

superficial, along with the means to counteract it, however spurious. More than that, he is lucky to be so pathetic that the Costanza Maneuver would occur to him at all, much less work. But the strategy is fraught with many difficulties, as we have seen, too many to make it viable. Is it rational to do the opposite? No, but even a blind squirrel can find a nut.⁴

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10 Peterman and the Ideological Mind: Paradoxes of Subjectivity¹

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People want things that are hard to find. Things that have romance, but a factual romance, about them. . . . Clearly, people want things that make their lives the way they wish they were.

—J. Peterman, *The J. Peterman Company Owner's Manual*

[I]n contemporary societies, cynical distance, laughter, irony are, so to speak, part of the game. The ruling ideology is not meant to be taken seriously or literally.

—Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*

Those who watch the television comedy *Seinfeld* are aware that in the seventh season Elaine got a job writing copy for the catalogue clothing company, J. Peterman, a company better known for its narratives of clothing than for the clothing itself.² In this

¹ Thanks to Emily Zakin for numerous conversations about Lacan and for comments on an earlier draft of this paper. Thanks also to the many people with whom I have discussed *Seinfeld*, especially Jason Holm.

² For those who still don't know—J. Peterman is a real catalogue clothing company based in Lexington, Kentucky. Its catalogue, "The J. Peterman Owner's Manual," as on *Seinfeld*, contains narratives and line drawings.

⁴ For helpful discussion, and for comments on earlier drafts, I thank Bob Bright, Larry Holt, Bill Irwin, Rhonda Martens, and Carl Matheson.

essay I show the way in which J. Peterman's appearance on *Seinfeld* can be used to understand how ideology functions both through irony and through cynicism. Cynicism is, as will become clearer in the course of this essay, characterized by a naive belief in ultimate reality outside the illusions presented by ideology. Irony, on the other hand, involves the reduction of reality itself to a fiction. We will see this at two levels. On the first level we see why Peterman's appearance turns out to be good advertising, not in spite of, but rather *because* it makes us aware of the absurdity of the catalogue's premise, namely that people would prefer to read stories than see photographs of the clothing they are going to buy. If one were a cynic, one would sneer at the fanciful narratives (as indeed Elaine does), but if one is an ironist one laughs at the fact that one knows that the narratives in the catalogue are silly and yet one is still taken in by them. One still wants to be the person described in the narratives. One buys the clothing. The second level has to do with the Peterman character himself and the way in which he is like us. What Peterman ultimately reveals to us is that the Subject, the coherent and unified self, is constituted and maintained through ideology. In this revelation the ironic attitude extends beyond the world to oneself.

Ideology

Peterman's presence on *Seinfeld* could be seen to exemplify what Slavoj Žižek, a Marxist Lacanian,³ calls "performative ideology." By "performative ideology" Žižek means a form of ideological consciousness in which we know that we are dealing with a fiction, but in which that fiction nonetheless regulates our actual real behavior. In other words, although we know that we are dealing with a fiction, we regulate reality as though the fiction were real. Ironically, in doing this we *make* the fiction real. Žižek uses the example of money. When people use it, they know that there is nothing magical about it. It is simply a means of exchange that gives the one who has it the right to certain

³ Žižek is a philosopher who combines the social and political analysis of Karl Marx (1818–1883), particularly with regard to ideology, and the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan (1901–1981). This explosive combination allows him to use psychoanalysis to engage in a critique of culture and society.

things. On an everyday level, everyone knows that there are relations between people behind the relations between things. The problem is that people *act* as if money in itself is wealth. As Žižek says, "they are fetishists in practice, not in theory."⁴ What they do not know or "misrecognize" is that in their activity they are guided by an illusion.

What is ideology? It is the system of ideas whereby we become conscious of ourselves, our lives, our world. In short, it is the system of ideas by which we become conscious of reality. Karl Marx draws a strict distinction between the actual conditions of life—the economic structure of society which is society's real foundation—and the "legal and political superstructure" or the "definite forms of social consciousness" by which we become aware of the foundation, albeit it in an inverted or disguised way. Marx sometimes refers to ideology as being like a *camera obscura*.⁵ The mode of production of material life (capitalism, for example) conditions the social, political and intellectual life process—the *ideology*—of society. Marx says, "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness."⁶ We are conscious of ourselves, our lives, our world, through ideological forms.

For Marx, of course, there is an extra-ideological reality—the real material forces that govern our existence. For later theorists, this is, at best, not so clear. For psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, we deal with the Symbolic Order (for example capitalism, liberal democracy, or patriarchy) in a fictional way. In other words, we believe that our world *makes sense*, is coherent, unified and consistent. However, this is a belief in an illusion. In believing in it we are averting our gaze from the gaps, the lack of consistency and coherence, and the raw power of the symbolic order. We

⁴ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), p. 31.

⁵ A *camera obscura* is a concave mirror into which is reflected a scene from the outside through a series of mirrors, rather like a periscope. The effect is of seeing the outside from which one has just come, only everything is, as it were, "the same, yet different." Things are inverted, but it is hard to detect, and that is why it seems eerie. For further discussion of ideology, see Karl Marx, *The German Ideology* in David McLellan ed., *Karl Marx: Selected Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 159–191.

⁶ Karl Marx, "Preface to *A Critique of Political Economy*," in David McLellan ed., *Karl Marx: Selected Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 389.

are always dealing with a fiction because we always have, and need to have, an Imaginary relation to the Symbolic Order. In this sense, ideology *constitutes* our reality. Without it we can't have coherent, consistent experience. This is what Lacan means when he says that "reality is structured like a fiction."⁷

I Laugh, Therefore I Buy

The way in which ideology functions may become more clear if we consider the distinction between cynicism and irony. We are all familiar with cynicism. Indeed, people often point to *Seinfeld* as a paradigm case of cynicism. *Seinfeld* is cynical in that its very premise is to point out the way in which we all participate in absurd social rituals, like bringing wine (not Pepsi or RingDings) when we are invited to someone's house for dinner, even if we don't drink wine. *Seinfeld* reveals what we already know: that we do it because of the power society seems to have over us, because of the rules that govern us, but of which we are not usually even fully conscious, not because of any real desire to do these things. We laugh as we see ourselves in the characters. We recognize the absurdity of these things that we do, and yet we all continue to do them. The stance of the cynic is to point out the inauthenticity of such behavior. The cynic believes that in doing that s/he is freed from the fetters of such social rules and rituals, freed from oppressive ideology.

When we look at the role of the J. Peterman Company, at Mr. Peterman himself and at Elaine's relation to them, however, we see something more than the cynicism we have come to expect. We cease to be cynics and begin to be ironists.

The cynic correctly believes that we deal with fictions, but s/he incorrectly concludes from this that the role of these fictions can be discounted. S/he believes that in recognizing the fiction s/he is free of it. But we can see that recognition of the fiction does not make us free. The fiction continues to regulate the behavior of the characters on *Seinfeld* as it does our own behavior. We laugh and we continue to behave as we always have. In fact we enjoy the behavior all the more for being able to laugh at it. We know it's not real, but we do it anyway. We can laugh at ourselves all we want, but we have not broken free. Indeed, it is in laughing at ourselves that we find ourselves doing it all the more, with that much more enjoyment. This is why Peterman's appearance on *Seinfeld* and our laughter at the

absurdity of the premise of the catalogue is its best advertising. We enjoy the absurdity of buying clothes because of the "pointless drive" which nonetheless has an effect on us.

Mr. Peterman, however, does not laugh at himself. Of all the characters on *Seinfeld*, none takes himself more seriously (in fact that's part of what is funny). Yet at the same time, he knows he's not *real*. He knows his whole life is the fiction in the catalogue. After all, he needs to buy Kramer's life stories because his life is only the one described in the catalogue, a life we know has been invented by people like Elaine. Mr. Peterman is completely a character. Every mundane experience he *does* have is narrated by him as though it was right out of his catalogue (as when he sees Sue Ellen Mishki disappear into an elevator wearing what was to become the "Gatsby Swingtop"). For him, every experience is a catalogue experience. Peterman knows none of it is real, yet he does not adopt a cynical distance, he is, ironically, committed to the fiction.

Elaine, however, does appear to have cynical distance. She refers to what she writes for the catalogue as "pointless drive!" (what the psycho from the mailroom might write couldn't be any worse than the pointless drive they usually print, she says). We identify with Elaine. We know the descriptions in the catalogue are made up by people like her. We know (or at least strongly suspect) that the real Mr. Peterman (if there is one) isn't nearly as interesting as the one created in the catalogue. And we laugh. We laugh because none of that matters. We laugh and we look forward to getting the catalogue with the pointless drive promising life "the way we wish it were."

Mr. Peterman, the Wicked Witch of the West, and Me

But why do we do this? To understand we must look more carefully at how Mr. Peterman is, strangely enough, the most realistic⁷ character on *Seinfeld*. In him we can see the truth of of subjectivity.

⁷ I am frequently reminded of the line from Portland's Church of Elvis: "It's not real, it's *realistic*." Compare this to the challenge Malcolm McDowell finds in the new *Fantasy Island*: "We must be real, but not realistic" (*TV Guide*, October 10-16, 1998, p. 32).

Mr. Peterman is completely empty. He is nothing more than the narratives from his catalogue that make his life "the way he wishes it were." The catalogue is filled with vignettes from Mr. Peterman's fictional life. When he needs stories about his actual life, he has to buy someone else's, for he has none. Mr. Peterman's emptiness becomes sadly clear when we visit his apartment with Elaine and find nothing but a few pieces of plain furniture, blank walls and bare surfaces (what were we expecting to find?). In the case of Mr. Peterman (who, unlike Kramer, does not seem to have a first name⁸), when we, as it were, pull aside the curtain we don't find the pathetic humbug (which is what we find when we look at the real-life John Peterman who is a self-described failed businessman⁹ with a way cool horseman's duster) but rather nothing at all. There is no Mr. Peterman beyond the catalogue narratives and the dashing exterior. He may accumulate things like JFK's golf clubs and a piece of the Duke and Duchess of Windsor's wedding cake (though presumably only for the catalogue, just as the real J. Peterman acquires things for the catalogue like the dress Rose was wearing when she met Jack on the Titanic), but that doesn't make him anything underneath.

In Lacanian/Zizekian terms, this makes him the subject *par excellence* and as such he reveals a fundamental truth, *the fundamental truth*, of us all. While we identify with the situations in which Jerry, Elaine, George, and Kramer find themselves, we also despise these characters (even while secretly loving them), but Mr. Peterman is us.

Whereas the typical Cartesian/Kantian subject, the self of the Modern Era, tends to be conceived of as being more like the Wizard of Oz—great and powerful on the outside, but really just the pathetic little man behind the curtain—Mr. Peterman is more like the Wicked Witch of the West—once the show or fiction is gone there is literally nothing left but clothing. In Mr. Peterman we see that the "inner self" or "real me" is nothing but an illusion, a primordial lie.¹⁰ We need to believe in this illusion, but

⁸ He is never referred to as anything but "Mr. Peterman" or "Peterman." (The J. of the real-life J. Peterman stands for John.)

⁹ *The New York Times*, Business Section (16 December, 1997).

¹⁰ In *The Indivisible Remainder* (London: Verso, 1996), Zizek says that the fundamental truth of Freud's teaching is that, "in the deepest kernel of our

it is just that. There is nothing at the center, as we can see if we look more carefully at the notion of subjectivity that emerges in the philosophical tradition that begins with Descartes.

The subject, the one who has experiences and thoughts, has been characterized by Lacan, Hegel, and Žizek as fundamentally a lack or "the self-identity of negativity." The subject is ultimately empty because it is the 'I' which stands behind all of our experiences, but is not and cannot itself be an object of experience as it is constituted by the predominant philosophical tradition stemming from Descartes and Kant. In this tradition, we find an empirical self that we experience, a 'me' with various characteristics, but the 'I' who is that 'me' has no experiential qualities, no determinations. What is determinateless or indeterminate is nothing. The self that we know, then, the 'me', could be seen as a masquerade, a self 'put on'. Usually when we think of the self as a mask or masquerade we imagine that there is a *true* or *real* self behind the various masks, under the various costumes (even if, or perhaps especially if, it is only the pathetic little man behind the curtain). But this is an ideological illusion, an inversion if you will. Ultimately, there is nothing behind the mask or under the costume and so without them we are left with a pure void, just as the Wicked Witch of the West turned out to be nothing in herself—all that remained was a small pile of crumpled clothing and a hat. The 'real self', that is, a coherent, unified subject underneath the show, is a fiction. There is nothing but the show itself.

Jerry seems to see this fact only too well. In the same episode where Peterman buys Kramer's stories, "The Van Buren Boys," Jerry is dating a woman who *appears* to be perfect—attractive, funny, smart, and so forth—yet who is supposedly, in her essence, "a loser." Jerry is the only one who can't see this essence, the only one who operates solely on the level of appearance. When George asks, "Are you looking deep down at the person underneath?" Jerry responds, "No, I'm being as superficial as I possibly can." And of course that's all that Jerry can be. Unlike Peterman, Ellen, Jerry's girlfriend, has a "real self" beneath the surface to which Jerry, who can see only surfaces,

personality is a fundamental, constitutive, primordial lie, the *proton pseudos*, the phantasmic construction by means of which we endeavor to conceal the inconsistency of the symbolic order in which we dwell" (p. 1).

has no access. Kramer and George, however, can see her "loser" essence and conduct an intervention to get Jerry to see the truth. Jerry, confused, feels as if he is in a *Twilight Zone* episode. For him, the belief in this ideological illusion in which everyone else seems to be participating makes no sense. He lives in a world that is the same, yet different, from that of his friends, much like the experience of looking in a camera obscura. While George and Kramer believe in the myth of the coherent subject that underlies all experiences, Jerry seems to recognize that there is no such thing, or if there is, he can't see it. Peterman *demonstrates* that there is no such thing.

Mr. Peterman, like the Wicked Witch of the West, is nothing in himself. Without the narratives, the clothing and the "things that make life the way he wishes it were," there is no one. That's why he needs to *buy* his life story. His nothingness is all the more apparent if we consider the impossibility of his autobiography. An autobiography is the history of one's life written by oneself. Mr. Peterman's "autobiography" is made up of stories from Kramer's life written by Elaine. One might even see Mr. Peterman in this sense as being in the same position as a vampire trying to look at himself in the mirror.

Mr. Peterman thus represents us most completely. The *T* is experienced by us as emptiness and as desire. In other words, as dissatisfaction. It is this constant dissatisfaction that creates what Marx identifies as "the proliferation of needs." Rather than recognizing that we lack, we constantly strive to "make our lives as we wish they were." The clothes in this case really do make the man (or woman). The narratives give us the sense of being the main character in a story far more interesting than the one we live. Now all I need to do to be that character is to buy the costume. I recognize the absurdity of it, but, ironically, I am still committed to the fiction. In fact, recognizing the absurdity only makes me more comfortable buying, as I at one and the same time recognize and refuse to recognize that there is nothing to me but the narratives. Kierkegaard, taking up a dictum attributed to the early Church Father Tertullian, said "I believe because it is absurd." Now we buy because it is absurd, but we have to if we are to maintain that fiction that gives us coherence, and we have to believe that it is absurd to avoid recognizing the lack of coherence, to avoid recognizing what Mr. Peterman shows us: that there is no unified subject beneath the appear-

ance, that beneath the appearance there is no one at all, just as there is never anyone wearing the clothes in the line drawings in the catalogue.

The ironist recognizes this, but, necessarily, lives in the fiction. The ironist is in a much better position, however, than the cynic. Cynicism leaves one in an endless loop wondering why everyone doesn't understand the contradictions he sees. The ironist does understand this and also understands her own commitment to the fiction. The cynic is frustrated that it doesn't make sense that we participate in the fiction. The ironist simply smiles at it. She doesn't *experience* the lack of a coherent self and consistent world. If she did, she would be psychotic. Nonetheless, the ironist recognizes the necessity of the fiction and appreciates the absurdity.