true Camusian sense, is always both a "no" and a "yes", is the symbolic gesture that binds the individual person with the infinity of humanity.¹⁴

Appropriately, pondering Zizek the man and his thoughts in *Less Than Nothing* leave us fulfilled, yet unsatisfied. The promise of Truth and newfound knowledge, to revel in Zizek's epiphany, is merely the drink before and illusory. The intercourse between his written word and its meaning for us lays us bare to the work involved in truly digesting critical philosophy and, given its length, the task can be arduous and get monotonous not because the subject matter is boring, but because it is normal, within the human condition, to normalize exceptional things.¹⁵ Our cigarette after, also unsatisfying, is that the epiphany we so desired is the recognition that reality is our individual and collective failure(s) that generate the symbolic ideal. Zizekian reality, is, perhaps best reflected by Jackson Publick's self-reflection on his intentional creative drive for the *Venture Brothers*, "What is this show if not setup and a debilitatingly disappointing revelation?"¹⁶

Endnotes

¹ Slavoj Zizek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*(Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2012), 504.

² John Gray, "The Violent Visions of Slavoj Zizek," *The New York Review of Books*(2012), <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2012/jul/12/violent-visions-slavoj-zizek/?pagination=false>.

³ This is an interesting addition for those who are reviewing a work to state, which increases the suspicion that the reviewers were merely writing their thoughts on a book they hadn't actually read, thus employing cognitive transference rather than any critical analysis: Peter Osborne, "More Than Everything: Zizek's Badiouian Hegel," *Radical Philosophy*, no. 177 (2013), <http://www.radicalphilosophy.com/article/more-than-everything>; Tom Eyers, "Review," *Marx & Philosophy Review of Books*(2012), <http://marxandphilosophy.org.uk/reviewofbooks/reviews/2012/574>.

⁴ For an excellent exception and an exceptional review of *Less Than Nothing*, I suggest: Robert Pippin, "Back to Hegel?," *Mediations* 26, no. 1-2 (2012).

⁵ Jackson Publick and Doc Hammer, 2006., in Lea Rosen, "'I'm Not a Boy Adventurer Anymore': Success and 'Failure' in the Venture Bros," *Journal of Venture Studies* 1(2012): 2.

⁶ Zizek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*, 949.

⁷ Ibid. For Zizek's full treatment of parallax, see: *The Parallax View*, ed. Slavoj Zizek, Kindle ed., Short Circuits (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).

⁸ *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*, 934-35.

⁹ Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, Kindle ed.(Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); Michael A. Weinstein, *The Tragic Sense of Political Life*(Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1977).

¹⁰ For the most cutting-edge work being done on void ontology, one cannot ignore Sergei Prozorov and his following works: "What Is the 'World' in World Politics? Heidegger, Badiou, and Void

Universalism," *Contemporary Political Theory*(2012); *Ontology and World Politics: Void Universalism I*, ed. Jenny Edkins and Nick Vaughan-Williams, Interventions (New York, NY: Routledge, 2014); *Theory of the Political Subject: Void Universalism II*, ed. Jenny Edkins and Nick Vaughan-Williams, Interventions (New York, NY: Routledge, 2014).

¹¹ Zizek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*, 959.

¹² *Ibid.*, 1010.

¹³ Robert L. Oprisko, *Honor: A Phenomenology*, Routledge Innovations in Political Theory (New York, NY: Routledge, 2012); "The Rebel as Sovereign: The Political Theology of Dignity," *Revista Pleyade*, no. 9 (2012).

¹⁴ Slavoj Zizek, *Living in the End Times*, Kindle ed.(New York, NY: Verso, 2011), 395.

¹⁵ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed.(Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

¹⁶ Jackson Publick, interview by Heidi MacDonald, May 29, 2008.