

Žižek



Fall 2022

Thursdays 10:00 AM–12:50 PM, A 225

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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.

PHIL 483L: Žižek

Course Description

Slavoj Žižek is well-known among intellectuals and the general public alike for his reflections on contemporary culture and politics, as well as for his distinctive style, marked by film analysis, obscene jokes, and a plethora of references to supposedly obscure continental thinkers. But one should not let his left-leaning critiques of ideology and capitalism, nor his insistent discussions of Hitchcock, 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 dialectical materialism—merits investigation in its own right. In this seminar, we will explore how Žižek provides compelling, if provocative, answers to various big philosophical questions, including the freedom vs. determinism debate, the origins of consciousness, what we can hope for, and even why there is something rather than nothing.

A Breakdown

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 and potential, we will first explore the philosophical origins and consequences of psychoanalysis to set the stage for immersing ourselves in his work. We will overview the development of the concept of the unconscious from the 19th 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 the philosophical tradition and our everyday conception of the self, which place a lot of trust on the powers of reason and conscious thought and deliberation—and is still widely used today.

With this foundation, we will then examine some of Žižek's most important philosophical works. 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 academic 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. Indeed, he argues that these unconscious fantasies are so woven into the very fabric of culture and politics that we must acknowledge that ideology is inevitably embedded in everyday life.

Next, we will track how Žižek's continued 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*, *The Parallax View*, and *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* leads him to speculate about what the unconscious tells us about not only human nature but even nature as a whole. Combining psychoanalytic insights with German Idealism, Žižek proposes a comprehensive account of the universe and our place in it, arguing that the universe began with a contingent quantum fluctuation of the primordial void and that our consciousness and freedom demonstrate that the human being, ravaged by death drive and *jouissance*, is a failed animal bent on its own destruction. 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 wed Lacan with Hegel—not only contributes to a range of contemporary debates in political philosophy, metaphysics, ontology, and philosophy of mind but is also able to ground meaningful political change by culminating in a materialist theology of hope.

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 summary of key points. During the seminar, we will discuss points of interest led by student presentations.

Learning Outcomes

Upon successful completion of the course, students will be able to:

- Analyze central concepts in philosophy (e.g., absolute idealism, structuralism, and post-structuralism).
- Evaluate Žižek's relationship to the history of philosophy.
- Evaluate Žižek's views on central debates in metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, and social and political philosophy.
- Evaluate Žižek's contributions to contemporary continental and analytic philosophy.
- Create a new and unique research paper on a central aspect of Žižek's philosophy.

Texts

The text below is required. It is available through the bookstore. Other readings will be made available on Blackboard.

- Slavoj Žižek. *How to Read Lacan*. London: Granta Books, 2006.

Requirements and Grading	Holistic Assessment	10%	
	Exegetical Essay	25%	
	Presentation	15%	
	Research Proposal	10%	November 16
	Research Essay	40%	December 15

Holistic Assessment

Holistic assessment will be determined not only by regular attendance and contributions to discussions, exercises, and activities but also by preparation, improvement in academic performance throughout the

Exegetical Essay

The essay will be of a historical and expository nature. You will contextualize and summarize the formal argument from one of our readings. A list of possible texts will be distributed in the first week of the course. The essay should be approximately 1500 words and will be due two weeks after the session in question.

Presentation

Each student will be responsible for giving a presentation. Each presentation will be a minimum of 10 minutes. The presentation should include two or three questions that will serve as a springboard for discussion. Presentations will be chosen in the first week of the course.

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 debates in philosophy. 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 Hegel as well as secondary literature from your own independent research.

Research Essay

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

Course Schedule

Unit	Date	Topic
1	Sep. 7	Žižek and the Philosophical Significance of Psychoanalysis
2	Sep. 14	The Discovery of the Unconscious <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Schopenhauer, <i>The World as Will and Representation</i>, excerpts Nietzsche, <i>The Anti-Christ</i>, <i>The Twilight of the Idols</i>, and <i>On the Genealogy of Morals</i>, excerpts
3	Sep. 21	Freud's Royal Road to the Unconscious <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Freud, <i>The Interpretation of Dreams</i>, excerpts
4	Sep. 28	Freud on the Ego, Superego, and Id <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Freud, <i>The Ego and the Id</i>, Chapters I-III Freud, <i>Beyond the Pleasure Principle</i>, excerpts
5	Oct. 6	Lacan's Return to Freud <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Saussure, <i>Course in General Linguistics</i>, excerpts Lacan, <i>Seminar II</i>, excerpts Žižek, <i>How to Read Lacan</i>, Introduction and Chapter 1
6	Oct. 13	Lacan on the Imaginary and Symbolic <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lacan, <i>Écrits</i>, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function" Žižek, <i>How to Read Lacan</i>, Introduction and Chapter 2 Recommended: Fink, <i>The Lacanian Subject</i>, Chapters 1-3
7	Oct. 20	Lacan on the Real <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Žižek, <i>How to Read Lacan</i>, Chapters 3-4 Recommended: Fink, <i>The Lacanian Subject</i>, Chapter 5
8	Oct. 27	Žižek on Ideology and Unconscious Fantasy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Žižek, <i>The Sublime Object of Ideology</i>, excerpts
9	Nov. 3	Žižek's New Metapsychology <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Žižek, <i>The Indivisible Remainder</i>, excerpts
10	Nov. 10	Žižek's New Dialectical Materialism

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Žižek, <i>The Most Sublime Hysteric: Hegel with Lacan</i>, excerpts • Žižek, <i>The Ticklish Subject</i>, excerpts
11	Nov. 17	<p>Žižek on Freedom, Consciousness, and Biological Maladaptation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Žižek, <i>The Parallax View</i>, excerpts
12	Nov. 24	<p>Žižek on the Emergence of the Universe <i>Ex Nihilo</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Žižek, <i>The Indivisible Remainder</i>, excerpts • Žižek, <i>Less Than Nothing</i>, excerpts
13	Dec. 1	<p>Žižek on Capitalism and Popular Culture</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Žižek, <i>First as Tragedy, Then as Farce</i> • Žižek, <i>How to Read Lacan</i>, Chapters 5-6

Course Procedures and Policies

Professionalism

I require that students maintain a professional attitude toward the class and their peers. This entails doing all readings before each session, paying attention during lectures, participating in discussions, completing in-class exercises, arriving on time, not leaving early, and being respectful.

Email Communication

The subject line should include the course number and the nature of the inquiry. I do my best to respond within 2 weekdays. Please refrain from resending the inquiry or asking about its status before the timeframe has passed. If it has passed without a reply, feel free to reach out with a friendly reminder. Should it be an urgent matter, indicate so in the subject line. That way, I can prioritize getting back to you. Kindly note that UFV's Instructional Responsibilities Policy 46 states that "Instructors are not expected to respond to student emails on weekends or statutory holidays."

AI Use

Students are strictly prohibited from using generative AI for any requirements. In alignment with UFV's Student Academic Misconduct Policy 70, it "shall be an offense knowingly to [...] submit academic work for assessment that was purchased or acquired from another source." This includes work created by generative AI tools.

Essay Drafts

I appreciate the eagerness to learn students display when asking for feedback on essay drafts. However, I must respectfully inform you that I cannot provide this service. Reviewing academic work for some students and not others creates an uneven playing field that is contrary to the principle of fairness that I uphold myself to. I encourage you to make use of my office hours for any specific questions or concerns you may have regarding your essays. For general help on essay writing, the [Academic Success Centre](#) offers [individual tutoring](#) and [writing support tools](#). If you need assistance with references, please consult the [Citation Style Guides](#) developed by the [Library](#) or [request an appointment](#) with a librarian.

Late Essays

Any essay handed in late will be penalized by 5% per day for a maximum of 5 days. Late essays submitted after this period will not be accepted, except under extenuating circumstances.

Rewrites

While I admire the dedication to academic success students show when they request a rewrite, I do not permit any rewrites. It is inequitable to offer some students and not others the opportunity to improve their grades. I encourage you to make use of my office hours throughout the term for any specific questions or concerns you may have regarding course material, learning outcomes, and requirements. Once again, the [Academic Success Centre](#) and the [Library](#) offer personalized support in the form of [tutoring](#) and [consultation](#), [writing support tools](#), and [Citation Style Guides](#) to aid you in your studies. If you take advantage of all the resources available to you, you will be prepared for each requirement by its scheduled time or due date.

Grade Grubbing

Grade grubbing is when a student requests, threatens, or pleads for a grade increase no legitimate academic reason. Instances include asking or begging for a grade bump, seeking preferential treatment, disputing grades on subjective rather than objective criteria, or seeking to complete requirements long after they were scheduled or due. The course syllabus clearly articulates students' responsibilities in demonstrating learning outcomes through the listed requirements, the grading scheme, and policies regarding missed exams or late essays. There will be no grade changes that are not rightfully earned.



"Miracles do happen."

— Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, Chapter 3