

Consider the way in which Zizek's focus on *fantasy* has helped him to develop the notion of ideology and how it works.

"Even this imperfect consciousness faded away at last, and he dreamed a long, troubled dream"<sup>1</sup>. In using Zizekian ideas about ideology and fantasy to interpret Stephen Blackpool's dream in *Hard Times*, I will be referring to Zizek's conception of fantasy as discussed in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*<sup>2</sup>. Zizek's development of fantasy draws upon a diverse range of theories and it is necessary to refer to these in order to explain how Zizek believes fantasy and ideology work together. I will then apply this thinking to the dream-sequence in *Hard Times*, elaborating upon how Stephen Blackpool's dream constructs his subjectivity and his imperfect consciousness of reality.

In his eclectic prose, Zizek uses the word fantasy in a number of different contexts to mean a number of different things. In his recent book *The Plague of Fantasies*<sup>3</sup>, Zizek refers to "the seven veils of fantasy"<sup>4</sup> - each of which are features of fantasy, but few of which help to define fantasy itself. In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*<sup>5</sup> however, Zizek's conception of fantasy is closer to Lacanian thought. Zizek describes fantasy as our world as constructed by our dreams. When we wake up, says Zizek, we dismiss dreams as a fake world, a misleading and nonsensical narrative - we say "it was just a dream"<sup>6</sup>. Zizek observes that in casting aside these memories, we are ignoring what psychoanalysis would regard as the repressed

---

1 Charles Dickens; *Hard Times*; (UK; Penguin Books; 1995); p89.

2 Slavoj Zizek; 'The Sublime Object of Ideology'; *Literary Theory: An Anthology*; first edition; Julie Rivkin, Michael Ryan; (GB; Blackwell Publishers Ltd.; 1998); pp. 312-325.

3 Slavoj Zizek; *The Plague of Fantasies*; first edition; (UK; Verso; 1997).

4 Ibid. Part 1, chapters 1 - 7.

5 Slavoj Zizek; 'The Sublime Object of Ideology'; (GB; Blackwell Publishers Ltd.; 1998); pp. 312-325.

narratives of the unconscious. Freud, in *The Interpretation of Dreams*<sup>7</sup> expounded the way in which a vast web of seemingly unconnected events served to be woven together into "the dream-work"<sup>8</sup> and that this web of often tenuously linked associations was representative of the anxieties of the unconscious mind.

Lacan developed Freud's ideas along structuralist lines and thus brought psychoanalysis back towards the external social structure of language, using the linguistic theory of Saussure<sup>9</sup>.

Since Zizek goes further towards closing this circle - by linking the structure of ideology to the structure of dreams - it is helpful to examine what Lacan calls the Real of our Desire.

Rivkin and Ryan discuss the Lacanian Real in the following terms: "Desire and its realisation only appear immediate, however, and what Lacan calls the Real, an impossible wholeness of self, plenitude of desire satisfaction (*jouissance*), and continuity of signifier and signified or word and object, is never possible"<sup>10</sup>. Where Freud had observed how the repression of desire created a split, repressed self, in elucidating the "mirror stage"<sup>11</sup>, Lacan located this fracture and thus associated the recognition of individual identity with the "assumption of the armour of an alienating identity"<sup>12</sup> and the beginnings of the Real of our Desire.

Fantasy is distinct from ideology in that it derives from the internal, from the id. Zizek sees it as the influence of the unconscious self upon all of our actions, an influence which is exerted though the way our dreams structure our waking lives and determine our perceptions of reality. He writes: "in our everyday, wakening reality we are *nothing but a consciousness of*

---

6 <sup>6</sup> Ibid. p324.

7 <sup>7</sup> Freud, Sigmund; 'The Interpretation of Dreams'; *Literary Theory: An Anthology*; first edition; Julie Rivkin, Michael Ryan; (GB; Blackwell Publishers Ltd.; 1998); pp. 128-150.

8 <sup>8</sup> Ibid.: p131.

9 <sup>9</sup> Lacan, Jacques; "'The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason since Freud'"; *Literary Theory: An Anthology*; first edition; Julie Rivkin, Michael Ryan; (GB; Blackwell Publishers Ltd.; 1998).

10 <sup>10</sup> Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan; 'Introduction: "Strangers to Ourselves: Psychoanalysis"'; *Literary Theory: An Anthology*; first edition; Julie Rivkin, Michael Ryan; (GB; Blackwell Publishers Ltd.; 1998); p123.

11 <sup>11</sup> Jacques Lacan; "'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience'"; *Literary Theory: An Anthology*; first edition; Julie Rivkin, Michael Ryan; (GB; Blackwell Publishers Ltd.; 1998); pp. 178-183.

*this dream*<sup>13</sup>. Thus our fantasy-construct is the frame through which our personality, our notions of identity are externalised - it "determines our activity, our mode of acting in reality itself"<sup>14</sup>.

The way that fantasy constructs us as subjects is, Zizek argues, analogous to the way that ideology interpellates us. In *The Plague of Fantasies*, he writes "Bergson's expression of "purely material sincerity" dovetails perfectly with the Althusserian notion of Ideological State Apparatuses - of the external ritual which materialises ideology"<sup>15</sup>. Both fantasy and ideology make us act as if we believed them entirely, despite the fact that we remain slightly detached from them. He writes, "an ideological identification exerts a true hold on us precisely when we maintain an awareness that we are not fully identical to it"<sup>16</sup>. Zizek refers to this as "ideological fantasy"<sup>17</sup>. The ideological fantasy is a behavioural trait whereby, modifying Marx's phrase "they do not know it, but they are doing it"<sup>18</sup>, Zizek observes (as Peter Sloterdijk originally suggested) that "they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it"<sup>19</sup>. Zizek is proposing that there is an extent to which we subscribe to ideology, not through conscious choice, but as a behavioural commonplace. He points to the example of commodity fetishism: "When individuals use money, they know very well that there is nothing magical about it"<sup>20</sup>, money is "simply an expression of social relations"<sup>21</sup>. Yet, he continues, "the problem is that in their social activity itself, in what they are *doing*,

---

12      12  
          Ibid., p181.

13      13  
          Slavoj Zizek; 'The Sublime Object of Ideology'; (GB; Blackwell Publishers Ltd.; 1998); p324.

14      14  
          ibid.

15      15  
          Slavoj Zizek; *The Plague of Fantasies*; first edition; (UK; Verso; 1997); p6.

16      16  
          Ibid.: p21.

17      17  
          Slavoj Zizek; 'The Sublime Object of Ideology'; (GB; Blackwell Publishers Ltd.; 1998); p320.

18      18  
          From Karl Marx; 'Capital'; *Literary Theory: An Anthology*; first edition; Julie Rivkin, Michael Ryan; (GB; Blackwell Publishers Ltd.; 1998), but quoted here from: Ibid; p320.

19      19  
          Slavoj Zizek; 'The Sublime Object of Ideology'; (GB; Blackwell Publishers Ltd.; 1998); p322. Zizek is here reaffirming a formulation proposed by Peter Sloterdijk; *Critique of Cynical Reason*; (1983).

20      20  
          Slavoj Zizek; 'The Sublime Object of Ideology'; (GB; Blackwell Publishers Ltd.; 1998); p320.

they are *acting* as if money, in its material reality, is the immediate embodiment of wealth as such"<sup>22</sup>. The implication for those who would claim to be post-ideological is therefore that nonetheless "they are fetishists in practice, not in theory"<sup>23</sup>. Thus Zizek regards ideological fantasy as a form of double-think: he writes "The illusion is therefore double: it consists in overlooking the illusion which is structuring our real, effective relationship to reality"<sup>24</sup>. To take a contemporary instance, whilst we might accept that: "Value in itself does not exist, there are just individual things which, among other properties, have value"<sup>25</sup>; we actively condone the use-value of fetishised products being subsumed into a glorified exchange-value. Branded products and designer clothes, names and labels all speak of the inescapable allure of ideological fantasy.

Yet what Zizek sees in fantasy is more than just an analogy for the way that ideology operates on us. Fantasy and ideology both work to serve the same purpose. They both allow us to escape from the Real of our Desire. It is with this link that Zizek ties Althusser to Lacan. He restates the Lacanian principle that fantasy is "the support that gives consistency to what we call "reality""<sup>26</sup> and assures us that Althusserian ideology is employed to the same effect. Zizek points to the Lacanian interpretation of the "burning child" dream<sup>27</sup>. This dream occurred when a father finally slept after having helplessly watching his child gradually die of an illness. As he slept, the father smelt smoke and dreamt that the child was standing beside him - alive but on fire and whispering, "Father, don't you see I'm burning?". The father awoke to find that his dead child's arms had indeed been burned by a fallen candle. The

---

21     21  
      Ibid.  
22     22  
      Ibid.  
23     23  
      Ibid.  
24     24  
      Ibid. pp.321-322.  
25     25  
      Ibid. p321.  
26     26  
      Ibid. p322.

Lacanian analysis of this situation is that the father's dream confronts him with the Real of his desire - "the child's reproach ... implying the father's fundamental guilt"<sup>28</sup> - and the father wakes up in order to escape this Lacanian real and hide in "reality". The implication is that it is the unconscious mind, operating through fantasy which makes us susceptible to ideology - it is the unconscious recognition of a fearful Real which drives our acceptance of ideology. The significant inversion for Žižek is that it is in dreaming, it is whilst we are asleep, that we come closest to an understanding of our world: "*The only point at which we approach this hard kernel of the Real is indeed the dream*"<sup>29</sup>. Reality, as opposed to sleep, is the place we escape to in order to avoid the Real, it is where we listen to the narrative interpretations which ideology and fantasy sustain in order to distract us from the Real. Whereas one of the purposes of dreams is thought to be that they help to prolong sleep<sup>30</sup>, Žižek sees fantasy and ideology as promoting the waking dream which shelters us from our Lacanian Real. The implication of this parallelism is that although ideology acts upon us from the outside, it exerts a true hold on us because it resonates with the Real within our unconscious; thus it is that Žižek claims "the only way to break the power of our ideological dream is to confront the Real of our desire"<sup>31</sup>.

Furthermore, in the same way that dreams incorporate outside stimuli (such as the smell of smoke, a dog barking) in order to keep us asleep, Žižek states that this process of assimilating the foreign characterises the way ideology works to sustain our reality. Thus: "an ideology really succeeds when even the facts which at first sight contradict it start to function as

---

27     <sup>27</sup>  
          Ibid.  
28     <sup>28</sup>  
          Ibid. p323.  
29     <sup>29</sup>  
          Ibid. p324.  
30     <sup>30</sup>  
          Ibid. p322.  
31     <sup>31</sup>  
          Ibid. p324.

arguments in its favor"<sup>32</sup>. Zizek gives as an example a German householder under the Nazi regime who is bombarded by anti-Semitic propaganda. When he tries to reconcile this with his experience of a friendly Jewish neighbour, his response is not to doubt the ideology, but as a true subject of ideology, to allow it to "turn this gap, this discrepancy itself, into an argument for anti-Semitism"<sup>33</sup> - effectively to use the neighbour's assumedly duplicitous outward appearance as evidence of "how dangerous they really are"<sup>34</sup>.

In Charles Dickens' *Hard Times*, Stephen Blackpool has a dream. His circumstances are that he has returned home to find his alcoholic wife being tended to by Rachel. Of his wife he has previously said "I mun' be ridden o' her. I cannot bear't nommore"<sup>35</sup>; and when he sees Rachel applying disinfectant from a bottle marked poison, "a tremble passed over him"<sup>36</sup>. He later explains: "It were the Poison-bottle on table. I never hurt a livin' creetur; but happenin' so suddenly upon't, I thowt, "How can *I* say what I might ha' done to myseln, or her, or both!""<sup>37</sup>.

Stephen falls asleep soon after he has returned home, and in his dream, he recalls his wedding day, the unbreakable bond of marriage to his wife. As he does so, the moment is shattered by the light emerging "from one line in the table of commandments at the altar"<sup>38</sup>. We can interpret this as a reference to the commandment "thou shalt not kill". The scene resolves itself into a multitudinous crowd which seems to be constituted of "all the people in the world"<sup>39</sup>. Everyone in this crowd is eyeing him with condemnation and he realises that he is

---

32 <sup>32</sup>  
Ibid. p325.

33 <sup>33</sup>  
Ibid.

34 <sup>34</sup>  
Ibid.

35 <sup>35</sup>  
Charles Dickens; *Hard Times*; (UK; Penguin Books; 1995); p78.

36 <sup>36</sup>  
Ibid. p88.

37 <sup>37</sup>  
Ibid. pp.92-93.

38 <sup>38</sup>  
Ibid. p89.

39 <sup>39</sup>  
Ibid.

to be hanged. In the second part of the dream, Stephen is "wandering to and fro, unceasingly, without hope". Like a modern Cain - he has become the condemned outcast and is forbidden "to look on Rachel's face or hear her voice". His attempts at rehabilitation are made impossible by his need to conceal and repress something: "The object of his miserable existence was to prevent its recognition by any one among the various people he encountered. Hopeless labour!". He despairs of achieving this because of the seeming omnipresence of the repressed object. As much as he tried - "he led them out of rooms where it was ... he drew the curious from places where he knew it to be secreted"<sup>40</sup>, he found that "whatsoever he looked at, grew into that form sooner or later"<sup>41</sup> and even "the very chimneys of the mills assumed that shape, and round them was the printed word"<sup>42</sup>. Dickens makes clear that this "shape" was that of the bottle of poison - when Stephen woke up, "the table stood in the same place, close by the bedside, and on it, in its real proportions and appearance, was the shape so often repeated"<sup>43</sup>.

This is the dream acting as Zizekian fantasy; it is determining Stephen's "mode of acting in reality itself"<sup>44</sup>. The fundamental anxiety within the Real of Stephen's Desire is that he wants to kill his wife. This is the terrifying Real which his unconscious tries to conceal during his waking reality. In the same way that in the dream he is trying to conceal the bottle, it is necessary for Stephen to repress his Desire in order to be accepted in society. He finds that this is torturous - hence his exclamation "Hopeless labour!"<sup>45</sup> - his unconscious can never be completely silenced; but it is only by undergoing this division that Stephen is able to put his

---

40      40  
          Ibid. p90.

41      41  
          Ibid.

42      42  
          Ibid.

43      43  
          Ibid.

44      44  
          Slavoj Zizek; 'The Sublime Object of Ideology'; (GB; Blackwell Publishers Ltd.; 1998); p324.

45      45  
          Charles Dickens; *Hard Times*; (UK; Penguin Books; 1995); p90.

Real self aside and become an ideological subject. Thus it is that Stephen's dreams of killing his wife provide the foundation for the construction of an ideological mask. The ideology of behaving as a law-abiding citizen grasps him all the more tightly for its purchase on this aspect of his repressed self.

In his waking life, fantasy determines that Stephen must also repress his desire for Rachael. He dreams that "this condemnation [was] upon him, that he was never ... to look on Rachael's face or hear her voice"<sup>46</sup>. Thus here again, fantasy instructs Stephen as to how he must act in reality in accordance with ideology; in this case the ideology of the Church concerning divorce and adultery. His dream associates the Church with the great multitude of humanity and thus with what is socially and morally acceptable and "good". We are able to see the mechanisms of this ideology gaining strength from Stephen's fear - in the dream - of social exclusion, of the opprobrium of the group. When the vast crowd he is surrounded by "all abhorred him"<sup>47</sup>, it is then that Stephen hears "the burial service distinctly read"<sup>48</sup>. He associates social death with physical death.

Stephen's Desire is to take his wife's life, yet he is so thoroughly constituted by ideology that his unconscious defines, via fantasy, reasons why he cannot. If we regard this dream as Stephen's unconscious revelling in the possibility of murder, its various scenes can be interpreted as exploring the possible consequences of satisfying his Desire. The prospect of the scaffold is raised. We can note that for Stephen, capital punishment has become intertwined with the capitalist symbol of the loom he works at. A conflation of capitalism and the state which finds a similar embodiment in Stephen's perception of Bounderby - whom he

---

46 <sup>46</sup>  
Ibid., p90.

47 <sup>47</sup>  
Ibid., p89.

48 <sup>48</sup>  
Ibid.



consults about divorce law<sup>49</sup>. The other possibility explored in the dream is that of a life in which he kills his wife, but is not found out. Yet as the dream runs this course, it becomes clear that Stephen will be unable to conceal his guilt, and will live under the constant fear of "a nameless, horrible dread, a mortal fear of one particular shape which everything took"<sup>50</sup>. The seeming omnipresence of the "particular shape" evokes the ideology of an omnipresent state which serves its inescapable justice through every keyhole of a close-knit communal society. To escape the law, Stephen must hide his crime from "any one among the various people he encountered"<sup>51</sup>. Furthermore, he must be able to withstand the scrutiny of the group. When he imagines himself upon the raised stage with "not one pitying or friendly eye among the millions that were fastened on his face"<sup>52</sup>, Stephen is deeply conscious of the penetrating gaze of society. As the establishment figure Bounderby himself warns, "I can see as far into a grindstone as another man; farther than a good many, perhaps"<sup>53</sup>. Fantasy thus confirms for Stephen what ideology has taught him, that he would not be able to elude the hangman's noose if he murdered his wife; and that even if he did, he would not be able to cope with the weight of guilt on his conscience. As well as imposing the threat of an assumed, or socially conditioned guilt response, ideology instructs Stephen that he could not withstand the omnipresence of the state's inquisitive gaze. Thus fantasy provides an internal support to the ideological assumptions upon which Stephen lives his life, it works from his Lacanian Real to ensure that he can continue to hide from his Desire to murder, in an ideologically-constructed reality.

---

49      49  
          Ibid., Chapter 11, pp. 73-80.  
50      50  
          Ibid. p90.  
51      51  
          Ibid.  
52      52  
          Ibid. p89.  
53      53  
          Ibid., p80.

Evidence of how ideology assimilates awkward discrepancies can be found when Stephen wakes up. The dream has confirmed him in the belief that he could not kill his wife. He is Stephen Blackpool, he is a subject of ideology - fearful of guilt and social exclusion; he is glad to escape from the nightmare of his Real into a safe identity constructed by fantasy. Having emerged from this process of deconstruction as a newly reconstituted and freshly repressed subject, Stephen is immediately confronted with the sight of his wife deliberating between two bottles, then choosing to drink the poison. Stephen is immobilised. His unconscious Desire is externally challenged by this direct appeal to the repressed. Yet as a socially constructed subject it is his duty (and his legal obligation) to prevent suicide. It is only when Rachael intercedes to save his wife that this conflict is resolved and "Stephen broke out of his chair"<sup>54</sup>. At this point, fantasy fills in to reaffirm his identity, he says "Rachel, am I wakin' or dreamin' this dreadfo' night!"<sup>55</sup>, thus suggesting that "of course"<sup>56</sup> he would have done something. Stephen hides in the ambiguity of the hinterland between the conscious mind and the unconscious mind - this is exactly where he was during his immobile struggle with the Real of his Desire. Later, as he rationalises further, he is able to revert to his ideological grounding as a responsible subject who consistently tries to do what is right. He couches in a tone of shocked horror the prospect which he had secretly wished for, and he attempts to detract from the question of murder by making reference to the hitherto unmentioned issue of his own suicide: ""How can I say what I might ha' done to myseln, or her, or both!"<sup>57</sup>. This process of rationalisation displays the mechanism of ideological fantasy. Stephen has first overlooked his paralysis of the Real; he has then subsequently also

---

54 <sup>54</sup> Ibid. p91.

55 <sup>55</sup> Ibid.

56 <sup>56</sup> As Althusser notes, "It is indeed a peculiarity of ideology that it imposes ... obviousnesses as obviousnesses" to which our reaction is characteristically, "That's obvious!". Louis Althusser; 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses'; *Literary Theory: An Anthology*; first edition; Julie Rivkin, Michael Ryan; (GB; Blackwell Publishers Ltd.; 1998); p300.

overlooked the ideological means of concealment. In doing so he can sustain the illusion of integrity in his subject status.

To conclude, by applying Zizekian notions of fantasy to Stephen Blackpool's dream, we are able to see how fantasy and ideology work in tandem to define his identity as a subject and to construct the shape of his world. We can see that whereas fantasy works from the internal through the medium of dreams, and ideology works from the external, they both serve to hide the subject from the Lacanian Real of the unconscious. In Stephen's case, the Real of his Desire to kill his wife is repressed by fantasy - fantasy shows him the consequences of his act. Ideology operates by latching onto this repressed fear of the Real. Thus even when the illusion of subjectivity is exposed, as when Stephen is immobile during his wife's attempt at suicide, fantasy colludes to conceal and the ideological dream is prolonged.

## Bibliography

Althusser, Louis; 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses'; *Literary Theory: An Anthology*; first edition; Julie Rivkin, Michael Ryan; (GB; Blackwell Publishers Ltd.; 1998).

Barglow, Raymond; *The Crisis of Self in the Age of Information: Computers, Dolphins and Dreams*; first edition; (UK; Routledge; 1994).

Barry, Peter; *Beginning Theory*; first edition; (UK; Manchester University Press; 1995).

Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari; 'The Anti-Oedipus'; *Literary Theory: An Anthology*; first edition; Julie Rivkin, Michael Ryan; (GB; Blackwell Publishers Ltd.; 1998).

Dickens, Charles; *Hard Times*; (UK; Penguin Books; 1995)

Freud, Sigmund; "'Beyond the Pleasure Principle'"; *Literary Theory: An Anthology*; first edition; Julie Rivkin, Michael Ryan; (GB; Blackwell Publishers Ltd.; 1998).

Freud, Sigmund; "'The Uncanny'"; *Literary Theory: An Anthology*; first edition; Julie Rivkin, Michael Ryan; (GB; Blackwell Publishers Ltd.; 1998).

Freud, Sigmund; 'The Interpretation of Dreams'; *Literary Theory: An Anthology*; first edition; Julie Rivkin, Michael Ryan; (GB; Blackwell Publishers Ltd.; 1998).

Lacan, Jacques; "'The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason since Freud'"; *Literary Theory: An Anthology*; first edition; Julie Rivkin, Michael Ryan; (GB; Blackwell Publishers Ltd.; 1998).

Lacan, Jacques; "'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience'"; *Literary Theory: An Anthology*; first edition; Julie Rivkin, Michael Ryan; (GB; Blackwell Publishers Ltd.; 1998).

Marx, Karl; 'Capital'; *Literary Theory: An Anthology*; first edition; Julie Rivkin, Michael Ryan; (GB; Blackwell Publishers Ltd.; 1998).

Rivkin, Julie and Michael Ryan; 'Introduction: "Strangers to Ourselves: Psychoanalysis"'; *Literary Theory: An Anthology*; first edition; Julie Rivkin, Michael Ryan; (GB; Blackwell Publishers Ltd.; 1998).

Stevens, Anthony; *Private Myths: Dreams and Dreaming*; first edition; (UK; Penguin Books; 1996).

Zizek, Slavoj; *The Plague of Fantasies*; first edition; (UK; Verso; 1997).

Zizek, Slavoj; 'The Sublime Object of Ideology'; *Literary Theory: An Anthology*; first edition; Julie Rivkin, Michael Ryan; (GB; Blackwell Publishers Ltd.; 1998).