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## When an Exception is just an Exception: Slavoj Žižek's The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieślowski between Theory and Post-Theory

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## Review Essay

### **When an Exception is just an Exception: Slavoj Žižek's *The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieślowski between Theory and Post-Theory***

**Sheila Skaff and Chris Luebbe**

Slavoj Žižek. *The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieślowski between Theory and Post-Theory*. BFI Publications, 2001.

Among the primary virtues of Slavoj Žižek's indefatigable, somewhat compulsive efforts to explicate the strange topographies of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory and contemporary cultural politics are his ready wit and his facility in drawing upon his familiarity with diverse topics, from the finest points of Kantian and Hegelian metaphysics to slapstick teenage comedies. Both of these are evident in his recent book *The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieślowski between Theory and Post-Theory*, based on a series of lectures delivered at London's National Film Theatre on the films of the Polish director. Significantly, the self-proclaimed aim of this study of Kieślowski is "not to talk *about* his work, but to refer to his work in order to accomplish the *work* of Theory" (9). Žižek's modus operandi throughout all of his writings is to formulate highly abstract philosophical and theoretical meditations by referring to the widest possible variety of North American and European cultural products, such as films, literature, music, and jokes. This is what he means by "the *work* of Theory," further specified as elaborating the *notion* of the subject under investigation, as opposed to merely detailing its history. Over the years Žižek has strengthened his theoretical compositions by choosing examples to size

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and has developed new theories by allowing the cultural products that do not quite fit to propel his theories in new directions. The films of Krzysztof Kieślowski, he claims, do just this.

The focus of Žižek's book is theory rather than Kieślowski, and he proves this by adjusting information on the filmmaker and his films to suit his needs. The book's title is taken from one of Kieślowski's reasons for his decision to move from documentary to feature filmmaking in the mid-1970s. After years of documenting daily life, provoked by the realization that he might capture something that he would rather not have seen, Kieślowski switched to feature films. He felt that by creating fictional scenes he could portray the more private aspects of life without harming anyone, and therefore avoid the worries that lead to dishonesty or leave the human subjects of documentaries without protection. Žižek describes this predicament beautifully: "[T]he only proper thing to do is to maintain a distance towards the intimate, idiosyncratic, fantasy domain—one can only circumscribe, hint at, these fragile elements that bear witness to a human personality" (73). Žižek does not mention that the footage for one of Kieślowski's documentaries was taken by the police, indirectly implicating him in the solution of a murder case. Herein lies the plus/minus of Žižek's book: for better and for worse, *Fright* is all about theory and events only get in the way. Žižek finds in Kieślowski's films a penchant for creating multiple versions of films with different contingent outcomes and endings in documentary as well as in fiction, which furthers Žižek's disbelief in the legitimacy of real events. In documentary, he claims, "We are shown what 'really happened,' and suddenly, we perceive this reality in all its fragility, as one of the contingent outcomes, forever haunted by its shadowy doubles" (77). According to Žižek, reality is actually "lost" in documentary instead of merely hidden as the possibility of contingent outcomes overwhelms the outcome presented on the screen (121). These worthwhile meditations are, unfortunately, offset by Žižek's unwillingness to separate life off-camera from life on-camera. He places a rectangular screen in front of Kieślowski's own life and early death and claims that it fits within his paradigm of lost reality. In doing so he ignores the very basis of the filmmaker's move from documentary to fiction and undermines a potentially excellent argument about documentation and contingency.

Žižek examines the fright of real tears carefully and succinctly, with the expertise of a good theorist who understands the fragile nature of a field that attempts to encompass both fiction and life. However, his analysis fails to reflect this understanding in all of its complexities and is weak in comparison to the existing body of criticism on the director. Žižek writes, "If documentaries intrude into and hurt the personal reality of the protagonists, fiction intrudes into and hurts dreams themselves, secret fantasies that form the unavowed kernel of our lives" (77). It is difficult to discern the fact from the fiction in Žižek's own work, which makes it interesting but in some cases less valuable than customary scholarship. When Žižek turns the director's death into the fulfillment of a wish in Freudian terms, a statement or at the very least the contingent outcome of the choices that he made, it is hard to tell if he understands that he is dealing with fact, not fiction. By disregarding very real life consequences, which are usually much more complicated

than the sanitized choices presented in fiction, he is able to fit the trajectory of Kieślowski's career and life choices to his theory.

What, then, is the true subject of Žižek's book? The question is tied to questions of whether and how he confronts "the shared implicit set of beliefs and norms that regulate our interaction" (3), and whether he makes the case for the exceptional status of Kieślowski and his films; namely, that they function as "concrete universals" in relation to the total field of film theory. In this particular instance, the former takes the form of a polemic directed against the advocates and practitioners of "Post-Theory," meaning a cognitivist and historicist approach to film criticism. Such criticism fails to discern the dialectical alternative to "mid-level empirical research and cultural studies historical relativism [and] the old-fashioned metaphysical TOE [Theory Of Everything]," which "concerns the paradoxical relationship between universality and its constitutive exception" (14). Its basic procedure is to attempt to generate general principles or definitions by discerning underlying similarities or patterns in a sufficiently large set of examples. What it fails to notice in following this procedure is that each and every individual example distorts or colors the general rule in a unique way. "Post-Theory" also fails to "reconstruct 'all' of the narrative content [of a given film]" (58) due to its refusal to acknowledge the unconscious dimension of narrative. The debate between theory and post-theory within the discipline of film studies is further presented as emblematic of a crisis in cultural studies in general, which in Žižek's reading is caught in the predicament of being split between an objective "neutral" but totally opaque language of experts and a Leibnizean universe of multiple self-enclosed and mutually untranslatable languages. The problem with post-theory in this account is its refusal to confront this split and to assert a new universality. In repressing the essential place of the universal within the identity of the particular, post-theorists lose that very identity/meaning.

The arguments for Kieślowski's exceptional status, given Žižek's focus on the universal/theoretical dimension, as well as the fact that the book has its origins in a series of lectures, are perhaps understandably less well developed and often difficult to discern. Symptomatic of this is the fact that a crucial point in his argument about Kieślowski's films—namely, the standard Lacanian thesis regarding the impossibility of the sexual relationship in that during the sex act each partner is never fully present (to the other) but rather always mediated through fantasy—is made without a single reference to Kieślowski, but instead is elaborated by way of Nabokov's *Lolita*, Cuban machismo, Wagner, Goethe, and *The Thornbirds*, among others. As in all of his books it appears as a digression from the main discussion of ethical choice in *Blind Chance*, *The Double Life of Véronique*, and *Three Colours: Red*. Thus, to the extent that there is an overarching argument it is one involving a totalizing reading of Kieślowski's work as presenting the ambiguity of a choice between "resignation at the missed encounter which asserts the gap [of the failed suture], or the closed loop of fantasy which fills this gap" (181).

The book is divided into three sections: the universal, the particular, and the individual. Each section is organized around a central opposition, which upon reflection can be seen as a version of the ambiguity Žižek finds in Kieślowski, but

which in his own argument is decidedly not ambiguous. This series of oppositions are made explicit in the final section, when he asks rhetorically, “Is the topic of our first chapter, the choice between Theory and Post-Theory, not yet another case of the ethical choice between event and Being, between ethics and morality, between mission and life?” (148). It becomes clear in Žižek’s reading of the films and in subsequent readings of Žižek’s book that the first term in each of these pairs is the privileged one.

The first section contains the argument against post-theory, largely through a discussion of the Hegelian notion of “concrete universality” and the move from the failure of classical film theory’s “suture” to what Žižek calls “interface.” This building of a theoretical framework is familiar ground for Žižek, and he carries it off with characteristic aplomb. The first part of his case for theory over post-theory hinges on his particular interpretation of Hegelian dialectics, which by now is familiar to his readers. Hence, the comprehensibility and forcefulness of this case will in large part depend upon how compelling and/or useful one finds this interpretation and its corresponding application to cultural and aesthetic objects. His central claim in this section is that the empirical approach of post-theory, while achieving valuable results in film analysis and criticism, and with historical specificity, can never attain true (“concrete”) universality in its claims or judgments. This is because it overlooks how “at every stage its particular content is not only a subspecies of the universality of the total process: it ‘hegemonises’ this very universality” (24). The empirical-conceptual divide is manifested in post-theory’s inability to account for uncanny reversals of the relationship between subject and object, in psychoanalytic terms, the “Gaze” (34), the unconscious, and ultimately, the symbolic order as a realm of fiction or potentiality that sustains our very sense of reality (61-68). In Žižek’s conception, this sense of reality is only achieved through suture, which in one formulation is the point of inscription within a signifying structure or symbolic order of this structure/order’s absence (32). (The notion of suture is obviously a complex and highly debated one. In the work under consideration, it is not fully elaborated. While this is among the book’s shortcomings, a thorough critique of Žižek’s deployment of this term is beyond the scope of this review.) The question now becomes: What happens when the suture fails? Žižek’s answer is the most original part of the book. According to Žižek, interface steps in to mark this failure self-reflexively. Interface, then, is a technique whereby the gap between the subjective and objective dimensions of experience is presented within the narrative as a spectral object, in some cases the same as the Lacanian *objet petit a*. His examples include a glass ball in *The Double Life of Véronique* and *Citizen Kane*, an image of Valentine on a red billboard in *Red*, and a reflection of Julie’s doctor in her eye in *Blue*. This uncanny spectral dimension is not merely a supplementary, superficial feature that can be ignored or removed, but rather an essential part whose exorcism would lead to the dissolution of reality/meaning itself, as in the example of the glass ball in *Citizen Kane* signaling Kane’s death. Another demonstration of interface, according to Žižek, occurs when a third image is added to a standard shot/reverse-shot in order to disturb the viewers’ sense of on-screen reality. Interface, he explains, urges the viewer to ponder the

existence of another dimension and to doubt the conclusiveness of the reality presented on the screen. The main attraction in this most exciting of Žižek's theoretical queries requires suspended doubt: Žižek often forgets that the shot/reverse-shot is just as imaginary as the spectral image.

Žižek establishes that filmmakers often script an ethical dilemma for their characters based on the decision of whether or not to pursue their talents and dreams in spite of risk of physical danger to themselves and others. This vocation-versus-calm-life dilemma, he claims, runs through the work and life of Kieślowski and forms a basis for theoretical inquiry into the relationship between intention, action, contingency, and outcome in the second section. He rightly sees the mission-life alternative as the thesis of *Blind Chance* and *The Double Life of Véronique*, and points to elements of it in *Three Colours: Blue, White, Red* and parts of *Decalogue*. For Žižek this multiplicity of contingent outcomes based on an opposition between professional objectives and private existence is a forerunner of digital technology, which allows more and more for the creation of multiple fictional universes and the sophisticated interface. Žižek wants either to ascribe a necessary trilogy to these multiple universes, claiming that the third in the row of outcomes is presented in film as the only real one (*Blind Chance*) or to claim that in the case of two possible outcomes the filmmaker is simply breaking the illusion of a time-space continuum by allowing his characters to travel through time (*Véronique, Red*). It also opens the door for Žižek to ask, though unfortunately more in the context of Tarkovsky than Kieślowski, about “the ambiguity of the role of chance in Kieślowski's universe: Does it point toward a deeper fate secretly regulating our lives, or is the notion of fate itself a desperate stratagem to cope with the utter contingency of life?” (107). According to Žižek, Kieślowski tackles this question by creating characters who attempt to recreate reality and by making multiple versions of some of his films. His examples seem random and scattered and, in spite of his attempt to use them to do the work of theory, related more thematically than theoretically—though they deal with similar issues, they offer little motivation for understanding Žižek's theoretical abstractions.

The most disappointing part of Žižek's study is the section on Kieślowski's ten-segment masterpiece about the Ten Commandments made for Polish television in 1988, *Decalogue*. Because this series of television films has received much attention outside of Poland, there is a relatively good deal of available scholarship on the subject in English, and many of Žižek's own ideas, particularly pertaining to interface, could have been elaborated and proven with the help of this scholarship. He chooses to disregard it, and in doing so hurts his own arguments. Žižek claims that the majority of interpreters of the films are wrong (he never names these interpreters) and insists upon a strict (in italics!) Hegelian correlation between the ten films and the Ten Commandments. As if claiming that there is a correct order to the Ten Commandments (which actually differ depending on one's religious beliefs) were not mistaken enough, Žižek also turns to a random assortment of Western cultural products to prove that theory can define a correlative system within *Decalogue* in spite of such contrary evidence as the filmmaker's expressed intentions and the actual topics of the films. Žižek claims that each segment of *Decalogue*

refers to the commandment of one number higher, so that *Decalogue: One* refers to the Second Commandment, and so on until *Decalogue: Ten*, which he claims refers to the First Commandment. The results are hit-and-miss. The author devotes one paragraph to each film segment, asserting at times the obvious (*Decalogue: Five*, about a young murderer, is associated with “Thou shalt not kill”) and at times the absurd (*Decalogue: Six*, about a teenage peeping Tom and the unmarried, lonely object of his desire, is associated with “Thou shalt not commit adultery”). He attempts to analyze *Decalogue: One* in detail, but unfortunately he makes basic mistakes regarding the action of the film that render his reading untrustworthy. In short, he completely misses opportunities to develop his theories and gives a false impression of the films.

For all of his attempts to link dissimilar concepts, Žižek’s work is best when it distinguishes between seemingly similar ones. A highlight of the book is his explanation of the distinction between ethics and morality in the third section. Ethics, according to Žižek, is the refusal to compromise one’s attitude, while morality is moral compassion (137). Kieślowski’s films, he states, are about ethics rather than morality. In this way they demonstrate a theoretical shift. Žižek demonstrates this difference by reading the shift from morality to ethics in a few films, concentrating mainly on *Hilary and Jackie*, *In the Company of Men*, and *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, but venturing a bit into *Decalogue*, *The Double Life of Véronique*, and *The Scar* as well. He finds that the distinction between ethics and morality becomes apparent when the intentions and actions of two characters are depicted in opposition to each other. Effect, then, takes a back seat to intention in these characters’ dilemmas. When they are able to demonstrate willingness to help others by revealing their good intentions, they portray moral compassion. If, however, characters retain their self-accepted code of behavior, regardless of the harmfulness or helpfulness of their actions, they are acting in an ethical way. Žižek’s explanations of this distinction are expert, engaging, and positively provocative, leaving the reader to search for yet more examples and explanations.

Indeed, when Žižek is right he is so wonderfully right that the problems with his scholarship become pronounced. Is Žižek himself acting morally or ethically when he writes of Kieślowski’s films? Refusing to compromise his ideas, he insists upon the commandment-film correlation even when it destroys the argument. Similarly, he insists upon the three-part, three-chapter structure, even though the final chapters weaken the book as a whole. He is extreme in his insistence upon making reference to unrelated films. He makes mistakes when summarizing films. He leaves gaps in his arguments when the films’ plots contradict his ideas. For example, he chooses to read *Blue* and *No End* together because they both begin with the tragic loss of a woman’s husband but end in dramatically different ways. He analyzes the message of the wife’s double loss in *Blue*, in which she learns that her late husband had been having a long-term affair throughout their marriage. She therefore effectively loses both her husband and her memories of a faithful marriage, and it is the recognition of the second loss that allows her to move forward with her mourning and her sexual life at the end of the film. Žižek, however, avoids mention of the attendant message of *No End*. In this film, the widow searches for evidence that her

husband had been unfaithful, but when she finds none she realizes that she is unable to live without him. The outcome is suicide instead of rebirth. Žižek's explanation of the inevitability of a third fantastical element in sexual relationships contradicts the plot development of *No End*, while omission of *No End* from the analysis contradicts his explanation of multiple outcomes. He chooses to avoid the dilemma by concentrating on outcome rather than contingency, effectively weakening his main argument.

The main problem, though, is that the promising distinction between morality and ethics is lost at the end of the book, and the dilemma of calm life versus mission fares little better. An unrelated passage on human rights and religion ("In our post-political, liberal-permissive society, human rights are ultimately reduced to the rights to violate the Ten Commandments" [155]) and an awkward comment on *Blue* ("[I]t is the ideal film to satisfy the needs of a Brussels bureaucrat who returns home in the evening after a day full of complex negotiations on tariff regulations" [177]) unfortunately wrap up the book. Not that it seems to matter at this point. Žižek uses Kieślowski's films and random United States and Western European films as tools, which allow him to theorize. The films themselves are secondary—always already insufficient, imperfect—to theory.

Polish cinema fans and film historians may want to think twice before investing in this book. In spite of a sincere interest in Kieślowski and film theory, *The Fright of Real Tears* stubbornly dissatisfies by trying to act as a lone trail-blazer on a busy superhighway. There simply is much better, more pertinent, more intelligent scholarship available. Other scholars have taken better care to recall correctly the plots of Kieślowski's films and to consider in depth the religious and social circumstances behind their production. Žižek's dismissal of this scholarship weakens his arguments, as does the dismissal of so much of Kieślowski that absolutely belongs to, even drives, the "work of Theory." Where is Ingmar Bergman in *Fright*? Where is the Łódź Film School? Where are Kieślowski's college classmates and colleagues? Why does Žižek expend his letters on back-handed comments about national cuisines, German billboards, and a footnote that rearticulates the history of modern philosophy around the central term "fucking" instead of delving deeper into film? The short answer may be that *The Fright of Real Tears* alternates between the meaningful practice of theoretical inquiry and the seemingly endless chore of cultural criticism, where nothing that is Western is acceptable and everything that is not Western is misplaced or mentioned briefly in a bibliographic endnote. Žižek asks the reader to oscillate with him between these two poles. He often builds highly complex arguments out of seemingly insignificant details and ignores blatant exceptions to the point he is trying to make. Moreover, he leaves the most disappointing comments for the last pages of the book and even adds a picture in a pathetic attempt to prove his point. Although one might agree with his Hegelian reading of the exception that proves the rule, in the case of his treatment of Kieślowski we might prefer a Freudian reading and assert that sometimes an exception is just an exception.