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Perversions of power – on the inconsistency of ideologies
in Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*

Perwersje władzy – o niespójnościach ideologii w powieści *Tęcza grawitacji*
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SUMMARY

In *Gravity's Rainbow*, Thomas Pynchon claims that ideologies hide internal inconsistencies and contradictions. His observations are surprisingly similar to the analysis of ideologies carried out by a Lacanian philosopher, Slavoj Žižek. We compared the works of the two writers and discovered fierce criticism of capitalism as a system thriving on exploitation and destruction. Both writers denounce the cynicism of modern western societies, analyse the fundamental lie of prosperity promised by capitalism, describe the role of human desire which allows the system to survive and tackle the issues of pornography and masochism as the ultimate products of the capitalist machine. Applying Žižek's psychoanalytical theories to read Pynchon's text allows for a fresh and deeper understanding of why capitalism revolves around death, what illusions it creates, how it struggles to mask its true nature and why it nevertheless fails to conceal its perversions.

Keywords: Thomas Pynchon, Slavoj Žižek, capitalism, ideologies, inconsistencies

Saying that Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* is an overwhelming piece of work which tackles a multitude of issues, one runs a risk of sounding cliché. The book, which is commonly referred to as an encyclopedic novel, leaves the reader with an illusion of totality; of giving a complete account of the state of the world described. At the same time, it estranges the reader by confronting him or her with a condensed and fragmented discourse which may basically seem unreadable. However, such way of writing introduces the reader into a complex, multi-layer world of information, where, by means of associations, one can dis-

cover meaningful theories and statements, provided that he or she finds their own way of “travelling” through hundreds of pages. One of the recurrent topics are issues related to the notion of power and political systems. On several occasions, Pynchon denounces how ideologies, primarily capitalism, hide internal inconsistencies, contradictions, and even perversions. The author describes the functioning of states, as well as of complex multinational organisations, and he questions the possibility of finding freedom or the truth within these structures. He also challenges the principles upon which several systems and ideologies have been built. Similar ideas can be found in the works of a Slovenian philosopher and critical theorist, Slavoj Žižek, who uses the psychoanalytical theory of Jacques Lacan, Hegelian philosophy and Marxist economic criticism to interpret popular culture, social phenomena, politics and ideologies. The aim of this work will therefore be to propose a reading of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, which would enter into a dialogue with Žižek’s criticism of modern ideologies, comparing and contrasting different aspects of political and ideological systems, as discussed by both writers.

What are ideologies? Why and how are they born? Slavoj Žižek finds the answer to these fundamental questions in Lacanian psychoanalysis. According to Jacques Lacan, there are three orders in which human beings exist within the World: the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real.¹ The Real is the traumatic core of our existence, which is always there, but which is unbearable. It cannot be expressed with words, and comprises the terror of our insecurity, uncertainty of the meaning of life, the chaos of the world surrounding us, the futility of human ventures, the ultimate loneliness, the void of the Universe, the ruthless brutality of nature etc. The Imaginary, in turn, is connected with fantasy. It is how people, in a child-like manner, dream of a perfect, harmonious world, and believe that such world could exist or has existed; it is synonymous with desire we chase, which can never be fulfilled, but which turns our eyes away from bleak reality and pushes us towards illusory goals. Finally, the Symbolic is the realm of law and language, this is how people organize their social relations in order to avoid the barbarism of the Real, by establishing rules of coexistence, codes of conduct, hierarchies, and images of order. However, the Symbolic contains a disappointing gap, as there is always something in the Real which cannot be described nor organized in a symbolic manner, thus escaping all human attempts to orderliness, meaningfulness, completeness.

Slavoj Žižek claims that all ideologies stem from the same source: our dramatic attempt to hide the gap in the Symbolic order.² Ideologies seem to provide us with a comprehensive picture of reality, they also explain the world which surrounds us, give us hope for some better future. Nevertheless, ideologies are built

¹ Cf.: B. Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1995, pp. 24–31.

² T. Myers, *Slavoj Žižek*, Routledge, London–New York, 2004, pp. 75–78.

around the same disturbing truth: at their core lies a void, an inconsistency. There is always a limit to which they appear coherent, and beyond which they fall into paradoxical contradictions, becoming caricatures of themselves. As Žižek puts it: “The very concept of ideology implies a kind of basic, constitutive naïveté: the misrecognition of its own presuppositions, of its own effective conditions, a distance, a divergence between so-called social reality and our distorted representation, our false consciousness of it”.³ Moreover, Slavoj Žižek argues that today we are living in an era where the dominant ideology is cynicism. After the end of the Cold War most people ceased to seek an alternative to capitalism, and, generally, they embrace liberal democracy as the universal model of social and political relations. At the same time, the majority of people have become increasingly concerned with apocalyptic perspectives brought by exploitation of nature, as well as with violation of human rights in multiple parts of the world. Most astonishingly of all, people adherent to the dominant culture are aware of the fact that these negative phenomena derive from capitalism, yet, nevertheless, they find comfort in the ideology, regardless of this paradox. In *The Sublime Object of Ideology* we read:

The cynical subject is quite aware of the distance between the ideological mask and the social reality, but he none the less still insists upon the mask. Cynical reason is no longer naïve, but is a paradox of an enlightened false consciousness: one knows the falsehood very well, one is well aware of a particular interest hidden behind an ideological universality, but still one does not renounce it.⁴

Žižek concludes this theory by saying:

This cynicism is not a direct position of immorality, it is more like morality itself out in the service of immorality – the model of cynical wisdom is to conceive probity, integrity, as a supreme form of dishonesty, and morals as a supreme form of profligacy, the truth as the most effective form of a lie. This cynicism is therefore a kind of perverted ‘negation of the negation’ of the official ideology: confronted with illegal enrichment, with robbery, the cynical reaction consists in saying that legal enrichment is a lot more effective and, moreover, protected by the law. As Bertold Brecht puts it in his *Threepenny Opera*: ‘what is the robbery of a bank compared to the founding of a new bank?’⁵

How do these theories correspond to Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*? Already in one of the opening episodes of the novel we can find hints denouncing capitalism, which later are developed into a devastating criticism of the system. In Episode 4, Part 1, we read about the main protagonist’s, Tyrone Slothrop’s, Puritan ancestors, and their slowly wasted fortunes.

³ S. Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Verso, London–New York, 1989, p. 28.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

They began as fur traders, cordwainers, salters and smokers of bacon, went on into glassmaking, became selectmen, builders of tanneries, quarriers of marble. Country for miles around gone to necropolis, gray with marble dust, dust that was the breaths, the ghosts, of all those fake-Athenian monuments going up elsewhere across the Republic. Always elsewhere. The money seeping its way out through stock portfolios more intricate than any genealogy: what stayed at home in Berkshire went into timberland whose diminishing green reaches were concerted acres at a clip into paper – toilet paper, banknote stock, newsprint – a medium or ground for shit, money, and the World. [...] The tradition was clear, everyone knew – mine it out, work it, take all you can till it's gone then move on west, there's plenty more.⁶ (pp. 27–28)

Even this short passage announces several of the issues crucial to Pynchon's deliberation. Primarily, the essence of capitalism seems to be exploitation and destruction. The careless use of natural resources only to individual benefit, making money without creating anything sustainable, turn out to be the *raison d'être* for all the inhabitants of America. Pynchon emphasises this aspect of capitalism by comparing the country to a necropolis, a gigantic cemetery where death reigns in the dust of the quarries. Moreover, the extracted stones serve to create fake monuments, the falsity of which is the emanation of the falsity of the whole system, built upon a lie of prosperity and progress, but brings nothing but degradation and havoc. Finally, the non-sustainability of all production is highlighted by the description of the disappearing forests, the timber of which serves to manufacture toilet paper, banknotes and newspapers. The choice of these three products is not coincidental. Toilet paper is used to clean up shit, which as a matter of fact is a powerful metaphor both for Pynchon and for Žižek (and will be discussed later in this work). Banknotes are the greatest symbol of the system as they do not carry any real value, and at the same time are the most coveted of all objects accessible to a member of a capitalist society.⁷ Finally, newspapers carry two major characteristics: first, they are vehicles of ideology since their principle role is to inform, or rather – to misinform – an interesting ambiguity which will also be discussed further in the present work, and second, they are thrown away every day and replaced by new ones, is it therefore hard to find a better example of waist on a massive scale.

Such a diagnosis of capitalism reoccurs in multiple places throughout the whole novel. For example, in Episode 19, Part 1, we read how Franz Pökler's plan to create incredible, patterned paint is compromised by the fact that the fac-

⁶ All quotations and paging taken from: Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*, Penguin Books, New York, 1987.

⁷ In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek develops this idea by reminding one of classic Marxian examples of commodity fetishism: “money is in reality just an embodiment, a condensation, a materialization of a network of social relations, (its function being) conditioned by its position in the texture of social relations. But to the individuals themselves, this function of money – to be the embodiment of wealth – appears as an immediate, natural property of a thing called ‘money’, as if money is already in itself, in its immediate material reality, the embodiment of wealth”. (p. 31)

tory owner prefers to burn his business down (*Gravity's Rainbow*, pp. 159–160). The fantastic images of paint swirling and locking into stripes and dots by means of ingenious technology, are contrasted with the image of “a blackened waste”, which would allow the owner to collect money from the insurance. This simple mechanism shows how, under capitalism, destruction often proves more profitable than creation, and how abuse and a drive towards extinction propel the market machine. Perhaps the most acute insight into the perverse logic of capitalism is given in the famous Great Serpent metaphor, in Episode 11, Part 2.

Kekulé dreams the Great Serpent holding its own tail in its mouth, the dreaming Serpent which surrounds the World. But the meanness, the cynicism with which this dream is to be used. The Serpent that announces, “The World is a closed thing, cyclical, resonant, eternally-returning”, is to be delivered into a system whose only aim is to *violate* the Cycle. Taking and not giving back, demanding that “productivity” and “earnings” keep on increasing with time, the System removing from the rest of the World these vast quantities of energy to keep its own tiny desperate fraction showing a profit: and not only most of humanity – most of the World, animal, vegetable, and mineral, is laid waste in the process. The System may or may not understand that it's only buying time. And that time is an artificial resource to being with, of no value to anyone or anything but the System, which must sooner or later crash to its death, when its addiction to energy has become more than the rest of the World can supply, dragging with it innocent souls all along the chain of life. (p. 412)

It is worth to note how Pynchon refers to cynicism, the feature also investigated by Žižek. The awareness of the forthcoming apocalypse does not stop the System from exploiting all available resources, for the sake of getting a minute profit. Moreover, the only profit is buying time, which, just as money mentioned in the previous fragment, is not a real, valuable produce, but only a human construct, a worthless reference point which is powerless against the real annihilation of the World prophesied by *Gravity's Rainbow*.

Are death and destruction inseparable side-effects of capitalism-in-action? When we study Pynchon's novel more attentively, it seems that the author states a far more audacious claim. Death and exhaustion are not mere aftermath of capitalistic ventures, but instead, they constitute its essence, they are in the core of the whole System. Death is the ultimate goal of capitalism, and at the same time – to adopt Žižek's terminology – the traumatic core of this ideology, the unspeakable truth about the system. This truth is deeply hidden, and still manifesting itself at every turn. The story of Frans Van der Groov, an ancestor of one of the characters, who exterminated the dodoes on the island of Mauritius, as a part of his colonial exploration (pp. 108–110) embodies the deadly character of Western civilisation. He killed the birds “for reasons he could not explain”, angry that the dodoes succumb to his destructive mania, and trying to justify his act by the birds' ugliness and vulnerability. Similarities to the other episodes describing useless and barbaric exploitation become more evident when we take into account that Frans “left the

dodoes to rot, (since) he couldn't endure to eat their flesh" (p. 109), and that "by 1681, *Didus ineptus* would be gone, by 1710 so would every settler from Mauritius". (p. 110) Again, we witness the same scheme: humans intervene, abuse, and then move on, leaving a devastated landscape as the only trace, but also – the only lasting result of their activity.

The most overt denunciation of capitalism as a system leading to death, appears in Episode 19, Part 1. There, the ghost of Walter Rathenau, the former German foreign minister, speaks out about the truth of how the capitalist state functions. The choice of the character who announces these facts is of double importance. On the one hand, Rathenau speaks in the name of those who were at power, he is an expert on the intricacies of the capitalistic system of corporations, "a prophet and architect of the cartelized state [...], he had coordinated Germany's economy during the World War [...] demolishing the barriers of secrecy and property that separated firm from firm – a corporate Bismarck, before whose power no account book was too privileged, no agreement too clandestine"(pp. 164–165). On the other hand, he is dead, and thus, somehow independent of the present regime and free to say whatever he wishes. He no longer belongs to the Symbolic order which organizes and regulates relations of power within the system. Speaking from this position, Rathenau does not leave any doubts for those who are listening to him during the *séance*:

Imagine coal, down in the earth, dead black, no light, the very substance of death. Death ancient, prehistoric, species *we will never see again*. [...] (T)o make steel, the coal tars, darker and heavier must be taken from the original coal. Earth's excrement, purged out for the ennoblement of shining steel. [...] But this is all the impersonation of life. The real movement is from death to death-transfigured. The best you can do is to polymerize a few dead molecules. But polymerization is not resurrection. [...] You don't have to listen. You think you'd rather hear about what you call 'life': the growing, organic Kartell. But it's only another illusion. A very clever robot. The more dynamic it seems to you, the more deep and dead, in reality, it grows. [...] The persistence, then, of structures favoring death. Death converted into more death. Perfecting its reign, just as the buried coal grows denser, and overlaid with more strata – epoch on top of epoch, city on top of ruined city. This is the sign of Death the impersonator. (pp. 166–167)

A dead capitalist mogul talking about Death (with a capital "D") as the sole stable and persisting element of corporate activity is truly a masterpiece of Pynchon's argumentative force. The reader, just as the participants of the *séance*, would find it extremely difficult to keep on holding to any kind of illusions as to the true nature of capitalist ideology.

Death is "the Real" of capitalism. "The Real", which is always present. Unlike the Imaginary, it is free of illusions and idealistic visions; unlike the Symbolic, it is free of any lack, any inconsistency. Death being "the Thing", which is,

as Lacan himself puts it: “the traumatic, real object fixing our desire”.⁸ Sticking to the Lacanian interpretation of what “the Real” actually is, we find in Žižek a familiar metaphor of excrements. In several lectures, Žižek refers to Coca-Cola, as the ultimate capitalist merchandise, ultimate object of consumers’ desire.

In Coke, we have a drink removed of all the objectively necessary properties of a satisfying drink; it provides no nutritional benefit, it does not quench thirst, nor provide the ‘satisfied calm’ of an alcoholic beverage. Instead, all that is left is the mysterious ‘IT’ (the slogan of the merchandise being ‘Coke is IT’), the surplus over enjoyment that is characteristic of the commodity.⁹

Žižek describes, how Coca-Cola provides an illusion of being a perfect drink, however, if the illusion is somehow distorted (for example, if the beverage is served warm), the elation instantaneously disappears and is replaced by disgust, and the extraordinary drink “turns into SHIT”. For Žižek, just as for Pynchon, excrements seem to be the metaphor of the real substance behind illusory images and discourses provided by ideologies and policies. As Žižek himself puts it (quoting Lacan): “metaphor is an eminently anal process: we give something (shit) to fill out the nothing, that is, to make up for what we do not have”.¹⁰ Excrements are the epitome of uselessness and foulness, stripped of any embellishing factors or attempts to mask their true nature. With a pinch of salt, one could add, that “shit” is a vehicle for all ideologies. One of the most famous Žižek’s comments on the subject is his comparison of three toilets: the German, the French and the Anglo-Saxon one.¹¹ These toilets are designed in different ways which reflects different frames of mind of the three nations, just as they were described by Hegel: the German attitude toward life was “reflective thoroughness”, the predominant French attitude is “revolutionary hastiness”, and the English is “utilitarian pragmatism”. In politics, these play out as “German conservatism, French revolutionary radicalism, and English liberalism”.¹² One can wonder whether Žižek is serious in his

⁸ S. Žižek, *Looking Awry, An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*, The MIT Press, London, 1992, p. 162.

⁹ S. Žižek, “The Superego and the Act”, a lecture, August 1999, available at <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/slavoj-zizek/articles/the-superego-and-the-act/>

¹⁰ S. Žižek, *Looking Awry ...*, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

¹¹ In his book *The Plague of Fantasies*, (Verso, London–New York, 1997) Žižek writes: “In a traditional German lavatory, the hole in which shit disappears after we flush water is way in front, so that the shit is first laid out for us to sniff at and inspect for traces of some illness; in the typical French lavatory, on the contrary, the hole is in the back – that is, the shit is supposed to disappear as soon as possible; finally, the Anglo-Saxon (English or American) lavatory presents a kind of synthesis, a mediation between these two opposite poles – the basin is full of water, so that the shit floats in it – visible, but not to be inspected” (p. 4). See also: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AwTJXHNP0bg>, 16 July 2007.

¹² S. Žižek, *The Plague...*, *ibid.*, p. 5.

statements, just as the readers of *Gravity's Rainbow* are incessantly confronted with the dilemma of whether they are dealing with a serious diagnosis of contemporary political and economical realities, or with a derisory pastiche. One way or another, the conclusion of Žižek's remarks appears to be the following: one cannot run from ideologies, they are present in every aspect of our lives, and they eventually show their true face, however hard anyone would initially try to mask it.

Let us concentrate for a moment on this issue, namely – masking the true face of ideologies. On numerous occasions, Pynchon exposes in *Gravity's Rainbow* how people are subject to indoctrination, misinformation, and, above all, to various processes aimed at soothing and distracting their minds from the truth about their lives and the world around them. In Episode 19, Part 1, we read:

[...] look at the forms of capitalist expression. Pornographies: pornographies of love, erotic love, Christian love, boy-and-his-dog, pornographies of sunsets, pornographies of killing and pornographies of deduction – *aah*, that sigh when we guess the murderer – all these novels, these films and songs they lull us with, they're approaches, more comfortable and less so, to the Absolute Comfort. [...] The self-induced orgasm. (p. 155)

Capitalism produces and multiplies substitutes for real satisfaction, a kind of intoxicating patterns which people follow believing they are making the right choice, or dealing with the truth, or getting closer to happiness. This can be entertainment: films and novels which reinforce the *status quo* of the system¹³, this can also be the media (just like the newspapers mentioned at the beginning of the present work) which pretend to provide their audience with pure facts, and actually

¹³ In an essay entitled *Action-Adventure as Ideology* (in: Ian Angus and Sut Jhally (eds.) *Cultural Politics in Contemporary America*, New York, Routledge, 1989), Gina Marchetti analyzes how popular action-adventure Hollywood films support the dominant ideology. Marchetti states that action-adventure films provide a safe way to vent tensions provoked by the dominance of the ruling ideology. Although these films appear to be pure entertainment, they are polysemic, they deal with ideological contradictions and “allow places of resistance for those marginalized by the dominant ideology”. The hero of the story is usually white and male, but also an outsider, very often in conflict with state institutions, which is a way of venting many viewers' distrust of the ‘establishment’ and their opposition against ruling power. Moreover, the hero is often accompanied by a female or a non-white ‘buddy’ which allows members of these social groups to identify with the main character and to feel they ‘have a role to play’ in the quest against the villains. As for the villains, they express utter contempt for American middle-class values and often destroy some of middle-class wealth, which also can be seen as a way of venting viewers' frustrations. Nevertheless, the action-adventure stories always privilege the dominant ideology in the end. The hero fights to save the American world, the buddies loyally join him in this quest and identify with “the power and prerogatives of white, male, American culture”, and the villain, whose role is to express, explore and finally reject those actions which are forbidding but strongly tempting, is killed in a violent way. Thus, the action-adventure story exposes ideological contradictions, transposes them into fantasy and resolves them.

pass on indoctrinating messages structured by specialised agencies.¹⁴ Finally, it can be education, especially education on history. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, Pynchon through the voice of a third-person narrator tears the mask off the face of war, telling the readers what war really is:

[...] the real business of war is buying and selling. The murdering and the violence are self-policing, and can be entrusted to non-professionals. The mass nature of wartime death is useful in many ways. It serves as spectacle, as diversion from the real movements of war. It provides raw material to be recorded into History, so that children may be taught History as sequences of violence, battle after battle, and be more prepared for the adult world. Best of all, mass death's a stimulus to just ordinary folks, little fellows, to try 'n' grab a piece of that Pie while they're still here to gobble it up. The true war is a celebration of markets. Organic markets, carefully styled "black" by the professionals, spring up everywhere. (p. 105)

War turns out to be the epitome of capitalistic ventures. It revolves around death, feeds on death to prosper and continue. It induces artificial crises to boost people's demand for commodities. It secretly takes advantage of phenomena which it officially condemns such as killing, emergence of black markets etc. This deceitful nature of capitalism is denounced throughout the whole novel. On page 238 we find a suggestion that "the whole German Inflation was created deliberately", on page 585 there is a song praising the "Bright Days for the Black Market", with the lyrics "Just flip another dollar, [...] That ever-lovin' War goes on and on, ya know, Just follow that dollar and vo-dee, o-do-do!" So it looks as if capitalism as ideology was constructed on a primordial lie, that it aims at promoting justice and maximising prosperity for all the humanity, whereas in reality, it preys on death and destruction in the neverending pursuit of maximising profit for the few who pull the strings. Moreover, we seem to have proven by now, that people are not totally unaware of this state of affairs, or even some are fully aware of it but prefer to cynically act as if they did not know what the truth holds.

As it has been already stated, in the standard Lacanian-Žižkian understanding, human existence consists of three orders: the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real. Every human being struggles to keep at a certain distance from the Real, as

¹⁴ A brilliant analysis of this phenomenon has been proposed by the American sociologist and media critic Herbert Schiller, who in his article *Dumbing down, American-style* in "Le Monde diplomatique", August 1999 explains how it is possible that most Americans continuously share and support the idea of United States' privileged role in shaping universal policies, while this leadership is generally contested by the rest of the world's population and is a burden even to the Americans themselves. According to Schiller, it is achieved by heavy indoctrination, what he calls 'definitional control' assured by "the information infrastructure that produces meaning and awareness". The process consists in emphasizing certain pieces of information and omitting others, to the point that the majority of US population is ignorant of the events and opinions outside the United States. Schools, press, TV, institutions specialized in 'developing ideas' are all involved in the process, promoting the government's view of the world, as well as consumerist lifestyle.

it is too unbearable and bleak. People therefore develop Symbolic structures, like laws or ideologies, to maintain an illusion of order, stability and coherence of the reality. However, what truly drives human beings to act, and, in general, to keep on living, are not laws or opinions, but desires. And these emerge and function within the realm of the Imaginary, as desires are based upon fantasy-scenarios.¹⁵ It is therefore a vital interest of every ideology, to provide people with such fantasy-scenarios, in order to keep them entrapped within the fictional world that the ideologies have created. Capitalism excels at luring people with promises of a better life if only they keep on their consumerist lifestyle, work hard to increase their earnings and, consequently, increase their spendings. However, the truly perverse facet of capitalism, is that it also provides people with fantasy-scenarios of how wonderful the world could be if capitalism was abolished. Žižek compares this situation to the one of a prisoner, who spends his prison life on dreaming about how life will be different and perfect once he is set free.¹⁶ As a result, he spends his whole life in a dream-like state, not doing anything productive during his time at prison, and staying totally dependant on the prison-like mentality. Similarly, people are free to rebel against injustices, to fight for ecology or to manifest in favour of equal rights but as long as they continue living within the capitalist society, their actions actually support and not undermine the system. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, such an attitude is represented by Franz Pökler, who, while chasing the dream of technological progress, largely ignores the realities accompanying his work and its consequences. But there is another property of desire, as described by Lacan and Žižek, which as well features in *Gravity's Rainbow*, namely, that desire constitutes itself always towards an object, which is unattainable, because it actually is a fictive object created by the desire itself.

The paradox of desire is that it posits retroactively its own cause, i.e. the object (of desire) can be perceived only by a gaze “distorted” by desire, (...) since it is nothing but the embodiment, the materialization of this very distortion, of this surplus of confusion and perturbation introduced by desire into so-called “objective reality”.¹⁷

This situation engenders in turn “a nostalgic yearning for the “natural” state in which things were only what they were, in which we perceived them straightforwardly, in which our gaze had not yet been distorted”.¹⁸ We long for a “paradise lost” which has never existed, because it is conceived precisely at the same moment when it was lost. One can discover a similar attitude in Oberst Enzian's

¹⁵ Cf.: S. Žižek, *Looking Awry...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 83–4; *The Sublime...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 118–120.

¹⁶ See: S. Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute: or, Why Is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting for?*, Verso, London–New York, 2000, pp. 146–148.

¹⁷ S. Žižek, *Looking Awry...*, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

yearning to come back to a “natural state” from before capitalism: “Somewhere, among the wastes of the World, is the key that will bring us back, restore us to our Earth and to our freedom”. (p. 525) Another similar passage are Slothrop’s speculations of how America would look like if it had embraced the religious concepts of one of his protestant ancestors:

Could he have been the fork in the road America never took, the singular point she jumped the wrong way from? Suppose the Slothropite heresy had the time to consolidate and prosper. Might there have been fewer criminals in the name of Jesus, and more mercy in the name of Judas Iscariot? It seems to Tyrone Slothrop *that there might be a route back* – maybe the anarchist he met in Zürich was right, maybe for a little while all the fences are down, one road as good as another, the whole space of the Zone cleared, depolarized, and somewhere inside the waste of it a single set of coordinates, from which to proceed, without elect, without preterite, without even nationality to fuck it up. (p. 556, emphasis added)

Dreaming of a perfect world, wishing to come back to a mythical, initial state of harmony and happiness, looking back into the distant past or drifting away into an idealized future, are all mental states much cherished by ideologies and political systems, as they draw people’s attention away from the present state of affairs and the actual situation in which they find themselves.

What is more, talking about masking the true face of ideologies, we noticed how Pynchon compares capitalist intoxicating patterns to pornographies. By using this word in a perverse manner, Pynchon shows how capitalism is able to use and abuse various aspects of human life (Christian love, the beauty of nature, the tragedy of death), and turn them into their own caricatures: too literal, garish, excessive on the outside, but deprived of substance, dead and empty on the inside. Žižek himself has paid much attention to pornography in his works. He points out how pornography

[...] is the genre supposed to “reveal all there is to reveal”, to hide nothing, to register “all” and offer it to our view. It is nevertheless precisely in pornographic cinema that the “substance of enjoyment” is radically lost. [...] pornography goes beyond, it shows everything. The paradox is, however, that by trespassing the limit, it always goes too far [...]. If we proceed too hastily “to the point”, if we show “the thing itself”, we necessarily lose what we were after. The effect is extremely vulgar and depressing.¹⁹

If we applied this metaphor to Pynchon’s analysis, we could say that what capitalism provides us with, are substitutes, false images of completeness which aim to mask the insufficiencies of the ideology, but fail to do so precisely because they do not bring satisfaction but only disappointment and the feeling of “wanting more” or “wanting something else”. This brings us back to the Lacanian notion

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 109–110.

of lack, which – as it turns out – lies also in the heart of democracy. Towards the end of his book, Žižek asks a fundamental question: “who is the subject of democracy?” And immediately he states: “The Lacanian answer is unequivocal: the subject of democracy is not a human person, “man” in all the richness of his needs, interests and beliefs. [...] the principle of formal democracy (is that) “democracy” is fundamentally “antihumanistic”, it is not “made to the measure of (concrete, actual) man,” but to the measure of a formal, heartless abstraction”.²⁰ By “abstraction”, Žižek means the dissolution of all positive aspects in the preamble of every democratic proclamation “all people *without regard to* (race, sex, religion, social status)”. The paradoxes which arise from this principle of formal equality have been revealed by a daring project undertaken by none other than Marquis de Sade. In *Looking Awry* we read:

To the list of the “rights of man” proclaimed by the French revolution, Sade adds the “right to enjoyment”, an embarrassing supplement that secretly subverts the universal field of rights in which it purports to place itself. Again we witness the logic of the not-all: the field of the universal “rights of man” is based upon the exclusion of a certain right (the right to enjoyment); as soon as we include this particular right, the very field of universal rights is thrown off balance.²¹

Why? Because enjoyment, according to Lacan, depends on exerting your particular fantasy, while fantasies, by definition, cannot coexist peacefully in neutral medium. The Sadian norm of the right to enjoyment

[...] would affirm that anybody – irrespective of his/her sex, age, social status, etc. – has a right to dispose freely of any part of my body in order to satisfy in any conceivable way his/her desires. [...] Lacan points out that such a universal norm is self-defeating insofar as it excludes reciprocity: ultimately, one always gives more than one takes, i.e., everybody finds himself occupying the position of the victim.²²

To develop this thesis, Žižek asks a number of questions:

What can we say, then, about somebody with whom a sexual relation is possible only when the clitoris is cut out? Moreover, what can we say about *the woman* who accepts this and demands the right to undergo the painful ritual of cutting out her clitoris? Is this part of her “right to enjoyment,” or are we supposed to liberate her in the name of Western values from this “barbaric” way of organizing her enjoyment? This point is, there is no way out: even if we say a woman can humiliate herself as long as she does so of her own free will, we can imagine the existence of a fantasy that consists in being humiliated *against* her will.²³

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 167–168.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

Sadomasochism is thus the ultimate impasse of Western ideologies. Curiously enough, the same impasse is thoroughly investigated in Pynchon's novel. Sadomasochism is the main sexual practice exercised by Captain Dominus Blicero, and one could argue that is his way of escaping the Nazi ideology he represents; his voluntary submission in acts of masochism can be considered as an act of ultimate freedom, since he is consistently following the urge of his authentic desire. Thus, he is no longer submitted to the dominance of an external power, in this case, exercised by the Nazi German military state, nor to artificial desires created and proposed by the System. However, the broadest analysis of sadomasochism in the context of systems of power, is given at the end of the novel, and therefore, just as it was in Žižek's case, it may be considered as a kind of conclusion to the whole debate on organisation of social life in every political and ideological system. In the very last Episode of *Gravity's Rainbow* we read:

[...] a little S and M never hurt anybody. [...] But why are we taught to feel reflexive shame whenever the subject comes up? Why will the Structure allow every other kind of sexual behavior but *that* one? Because submission and dominance are resources it needs for its very survival. They cannot be waisted in private sex. In *any* kind of sex. It needs our submission so that it may remain in power. It needs our lusts after dominance so that it can co-opt us into its own power game. There is no joy in it, only power. I tell you, if S and M could be established universally, at the family level, *the State would wither away*. (p. 737, final emphasis added)

So there we have it. Jokingly, Pynchon draws an analogous conclusion to Žižek's and Lacan's: "the System" (i.e. a state, an economic or ideological system etc.) thrives upon people's lack of fulfilment, holds them in check by arousing and channelling their desire so that they take the bait and follow the patterns offered by the system itself (e.g. chasing after power, money or domination), instead of rebelliously seeking their personal satisfaction outside the system, regardless of the system, or against the system's Symbolic requirements. One can pretend not to notice this ultimate perversion of how the western societies are organized, or again, pretend not to be concerned with these mechanisms, feeling somehow "above" the whole thing. However, this will not stop the system from going, won't even change it in any other way than supporting its further development.

To sum up, Pynchon's and Žižek's views on ideologies, political systems and capitalism doubtlessly do coincide. Both authors reveal how perversely inconsistent such systems are, how paradoxically they contradict their own claims and how desperately they try to mask this fact and their true face. Still, this "true face" recurrently re-emerges on various occasions, and in various ways. And thus, it becomes apparent that "universal" freedom is built upon the exclusion of certain personal freedoms, that the fight for equal rights can conceal aspects of superior-

ity of some groups of individuals over others²⁴, or that prosperity is built on the impoverishment and exploitation of certain people and resources. The majority of Western societies either cynically continue to support the dominant ideology despite full awareness of its falseness, or they drift into illusions of a perfect world while continuing their servility to the System which they claim to reject. There can be multiple reasons for this state of affairs, one interesting hypothesis to take into account is Erich Fromm's psychoanalytical theory developed in his book *The Fear of Freedom*. Fromm describes how people are eager to give up their personal freedom and responsibility for their own actions, from fear of insecurity and isolation, and for the sake of fitting into a smoothly functioning society and responding well to what they believe is expected from them²⁵. Yet, the most important question to ask is not why people remain faithful to systems which interfere drastically with their personal happiness and fulfilment, but rather, if there exist any real possibilities to truly oppose such systems, to abandon their logic and mechanisms, to propose an alternative which would not bear the same tragic flaws?

STRESZCZENIE

W powieści *Tęcza grawitacji*, Thomas Pynchon stawia tezę, że każda ideologia kryje wewnętrzne sprzeczności. Wnioski te są zaskakująco podobne do wyników badań nad ideologiami prowadzonymi przez filozofa – lacanistę, Sławoja Žižka. Porównując dzieła obydwu pisarzy, odnajdujemy w nich ostrą krytykę kapitalizmu, będącego systemem czerpiącym siły witalne z wyzysku i zniszczenia. Autorzy demaskują cynizm współczesnych społeczeństw zachodnich oraz fałszywą obietnicę dobrobytu, na której opiera się kapitalizm, analizują sposoby, w jakie system wykorzystuje ludzkie pragnienia by przetrwać, oraz poruszają kwestie pornografii i masochizmu, będących

²⁴ In *Gravity's Rainbow* Pynchon alludes on several occasions to hostility towards the Jews or Blacks, and in *Looking Awry...* Žižek explains the postmodern return of racism. Žižek ascribes the rise in ethnic nationalisms to the process of globalization. This process refers to the way in which capitalism has spread across the world, displacing local companies in favour of multinational ones. The more capitalism spreads, the more it works to dissolve the efficacy of national domains, dissipating local traditions and values in favor of universal ones. The only way to offset this increased homogeneity and to assert the worth of the particular against the global is to cling to one's specific ethnic fantasy (pp. 162–165). Moreover, as we can read in Tony Myers' *Slavoj Žižek*, racism is now articulated in terms of a respect for another's culture. Instead of saying "My culture is better than yours", postmodern or reflexive racism will merely say: "My culture is different from yours" (pp. 93–110). Still, this will include the same element of ideological cynicism, which we described earlier: a contemporary racist thinks: "I know very well that all ethnic cultures are equal in value, yet, nevertheless, I will act as if mine is superior". Moreover, he or she will blame his socio-economic environment, poor childhood, peer group pressure, and so on, in such a way as to suggest that he cannot help being racist, but is merely a victim of circumstances. As Žižek puts it: "in the racist perspective, the "other" is either a workaholic stealing our jobs or an idler living on our labor". Thus postmodern racists are fully able to rationalize their behavior in a way that belies the traditional image of racism as the vocation of the ignorant.

²⁵ See: E. Fromm, *The Fear of Freedom*, Routledge, London–New York, pp. 119–121.

ostatecznym produktem kapitalistycznej maszyny. Lektura tekstu Pynchona przez pryzmat psychoanalitycznych teorii Žižka przynosi nowatorską odpowiedź na pytania, w jaki sposób kapitalizm obraca się wokół śmierci, jakie iluzje tworzy, jak stara się zamaskować swą prawdziwą naturę i dla czego mu się to ostatecznie nie udaje.

Słowa kluczowe: Thomas Pynchon, Slavoj Žižek, kapitalizm, ideologie, niespójności

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