

From the *Slavic Review* Editorial Board:

Slavic Review publishes signed letters to the editor by individuals with educational or research merit. Where the letter concerns a publication in *Slavic Review*, the author of the publication will be offered an opportunity to respond. Space limitations dictate that comment regarding a book review should be restricted to one paragraph of no more than 250 words; comment on an article or forum should not exceed 750 to 1,000 words. When we receive many letters on a topic, some letters will be published on the *Slavic Review* website with opportunities for further discussion. Letters may be submitted by e-mail, but a signed copy on official letterhead or with a complete return address must follow. The editor reserves the right to refuse to print, or to publish with cuts, letters that contain personal abuse or otherwise fail to meet the standards of debate expected in a scholarly journal.

To the Editor:

In his reply to my article, “The Rhetorics of Interpretation and Žižek’s Approach to Film” (vol. 72, no. 4), Slavoj Žižek dismisses my criticism of his use of the concept of the Real. According to him, I have failed miserably in construing his claim that the Real is “that [which] resists all symbolization” as a variant of Immanuel Kant’s thing in itself, for, as he claims, he has written “dozens of pages explaining why the Real is NOT Kant’s thing in itself, and how it is not external to the Symbolic but a retro-active effect of the symbolization itself.” Such a reply only gives further credence to my criticism. The crucial point to notice here is that Žižek does not retract his initial statement but simply offers a clarification of it. My objection, therefore, remains the same: although we can conceptually grasp that there might be something beyond all symbolization, content-wise there is nothing more to say about “it” upon this discovery. To spend dozens of pages providing further elucidations of “it”—whether we call “it” noumenon or not—only serves as further proof of the lack of analytical rigor in Žižek’s writing I critiqued throughout my article.

As for my alleged amazement at Žižek’s double use of “frame” in his monograph on Krzysztof Kieślowski, it seems that Žižek misses the point here. I was speaking of David Bordwell’s take on this double use and in fact defending Žižek against Bordwell’s claim that we can never be certain whether Žižek really means something when he says it or whether he is merely bluffing. The point is precisely that most of the time, as evident in his reply to my essay, Žižek is not bluffing.

Regarding suture, Žižek states that I misattribute to him the claim that “the Absent One who manipulates images . . . is none other than the author.” He neglects to mention, however, that after examining the validity of this claim as one possible interpretation of his position I proceed to discuss other possibilities. Moreover, when in his reply he emphasizes that “the absent gaze is not the gaze of a subject (of the manipulating author/director), but the gaze as object, the gaze as opposed to the eye, the gaze that cannot be subjectivized,” he also forgets that he claims the exact opposite for some of the key film examples he presents us with throughout his oeuvre. That is, in his recurrent discussions of the Bodega Bay shot from *The Birds* (1963) and the murder of Arbogast from *Psycho* (1960), Žižek regularly identifies these shots as subjective ones from the position of the impossible gaze itself.

Perhaps the most problematic aspect of Žižek’s reply is that he fails to properly address the key point of my article—the need for propositional factuality, argumenta-

tive validity, and conceptual clarity in interpretative work, and his disregard for this need. For instance, he does not even attempt to tackle a single factual inaccuracy listed in my section titled “The Unbearable Lightness of Interpreting” and the invalid inferences stemming from them. When he does address my criticism of his periodization of Alfred Hitchcock’s oeuvre it is only to tackle thematic points (leaving the formal ones on the sidelines). He admits that “the maternal superego is not directly present in most of Hitchcock’s films of his last stage,” but this does not make him reconsider his classifications. Instead, he invokes “the Hegelian notion of ‘concrete universality’—a singular privileged point at which the universal appears as such, in contrast to its particular content” in order to claim that the maternal superego as such a notion “provides the ‘specific color’ that overdetermines all other narratives [from Hitchcock’s postmodernist period].” The reason why it is legitimate to stick with his periodization is, he claims, the fundamental difference between the two of us “concern[ing] the status of universality,” for I, unlike him, “remain essentially within the empirical notion of universality as the common feature of many particularities.”

At this point one might think that Žižek is free from (almost all) empirical considerations pertaining to the class of movies he lumps together according to the “concrete universality” of his choosing. In other words, the identification of a single example of the direct representation of the maternal superego will suffice to vindicate his periodization. But freedom from empirical consideration cannot be the case, for above he clearly states that the “specific color” in question overdetermines *all* narratives from Hitchcock’s postmodernist period. Therefore, although Žižek need not identify the maternal superego in all of these narratives, he does need to give an account of how the maternal superego’s “specific color” operates in these narratives. Interestingly, the only example he draws attention to—*North by Northwest* (1959)—is not even a film to which I denied the presence of the maternal superego. My point, therefore, remains essentially the same. In order to identify the maternal superego’s specific color in narratives such as *Dial M for Murder* (1954), Žižek (or anybody else for that matter) would be forced to make claims that have no grounding, either direct or indirect, in the narratives. Speaking more generally, Žižek has simply loosened his criteria for periodization—they need not be present directly, that is, their indirect presence will suffice. But what would amount to the indirect presence of, say, formal devices such as long takes, which are taken by Žižek, on the basis of one or two examples, to be the key formal property of the whole of Hitchcock’s modernist period? In other words, the identification of these thematic and formal properties’ indirect presence would still lead to disregard for propositional factuality, argumentative validity, and conceptual coherence, regardless of whether we subscribe to empirical or concrete universality.

MARIO SLUGAN
University of Chicago

Professor Žižek chooses not to respond.