

"The Supersensible is Appearance Qua Appearance"— the Basic Structure of Zizek's Dialectics

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Abstract: Slavoj Zizek's Lacanian adaptation of the Hegelian dialectics has attracted much attention in Western scholarship, and this unique dialectic is used as a fundamental research method throughout the entirety of Zizek's theoretical system. Taking the antagonistic relationship between the supersensible and appearance as a starting point, this paper transforms the epistemological opposition between the two into an ontological split, thus transforming the relationship between the two into a relationship between void and fantasy, and finally arriving at the double meanings of the proposition "the supersensible is appearance qua appearance". Accordingly, this paper proposes the quaternary structure of Zizek's dialectics, which provides a basic interpretive framework for understanding Zizek's postmodern theory.

1. Introduction

Slavoj Zizek is one of the most highly regarded neo-Marxists in the contemporary Western academic arena and the public ideological field, known for his radical ideological critiques of global capitalism and his Lacanian reading of classical German philosophy, especially Hegel's. The important and grotesquely counter-intuitive proposition of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, "the supersensible is appearance qua appearance"^[1], is newly elaborated in Zizek's ontology centered on void and fantasy. The new elaboration of this proposition constitutes both an overview and a foundational part of Zizek's critical theoretical system, as well as the semiotic framework and an important core on which Zizek's dialectics is based. In Zizek's many works, from profound philosophical discussions and ideological critiques to popular cultural criticism and political jokes, the opposition between the supersensible substance and appearance is always present. This paper will begin with Zizek's interpretation of the relationship between the two, combine it with the postmodern elaboration of classical philosophical propositions such as "substance is subject", and finally argue for the double meanings of "the supersensible is appearance qua appearance". The paper then compares the difference between Zizek's dialectics and the Hegelian dialectics under the traditional reading according to the interpretation of this proposition, whereby the basic quaternary structure of Zizek's dialectics is obtained.

2. Decode double meanings of the proposition

2.1 The inescapable void inside the phenomenal realm

Hegel's exploration of the supersensible and appearance is presented as a response to Kant's epistemology. In his apriorism system, Kant divides the realms of noumenon and phenomena so thoroughly that the empirical act of knowing can only be phenomenal, while the noumenal realm is an unknowable realm to which a priori categories cannot be applied. Therefore, all epistemological conclusions should be attributed to the phenomenal realm rather than the noumenal realm. The radical difference between Kant's supersensible substance (thing-in-itself) and appearance (phenomenon or visualization) leaves an irremovable rift between the two. Post-Kantian classical philosophers dealt with this rift by concentrating on the discussion of subject and substance. Fichte argued that to ensure the production of the a priori object X, the subject must first exist so that thing-in-itself and subjectivity are linked.

But for Hegel, the noumenal realm is by no means supersensible but is constructed precisely through appearance. "The supersensible is the sensuous and the perceived posited as it is in truth; but the truth of the sensuous and the perceived is to be appearance. The supersensible is therefore appearance qua appearance."^[2] For Zizek, Hegel reverses Kant's epistemology because he realizes that the distinction between the supersensible substance and appearance is precisely embedded in appearance itself, and that Kant's noumenal realm is not an a priori independent realm, but a derivative of the phenomenal realm^[3]. Hegel argues that "The thing-in-itself (and under thing, spirit, God are also included) expresses the object insofar as one abstracts from everything that it is for consciousness, i.e., from all determinations of sensation as well as from all determinate thoughts of it."^[4] This abstraction of the supersensible substance, by removing all empirical reality from the phenomenal realm, must be the untouchable void around which all appearances are constructed. The supersensible void necessarily negates everything in the phenomenal realm and the symbolic order, in which sense the supersensible substance is pure negativity immanent in appearance, and the noumenal realm is a naturally open cavity inside the phenomenal realm. Thus, there is no empirical content "behind the appearances". There is only "nothing".

Here, Hegel transforms the impossibility of epistemology into the inadequacy of ontology. The transformation ultimately comes from his famous proposition "substance is subject" ("Not only as substance but also as subject"). Hegel regards the subject as the surplus of substance in his "doctrine of the concept". In order to integrate its own content and certainty, the substance throws out the reflexive subjective spirit and puts its own negativity on the side of the subject to form the negative subject. In the operation of the subject, the substance realizes itself and the idea as a substance recognizes itself through the subject. Therefore, in Zizek's view, Hegel believed that "substance is subject", that is to say, the subject is a part of the substance, as its inner self-division, in the final analysis, and that the negative movement of the subject is actually the movement set by the substance itself. Therefore, "what looks like an epistemological limitation of our capacity to grasp reality (the fact that we are forever perceiving reality from our finite temporal standpoint) is the positive ontological condition of reality itself." ^[5]

In the antagonistic relationship between the supersensible and appearance, the subject constantly plays a negative role, refuses to recognize appearance, and believes that there is something supersensible in the abyss behind appearance. After the introduction of "substance is the subject", we can see that appearance as the substance is to shape the subject for self-realization and the subject is only the split of appearance. The continuous negation of appearance by the subject is actually appearance's activity of the continuous ontological split and the resistance to certainty. It can be said that the negative activity of representational self-reference is precisely where the subjectivity lies.

It is in the negative activity of self-reference of appearance that the supersensible thing is reflected as the inevitable crack in the phenomenal realm. To better illustrate this point, we need to introduce the dialectics concept of "parallax", which is the core of Zizek's expression of appearance and reality, substance and subject, that is, to emphasize the difference of perspective in observing the same background. Parallax has important ontological significance in Zizek, and he believes that the shadow of truth and the real body of things - that is, the supersensible substance behind the image - lies in the parallax gap^[6].

The following is an example for discussion: in the face of a portrait, the observer will see different contents from different angles, which impels the observer to think that the portrait has a fixed fundamental state, and to imagine that there is a higher, farther, and more comprehensive perspective to view the true face of the portrait. However, the incompleteness and uncertainty of the observer's observation, in the final analysis, comes from the ontological uncertainty and inconsistency of the portrait. The portrait itself has not set its own shape, and a more comprehensive perspective does not exist, because the portrait cannot show its true face at all. So where is the real face? In Zizek's view, the true face of the portrait exists in the parallax of different observation angles of the observer, in the inevitable failure of observation, and in the impossibility of comprehensively grasping the content of the portrait. This is because, although the observer cannot grasp the true face of the portrait from any angle of view, each failure to grasp reversely defines the true outline of the portrait, and these pure "nothing" constitute the pure "being". In the pure structural cracks between these failed observation positions, the true face of the portrait is synthesized downward. In other words, the true face of the portrait only exists in a purely negative way.

In this example, the portrait that changes the content from different angles stands for (and also is part of) appearance. Appearance splits in different angles, which leads the subject to constantly negate appearance. Each negation is the self-negation of the portrait, which points to the emptiness of appearance where the supersensible substance stays. This kind of persistent negation constitutes all the stipulations of the supersensible, which can be described as an empty hole that repels everything to go inside. But the repelling nature of the hole predisposes it to be different from everything else and to hold boundaries, that is to say, it is a hole with certain boundaries that constitute all the stipulations of the hole - in a purely negative way. "In this precise sense, the Real emerges from the impasses of formalization: the Real is not a hard external kernel which resists symbolization, but the product of a deadlock in the process of symbolization."^[7]

Here we find that, as the "substance is subject" emphasizes, the void within appearance is the very manifestation of the Cartesian subject, which represents the pure and eternal negativity, and that the only "nothing" behind the curtain of appearance is identical with the subjectivity. Here again, Zizek identifies ontology with epistemology. The negative function of the subject constitutes the entire abyss of appearance, or rather, it is the process by which the void is constantly synthesized downwards that constitutes the entire stipulations of the subject. In the ontological sense, the rupture of the phenomenal world presents the supersensible substance; in the epistemological sense, the rupture of the phenomenal world presents the subject.

Taking the above together, we can obtain the first meaning of Hegel's proposition "the supersensible is appearance qua appearance", as interpreted by Zizek. That is, the "qua" in the statement is interpreted as a juxtaposition, i.e. the two appearances in the proposition are seen as equivalent. The supersensible substance appears in the parallax of the two appearances, grasped negatively as a necessary scarcity in the realm of appearances, and synthesized as the inverse setting of multiple appearances. This proposition emphasizes the way in which the supersensible is grasped, and this is where the subject is generated and comes into play.

2.2 The fulfillment of the fantasy object

However, although this void is persistent, it is always filled by the fantasy object, that is, the subject will fantasize that there is something empirical behind appearance instead of the void, and think that the supersensible substance is present and is active in the phenomenal realm. This is called the "reflexive illusion" role of the subject by Žižek^[1]. This role comes from Lacan's statement of the eternal way of constructing the object of the subject. It is the defensive measure taken by the subject when resisting the incompleteness of the symbolic order: the subject cannot accept the inconsistency of the order that dominates itself, cannot tolerate the fact that the supersensible behind appearance cannot be positively grasped, and cannot recognize the inevitable gap in the phenomenal realm. So the fantasy object is constructed and filled in the empty space of the phenomenal realm to cover the scandal of the symbolic order. Thus the subject, having denied appearance and dug down deeper, still gets appearance.

This newly acquired appearance, because it occupies the position of the supersensible, is sublimated and has acquired a mysterious nature beyond itself. "This object or act may be in itself extremely banal. It has only to occupy the sacred/forbidden, empty place in the Other, and a whole series of impassable obstacles will build up around it; the object or act, in its very vulgarity, cannot be reached or accomplished." Žižek's strong structuralism permeates here. The structural position of the object determines the nature of the object more than the empirical content of the object itself. Therefore, the fantasy object is clearly a new appearance, but it is misunderstood by the subject as the manifestation of the supersensible substance^[1].

The fulfillment of the fantasy object is what Lacan calls the constitutive exception, which in fact occupies the place of the rupture of appearance but instead sews together the many appearances of the phenomenal realm - allowing the symbolic order to be solidly unified into a totalitarian one. This is paradoxical to the embryology mechanism of the supersensible. The opposition between appearance and the supersensible substance is thus ultimately transformed into an opposition between the fulfillment of the fantasy object and the inevitable void.

Based on the above discussion, we can see the second meaning of the proposition "the supersensible is appearance qua appearance", where the "qua" in the text is interpreted as a subordinate relationship. The second "appearance" in this proposition is doubled as the first "appearance", which means that the subject creates a new appearance at the fracture of the appearance through reflexive illusion, and the new appearance is regarded by the subject as the embodiment of the supersensible substance due to its special position.

3. The basic quaternary structure of Žižek's dialectics

Žižek has mentioned dialectics many times in many of his works, but in each discussion, dialectics is not only discussed as part of his research object, but also used as a research method. His discussion of dialectics is itself a practice within the scope of dialectics. Therefore, just as "we should understand Lacan before reading Lacan", we seem to understand dialectics before reading Žižek's dialectics. However, after the introduction of the double meanings of the proposition "the supersensible is appearance qua appearance", the basic logical structure of dialectics as the ontological movement of things can be clearly expressed in a linear way.

In the traditional sense, the interpretation of Hegel's dialectics is often reduced to the form of syllogism of "thesis - antithesis - synthesis". The thesis means the original identity, which corresponds to the initial harmony of appearance. The antithesis means the manifestation or differentiation of the opposite of the thesis, corresponding to the rupture of appearance or the second appearance that negates the stability and consistency of the first. The synthesis is the unity of the thesis and the antithesis. The synthesis unifies some characteristics or positive factors of the two stages on a new or higher basis,

corresponding to appearance and its own gap being unified in the essential dimension. This negative process is affirmed in the self-realization of the absolute idea.

However, in Žižek's case, dialectics is by no means the same. The logical form of dialectics should be reduced to the quaternary structure of "thesis - antithesis - false synthesis - true synthesis". The connotation of the thesis and the antithesis is consistent with the traditional understanding, which is the reflection of the parallax of appearance. The false synthesis is the hallucinatory unification of the opposite thesis and antithesis, corresponding to appearance being filled with the fantasy object at its gap. This shows Žižek's most radical interpretation of Hegel. In Žižek's interpretation, the unity that reconciles all opposites and serves as a stable background order does not exist, and the overall unity is only the result of the sublimation of the fantasy object. The Symbolic where appearance is located and the Real where the supersensible substance is located is absolutely separated. The only way to show the Real is to appear in the inevitable disorder of the symbolic world as a pure negation (that is, the supersensible set in reverse). This manifestation is immediately replaced by the subjective illusion, and as a "sewing point", it retroactively gives continuity to the traumatic events that have occurred. This kind of coherence is finally mistakenly grasped as a mysterious transcendental unity^[8]. Here, Žižek applies Lacan's logic of retrospective construction, where it is not that the unity is revealed between appearances, but that the appearances, when sewn together, set up the unity of the gap in reverse. As a result, Žižek moved the illusion to the position where the original unity was, and pointed out the falseness of the traditional synthesis.

The true synthesis is to refuse to let the fantasy object replace the truth, to face the inevitable failure of order and the natural inconsistency of the phenomenal realm, and to grasp the negative presence of the supersensible thing with a reflexive attitude. This grasp is reflected in the radicalization of appearance (thesis). It means that take appearance as the appearance that inevitably contains the negation of itself, that is, the appearance in which the supersensible substance can be manifested, and admit that the phenomena realm is inevitably full of inevitable and never-ending confrontations and contradictions. This radicalization of the thesis is pretty different from the antithesis, which is only the negation of the point where the thesis is located. The antithesis is the appearance constructed correspondingly to the thesis, and is restricted in the symbolic order where the topic is located. The two propositions are still in the illusion of the unity and integrity of the phenomenal realm, and are still placed under the same symbolic framework. This symbolic framework is the embodiment of the sewing effect of the fantasy object in the phenomenal realm. The true synthesis is to sublimate the whole symbolic framework, to disenchant the fetishistic fantasy object from the subject's vision. And finally, the traumatic new posture of appearance is displayed in front of the subject. Thus, "a thing emerges out of its own loss."^[9]

In this sense, the traditionally antagonistic relationship between opposing propositions has been disintegrated, and the two have gone to the field of "infinite judgment" described by Hegel. The field formed by the split appearance has disappeared, and the newly generated field is full of emptiness. This emptiness has no judgment, so it is open to infinite judgment. In Žižek's view, the ultimate limit of dialectics is the "absolute freedom" brought by infinite judgment, and the "nothing" itself obtained after all the "being" are denied^[10]. Therefore, the negativity of the subject has been affirmed and emphasized in dialectics, and Žižek's theoretical system has thus established legitimacy for subversive and revolutionary practical activities.

4. Conclusions

Žižek's dialectics brought a radical and uncompromising social view. This kind of social view believes that, as stated in Lacan's proposition of "traversing the fantasy", when facing all social phenomena, we should actively explore the antagonistic cracks and ruptures in the "parallax gap", as

well as the ideology mechanism that plays a sewing role on the unshaped "hard kernel". Traverse the fantasy, keep a distance from the illusion, and pay attention to how the fantasy-formation covers and fills the gaps, deficiencies and empty positions in the Other. When the sewing point of appearance is grasped in the social symptoms, the collapse point of the capitalist order will also appear. As a result, Zizek's dialectics is wide open in the field of social phenomena as an open and revolutionary attitude. It believes that all ideological structures are in eternal confrontation, so a better and reasonable social order can always be conceived and practiced, and that is how the postmodern revolutionary subject acts. Thus, the old world should always be overthrown, and the new world should always be welcomed. On this basis, Zizek went to his political plan against global capitalism and the theoretical plan to reconstruct left-wing ideological criticism. In the practice of Zizek's dialectics, a practical path of "resisting and countervailing" stereotyped by the capitalist society was sublated into a constantly negative action against the entire framework of the capitalist symbolic order. The identification of lies and illusions in the phenomenal realm has become a major task of Zizek on the political and cultural stage.

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