

Mass-Produced Fantasy in Commodity Culture: A Reading of Zizek and the Contemporary Romance Novel

In his analysis of cultural objects, Zizek's major contribution to cultural studies has been the merging of a variety of disciplines from Film Theory to Marxism to Psychoanalysis. Zizek's treatment of the cultural object as a symptom to be interpreted by the analyst/cultural theorist posits commodity fetishism as a symptom of capitalism: "the symptom, the point of emergence of the truth about social relations, is precisely the 'social relations between things'" (*Sublime Object* 26). For cultural theorists, this approach can be very appealing, because in late-capitalist society, so much of ideology is evidently embedded in the objects themselves. Similarly, interpreting objects in terms of the symbolic order of the Lacanian system opens up a variety of opportunities for interpretation. Zizek's mode of cultural critique is completely adequate to the object but - and this may seem like an odd question in light of that admission - is an "adequate" cultural critique what we want?

In this paper, I'm going to look at the contemporary romance novel - because that's what I work on - and attempt to demonstrate how these texts use a Lacanian model of the subject to market themselves. I suspect that one could perform a similar operation with a variety of different marketing techniques. As an object that purports to be providing fantasy, I think that the romance novel is a particularly interesting instance. Specifically, I'll going to be looking at the Harlequin - again, because that's what I do - and because, after decades of what Keith Negus would call "'vertical' and 'horizontal' integration" (Negus 84-7), the Harlequin is a remarkably homogenous product whose image and existence in the world is controlled by a centralized source - which is a happy accident when talking about ideology.

I feel that I should warn you, so that you don't find the experience too frustrating, that I'm about to perform a reading of a cultural object and then attempt to negate my own interpretation – which, I acknowledge, might be an entirely pointless endeavour – so feel free to just tune out and let your mind wander at will.

Let's start by looking a quotation from Žižek which encapsulates, somewhat, the reading that I'm about to do. In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, in response to the suggestion that we may, in fact, be living in a post-ideological world – since subjects are so cynical that they no longer believe in ideology – Žižek instead posits that “*the things (commodities) themselves believe in their place*, instead of the subjects: it is as if all of their beliefs ... are embodied in the ‘social relations between things’. They no longer believe, *but the things themselves believe for them*” (*Sublime Object* 34).

The romance novel, in its form, marketing, inception and reception seems to take this Siberian model of ideology quite literally. The contemporary romance novel understands itself as a symptom of the desire for romantic love on the part of its reading public. Its existence, popularity and economic success points to an overwhelming desire for itself:

Fun Facts About Harlequin

- Last year Harlequin sold more than 160 million books worldwide — more than 5.5 books a second.
- Harlequin books are sold in more than 100 international markets and translated into more than 23 languages around the world.
- During the past four decades, Harlequin characters have kissed each other over 20,000 times, shared about 30,000 hugs, and headed for the altar at least 7,000 times.
- If you set out to read all of the Harlequin books sold over the past 10 years, and averaged about two hours per book, you would be reading for the next quarter of a million years.
- Approximately one in every six mass-market paperbacks sold in North America is a Harlequin or a Silhouette novel.
- More than 50 million women read Harlequin books worldwide.

(eharlequin.com)

This text is taken from the Harlequin website: so basically, part of Harlequin's marketing technique is now to impress you with its incomprehensible multitude: "If you set out to read all of the Harlequin books sold over the past 10 years, and averaged about two hours per book, you would be reading for the next quarter of a million years." This enumeration of the vastness of these texts as a whole elevates the object to the level of the sublime. The Harlequin is, as Žižek would say, "an ordinary, everyday object which quite by chance, finds itself occupying the place of what [Lacan] ... calls *das Ding*, the impossible-real object of desire" (*Sublime Object* 194). The homogeneity and immensity of the Harlequin renders it unthinkable, a cultural object that cannot even be approached – and, conveniently, cannot be examined too closely. The subtext of these "Fun Facts about Harlequin" is that "if you think you know what the Harlequin is, you're wrong because you can't possibly think of anything this big." In this way, questions such as "Why do women read the romance novel?" or "Is the romance novel really an expression of what women want?" get sucked into the incomprehensible void that is this sublime object. When Harlequin is producing 5.5 texts a second and 50 million women are reading them, the question "Is this what women want?" becomes absurd. In the face of the sublime, the intellect is reduced to saying "160 million. Wow, that's a lot of books!"

Fortunately, we don't need to think of the object at all, because the object is thinking us. [The wonderful thing about this reading of the romance novel is the circular reasoning that it produces.] Harlequin readers read Harlequins because they're Harlequin readers. Or, to adapt Žižek again, the subject can "obtain some contents, some kind of

positive consistency, also outside of the big Other, the alienating symbolic network” through fantasy – that is by “equating the subject to an object of fantasy” (*Sublime Object* 46). I’m going to come back to this idea, but let me first make a separate point.

The contemporary romance novel, as a genre, is generally conceived to be fantasy: that is to say, fantasy is the primary conceptual framework, employed by critics and romance novelists themselves, for understanding the romance novel. This trend, of course, appeals to the Lacanian notion that ‘there is no sexual relationship’ and therefore we need fantasy because it “constitutes our desire, provide its co-ordinates; that is, it literally ‘teaches us how to desire’” (*Plague of Fantasies* 7). Fantasy, in its Lacanian sense, implies some “kernel of enjoyment” that must be located and worked through (124-128). As the space in which desire is “constituted (given its objects, and so on),” individual fantasy-scenes invoke a pre-existing lack which fantasy covers up (118). For *Li Ek*, ideology “implies, manipulates, and produces a pre-ideological enjoyment structured in fantasy” (125). Ideologies are compelling because they appeal to “the Real of our desire which announces itself in this dream” (48). As a conceptual framework for understanding the romance novel, fantasy challenges us to uncover the “kernel of enjoyment,” to discover the ingredient of universal feminine appeal. As an aside – successful as the romance formula has been, perhaps we should question whether anything has universal feminine appeal.

The problem with allowing the term fantasy to serve as the primary generic construct through which we approach the romance novel is that this imposes an *a priori* reception onto the readership. Romance readers want to read Fantasy because it is Fantasy...and that’s what Fantasy means. Here we’ve uncovered another absurd

question: “Do people want fantasy?” The reason that we can’t conceive of a subject who doesn’t want their own fantasy is because the subject is being constructed by the fantasy. Fantasy fulfills the need for intersubjectivity and answers the “original question of desire .. not directly ‘What do I want?’, but ‘What do *others* want from me? What do they see in me? What am I to others?’” (*Plague of Fantasies* 9). The romance novel is a fantasy because it provides the romance reader with a subject position – that of the romance reader.

This is particularly evident in advertisements for Harlequin Presents sub-series – books that have been thematically grouped around our romance reader’s insatiable desire for, in one example, International Doctors (Harlequin Presents. Advertisement). Not only is the romance reader told that she will enjoy the romance novel; she is also assured, with this delightful collection of thinly veiled sexual innuendos, that she will experience several specific physiological responses. Harlequin Presents promises “a world of spine-tingling passion” that will make the reader’s “heart race” and “send” unspecified “temperatures soaring...” Harlequin Presents is marketing, not so much a story, as an experience in subjectivity. While the by-line “Seduction and Passion Guaranteed!” might conceivably be referring to the seduction and passion of the characters, the phrase “Live the emotion” (a registered trademark apparently) gestures toward a state of being. This advertisement informs readers not only of what they want, but of what they should be and what they should feel.

Strange as it may seem, within this symbolic order, experiences, emotions, spines, hearts and temperatures do not adhere in the self. Remember, there is no self – you are the void – but just so that you don’t have to face this horrifying prospect, experiences,

emotions, spines, hearts, temperatures, and your subjectivity, will be provided to you at the low, low price of \$4.99. But wait, there's more! You can also purchase the "Book Mate": "this wonderful invention makes reading a pure pleasure" (Book Mate 1983). Taken from the back of a Harlequin published during the early 80's, this advertisement is for a product that the Harlequin Reader Service has been offering for decades. In case you thought this was only a fad, the winter 2003 edition of Harlequin's *Romance* magazine is offering the same contraption to "keep your paperbacks neat and tidy!" and not, of course, to hide the shameful fact that you're reading a Harlequin (Book Mate 2003). The book cover promises to keep your reading pleasure "pure" and "your paperbacks neat and tidy" because we can't have your private reading experience spilling out into the public realm.

The traumatic event that the book cover is trying to hide is not the fantasy itself, but the fantasy as public performance. The book cover recurs in Harlequin advertising because it is trying to resolve a disjunction between our understanding of fantasy as "always particular" and the Harlequin's status as an object of mass-culture. As Žižek argues in *Looking Awry*, the particularity of fantasy "is absolute, it resists 'mediation,' it cannot be made part of a larger, symbolic medium. For this reason we can acquire a sense of the dignity of another's fantasy only by assuming a kind of distance toward our own, by experiencing the ultimate contingency of fantasy as such, by apprehending it as the way everyone, in a manner proper to each, conceals the impasse of his desire. The dignity of a fantasy consists in its very 'illusionary,' fragile, helpless character" (*Looking Awry* 156-7). The book cover operates as a shield, preserving the "fragile, helpless" "dignity of a fantasy." Its purpose is to obscure that which must not be defined, because

exposure to scrutiny would do violence unto it. The book cover allows us to maintain the illusion, amidst 160 million books a year, of the privacy of fantasy, whereby fantasy, somehow, remains particular to the subject.

And contrary to popular perception, romance readers are remarkably cynical subjects. After all, they understand the romance, a story of two people falling in love, to be fantasy, and romantic love to be the impossible-real. Nor is this cynicism an unacknowledged part of their identity. Romance novelists, like Judith Krentz, insist that romance readers know what they're reading is not real (2). As i_ek points out, the cynicism of this fetishistic-split does not indicate an absence of ideology. It may well be the case that: "They know very well how things really are, but still they are doing it as if they did not know" (*Sublime Object* 32). But the appearance of seeing through an illusion only serves to reify the ideological fantasy. Labeling the texts as fantasy is an exercise in slight of hand. The apparent cynicism of the argument – "We know its not real, therefore it's fantasy" – doesn't alter the phenomenal rate of consumption. And the awareness of one illusion does not alter the gigantic leap of logic that this assertion performs: just because something is not real does not make it utopian.

As a conceptual model for understanding the romance novel, i_ek's mode of reading cultural objects and his explanation of how ideology and fantasy function in capitalist society works really well. It illustrates the ways in which these texts are functioning in society. It is a very comprehensive theoretical model that is entirely adequate to its object. And, under this construction, any questions that might undermine the reading cannot be asked because they don't make literal sense. At the same time, a whole economy of the object is being obscured by this reading, which de-historicizes the

cultural object to the point where you can no longer ask simple, and important questions, like “Where did it come from?”, “How was it produced” and “Who benefits from its consumption?”

When looking for an appropriate theory to apply to an object, we consistently try to find the best fit. But Žižek’s process certainly works for reading the romance novel. Does that mean that our “line of best fit” is not the optimal approach? Maybe we should apply the least appropriate model. That might, at least, produce a resistant reading. I’d like to end by suggesting that we completely ignore the reading that I just gave of the romance novel. Fantasy, as a mode of interpretation for the romance novel, seems to completely shut down the discussion. So, I would like to strike all of my comments from the record and suggest that, perhaps, not all utterances are productive. In a move that I suspect Žižek would approve of, let us, instead, as cultural theorists, embrace a project of subtracting from the sum-total of human knowledge.

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