
ABSOLUTE KNOWING: ŽIŽEK AND SUBJECT-AS-TRAUMA

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INTRODUCTION: THE CASE OF GRETA THUNBERG AND SUBJECTIFICATION

Education as a domain of conceptual activity and a field of scientific/scholarly research needs to address the movement from the traumatized subject to subject-as-trauma.¹ This movement and the concomitant conceptual shift in how we ought to understand the subject correspond, in the domain of education, to the *radicalization* of what Gert Biesta identifies as the most essential function of education, that is, *subjectification*, which is “the way in which educational processes and practices contribute to the emergence of human subjectivity or ‘subject-ness.’”²

For our purposes, the most crucial aspect of Biesta’s discussion of subjectification concerns the subject’s capacity to choose *not to belong* to a predetermined place within the existing order of discourse and power, or at least to contest one’s *a priori* placement in a particular position in society. In other words, subjectification concerns the *freedom* of the human subject, its autonomy and independence from the existing order of things, wherein there is a proper place for everyone, and everyone is at their proper place.³ Here Biesta relies on the work of Jacques Rancière, for whom subjectification as a political act is both *necessary and possible* albeit rare and sporadic.

Take Greta Thunberg, for example, the Swedish school strike activist, whose unaccompanied sit-in outside the Swedish parliament in August 2018 protesting the political inaction on climate crisis has mobilized a worldwide movement, the so-called “school strike for climate” after the homemade placard she was holding, among school-age children. As a sixteen-year-old teenager with Asperger syndrome, she is assigned a predefined position in society. She is sixteen years old. She is a teenager. She is a student. She is female. And she has Asperger syndrome and some other autism spectrum disorders. In other words, she is not meant to stage a political strike on her own in front of the Swedish parliament, let alone inspire a worldwide movement of climate action against the hypocritical response of the world leaders in the face of the climate breakdown, become a spokesperson of the very same movement, and speak against the existing order of fossil-fuel-based global capitalist production that is wreaking havoc on a massive scale on our planet and society.

¹ Slavoj Žižek, *Disparities* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016).

² Gert Biesta, *The Beautiful Risk of Education* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2013).

³ Žižek, *Disparities*, 371.

She is a student and she is supposed to remain one. Her place is the school—the *proper* place—not the Swedish parliament, TEDxStockholm event, the United Nations Climate Change Conference, Davos Economic Forum, or the streets, all of which are considered *improper* places for this sensitive girl. She is excluded from political action by virtue of being a school-age teenager.

Well, she has changed all that. She has become a subject by making herself and her cause visible and audible by reconfiguring the existing (inegalitarian) order of “the distribution of the sensible.” The latter refers to Rancière’s idea that the distribution of spaces, times, and forms of activity that constitutes social hierarchies first and foremost has an aesthetic dimension.

According to Rancière, all social orders are reinforced by and reflected in the “distribution of the sensible”—the complex of individuals and individual speech (“bodies” and “voices”) that are effectively visible, sayable, or audible (or invisible, unsayable, or inaudible), together with implicit assumptions about the natural capacities of different individuals and groups. In some societies, for example, blue-collar workers, the poor, the unemployed, immigrants, ethnic minorities, and other groups may be largely unrecognized and their aspirations, complaints, and interests not so much dismissed as simply unseen or unheard. Correlatively, workers as a class may be tacitly perceived as lazy, ignorant, and selfish. For Rancière, politics rightly understood is the inherently disruptive attempt by those who are victimized or excluded by inegalitarian social orders (“the part without part”) to assert themselves as the equals of those with privilege and power. To the extent that such efforts are successful, the distribution of the sensible is redrawn in more egalitarian ways.⁴

The fact that Greta Thunberg was able to take action with her body (by sitting in front of the parliament) and articulate her position eloquently (in many speeches she has delivered, official and informal alike) was not part of the existing field of experience of those in whose world the distribution of the sensible was such that they were incapable of apprehending the possibility of a teenager mobilizing thousands of her peers to act in the name of the biosphere and a more equitable socioeconomic system. Immediately, she has been told to go back to school and study climate science so that *one day* she will become a climate scientist herself and contribute to the solution. She has also been told to appreciate the complexity of the problem and avoid simplistic solutions. In

⁴ Encyclopaedia Britannica Online, Academic ed., s.v. “Jacques Rancière: French Philosopher,” by Brian Duignan, accessed April 6, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jacques-Ranciere>.

worse cases, she has become the subject of brutal right-wing efforts to discredit her.

In Biesta's terms, Greta Thunberg has "come into presence," that is, a new way of being that has had no place and no part in the existing order of things has appeared.⁵ My argument begins at this point following this "event of subjectivity," the term favored by Biesta to highlight the "existential" as opposed to the "substantial" nature of subjectivity. The term was inspired by Levinas and focuses on the "quality of our relationships with what or who is other."⁶

In Biesta, it is not clear how this event of subjectivity is meant to unfold once it emerges. It appears that the event of subjectivity is necessarily ephemeral and is inevitably followed by the process of *identification*. The sheer fact of mentioning Greta Thunberg in the way I have done in this paper inadvertently contributes to this process of identification. The perceptual field of the existing order has now been reconfigured thanks to Greta Thunberg, the event of subjectivity, but now her name and image have become an identity, reified and hence made susceptible to being manipulated in the machinery of the existing order of capitalist exchange. She now has a Wikipedia page! She has even been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize! In other words, she has become a *substantial* center of meaning and initiative. She is unable to preserve the *eventness* of her subjectivity. She has already been reassigned a proper place in the order of things. Being nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize is a sure way to domesticate the eventness of her coming into presence.

In the face of the difficulties to preserve the eventness of subjectivity, as a counterpoint to both Rancière and Biesta, I attempt to expound Žižek's position regarding subjectification, according to which subjectification is both *necessary and impossible*. An insight into subjectification as necessary and impossible constitutes what I call *absolute knowing*.

Greta Thunberg is in a state of knowing but *not* absolute knowing. The event of her subjectivity is now being metamorphosed into a substantial being. She knows who she is, what climate change is, what the causes of climate change are, the science behind it, what her goals are, how to achieve these goals, what is right and wrong, and so on. She is in a state of knowing, which can be described as a fortification against the immanent ontological disparities or antagonisms that cannot be reconciled. The inherent and irreducible *traumatic* status of existence is obfuscated in a state of knowing. Against such a state, Biesta would recommend trying to remain with the event of subjectivity, which, perhaps, involves what Richard Smith calls "virtues of unknowing."⁷

⁵ Biesta, *Beautiful Risk*.

⁶ Biesta, 12.

⁷ Richard Smith, "The Virtues of Unknowing," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 50, no. 2 (2016): 272–284.

What I propose, the attitude of absolute knowing and the conceptual shift that goes with it, whereby the traumatic status of existence is accepted without any attempt to obscure it, then is counterpoised not only against the state of knowing, which characterizes the substantialization of the event of subjectivity, but also against the contemporary impulse to theorize “unknowing” within the context of postsecular thought in contemporary philosophy. My contention is that Biesta’s conceptualization of subjectification, *weak* by design—the so-called “beautiful *risk* of creation/education”—leaves it susceptible to a fatal capture by the capitalist appropriation with its power to metabolize and absorb anything it encounters turning oppositional subversive forces into profit-making consumerism.⁸ T-shirts printed with Greta Thunberg’s pictures à la Che Guevara to be sold on Amazon or on eBay are probably around the corner. She is already identified as an “environmental activist” and has the following epigraph that goes with her portrait on the internet: “I don’t want your hope. I don’t want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic . . . and act as if the house was on fire. Because it is.” Initially inspiring, such sound bites lose their potency as soon as they enter the circulation of information in global market flows.

Despite the fact that both Rancière and Žižek are philosophical allies in the sense that they both see politics primarily as division and struggle rather than dialogue and consensus, Biesta, to my knowledge, never references Žižek’s work. Caputo, Levinas, Derrida, Arendt, (and Dewey, of course) are the prominent conversation partners for Biesta, but never Žižek (or Lacan for that matter). Žižek remains Biesta’s blind spot. The core of my argument relies on Žižek’s notion of subject-as-trauma, a more elemental form of subjectivity which cannot be readily incorporated into the existing regime of the distribution of the sensible, since it is underlined by the radical *negativity* at the core of subjectivity which points to the limits of the process of identification.

Whether predetermined or reconfigured, a place or position within a given distribution of the sensible is bound to be a positive determination. Žižek by contrast points to negativity as the fundamental operation that undermines any determination, any identification. Capitalism, by its very nature, reifies given forms of positive determination so that they can more easily enter the flow of exchange. In the case of new forms emerging or existing forms being reconfigured, to the extent that they acquire positive determination—and they always do—they become subject to the same process of reification. So, how do you maintain the force of the event of subjectivity without being subject to reification? Biesta’s answer is by way of the virtues of unknowing; I propose instead the virtue of absolute knowing via Žižek’s notion of subject-as-trauma.

The conceptual distinction between the traumatized subject, the subject that has been *wronged*—and Greta Thunberg has been traumatized in this sense—and subject-as-trauma is therefore crucial. The traumatized subject

⁸ Biesta, *Beautiful Risk*.

is the everyday self that is being constantly assaulted by various forces beyond its control such as the impending (unfolding actually) ecological catastrophe, that is, the shock of the Anthropocene, unprecedented inequality in all domains of social-cultural life, unjust economic systems, political repression, religious persecution, authoritarian populism, xenophobia, revolutionary and scary scientific advances in biogenetics and AI, personal loss and misfortune, physical and emotional violence, displacement due to political and natural catastrophes, brain lesions, rare genetic diseases, discrimination of all sorts, and the like. As a response, the self whose fragile identity and integrity are under attack from all directions can only defend itself by ideological fantasy structures that help to create a semblance of a universe of meaning so that all the misfortune visited upon the self is made sense of. When such ideological fantasy structures, what Žižek calls the big Other, are put in place, the event of subjectivity is evaded.

So the basic move from the traumatized subject, which we all are to one extent or another, to subject-as-trauma runs through the following trajectory: the traumatized subject experiences the event of subjectivity first, that is, comes to presence, by which the ideological fantasy structure is momentarily suspended, the existing order of the sensible is reconfigured, and then takes one step further into the more elemental layer of subject-as-trauma to avert the substantialization of the insight attained in and through the event of subjectivity, and rests in the radical negativity at the core of subjectivity accepting the irreducibly traumatic status of existence. Absolute knowing involves the conceptual shift in understanding that there is no trauma-free state of knowing.

How would that look like in the case of Greta Thunberg? She has already come to presence; the presence of political dissensus. Now, she has to go even deeper into subject-as-trauma to remain with the negativity at the core of her subjectivity. This essentially means that the object of her commitment, that is, the climate breakdown, is not in-itself a consistent phenomenon, to which she directs her attention by being concerned about it, informing herself about it, understanding it, thinking hard about it, and so on. Rather, her subjectivity *is* the antagonism/inconsistency inherent to this phenomenon itself. To the extent that she fails to realize this, she remains within the domain of knowing.

ABSOLUTE KNOWING

Žižek's core idea is that absolute knowing is not about knowledge of reality in accordance with which the knowing subject attains perfect unity and harmony with/in existence hence resolving all inner and outer conflicts and tensions. On the contrary, absolute knowing points to the impossibility of such complete knowledge, and not only for the subject as such but more pertinently for reality-in-itself. In other words, this is the typical Žižekian gesture: reality is incomplete in itself, and not just incompletely known or knowable by the

epistemological subject. At a fundamental level, there is ontological inconsistency/incompleteness.

What about “unknowing” then? If absolute knowing is the realization of the impossibility of absolute knowledge, can “unknowing” help us come to terms with the trauma of life? Richard Smith argues that given the exhaustion of epistemology and the shift towards virtue epistemology in recent decades—in which the focus is on what it is to be a good knower rather than what knowledge is—it is essential that “the quieter epistemic virtues,” one of which he calls “unknowing,” should be made more prominent in the face of the dominance of “the tougher epistemic virtues” such as intellectual courage, intellectual rigor, and intellectual honesty, which tend to be translated in superficial ways into the domain of education.⁹ Despite my sympathies with Smith’s program, I would like to challenge his rendition of unknowing by articulating an account of absolute knowing as the radicalization of the domain of subjectification delimited by Biesta.¹⁰

Smith openly acknowledges the mystical connotations of the term “unknowing.”¹¹ It is clear that his account of unknowing has religious overtones in the vein of *postsecular thought*. By the latter term, I am referring to the *theologization of philosophy*.

The religious turn in phenomenology (Marion, Henry, Courtine), a Christian brand of deconstruction (Caputo) and feminist appeals to Mariology (Irigaray), all manifest the “theological turn” of recent Continental philosophy. The epithet “theological turn” itself implies that all these movements share the same intent: to contaminate philosophy with theological thinking. If anything defines the last decade of Continental philosophy of religion, it is the *theologisation of philosophy*.¹²

In Smith’s paper, references to Levinas (encounter with the unknowable Other), the tradition of *via negativa* (approaching God through unknowing), medieval Christian mysticism, ineffable God, Socratic ignorance (knowing that one does not know), enigma, mystery, Nietzsche’s critique of rationalistic thinking, the paradoxical language deployed (knowing by unknowing, presence in absence, making rational sense of unknowing), the role of passivity, and so on, are abundant.

⁹ Smith, “Virtues.”

¹⁰ Gert Biesta, *Good Education in an Age of Measurement: Ethics, Politics, Democracy* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2010); Biesta, *Beautiful Risk*.

¹¹ Smith, “Virtues,” 275.

¹² Anthony Paul Smith and Daniel Whistler, *After the Postsecular and the Postmodern: New Essays in Continental Philosophy of Religion* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), 2.

In Smith's account of unknowing, and by extension in the postsecular thought in general (to which, to a large extent, Biesta also belongs), despite the emphasis on the inconceivability of what lies beyond knowing there remains to be a subtle hope of knowing. There is something *there*: a mystery, the possibility that there is meaning, albeit inconceivable. As Caputo writes of Derrida, "for we are all—this is Derrida's wager—dreaming of the wholly other that will come knocking on our door."¹³ In contrast, the post-postsecular thought—represented by thinkers such as Badiou,¹⁴ Žižek, Lacan, Meillassoux, Brassier, and so on—completely destroys this hope. Basically, there is nothing (no meaning) besides, behind, beneath, or beyond this phenomenal reality. What is considered noumenal, Kantian *Ding an sich*, is immanent to the phenomenal reality. As Žižek explains:

What Deleuze refers to as 'things in themselves' is in a way even more phenomenal than our shared phenomenal reality: it is the impossible phenomenon, the phenomenon that is excluded from our symbolically constituted reality. The gap that separates us from noumena is thus primarily not epistemological, but practico-ethical and libidinal: there is no 'true reality' behind or beneath phenomena, noumena are phenomenal things which are 'too strong', too intens(iv)e, for our perceptual apparatus attuned to constituted reality—epistemological failure is a secondary effect of libidinal terror.¹⁵

Bluntly put, the desire for 'unknowing' is a form of Romanticism, which is "a defence formation, an attempt to contain the excess of subjectivity."¹⁶ Romanticism looks/hopes for the "true reality" behind or beneath phenomena. Our position in contrast is absolutely immanent. There is only the phenomenal realm, as Žižek attests above, but this realm is split "between the 'gentrified' normal phenomenon and the 'impossible' phenomenon."¹⁷ In this paper, absolute knowing therefore refers to an understanding of this uncanny split of the immanent and the fact that there is no harmonious blending of the gentrified and the impossible. In short, there is no ontologically consistent realm. In absolute knowing, reality is grasped not only as Substance but also as Subject, "where 'subject' does not stand for another ontological level different from Substance but for the immanent incompleteness-inconsistency-antagonism of Substance itself."¹⁸ That is, the universe of meaning is pitted against the brutal intrusion of the meaningless real.

¹³ Caputo quoted in Smith, "Virtues," 281.

¹⁴ Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (Verso, 2012).

¹⁵ Žižek, *Disparities*, 329, emphasis original.

¹⁶ Žižek, 339.

¹⁷ Žižek, 330.

¹⁸ Žižek, 335.

To approach the same idea from a different perspective, we can say that one has to realize that one has already been dead—dead to the universe of meaning we ordinarily call “life.” One has to die to the notion of life as the ontologically fully constituted reality. This is what being a subject means according to Žižek, a far cry from what Biesta has in mind! For Biesta, life, the goodness of life, and goodness itself are still guiding notions.¹⁹ Romanticism at its core is the refusal to accept that being a subject means one has already died to this notion of life, which is really a fantasmatic shell protecting us from the traumatic kernel of the meaningless real.

In the educational theory literature, notions such as the impossible phenomenon, Substance also as Subject, incomplete ontology, meaningless real, and similar ideas are not explicitly problematized and made visible to the extent that they should be. This paper aims to unequivocally address them.

To reiterate, the basic claim of the paper is that subjectification as the essential domain of education delimited by Biesta needs to be radicalized in the direction of Žižek’s subject-as-trauma rather than postsecular thought, since the way Biesta articulates the domain of subjectification fails to get to the core of the matter and risks being reterritorialized by dominant cultural and educational discourses as demonstrated in the recent case of Greta Thunberg.²⁰ The main reason Biesta’s approach fails is the Romantic valorization of life, which is pervasive in postsecular thought patterns, within which Biesta largely operates.

Absolute knowing is about coming to terms with what Lacan calls “the inexistence of the big Other,” the symbolic order maintained by a Master/Empty Signifier, which obfuscates the lack of ultimate harmony in existence. Put differently, absolute knowing is about coming to terms “with the death of God more rigorously than ever.”²¹ Simply, there is no “God.” Neither is there “Man,” nor “Reason,” nor “Meaning,” nor “Progress.” There is no “the Alpha and the Omega,” no *arche* or *telos*, no “Guarantor.” There is no sense of completion, unity, or harmony. *What there is* is nothing at all, where “the theistic schema of the sensory and the suprasensory” is radically questioned and completely jettisoned.²² Here, Badiou’s treatment of the death of God in three registers is relevant. He identifies three Gods whose demise defines his program: the God of religions, the God of metaphysics, and the God of the poets.²³

For the God of religions it is sufficient merely to declare that
he is dead; the God of metaphysics must be brought to an end

¹⁹ Biesta, *Beautiful Risk*, 17.

²⁰ Biesta, *Good Education*; Biesta, *Beautiful Risk*.

²¹ Christopher Watkin, *Difficult Atheism: Post-Theological Thinking in Alain Badiou, Jean-Luc Nancy and Quentin Meillassoux* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 1.

²² Watkin, 22.

²³ Watkin, 23.

by a thinking of infinity disseminated in multiplicity rather than gathered in the One, and the God of the poets is expunged by breaking the poetic disposition to think in terms of the Romantic loss and return of the divine.²⁴

The God of metaphysics is “the philosophical identification of the One with infinity, made possible by philosophy’s adherence to the disastrous notion of finitude,” which always leaves room for God.²⁵ This Badiou fights by laicizing thought set theoretically through the *matheme* interrupting the sacred *mytheme*. The One is no longer primary. The infinite is rethought “on the basis of a multiplicity that is no longer derived from a prior One.”²⁶ Oneness is a result of counting-as-one of the inconsistent multiple.

The God of the poets, where “the latent theology of finite thinking” can still breathe even after the God of metaphysics has been deconstructed, is Badiou’s third deity that he attempts to unravel.²⁷

The God of the poets is neither the God-principle of Western metaphysics nor the ‘living God’ of religions. It is the God(s)—or divine principle(s)—of Romanticism, whose most acute expression is found, Badiou argues, in the poetry of Friedrich Hölderlin . . . This God is the poetic principle of the enchanted world, and it is neither dead nor alive but rather withdrawn. It follows that the God of the poets cannot be mourned, like the God of religions, nor critiqued, like the God of metaphysics; its persistence is felt in terms of a nostalgia, a melancholic and endlessly disenchanting anticipation of its improbable return that leaves thinking in a state of paralysed suspense that Badiou gives the name ‘Romanticism.’²⁸

Concisely put, in its attempt to dismantle the primary deities of thought, Badiou’s thinking exemplifies absolute knowing in the form of post-theological thought.

Subjectification is not the same as the Subject, which is “the immanent incompleteness-inconsistency-antagonism of Substance itself.”²⁹ It is the Freudian death drive, the radical negativity at the core of subjectivity.³⁰ Subjectification amounts to a gentrification (or masking) of this radical negativity, the non-existence of the Other. In contrast, the subject-as-trauma,

²⁴ Watkin, 23.

²⁵ Watkin, 24.

²⁶ Watkin, 28.

²⁷ Watkin, 58.

²⁸ Watkin, 58.

²⁹ Žižek, *Disparities*, 335.

³⁰ Žižek, 335.

put in Meillassoux's terms, is the realization that "the illusory nature of sense experience veils the eternal inconstancy of the intelligible."³¹ This eternal inconstancy of the intelligible is the common thread that connects Badiou, Meillassoux, and Žižek (among others) together. I claim Biesta and Smith altogether miss the dimension these thinkers are pointing at.

STRUCTURAL SOURCES OF UNKNOWING: ŽIŽEK AND THE REAL

Notwithstanding Smith's claim, unknowing is not primarily a matter of epistemological attitude on our part that can be cultivated to a lesser or greater extent in educative contexts. It is not something we are in charge of. There are structures in place that put limits to what we can know. To begin by injecting some levity, let's refer to Žižek's comments on Donald Rumsfeld's engagement in amateur philosophizing regarding the relationship between the known and the unknown during the Iraq war; that is, Rumsfeld's theory of knowledge, where he as the then US Secretary of Defense states that "there are known knows. These are things we know that we know. There are known unknowns. That is to say, there are things that we know we don't know. But there are also unknown unknowns. There are things we don't know we don't know."³² Žižek points out that "what Rumsfeld forgot to add was the crucial fourth term: the 'unknown knows'—things we don't know that we know, all the unconscious beliefs and prejudices that determine how we perceive reality and intervene in it."³³ In other words, in matters of knowledge, some notion of the *unconscious* seems to be necessary to address the really important issues regarding the way ideology functions in today's world, or in any world really.

Smith's critique of virtue epistemology addresses the limitations of Rumsfeld's epistemology, viz. the desire to map out the whole reality and to exhaustively master the world. However, it does not address the unknown knows that Žižek is referring to, for here the problem is not epistemological. The relationship between the knowing subject and its object of knowledge is not one of disparity between the two. The disparity lies in the object itself. Žižek explains the gist of this idea in relation to Hegel:

The disparity between subject and substance is simultaneously the disparity of the substance with itself. . . . subjectivity emerges when substance cannot achieve full identity with itself, when substance is in itself 'barred,' traversed by an immanent impossibility or antagonism. In short, the subject's epistemological ignorance, its failure to fully grasp the opposed substantial content, simultaneously

³¹ Watkin, *Difficult Atheism*, 211.

³² Slavoj Žižek, "Rumsfeld and the Bees," *The Guardian*, June 28, 2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2008/jun/28/wildlife.conservation>.

³³ Žižek, "Rumsfeld."

indicates a limitation/failure/lack of the substantial content itself.³⁴

Unknowing is not a matter of the subject's limitation, or its resignation in the face of the sublimity of the Other (à la Levinas). It is not the subject's attitude that is the problem, whether it is one of mastery and control or one of resignation and passivity. The problem lies with being itself. Its unity is ruined forever from within itself. The world is out of joint. It is not a matter of us having the attitude of knowing or unknowing in the face of the organic totality of the world. The world's totality is already disrupted from within. This is the unknown known that is kept in the unconscious for this is where the trauma lies. Absolute knowing involves an insight into the mechanism of this unconscious. What we experience as reality seems to be consistent. This, however, is misleading.

The reality we experience is non-all, inconsistent, we cannot totalize it without getting caught in antinomies, so that the only way to experience reality as a consistent Whole is to supplement it with transcendental Ideas.³⁵

In Lacan's terminology, these Kantian transcendental Ideas that make up the transcendental scheme are called 'fantasy,' which sustains our sense of normal reality. Our sense of reality is sustained by this fantasmatic frame, which cannot constitute reality as a whole. It is merely an effect, essential for our sense of being (and well-being) but susceptible to being dismantled for it is underlined by nothing (positive). There is no mystery here. It is not that there is something out there that we have no idea about and possibly will never know. There is nothing out there and we absolutely know that albeit, initially and for the most part, unconsciously.

That reality is non-all, is experienced especially during episodes of extreme intense events (of violence, brutality, disgust, and horror) though it does not have to take place like that. A good fictional example can be found in the movie *The Green Inferno*. There, a group of college-student activists are captured by a cannibalistic tribe in the Peruvian Amazon when their plane is sabotaged and crushes in the jungle. Up to that pivotal point, the group enjoys the comfort and meaning rendered by the activism they are engaged in. Surely there are many risks and dangers involved, but they are all known, or at least foreseeable or imaginable. They are positively excited about leaving the comfort of their American bourgeois life behind and venturing into a world of risk and danger in a third-world country that supposedly needs their active participation to raise awareness of the ongoing exploitation of natural and human communities in the Amazonian rainforest. They feel like they are doing something significant with their lives.

³⁴ Žižek, *Disparities*, 10.

³⁵ Žižek, 13.

The activist's world gives meaning to them. There are known dangers and risks involved to be sure. But that is part of being an activist. The nonviolent activism in question involves fighting for the right to existence of the lifeworld of a native Amazonian tribe against the violent encroachments of the logging companies that are destroying anything that lies in their path to profit including the native people in question. This universe of meaning, the fantasy that sustains their Symbolic universe, collapses as the activists are captured, tranquilized, taken to the village of their captors, and become the objects of horrifying cannibalism: horrifying from the activists' perspective, of course. From the perspective of the natives themselves, the whole thing is a joyous celebratory event against their enemies. As they witness the brutal dismemberment and un/cooked consumption of each of their friends' bodies one by one while they are still alive, their fantasy is shattered. The bourgeois universe that has provided meaning to their actions up to that point gives way to primal fear and the instinct to survive. The meaning provided by naïve activism becomes irrelevant.

When the fantasmatic frame disintegrates, the subject undergoes a 'loss of reality' and starts to perceive reality as an 'irreal' nightmarish universe with no firm ontological foundation; this nightmarish universe—the Lacanian Real—is not 'pure fantasy' but, on the contrary, that which remains of reality after reality is deprived of its support in fantasy.³⁶

It goes without saying that death is a part of their fantasmatic frame. It is not a foreign element: dying of cancer, dying in a car or plane crash, being hit by a tornado or tsunami, being murdered on the street, dying of old age or Alzheimer's, even being killed in a suicide bombing, and so on are all acceptable forms of death (albeit unfortunate). But being dismembered and eaten alive is not part of the framework. This is definitely not a part of their reality as bourgeois American college students doing a little bit of activism in the beautiful rainforests of Peru for a great cause. Nevertheless, the Real is real albeit it is excluded from what we experience as reality. It is an unknown known.

We do not need to go to the Amazon to gain insight into the effect of the Real however. The latter is inscribed into reality whether you are in the Amazon, Hong Kong, or Mars for that matter. And that is the unknown known that is usually glossed over in much of educational theory. The Real is part of the human psyche. An insight into its workings is essential for educational theory.

³⁶ Žižek, 14.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Absolute knowing is about the ability to resist the lure of committing oneself to a new project, a new Master Signifier, with the aim of creating a consistent narrative, a harmonious organic unity. Absolute knowing is about knowing that such a unity is a chimera, that it does not exist. Reality is inconsistent/incomplete, and ideology is the filler projected onto the screen of reality to make it look like it is complete, consistent, and harmonious. Žižek puts it thus:

Giorgio Agamben said in an interview that ‘thought is the courage of hopelessness’—an insight which is especially pertinent for our historical moment when even the most pessimist diagnostics as a rule finishes with an uplifting hint at some version of the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel. The true courage is not to imagine an alternative, but to accept the consequences of the fact that there is no clearly discernible alternative: the dream of an alternative is a sign of theoretical cowardice, it functions as a fetish which prevents us from thinking to the end the deadlock of our predicament.³⁷

To go back to Greta Thunberg’s case, the clarity of her message is refreshing. Yet to the extent that she is committed to a Master Signifier, she is bound to be imprisoned within the confines of the big Other. Absolute knowing is the realization that there is no big Other.

³⁷ Žižek, 367.
