



Research Paper

The 'Thing': Interpreting the Vampire through Žižekian Paradigms

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ABSTRACT

The present paper seeks to make an attempt to understand the vampire within the Žižekian framework. Horror in the hands of Žižek, becomes a device, a way of transforming other people's arguments. He imposes an eerie riff upon his adversary's statements to restate the claims in a most unsettling manner. He feels that the 'real' is a kind of self-obfuscating screen and access to it is impossible. Taking up the case of the vampire in this context, it must be kept in mind that the vampire is often looked upon as the *doppelgänger*, an 'other' of the victim. Žižek is fascinated by Stoker's use of the word 'Thing', for the vampire. For him, this 'Thing' is the locus of enjoyment and cannot be driven away as it inhabits the gap carved out by the 'other' within the 'self'. Interestingly, all the characters in *Dracula* are not only vulnerable to vampirism, they have fear, fascination and a secret desire for it as well. The possibility of taking over the 'other' is ever open in the carved niche. The blood-sucking scenes are described in terms of illicit desire and sexual repression and, in fact, one of the underlying themes of *Dracula* is the threat of female sexual expression. The fight against *Dracula* draws upon Christian icons of 'good' as for instance, the crucifix. So much so, that the novel begins to read, at times, like a propagandistic Christian promise of salvation. The consequences of mere modernity are also focused upon. Throughout the various thematic concerns that come to the fore in *Dracula*, the 'other' – whether in insider/outsider, male/female or good/evil – is always inherently present, always transgressive. Žižek explains the same point by combining the philosophy of Kant with Lacanian psychoanalysis. He also pays attention to the 'blurring of boundaries' by presence of the 'Thing' and then even talks of ethnic conflict in terms of the 'Nation Thing' while comparing it to a vampire. What Žižek's modern Gothic exhibits for us is the feasibility of reading the Gothic as a tool to perceive the Real as an abstraction and assimilation of the warping consequences of opposition.

KEYWORDS: Vampire, Horror, 'Other', 'Thing', Real, Gothic

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It would not be wrong to say that Žižek is first and foremost a Gothic writer. It is not merely the fact that he publishes at the heightened pace associated with writers of pulp fiction that induces this viewpoint. Nor does it have anything to do with the fact that works like *Monstrosity of Christ* and *First as Tragedy* appeared in a single year. What provides a spur to this opinion is the lavish sprinkling of cues and triggers present in his own publications that lead us to look upon his writing as a sort of *Gruselphilosophie* (Thorne 1). The frequent accolades that he accords to Stephen King, his blatant admiration of Hitchcock, his practice of trying to explicate Lacan by outlining the plots of scary movies, his tenacious concern with trauma, disaster and grief, all combine to underline Žižek as a Gothic writer. He goes all out to point out that Psychoanalysis has established that "at any moment, the most common everyday conversation, the most ordinary event can take a dangerous turn, damage can be caused that cannot be undone" (Žižek, *Looking Awry* 16).

No doubt, it is almost unthinkable to describe an established philosopher as a horror writer. But, exploring the philosophical angle to all of Žižek's horror talk might help in illuminating the hidden, dark spaces. For that, a survey of the philosophy canon and understanding of the concepts establishing European thought's diverse accounts of terror, fear and uneasiness become imperative. The fine distinctions between the different grades of panic and fear come with the names of great thinkers already attached: Hobbesean fear, Kierkegaardian dread, Freudian *Unheimlichkeit*, the angst, anxiety or anguish of one's preferred existentialist. Reading Žižek in this manner can lead to yet another philosopheme¹ creating the impression that Žižek is a reasonably conventional theorist of the Gothic sublime². He claims that all language involves a doubling. Whenever we name something,

we fashion a doppelganger for it. I open my eyes, and whereas earlier there was one thing, the object, there are now two, the object and its name. A normal, thinking human being needs to be able to distinguish clearly between the object and the word for that object. Žižek assumes the stance that language severed from its referents is always on the side of fiction, fantasy and ideology. One can be sure one is in the presence of the real, if the object has not been surrounded by verbal shadows of itself. Going by this philosopheme, it has to be accepted that if one can talk about something, then it is unreal as it has already been translated into a derealized chatter³. And, if it is true or if it is real, then one cannot talk about it in an intelligible manner. But, in that case, the only things that are real are the things that resist being named. Almost everything gets drawn into the ambit of language, but some few things cannot. What remains is what is real – the unspeakable.

But, perhaps, this too fluid summing up of the issue is not really relevant. Calling Žižek a Gothic writer is, finally, to say less about the substance of his arguments than about his way of making those arguments – his philosophical style or *Darstellung* (Thorne 2). For instance, it is one thing to say that Žižek gives an account of fear. It is another thing to observe that Žižek is trying to scare you – not just attempting to explain the uncanny but simultaneously trying to give you goosepimples.

The Gothic in Žižek is something more than a reasoned out philosophical position. It is also more than a sinister rhetoric or set of literary conventions. An examination of his method leads one to three distinct claims that necessitate a distinct identification. In the first place, it can be said that Žižek likes to read Gothic fiction as also the more eerie of science fiction works but he does not read them in the way a literary critic would. He is ready to look upon *Pet Sematary* (King: 1989) as a work of analytic insight and to see horror stories as expansions of Lacanianism. Secondly, reading Žižek frequently creates the impression that one is reading speculative fiction, as in: “You are not an upstanding member of society who dreams on occasion that he is a murderer, you are a murderer who dreams every night that he is an upstanding member of society” (*Commonplace Book* 3). Thirdly, Žižek requires us to cultivate in ourselves a determination to read pretty much everything as Gothic. Once we have taught ourselves that horror fiction gives a more accurate description of the world than do realist novels – that it is the literature of the Real – then the only way to defend this insight will be to look upon the world as a horror show. And, in this way, the Gothic transcends the border and becomes a hermeneutic model rather than a genre. Horror, in the hands of Žižek, becomes a device, a way of transforming other people’s arguments. When Žižek indulges in polemics with his peers, he does not oppose his adversary’s arguments, but rather imposes an eerie riff upon them to restate the claims in a most unsettling manner. This can be termed a dialectic method although scholars like C. Thorne have suggested calling it “pestilence” as Žižek “infects his rivals with Lacan and forces them to speak macabre versions of their core positions: undead Heidegger, undead Badiou, undead Judith Butler” (3).

The triad of Lacanian register that makes up the psychic structure are the real, the symbolic and the imaginary. The real can be further broken down into three subtypes: the Symbolic Real, the Imaginary Real and the Real Real. It is noteworthy that the real is not reality but what is constitutively absent from it, the impossibility of anything being fully itself. This impossibility, similar to Hegelian minimal difference (Žižek *Less than Nothing*), is the Symbolic Real – the real expressed as a meaningless formula. The imaginary real is closest to the Freudian *das Ding*, the traumatic real horrific Thing. The Real real, Žižek points out, is a kind of ‘hard kernel’ or ‘bone in the throat’ (borrowing from Lacan). This should not be taken to mean that the Real real is an object or the same as the ‘horrific’ object or Kant’s unknown X. Žižek writes in *The Puppet and the Dwarf* (2003) that the real is a kind of self-obfuscating screen, the warp or twist in space perception that makes access to it impossible.

While taking up the case of the vampire in this context, it should be kept in mind that the vampire has often been looked upon as a double, a doppelganger, an ‘other’ of the victim. Scholars like Copjec (1991) and Dolar (1991) rejected the identification of the vampire with a stable allegorical ‘other’ (the proletariat, sexuality, other cultures, alternative ways of living, heterogeneity and so forth). Doing so would simply be an attempt to assign a specific content to the uncanny, a category that in Freud’s account is constitutively unstable. For Copjec and Dolar, the vampire is always a double of the victim, its contorted form specifying the possession of an excess object which is the perilous source of its draconian enjoyment or *jouissance*.⁴ The attempt to kill the vampire is an attempt to deprive it of its obstreperous enjoyment and, in so doing, carve out a stable place for the self. As an illustration, Žižek (1991) examines the scene from Stoker’s *Dracula* where Arthur stakes Lucy, his ex-fiancée who has been defiled by Dracula and has become a vampire herself:

The Thing in the coffin writhed, and a hideous, blood-curdling screech came from the opened red lips. The body shook and quivered and twisted in wild contortions, the sharp white teeth champed together till the lips were cut and the mouth was smeared with a crimson foam (Stoker 216).

Žižek is fascinated by Stoker’s use of the word ‘Thing’. For him (i.e. Žižek) this ‘Thing’ is the very locus of enjoyment, an imaginary surplus that refuses to be incorporated into the symbolic network of language and identity. Thus the attempt to drive it out of the body is always unsuccessful – the vampire cannot help but

return (even if in another bodily form) since it is a fantasy formation that inhabits the gap carved out by the 'other' within the self.

This struggle of the self with the 'other' is perhaps best exemplified in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. A detour through this best-known and most enduring Gothic vampire narrative becomes imperative in the given context. The story, narrated in epistolary format, begins with Jonathan Harker, a newly qualified English solicitor, visiting Count Dracula in the Carpathian Mountains to provide legal support for a real estate transaction. Initially, he is attracted by Dracula's gracious manners but soon realises that he is actually Dracula's prisoner. In Dracula's castle, he encounters three female vampires called "the sisters". At first Dracula rescues him from them and later leaves Transylvania abandoning Harker to the sisters. It is with great difficulty that Harker escapes from the castle alive.

Soon, Dracula is stalking Harker's fiancé, Wilhelmina "Mina" Murray and her friend Lucy Westenra. Lucy marries the Hon. Arthur Holmwood. Dracula communicates with Renfield who is a patient of Dr. Seward, one of Lucy's former suitors. Renfield is insane and desires to consume insects, rats, birds and spiders and thus has a sort of kinship with Dracula. He is able to detect the presence of Dracula.

After some time, Lucy begins to waste away and Seward (a former suitor of Lucy) calls his old teacher, Abraham Van Helsing who immediately diagnoses Lucy's condition. When both the doctors are absent, Lucy and her mother are attacked by a wolf. Her mother dies of fright and Lucy dies soon after. After her death, there are reports of children being stalked by a beautiful lady. Helsing realises that Lucy has become a vampire – a strange creature that can live for centuries on the blood of their victims and breed it is kind by attacking the innocent and making them vampires in turn. He confides in her husband and former suitors, Seward and Morris. The three of them along with Van Helsing manage to track her down, stake her heart, cut off her head and fill her mouth with garlic. Harker and Mina, who are now married, arrive there and form the coalition against Dracula.

Interestingly, all the characters in *Dracula*, whether it is Harker, Mina, Lucy or Helsing, are not only vulnerable to vampirism, they have fear, fascination and a secret desire for it as well. The possibility of taking over of the 'other' is ever open in the carved niche. Lucy is most susceptible to it as she seems to hover between reality and non-reality in her sleepwalking sessions. Once she is asleep, Dracula can influence her more easily and make her walk out of the house, where he can suck her blood, an act that seems to be 'obligatory' for vampires according to the vampire lore. Sleeping and half asleep people seem to be easier targets for vampires. For one thing, people who are asleep are less able to defend themselves physically. For another, their defences are vulnerable in other ways as well. The novel suggests that almost all the characters, even Mina and Helsing, have some kind of secret, deep-rooted desire to be bitten – they just keep it repressed when they are awake. When they are asleep or sleep walking, their conscious minds are not able to keep their socially tabooed desires under wraps and the desire bubbles to the surface. The novel was written and set in Victorian England, perhaps the most repressed era ever documented in the social history of Great Britain. Nobody was ready to admit that such a thing as sex existed. It was believed that carnal desires reared their head only in dreams. However, the blood-sucking scenes are described in terms of illicit desire and sexual repression. And, in fact, one of the underlying themes of *Dracula* is the threat of female sexual expression.

Victorian England dictated women's sexual behaviour according to very rigid social norms. By the time *Dracula* begins to work his evil magic on Lucy Westenra, the reader begins to comprehend that the impending battle between good and evil will hinge upon female sexuality. Both Lucy and Mina are chaste, pure and innocent women. Dracula embodies the threat of turning them into their opposites, into women who are voluptuous and possess an unapologetically open sexual desire. He succeeds in transforming Lucy, and once she becomes a raving vampire vixen, Van Helsing's men see no other option but to destroy her in order to return her to a purer, more socially respectable state. They keep a wary eye on Mina fearing the loss of another model of Victorian womanhood to the dark side. They are afraid of associating with a woman who is socially scorned. At one point, late in the novel, Dracula mocks Van Helsing's crew saying, "your girls that you all love are mine already; and through them you and others shall yet be mine". Here, Dracula gives expression to a male fear-fantasy that has existed since Adam and Eve were turned out of Eden: that women's ungovernable desires leave men on the brink of a costly fall from grace.

The fight against Dracula draws upon Christian icons of 'good' as, for instance, the crucifix. So much so, that the novel begins to read, at times, like a propagandistic Christian promise of salvation. Dracula stands as a satanic figure, possessing physical life but delinked from spiritual existence. The three "weird sisters" are also cursed with lasting physical life that is devoid of soul. Yet, all of them meet a death that conforms to the idea of Christian salvation. Dracula's face acquires a look of peace. Lucy's soul is returned to her and Stoker succeeds in presenting a particularly liberal vision of salvation in his implication that the saved need not necessarily be believers.

The consequences of mere modernity are also focussed upon. When Van Helsing wants to deal with Vampirism, he works not only to understand modern Western methods, but to incorporate the ancient and

foreign schools of thought that the modern West dismisses. "It is the fault of our science", he says "that it wants to explain all; and if it explain not, then it says there is nothing to explain". Here, he points out the terrible outcome of subscribing only to contemporary currents of Western thought. His own facility with modern medical techniques is tempered with open-mindedness about ancient legends and non-Western folk remedies and that helps him in grasping Lucy's affliction. Equipped with a unique knowledge of the East and the West, he represents the best hope of understanding the incomprehensible and ridding the world of evil.

The various thematic concerns that come to the fore in *Dracula* may be summed up as the threat of female sexual expression, consequences of modernity, damnation and promise of Christian salvation. However, these divergent strains seem to be converging at the immanent level. The 'other', whether in insider/outsider, male/female, good/evil is very much present there, always threatening the self. It can begin its presencing any time and anywhere and expand its territorial bounds. It is indefinable, inscrutable and unpredictable. Dwelling on the interstices, it is neither here nor there. Not only that, it is neither alive nor dead. Its very essence is transgressive.

Žižek explains the same point very well. Combining the philosophy of Kant with Lacanian psychoanalysis, he argues that vampires, in their perceived status as neither fully dead nor fully alive, become transgressive representations of the 'Thing in itself' and are thus able to elude the deathly symbolic world to which human beings are condemned:

This Kantian background is most easily perceived in the vampire novels; when, in a typical scene, the hero endeavours to deliver the innocent girl who has become a vampire by finishing her off in the appropriate way (the wooden stake through the heart, and so on), the aim of this operation is to differentiate the 'Thing' from the body, to drive out the 'Thing', this embodiment of perverse and traumatic enjoyment, from the body subordinated to the "normal" causal link.

(*For They Know Not What They Do* 220)

According to Žižek, when within the framework of popular culture, we refer to the 'living dead' or 'the undead', we are neither locating these 'borderline phenomena' within the domain of the living or that of the dead:

The fact that vampires and other 'living dead' are usually referred with its full Kantian meaning: a vampire is a Thing that looks and acts like us, yet is not one of us. In short, the difference between indefinite and negative judgement: a dead person loses the predicates of a living being, yet he or she remains the same person. An undead, on the contrary, retains all the predicates of a living being without being one. ... ("A Hair of the Dog that Bit You" 75)

Another striking instance of vampires being different from human beings lies in the total absence of their having any mirror image. At least, that is the popular belief and Bram Stoker makes full use of this belief to initiate the fear that *Dracula* evokes throughout the novel. When the Count taps on Jonathan's shoulder as he stands shaving before the mirror, the latter at first thinks that he did not notice *Dracula*'s reflection in the mirror by chance. But, when he turns to look at the mirror again, he realizes with a shock that there is no reflection of the Count there: "I turned to the glass again to see how I had been mistaken. This time there could be no error, for the man was close to me, and I could see him over my shoulder. But there was no reflection of him in the mirror" (*Dracula* 37). The two factors that determine a vampire in traditional lore are brought together by Stoker very skillfully. Jonathan is shocked on discovering that the Count is not reflected in the mirror and he nicks himself with a razor blade. The blood makes the Count make a sudden grab at his throat with demonic fury blazing in his eyes. "I drew away, and his hand touched the string of beads which held the crucifix. It made an instant change in him, for the fury passed so quickly that I could hardly believe it was ever there" (38).

The presence of the 'Thing', the excessive enjoyment revealed to us in examples of the uncanny as well as through beings such as vampires who blur the boundaries between life and death, both structures and subverts the status of the revealed intersubjective universe. Žižek writes:

The paradox of the vampires is that, precisely as "living dead", they are far more alive than us, mortified by the symbolic network. The usual Marxist vampire metaphor is that of capital sucking the blood of the workforce, embodiment of the rule of the dead over the living; perhaps the time has come to reverse it: the real "living dead" are we, common mortals, condemned to vegetate in the Symbolic.

(*For They Know What They Do* 220-1)

Fiona Peters, in her paper titled "Looking in the Mirror: Vampires, The Symbolic and the 'Thing'" says, "Vampires have no need of a mirror image; as metaphors for the threatening Thing, representing the Real, the antagonism that the human subject experiences is negated for the vampire". In this connection, Žižek writes:

It is therefore clear why vampires are invisible in the mirror: because they have read Lacan and, consequently, know how to behave – they materialize *objet a* which, by definition, *cannot be mirrored*. (*Enjoy your Symptom* 126)

By *objet a* Žižek means “the inherent, the internal ‘excess’ which impedes from within the ‘smooth running’ of the psychological apparatus (126). In Lacan’s schema, *objet a* is the surplus missing from the mirror image, what we lose when we become trapped within the symbolic order, the imbalance between myself and my mirror image.

Žižek also talks of the “Nation-Thing” in *Tarrying with the Negative* (1993). It is the remainder of some real, nondiscursive kernel of enjoyment. Here, ethnic tensions always involve the clash between different modes of enjoyment. The ‘other’s’ excess enjoyment is bothersome and frequently regarded as a threat because it also signifies the theft of one’s own enjoyment, even if only as a symbolic menace. The vampire then, becomes the ethnic ‘other’ as far as ethnic or racial violence is concerned. And, like the perpetrator of ethnic violence as discussed by Appadurai (“Dead Certainty: Ethnic Violence in the Era of Globalization”), the vampire slayer never gains any real or sustainable knowledge but only perpetuates the uncertainty and frustration that he or she sought to eliminate. In this way, vampire narratives offer a way of understanding ethnic conflict as an attempt to deprive the ‘other’ of its enjoyment.

It is no mere accident that Žižek has compared his “Nation Thing” to the vampire which in Stoker’s tale, is a human body inhabited by a ‘Thing’. Notwithstanding the fact that Transylvania is subject to ethnic tensions, Stoker does not make the vampire allegorize the ‘ethnic other’ in any direct way although this may be the case in other vampire stories. Rather, the vampire’s excess of enjoyment (its uncanny ability to occupy the place of all sorts of allegorical ‘others’) corresponds to the shared enjoyment that links members of a community to the nation qua Thing. Žižek argues that this national ‘Thing’ occupies the locus of the ‘Thing-in-itself’ in Kantian philosophy, opening up “the space for the ‘undead’ and similar incarnations of some monstrous radical evil” (221). He states emphatically that “today, one should refer to the dream of the ‘undead’ monsters to explain nationalism” (221). In this way, the vampire becomes something more than a symbol that attaches itself to the perceived excesses of the ethnic ‘other’. Rather, its very indeterminacy or blurring of the line between inside and outside specifies the feeling of dread that befalls the subject whenever it too closely approaches the ‘other’ in the self.

In the case of Transylvania, this indeterminacy manifests itself as an uncertainty over territory. This is evident not only in the fluctuation of border between Romania and Hungary but also in the disputes over lands that have plagued the process of property restitution in the post socialist era. Under post socialism, the vampire appears in the complex transference between capitalism and socialism, serving at once as a figure of flow and as a sign of the obstructionism practised by those whom circulation threatens to drain.

To sum it up, it can be said about Žižek that he offers his own, rather different way of dialectically revising the older vitalisms. As Noys states:

In the case of Žižek, his love affair with the Gothic sours at precisely the point when a return to the Gothic is most necessary, dismissing the Gothic as believing in the ‘real Real’ leads him to miss the ‘geometric’ Gothic that registers the disturbing effect of the ‘topological twist’ in the parallax view between the Gothic and psychoanalysis. It is in this topological twist that horror itself is rendered as the appearance of social reality, the Gothic distortions and curvatures of capitalist space, and here where psychoanalysis can and should re-counter the Gothic (Noys 10-11).

Three important points stem from Žižek’s analysis. The first, obvious one is that the relationship between the self and the ‘other’ is structured ‘by a means of fantasies’. Second, we need to locate how enjoyment (and its threatened theft) is materialized in the Gothic through a historically specific set of social practices and the national myths that structure them. The third point is that Žižek’s theft of the enjoyment is a reformulation of Kristeva’s abject (*Botting Gothic*). To some, Žižek’s understanding can seem simplistic, when he confines the Gothic to a naïve belief in myth of the Real, which it has actually discarded before him. What Žižek’s modern Gothic demonstrates for us is the possibility of reading the Gothic towards the de-reification⁵ of the Real and the registering of the distorting effects of antagonism.

Notes

- [1]. A philosophical proposition, doctrine, or principle of reasoning.
- [2]. Gothic sublime is fundamentally effective and pictorial as opposed to a Romantic sublime, which is hermeneutic and visionary.
- [3]. For Žižek, the Real cannot be grasped. If something can be talked about, then it is not real because it has been converted into a verbal shadow of itself.
- [4]. Here, cruel and brutal and enjoyment
- [5]. The unification and comprehension of the Real as a single entity.

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