It would confirm that Žižek is an academic rock star to recognize that each of his new books are indeed like rock concerts: we attend expecting to hear new songs scattered among the greatest hits, some which have been reworked to give the impression of freshness. It is tempting to say that Žižek has written this way since the publication of *For They Know Not What They Do* as the sequel to his first work, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*; this would establish that first brilliant book as the origin of his ideas from which all others spring and deviate, but with the publication of his doctoral work in English for the first time (*The Most Sublime Hysteric*) this idea becomes dispelled, the doctoral work retroactively becoming the text that all others repeat.

Sometimes, this can appear as a questionable form of “textual recycling,” in which old text appears verbatim in new locations without being cited. But here I do not wish to involve myself with such polemical attacks on style, for that would raise profoundly complex questions about the very nature of texts and of writing itself. I focus on this topic not to disparage Žižek’s efforts, but rather because, as it turns out, his repetitions are by far the easiest way to discern what his “greatest hits” consist of. By this I mean that Žižek’s messy style can, in a single work, obscure major arguments through its eclecticism and erratic movement, but navigating his works in succession, as if they were part of some interminable and labyrinthian scroll, reveals what Žižek cannot dispense with. For if we recognize Žižek’s repetitions as a formal feature of his work, we discover that although certain concepts are mentioned, frustratingly, without much development in one book, they are repeated and defined more rigorously elsewhere—patiently, we must make our way through tunnels until we reach the conceptual caverns. A reading method that focuses on the formations of these concepts seems to be the most productive way to go about interpreting and experiencing Žižek’s work.

It is dialectical to note that, among the many unavoidable concepts populating Žižek’s work (the Real, the dialectic, fantasy, ideology, negativity, the subject, retroactivity, enjoyment, objet a, to name a few), repetition is itself often discussed, a fact observed in a new collection of essays on Žižek. Repetition is mentioned here in his latest major work, *Absolute Recoil*, only in passing, and appropriately enough we are pointed back for an expanded definition of the concept to *Less Than Nothing*, which at the moment holds the title of his magnum opus.

Žižek’s sense of repetition entails a dialectical reading of Freud’s *Beyond the
Pleasure Principle and Hegel’s The Philosophy of History. On the one hand, Freud understands repetition to be a compulsion that “overrides” the pleasure principle. Observing that people tend to repeat activities that are not necessarily pleasurable to them, Freud theorizes that this compulsion to repeat has no other aim than the repetition of itself, no other purpose than to maintain a certain situation. It is this inherently conservative aspect that leads Freud to link repetition with the death drive, the principle that organisms are compelled to return to “inorganic existence.” Hegel on the other hand claims that repetition enables a potentially contingent event, like Napoleon’s first defeat at the Battle of Leipzig, to become a historical necessity as it did after Waterloo: “By repetition that which at first appeared merely a matter of chance and contingency,” writes Hegel, “becomes a real and ratified existence.”

The common understanding of Hegel suggests that this formula is dialectical because it involves a contingency that, through its negation, is transformed into its opposite (a necessity). Attempting to complicate such a reading, Žižek’s Freudian intervention declares that at the core of Hegel’s dialectical process resides a “non-dialectizable” absolute negativity that, as a repetition that purely repeats itself, corresponds with Freud’s death drive. This is to say that repetition compulsion ultimately accounts for the quasi-mechanical and obsessive nature of Hegel’s dialectical thinking, the way it seeks to process everything it encounters.

Whether there is some didactic and conscious element to Žižek’s own mechanical iterations (making contingent concepts into necessary ones), or whether it is an unconscious compulsion best understood through Freud’s theories, or both, ultimately can be difficult to judge. In any case, this question always seems to raise itself with each new work, as if it were some figure of the undead emerging from the grave, and in this latest book we find a great deal of repetition alongside extensions of prior arguments that were, in general, presented with greater refinement and detail in Less Than Nothing. But, to be sure, with Absolute Recoil Žižek’s energetic and thought provoking show goes on in as fascinating and entertaining a way as ever. Freud shows us, after all, that repetition can be associated both with trauma and with pleasure—it is at this level of enjoyment that Žižek himself might understand the echoic content of his work.

Žižekian Dialectics

The purported subject of Absolute Recoil is dialectical materialism, but we quickly learn that no abstract work will be done to define the concept itself—here we will merely find the “practice” of dialectical materialism in various chapters dedicated mostly to Hegel (Lacan, Žižek’s other master, takes more of a backstage position in this work, but is nonetheless present in Žižek’s engagements with Marx, Althusser, Badiou and Kant). Before I hazard to guess what exactly Žižek means by the phrase dialectical materialism (a task that will occupy the bulk of this review), it should be said that, although this subject has never been foreign to Žižek’s work, he has certainly grown more interested in explicitly working on the idea beginning with the publication of Less Than Nothing in 2012. I will eventually turn to Žižek’s materialism, where a definition of dialectical materialism in total can be clarified, but for now it seems more pressing to consider Žižek’s dialectical practice in general.
Žižek’s method can be represented as a simple and mechanical practice of reversal (“you think this is like that, but what if it is precisely the opposite of that?”), but to create such an occasionally accurate formula would downplay both the complexity and the content of many of his operations. Take for example the common understanding that there is a gap between knowledge and belief, that belief only emerges when knowledge cannot, as when we are astonished by some miracle that defies our explanatory capabilities. The dialectical reversal of such a standard truth reveals that all knowledge must in fact be supplemented by belief, because knowledge can never truly be assumed by the subject: there is thus a gap or “immanent split” internal or intrinsic to knowledge itself, and so belief emerges out of this internal inconsistency (I must both know about and believe in the impending ecological crisis, for example). Thus the dialectic for Žižek is a process of refolding concepts back into one another by finding a gap in one concept that internally necessitates the second concept.

Of course, Žižek has much more to say on the subject of dialectics—there is, as I mentioned before in the discussion of repetition, a “non-dialecticizable moment of the dialectical process,” or a negative motor of the dialectic that is internal to it. Negativity also appears in that crucial dialectical moment known as the “negation of the negation,” which has remained a central operation for Žižek ever since The Sublime Object of Ideology. There, the negation of the negation signifies a negative moment of thought that retains all of its disruptive power, but that can be seen as a positive condition for identity: “negativity as such has a positive function.” Žižek produces many examples of this kind of thinking, but perhaps the clearest reworks the relationship between crime and law. Crime, from this dialectical perspective, is not seen merely as a negation of the law, but rather as an integral and positive condition for the law itself. In Absolute Recoil, we encounter a similar conception, for which negation of the negation should be thought of as a “failed negation,” a negation that draws consequences from the first failure providing it with a minimally positive content. Reformulating the example of crime and law through this alternate definition, crime might be thought of as a failed negation of law, a negation that never fully succeeds but that, through its failure, reveals how the law must sustain itself through brutal activities that are themselves criminal.

Negativity in this sense also informs the concept of “absolute recoil,” a relatively minor speculative notion from Hegel’s Science of Logic that Žižek’s wishes to transform into a “universal ontological principle.” We can think of this term as defining a “withdrawal that creates what it withdraws from,” or that which “stands for the radical coincidence of opposites in which the action appears as its own counter-action, or, more precisely, in which the negative move (loss, withdrawal) itself generates what it ‘negates.’” Clear from this description is that absolute recoil is a force that, like the negation of the negation, either generates something minimally positive, or that generates the negated element in a retroactive move, yet what remains unclear is how this concept is to be deployed as an ontological or dialectical principle, for aside from its link with Žižek’s theory of the subject, which will be examined momentarily, absolute recoil is explained merely through the single example of a state’s nationalistic gesture of self-constitution through the propagation of lost or mythic origins that never existed in the first place.
This lack of conceptual development, as well as the absence of justification for the centrality of absolute recoil over the many previous conceptions of negativity, serves to emphasize one of Žižek’s most exemplary tendencies: he has never been one to generate new terms and hold on to them tightly; rather, he constantly appropriates older conceptual tools as if he needed them *ad hoc* and drops them just as quickly. This could certainly allow for the collapse of a philosophical work based on the brick-by-brick assembly of a fortress-like system, but that is not the form of Žižek’s books. Precise conceptual development is substantially less important than conceptual exercises (interventions in philosophy, theology, and culture), which strangely provide something less like a building or infrastructure for thinking, and more like a road or brick path on which old ideas are dialectically left behind. In this sense, the dialectic can be seen as a formal element in Žižek’s work.

**Many Materialisms**

Meanwhile, as for materialism, we should first ask why we might need a “new” foundation for a specifically *dialectical* materialism. Certainly the need arises in part due to the challenges posed by other materialism; the crucial philosophical struggle, Žižek writes, exists under the umbrella of materialism, “between democratic and dialectical materialism.” Democratic materialism consists of at least four other kinds of materialism, ranging from the pure or strong materialisms of cognitivist scientists, the atheist materialists like Richard Dawkins, the “discursive materialists” following Foucault, to the so-called “New Materialisms” exemplified by Jane Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter*, all of which are characterized by some non-dialectical attachment to matter. By contrast, dialectical materialism considers itself a part of the legacy of German Idealism and takes into account that movement’s most important assertion: a “gap in the natural order signaled by the emergence of subjectivity.”

It might seem strange indeed to ground any materialism in that movement, but by feeding Hegel’s idealism through the dialectical operations described above, it is materialism itself which magically appears on the other side (we think idealism is identical to idealism, but it is in fact materialism): “The only way to be a true materialist today,” Žižek asserts, “is to push idealism to its limits.”

This “materialism without matter” leads Žižek to identify philosophical problems from two perspectives: from the perspective of materialism, he asks how constrained and material historical circumstances could produce an “eternal Idea,” and from the perspective of idealism, he wonders whether the “transcendental dimension,” or what organizes and limits our experience, is the ultimate horizon of our thinking, and whether we can move beyond this limitation without regressing to naïve realism. These questions are all informed by Žižek’s understanding of the movement from Kant’s philosophy (in which reality is not immediately graspable as it is perceived through a transcendental structure) to Hegel’s, which involves displacing the gap that exists between the transcendental framework and reality back into reality (or content) itself. The gap between our transcendental framework of perception and reality is thus a feature of the Real itself; the “content” of the Real is inconsistent, incomplete, and needs the transcendental framework to fill in the gap.
What we immediately come to understand about Žižek's materialism, then, is that it is really a code word for incompleteness, inconsistency, nonidentity, antagonism, and contingency. Materiality here has little to do with the physical presence of an object or subject; the opposition that Žižek really sets up occurs between ideal unity and consistency against material disunity and inconsistency. It is through nonidentity or antagonism that Žižek complicates and twists our commonplace understanding of ideal unity into a paradoxical ideal disunity that generates materiality.

This dialectical understanding of idealism with materialism might seem very strange indeed as a basis for ontology, but its plausibility and interest seems to be most evident in his engagements with quantum physics. In general, what Žižek enjoys in quantum physics is certainly the discovery that characteristics of Lacanian psychoanalysis and German Idealism appear in scientific reality. For example, he references what is called the “collapse of the wave function” as a paradigmatic case; at its most basic, this means that with the addition of an observer, the behavior of particles at the quantum level ceases to follow the patterns dictated by waves, and instead follows the patterns dictated by particles. For Žižek, this collapse is absolutely central to connecting his ontology to science: the presence of an observer affects the outcome of an experiment, just as the subject’s position is implicated in the object, or just as the fissure between the transcendental framework and reality exists in reality. The lesson of such paradoxical discoveries should not be that quantum physics can talk about reality as if human beings were not here (or, that quantum physics can talk about the Real), nor is it the lesson that research can be done to resolve these bizarre contradictions, for both would miss the complexity of Žižek’s point: we must come to understand that not only will there inevitably be a gap between subjective experience (the symbolic and the imaginary, in Lacan’s terms) and objective functioning (the Real), but also that this gap is itself somehow present in the quantum universe in a different “version,” as a gap in nature or in the Real itself.

It is from the perspective of quantum physics that Žižek’s theory of the nonidentity of the void in this book and in Less Than Nothing finds its greatest expression as something philosophically interesting and, perhaps, empirically true. The void functions as the starting place from which all multiplicity must arise, but even this void cannot be posited as a unified consistent concept, for “even the Nothing cannot fully be Nothing,” and the void instead is already disturbed by a “minimal content” that is “less than nothing.” Žižek will thus come to think of the rise of multiplicity as a process of “broken symmetry” whereby a minimal disturbance in a quantum vacuum (here described as Democritus’s den) can allow something to emerge from nothing.

But these ontological arguments would mean less to Žižek without a comparable materialist theory of subjectivity, one that would take into account the inconsistency of the Real. Žižek’s Hegelian-Lacanian subject is unsurprisingly a paradox, the result of a failure of symbolic representation—if the symbolic order were to successfully map the subject, the subject would be a mere puppet for the Big Other, but due to the failure of the symbolic, the subject gains a modicum of freedom. Thus this subject emerges retroactively through its failure to be represented; there is no “substantial
content” before the failure, certainly nothing like a personality. The subject may then be thought of as the only true example of absolute recoil: it is a lack emerging from its own impossibility, created retroactively through its own withdrawal. This subject can ultimately emerge only from an inconsistent symbolic structure (at the heart of which is the Real) through “the structure’s own reflective self-relating which inscribes into the structure itself its constitutive lack” (240).

**Marx and History**

Throughout these abstract discussions of dialectics, materialism, and idealism, Žižek only incidentally mentions the concrete material world during the general discussions of quantum physics and the occasional references to events, stray news reports, or anecdotes. Yet even these moments never conjure what I would call the impression of materialism that we might have when reading some of Marx’s writing. And so it is unsurprising that Marx remains an ambivalent figure in Žižek’s work; he seems only sometimes to transform the duo of Žižek’s Hegelian-Lacanian thought into a trio, and when Marx does emerge into the spotlight, he is praised and chasised with precisely the same vigor.

In this work, Žižek emphasizes Marx’s ambiguous relationship with Hegel: on the one hand, we first confront in the introduction a Marx whose conceptualization of capital as an abstraction that determines material social realities has a great debt to Hegel’s logic. In this instance, Marx saw what Hegel simply could not: “the properly speculative content of the capitalist speculative economy.” But on the other hand, Žižek then dispenses with the part of Marx’s notion of capitalism that some would consider the most Hegelian. Marx theorizes that there is an antagonism inherent in capitalism between the productive forces and the relations of production that continually pose limits on these forces, an idea that seems acceptable to Žižek until communism is theorized as an ineluctable moment in which the productive powers of the worker are simultaneously enhanced while the fetters that held those productive powers back are eliminated. Žižek intervenes at this point with a Lacanian critique: the obstacle inherent in capitalism is precisely what allows productive forces to exist, and if a new mode of production were to suddenly overcome those contradictions, the productivity would also disappear.

This operation, where Hegel and Lacan become readers of Marx, and where Marx articulates the truth in Hegel, exemplifies the type of theoretical writing that Fredric Jameson has labeled transcoding. For Žižek transcoding might be another way to talk about “dialectical historicity” as it is a reading process in which conceptual languages are made to reflect upon one another: “a Hegelian reading of Freud,” Žižek explains, “means reading Freud in the same way Hegel approaches great names from the history of philosophy… The same goes for a Freudian reading of Hegel.” Žižek’s dialectical understanding of philosophical history—“what characterizes a really great thinker is that they misrecognize the basic dimension of their own breakthrough”—allows for the great proliferation of codes and readings that one finds throughout his work, and it also presents the opportunity for both orthodox and unorthodox readings, which is precisely what makes Žižek such an interesting thinker in the first place.
But there remains a contradiction in this process of transcoding, a contradiction that thereby pervades all of Žižek’s work: how can philosophical languages truly be compared in any meaningful sense when they are separated so dramatically by concrete historical situations? As Žižek puts it, Marx illustrates this problem well when he reverses Hegel by showing that “dialectical formal models are always mediated by concrete historical content,” a proposition that cannot be ignored in such a formal process of rereading various thinkers outside of concrete historical situations. I ultimately find Žižek’s answer to this question—“Hegel is to repeated today because his and our epochs are both epochs of passage from Old to the New”—to be unsatisfying, not merely because his assumption that today capitalism is coming to an end (a topic covered more fully in Living in the End Times) just as pre-modern society ended for Hegel is at best premature, but also because Žižek himself provides far stronger justifications throughout the book: discoveries in quantum physics almost demand a reexamination of German Idealism, and so perhaps do developments in computerized finance capital. Moreover, it seems to me that truly dialectical thinking would recognize, following Jameson, that the process of transcoding itself could occur only under a specific mode of production, which is not to assert that Žižek’s works are some symptom of capitalism, although others have said something similar, but rather it is to say that Žižek’s work could only be made possible under this particular regime of postmodern capitalism, with its own understanding of philosophical languages as codes instead of non-exchangeable worldviews, and its own waning regard for historical difference.

5 Ibid 47.
8 Freud, Pleasure Principle, 42.
9 Žižek, Absolute Recoil, 1.
10 Ibid., 52.
11 Ibid., 89.
13 Žižek, Less Than Nothing, 298.
14 Žižek, Absolute Recoil, 330.
15 Ibid., 4.
16 Ibid., 148.
17 Ibid., 148.
18 Ibid., 72.
19 Ibid., 72.
20 Ibid., 31.
21 Ibid., 73.
22 Ibid., 97.
23 Ibid., 109.
25 Žižek, Absolute Recoil, 225.
26 See Brian Greene’s The Elegant Universe (New York, Norton, 2010) for a very clear explanation.
27 Žižek, Absolute Recoil, 225
28 Ibid., 343.
29 Ibid., 343n26.
30 Ibid., 390.
31 Ibid., 330.
32 Ibid., 242.
33 Ibid., 31.
34 Ibid., 37-38.
36 Žižek, Absolute Recoil, 33.
37 Ibid., 34.
38 Ibid., 34.
39 See a summary of these critiques in Frank Ruda, “How to Repeat Plato?: For a Platonism of the Non-All.” Repeating Žižek, 43.
40 Jameson, Postmodernism, 394.