

PHIL 483L
Žižek as Philosopher

Fall 2022

CRN 91047, Section AB1

Thursdays 10:00–12:50, ABD 225

Instructor: Dr. Joseph Carew

Contact: joseph.carew@ufv.ca

Office Hours:

Wednesdays 15:00-17:00, ABK 167

Or by appointment in person or on Zoom

The University of the Fraser Valley is located on the unceded territory of the Stó:lō peoples. We gratefully acknowledge our ability to live and work on the traditional territory.

Course Description

Slavoj Žižek is widely recognized as a cultural theorist, radical leftist, and public intellectual whose work is marked by analyses of film and ideology, obscene jokes, and a plethora of references to supposedly obscure continental thinkers. But one should not let his insistent discussions of, say, Hitchcock and capitalism, bad-taste humor, or engagement with Lacan and Hegel blind oneself to the fact that Žižek is an original philosopher whose system—a new variation of what’s called “dialectical materialism”—merits investigation in its own right. Žižek provides compelling, if provocative, answers to various big philosophical questions such as the meaning of the political, the nature and scope of consciousness and rational agency, the mind-body problem, and even why there is something rather than nothing.

The goal of this course is to understand Žižek as a philosopher. Since Žižek takes his project to consist in an application and elaboration of psychoanalysis with the goal of demonstrating its philosophical dimension, we will first explore the philosophical origins and consequences of psychoanalysis to set the stage for immersing ourselves in his work. To this end, we will explore the development of the concept of the unconscious from the 19th century to the 20th century in Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Freud, and Lacan. In so doing, we shall see that psychoanalysis, taken both as a metapsychology and clinical practice, is far from being a psychiatric relic of the past: it develops a strong, internally consistent vision of human existence—albeit a vision that challenges philosophical tradition and our everyday view of self—and is still widely used today.

With this foundation, we will then survey readings from some of Žižek’s most important philosophical texts. We will begin our odyssey with *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, his debut English publication. Here is where Žižek made his first—and lasting—impact on the international intellectual scene. Building upon the psychoanalytic claim that our perception of reality and decision-making are inflected by the unconscious, he proposes a new theory concerning how the essential element in ideology is not false consciousness but rather unconscious fantasy. Next, we will track how Žižek’s continued philosophical interrogation of psychoanalysis in books such as *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters*, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Center of Political Ideology*, and *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* leads him to speculate about what the unconscious tells us about the origins of language, meaning, and culture, our biological nature, and nature as a whole. At the end of the course, we will investigate how Žižek’s dialectical-materialist system informs his critique of capitalism and his readings of pop culture. This

will permit us to see why, for Žižek, psychoanalysis—at least after we combine Lacan with Hegel—not only contributes to a range of contemporary debates in political philosophy, philosophy of mind, and philosophy of science, but is also able to ground meaningful political change and help us better understand society at large.

Course Structure

Each meeting will be divided into two equal parts: a lecture and a seminar. The lecture will provide background on the topic of the meeting as well as a breakdown of key points. During the seminar, we will discuss points of interest. Accordingly, each meeting will have two separate but interrelated readings.

Texts

All required readings are available online via Blackboard.

Student Evaluation

- | | | |
|---------------------|-----|--|
| • Participation | 10% | |
| • Expository Essay | 20% | <i>Due October 5</i> |
| • Presentation | 25% | <i>Date to be set during the first week of classes</i> |
| • Research Proposal | 10% | <i>Due November 16</i> |
| • Research Essay | 35% | <i>Due December 15</i> |

Participation:

Participation includes both attendance and active contribution to class discussions. Since half of the course will be structured as a seminar, you are expected to pose questions, provide commentary, and/or identify textual passages of particular importance for us to analyze and evaluate together.

Expository Essay:

The expository essay will be of a historical and exegetical nature. You will contextualize and summarize the key concepts from a text by Freud. The essay will be 1500 words.

Presentation:

Each student will be responsible for leading one seminar session. You will summarize the seminar reading of the meeting in a presentation of approximately 20 minutes. You will be required to produce a handout or PowerPoint.

Research Proposal:

At the end of this course, you will submit a research essay on a topic of your own choosing. You may write on Žižek or you may relate Žižek to other philosophers you have studied or to contemporary issues. To this end, you will hand in a prospective abstract of 500 words that describes your topic, the thesis you will defend, and the main steps of your argument. Additionally, you will include a bibliography that identifies the relevant primary texts from Žižek as well as secondary texts from your own independent research. The research proposal is not a contract; your essay is likely to change as you start writing, but the proposal will allow you to get feedback on your ideas before you jump in.

Research Essay:

You will submit a thesis-driven research essay that reflects your engagement with the course material, class discussions, and independent research. The essay will be 3000 words.

Class Schedule

Week 1 (September 7): Žižek and the Philosophical Significance of the Unconscious

- Žižek, No Class, *How to Read Lacan*.

Week 2 (September 14): The Discovery of the Unconscious

- Lecture: Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, excerpts.
- Seminar: Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, *The Twilight of the Idols*, and *On the Genealogy of Morality*, excerpts.

Week 3 (September 21): Freud's "Royal Road to the Unconscious"

- Lecture: Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, excerpts.
- Seminar: Freud, "Analysis of a Specimen Dream," *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

Week 4 (September 28): Freud on the Ego, Superego, and the Id

- Lecture: Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, excerpts.
- Seminar: Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, excerpts.

Week 5 (October 6): Lacan's Return to Freud

- Lecture: Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, excerpts.
- Seminar: Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, excerpts.

Week 6 (October 13): Lacan on the Imaginary and the Symbolic: The Mirror Stage and the Big Other

- Lecture: Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, chapters 1-3.
- Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function," *Écrits*.
- Seminar: Žižek, "The Interpassive Subject: Lacan Turns a Prayer Wheel," *How to Read Lacan*.

Week 7 (October 20): Lacan on the Real: Desire, Object a , and Jouissance

- Lecture: Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, chapter 5.
- Žižek, "Empty Gestures and Performatives: Lacan Confronts the CIA Plot," *How to Read Lacan*.
- Seminar: Žižek, "From *Che vuoi?* to Fantasy: Lacan with *Eyes Wide Shut*," *How to Read Lacan*.

Week 8 (October 27): Žižek's Political Philosophy: Ideology as Unconscious Fantasy

- Lecture: Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, excerpts.
- Seminar: Žižek, "The Inconsistent Other of *jouissance*" and "'Going Through' the Social Fantasy," *The Sublime Object of Ideology*.

Week 9 (November 3): Žižek's Return to German Idealism: Schelling on the Real of Drives

- Lecture: Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters*, excerpts.
- Seminar: Žižek, "The 'Formula of the World,'" *The Indivisible Remainder*.

Week 10 (November 10): Žižek's Return to German Idealism: Hegel on "The Night of the World"

- Lecture: Žižek, *The Most Sublime Hysteric: Hegel with Lacan*, excerpts.
- Seminar: Žižek, "The Trouble with Transcendental Imagination" and "The Passage Through Madness," *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Center of Political Ideology*.

Week 11 (November 17): Žižek’s Philosophy of Mind: Consciousness as a Maladaptation

- Žižek, *The Parallax View*, excerpts.
- Seminar: Žižek, “The False Opacity” and “Emotions Lie, or, Where Damasio is Wrong,” *The Parallax View*.

Week 12 (November 24): Žižek’s Philosophy of Science: The Ontology of Quantum Mechanics

- Lecture: Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*, excerpts.
- Seminar: Žižek, “Five Lessons of the Double-Slit Experiment,” *The Indivisible Remainder*.

Week 13 (December 1): Žižek’s Critique of Capitalism

- Lecture: Žižek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*, excerpts.
- Seminar: Žižek, “Communism, Again!”, “The New Enclosure of the Commons,” and “Socialism or Communism?,” *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*.

Week 14 (December 8): Žižek on Popular Culture

- Lecture: Žižek, “Troubles with the Real: Lacan as a Viewer of *Alien*,” *How to Read Lacan*.
- Seminar: Žižek, “Ego Ideal and Superego: Lacan as a Viewer of *Casablanca*,” *How to Read Lacan*.

Course Procedures and Policies

- 1 *Email*: I will respond within 2 business days. If something is urgent, please indicate so in the subject line so that I can prioritize getting back to you.
- 2 *Late Assignments*: Any assignment handed in late will be penalized by 5% per day for a maximum of 7 days. Late assignments after this point will not be accepted, except under extenuating circumstances.