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*‘There are more of you than there are of us’: Forced Entertainment and the  
Critique of the Neoliberal Subject*

**Linda Taylor**

**Introduction**

There are striking similarities between some of the work produced by Sheffield based performance ensemble Forced Entertainment and the revolutionary theories of Slavoj Žižek. On the surface this comparison may seem unlikely and unsupported by the two jokes below, which appear, at first glance, to be aiming for entirely different effects. The first, revolving around the anti-Semitic stereotype of the greedy Jew, is expansive and incident driven in the tradition of the shaggy dog story, with Žižek drawing the listener in to the circular incidents which lead exactly nowhere.

At the beginning of this century, a Pole and a Jew were sitting in a train, facing each other. The Pole was shifting nervously, watching the Jew all the time, something was irritating him; finally, unable to restrain himself any longer, he exploded: ‘Tell me, how do you Jews succeed in extracting from people the last small coin and in this way accumulate all your wealth?’ The Jew replied: ‘Ok, I will tell you, but not for nothing; first, you give me five zloty [Polish money].’ After receiving the required amount, the Jew began: ‘First, you take a dead fish; you cut off her head and put her entrails in a glass of water. Then around midnight, when the moon is full, you must bury this glass in a churchyard....’ ‘And’, the Pole interrupted him greedily, ‘if I do all this, will I also become rich?’ ‘Not too quickly,’ replied the Jew;

‘This is not all you must do; but if you want to hear the rest, you must pay me another five zloty!’ After receiving the money again, the Jew continued his story; soon afterwards, he again demanded more money, and so on, until finally the Pole exploded in fury: ‘You dirty rascal, do you really think I did not notice what you were aiming at? There is no secret at all, you simply want to extract the last small coin from me!’ The Jew answered him calmly and with resignation: ‘Well, now you see how we, the Jews...’<sup>1</sup>

The second joke, taken from Forced Entertainment’s production *First Night*, is a patter delivered directly to the audience which, in its exposure of the audience’s expectations and the performers’ staged inability to live up to these, immediately suggests a tradition of front cloth comedy pursued by such British variety performers as Morecambe and Wise:

Robin Arthur (to audience): There are more of you than there are of us. So if it comes to a fight you’ll win.<sup>2</sup>

The significant relation between the two jokes is that in each the listener/spectator is positioned as ultimately constitutive of the joke itself. Without the Pole’s initial suspicion, the Jew would not be able to trick him out of his money. Without the spectators’ suspected animosity there would be no prospect of a future fight. In each case, the listener/spectator’s real or supposed desire motivates resistance to and collaboration with the speaker, who is thus centrally implicated in the ensuing exchange. For Žižek, such inclusive dynamics raise crucial questions about the ways in which ideological operations are interwoven into everyday reality and, also, how they are socially and culturally sustained. Forced Entertainment probe such operations as they play out in the performer-spectator relationship,

creating, in Etchells' words, 'a place in which the audience can wonder about what they're watching, about why they're watching, about what they want from watching; wonder about their own role in terms of the piece that they're looking at'.<sup>3</sup>

Forced Entertainment is centred on a collective of six performers who have produced work together, in a wide variety of forms, for approximately thirty years. Below I consider three performances: *Void Story* (2009) *Speak Bitterness* (1995) and *Exquisite Pain* (2005), which I argue have a specific resonance with Žižek's theories. I discuss how *Void Story* and *Speak Bitterness* resonate with Žižek's particular understanding of ideology critique. For Žižek, the efficacy of ideology critique lies not in the urge to raise consciousness and expose the relations of production, as might be identified in Brecht's (somewhat more traditional) understanding of the term. Ideology, in Žižek's words, is not 'a dreamlike illusion that we make use of in order to escape our insupportable reality, in its basic dimension it is rather a fantasy construction which serves as a support for reality itself'.<sup>4</sup> The figure of the Jew cited in the joke above, whose supposed greed is a displacement and consequence of the Pole's own greed, is an example of such a fantasy construction. The joke typifies the 'radically intersubjective character of fantasy' in which both the Jew and the Pole are subjects ensnared in an 'opaque network whose meaning and logic elude [their] control'.<sup>5</sup> Ideology critique is no longer a matter of exposing the truth which the dominant order has hidden behind a smoke screen. Rather it challenges our active complicity in the construction of the ideological fantasy.

Just as in Žižek's joke the Pole is shown to be constitutive of the meaning attributed to the Jew, I argue that the dramaturgical structures of *Void Story* and *Speak Bitterness* invite recognition of how, as spectators, our own desire and enjoyment are problematically

embroiled in a process of ‘meaning making’ which is in itself embedded in our neoliberal culture. In contrast, I argue that *Exquisite Pain* moves beyond Žižekian ideology critique and into an exploration of the fidelity to desire - a different and yet equally important aspect of (the relationship between) Žižek’s and Forced Entertainment’s work. I suggest that *Exquisite Pain* offers an exploration of the energies which Žižek argues are required for political and social change and - in this sense - it complements, rather than furthers, the ideology critique implicit to *Void Story* and *Speak Bitterness*. In order to further these arguments, it is necessary to map out certain key features of what I have termed the ‘neoliberal subject’.

### **The Neoliberal Subject**

Žižek cites Walter Benn Michaels in his argument that American liberals

carry on about racism and sexism in order to avoid doing so about capitalism. Either because they genuinely do think that inequality is fine as long as it is not a function of discrimination (in which case they are neoliberals of the right). Or because they think that fighting against racial and sexual inequality is at least a step in the direction of real equality (in which case, they are neoliberals of the left).<sup>6</sup>

Here the distinctions between the political left and right are bound together around the nodal point of neoliberalism. Underlying distinctions between the two remain, but at the same time the two factions obviously appear to exist in agreement with rather than in antagonism to each other. Initially a term which designated a specific form of economic and political organisation, introduced into Britain by the right wing government of Margaret Thatcher in

1979, the term thus quilts a wide range of floating signifiers, thereby drawing into its orbit both the left and right wing of the political spectrum.

David Harvey has argued that neoliberalism has been able to absorb the left because from the outset it incorporated ‘the ideals of human dignity and individual freedom’ into the acceptable common sense traditions of British thought.<sup>7</sup> Before the premiership of Margaret Thatcher - in the protest movements of the 1960s, for example - Harvey argues that the fight for individual freedom was closely allied to matters of social justice. Subsequently, however, the ability to separate the two has become constitutive of the current neoliberal norm, diverting individual freedom away from socio-economic structures and into the realms of cultural concern.

Neoliberal rhetoric, with its foundational emphasis upon individual freedoms, has the power to split off libertarianism, identity politics, multiculturalism, and eventually narcissistic consumerism from the social forces ranged in pursuit of social justice through the conquest of state power.<sup>8</sup>

This raises questions concerning the connotations of the phrase ‘neoliberal subject’ as used in the title of this chapter. Žižek’s understanding of the subject is, of course, extrapolated from Lacan’s notion of the symbolic, the imaginary and the real. He summarises imaginary identification as ‘identification with the image in which we appear likeable to ourselves, with the image representing “what we would like to be”’.<sup>9</sup> He outlines symbolic identification as ‘identification with the very place *from where* we are being observed, *from where* we look at ourselves so that we appear to ourselves likeable, worthy of love’.<sup>10</sup> And he also argues that there is a continuous interplay between our imaginary and symbolic identifications.

Following both Žižek and Harvey, however, the point of identification which might be understood to yoke the symbolic to the imaginary in the neoliberal version of subjectivity is an ethical preoccupation with human relations purely on a cultural plane. This overlooks the traditional leftist concern with inequalities born of socio-economic factors, of the real of class relations and antagonisms. Thus that which is at stake for the neoliberal subject is a transcendent concern with personal freedom as a matter of cultural sensibility independent of the frameworks of what we might call 'social justice'. The work of Forced Entertainment is not, I argue, preoccupied directly with ideology critique as a means of analysing and exposing the political forces that threaten social justice. Instead, the company's aesthetic experimentation and investigation of the performer / spectator relationship arrest the sensibilities of the subject-spectator in ways which disallow the capacity to distance oneself from ideology, exposing individual freedom as a fantasy construct which supports neoliberal reality.

The dramaturgical structures of *Void Story* and *Speak Bitterness* invoke the imaginary and symbolic dimensions of the neoliberal subject whose self-deluding fetishistic operations form an intrinsic component of the performance. Where this implicates the spectator in these unfolding performance events, the repetitive structure of *Exquisite Pain*, alternatively, erodes the spectator's identification with such a subject allowing other possibilities to emerge.

### ***Void Story***

In a post-show talk after a performance of *Void Story* at the Lawrence Batley Theatre in Huddersfield, Robin Arthur recalled that, at a similar event, one audience member had said of the show that it was something Brecht might have done if he had had a laptop. The piece

involves Arthur and three other performers, Terry O'Connor, Cathy Naden and Richard Lowdon, who sit in pairs at each side of the stage reading out a story, whilst a series of accompanying black and white collaged images are projected onto a large screen centre stage, thereby creating the impression of a moving story board. The collaged imagery seems to capture a quality of abstractness which distances and defamiliarises their subject matter. It is in this context that we might understand Arthur's reference to Brecht as, unlike conventional film imagery, the cut-up images produce a distancing effect.

It is questionable, however, whether this can be compared to a Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* (V-effect). For Elizabeth Wright the purpose of 'the V-effect is to reveal how the laws of society operate, demonstrating that nothing is normal and natural for all time, and thus intervening in the process'.<sup>11</sup> Through the Brechtian V-effect, the spectator is invited to see how and where the protagonist might make alternative choices in order to effect social change. However, this is not a process which can be associated with *Void Story*. The two protagonists Kim and Jackson are faced with one crisis after another: they lose their home, they are attacked by giant insects, chased by unknown assailants, they find themselves in the middle of a war which they did not know was happening ... and so it goes on, crisis after crisis, until their final obliteration by a drone. Though the collaged images defamiliarise the spectator, potentially inciting them to imagine their own choices within the scenarios presented, this invitation is prematurely stunted by the persistent narrativising intervention of the performers. This might best be illuminated, not through reference to Brecht, but to Etchells' own writing on collage and Žižek's notion of 'the subject supposed to know'.<sup>12</sup>

In an essay written for the catalogue of artist Elizabeth Magill's 2005 exhibition at the Tate Liverpool, Tim Etchells discusses the properties of Magill's collages and their possible



effects on the viewer. Particularly interesting in relation to the use of collage in *Void Story* are Etchells' insights into the ways in which Magill's employment of fragmentary imagery captures 'heavily cropped and to some extent context-less views'.<sup>13</sup> Etchells argues that:

What becomes clear is that the significance of these incomplete places lies not so much in their content as in the very act - performed first by Magill and then by ourselves as viewers - of recovering images, however partial, from the 'museum of memory'.<sup>14</sup>

Just as Magill's collaged images engage the viewer in a process of remembering and imagining, so in *Void Story* the collaged, 'heavily cropped and to some extent context-less views' also invite the spectator to fill out the story. The difference is that in *Void Story* this 'filling out' is done *for* the spectator by the performers. They 'fill out' what is said by the cut-up collages of figures, adding the noises and sound effects of the collaged landscapes and so determining the 'personalities' of both people and place. Thus the spectator is consistently caught between an invitation to imagine implicit in the aesthetic form itself and the performers' full and incessant 'doing it for them'. In this formal delegation of the spectator's imaginative capacity to the performers, the performers are designated, in both Lacanian and Žižekian terms, as the 'subjects supposed to know'.<sup>15</sup>

For both Žižek and Lacan, the notion of 'the subject who is supposed to know' involves a transference of knowledge from the subject on to the Other. Coining the term interpassivity, as opposed to interactivity, Žižek argues that this experience in which 'the Other does it for me' is a way of registering one's compliance with the big Other of the symbolic order.<sup>16</sup> The Other is presumed to know the answer to the question of the subject's desire, a question

which is unanswerable and which in itself constitutes the role of the Other as the subject supposed to know. This circular bind is reminiscent of Žižek's joke about the Pole and the Jew at the opening of this chapter. In his analysis of the joke, Žižek draws attention to the glint in the eye of the Pole when he supposes the Jew to be the one who knows the answer to his question and therefore to be able to satisfy his desire. The Jew's story functions as a fantasy object which fills out a lack, a void in the Other. As Žižek argues 'there is nothing "behind" the fantasy; the fantasy is a construction whose function is to hide this void, this "nothing" - that is, the lack in the Other'.<sup>17</sup> What is revealed to the Pole is that it is his own desire which has motivated the Jew's story - the fantasy construction - and that this is ultimately the answer to his own question. In other words, he is the instigator and unwitting keeper of the secret he is so desperate to uncover elsewhere. In *Void Story*, the spectator is made explicitly aware of this imagining being 'done for them' and, correspondingly, that the performer is positioned as the 'one who is supposed to know'.

This point is driven home at the end of *Void Story* when for the first time the collaged story board images are construed to represent the spectator's point of view, and we see Kim and Jackson through the camera lens of a surveillance drone which identifies them as targets for extermination.

Kim: Can you picture the person who's controlling this drone?

Jackson: No.

Kim: They must be a thousand miles away. [...]

Jackson: It's like some poor creature.

Kim: It's just a drone; it's not a thinking thing at all.<sup>18</sup>

As the ultimate illustration of Žižek's notion of interpassivity, drones are not actively piloted but delegated to act on behalf of a faceless other. Accordingly, the big Other of the Symbolic order, presumed to lie behind the absurdist universe terrifying the protagonists, here becomes identified with the spectator who can no longer disavow responsibility for the relentless sequence of crises.

This conclusive positioning of the spectator as integral to Kim and Jackson's demise finally makes explicit what has been indicated throughout the performance: the implicit complicity between the desire of the spectator and the performer as the one who is supposed to know. The imaginative 'filling out' of the fragmentary collages is not, despite appearances, done for us in the sense that the other takes on the responsibility of acting on our behalf. Rather, it is done for us in the sense that it is shaped and enacted in order to fulfil our desire. Kim and Jackson's reflection on the drone disavows its apparent mechanical independence and relates it back to the unseen (ideological) programmer who has set it in motion; in doing so, they simultaneously implicate the spectator as the subject whose desire is the hidden cause of the theatrical catastrophes they have endured.

The aesthetic and dramaturgical structures of *Void Story* offer both an experience of interpassive complicity and its simultaneous critique, inviting reconsideration of complicit ideological engagement through experiential, rather than cerebral means. Unlike conventional ideology critique, this is located and exposed as operating inside the same theatrical structures that approach it, implicit to the intersubjective encounter between the performer and spectator. The impact of *Speak Bitterness* is similarly experiential, though its dramaturgical structures serve less an exploration of complicity through desire and more a sustained probing of the spectator's experience of enjoyment.

## *Speak Bitterness*

*Speak Bitterness* has been performed both as a durational performance lasting several hours and within a more familiar time frame of approximately an hour and a half. Unlike *Void Story*, *Speak Bitterness* does not follow a narrative structure but takes the form of an endless catalogue of confessions presented as a direct address to the audience. These range (in no particular order) from the banal, such as ‘We got drunk and got tattoos’ to the obscene, for example, ‘We dropped atom bombs on Nagasaki, Coventry, Seattle, Belize, Belsize Park and Hiroshima’.<sup>19</sup> Since its first performance, the text has been regularly updated with topical allusions including ‘We drove the planes right into the towers - it was beautiful, beautiful, beautiful and it changed the world’ and ‘We are guilty of leaving our children unattended in hotel rooms on holiday’, following the September 11th attack on the World Trade Center and the abduction of Madeleine McCann, respectively.<sup>20</sup>

This endless stream of confessions is read by the ensemble from sheets of paper laid out on a table which separates the spectators from the performers – us from them. These confessions may be, or may have been, true for someone at some time. They seem unlikely to be true for the performers, not only because of the extraordinary nature of some of the confessions, such as those regarding the twin towers and Madeleine McCann quoted above, but because of the way in which the performers randomly select and read out the texts - a technique which suggests the lack of a predetermined fit between speaker and confession. Nevertheless, the performers seem to capture a range of emotional responses (for example, embarrassment, anger, shame) indicating their commitment to, and complicity with, the confessions which they read. Tim Etchells sheds light on this seeming contradiction in his recent reflections on

*Speak Bitterness* when he states the piece 'is as much about the nature of confession and guilt, the limits and energies of empathy, complicity, forgiveness and judgement, as it is about any particular thing that is named'.<sup>21</sup>

The plural pronoun 'We' with which the performers begin most statements is, for Etchells, 'a shifting and problematic construct'.<sup>22</sup> It could refer to the onstage collective or might more broadly encompass members of the audience, who are also cast in the role of playing themselves. Etchells states that:

Most people would perhaps feel covered by or sign up to statements like 'we had our doubts' or 'we lost our way', but many would balk at signing up to statements such as 'we were date rapists' or 'we pushed the dog shit through immigrants' doors'. The we of the text, first appearing as a place of communal shelter and definition, rapidly becomes a problem.<sup>23</sup>

The all-encompassing 'we' fragments as the performers construct a sense of face-to-face responsibility by delivering many of their lines carefully and deliberately to specific spectators, artfully fostering a sense in the spectator that they are being sought out for a specific exchange. The direct address of the performance material, together with the manner in which the performers deliver it, requires the spectators to be answerable and therefore implicated in the immediacy of the event. The spectators may identify with the confessional statements, aligning themselves as accomplices in the guilty act, or may distance themselves, acting as witnesses to the public admission of the speaker. The witness position invites the spectator to take a critical stance on the confession. The accomplice position can arise from either direct recognition of the particular confession or a more vicarious identification with it,

potentially inciting a complex emotional response in which an obvious public shame clashes with the spectator's private *jouissance*.

The private indulgence in transgressive behaviour is, for Žižek, accompanied by a particular form of enjoyment that is grounded in the risky flouting of legal or moral norms, the breaking of the Law. This enjoyment, which he calls 'obligatory jouissance',<sup>24</sup> is produced by the possibility of standing outside of the symbolic mandate, cheating the role that is assigned to you within the social order. Such a transgression is no longer tolerable once it has come to the attention of the big Other. The public speaking of confessions in *Speak Bitterness* calls each transgression to the attention of the big Other in this way, and the spectators are invited to justify themselves before the big Other as accomplices, or occupy the place of the big Other as witnesses.

What is significant in Žižek's theory of enjoyment for understanding the political strategy implicit in *Speak Bitterness*, however, is that far from releasing the subject from his/her symbolic mandate, and thus introducing the possibility of adopting a radical position outside of the Law, transgression and its attendant experience of enjoyment embroils the subject further inside normative structures. As Žižek states:

*enjoyment itself, which we experience as "transgression", is in its innermost status something imposed, ordered - when we enjoy, we never do it "spontaneously", we always follow a certain injunction. The psychoanalytic name for this obscene injunction, for this obscene call, "Enjoy!" is superego.*<sup>25</sup>

The Law, internally monitored by the superego, is thus understood by Žižek to be underpinned by a shady, obscene possibility of its own violation - a possibility which the Law silently sanctions and sustains in order to ensure its own continuation. In this sense any enjoyment experienced through identifying with the transgression, either directly or vicariously, of various confessions is, from a Žižekian viewpoint, as implicit an element of legal and moral conformity as taking the judgemental position of the big Other.

The performer /spectator relationships of *Speak Bitterness* draw the audience repeatedly into such acts of conformity in an operation which can be understood with reference to Žižek's critique of Althusser's ideological procedure of interpellation. The oft quoted passage from Althusser which describes this procedure offers an example of 'hailing', where the one who responds to the policeman's call 'Hey, you there' immediately identifies herself as a subject of ideological power. For Žižek, however, the 'subject' is not produced, as Althusser argues, at the moment they respond to being hailed; rather 'there is already an uncanny subject that *precedes* the gesture of subjectivization.'<sup>26</sup> The policeman's cry may provoke a direct response from one respondent, but it also inspires a reaction in all who hear it. Žižek argues that even those who hear the policeman's hailing but protest their innocence nevertheless experience

an indeterminate Kafka-esque feeling of 'abstract' guilt, a feeling that, in the eyes of power, I am a priori terribly guilty of something, although it is not possible for me to know what precisely I am guilty of, and for that reason - since I don't know what I am guilty of - I am even more guilty; or, more pointedly, it is in this very ignorance of mine that my true guilt consists.<sup>27</sup>

Each confession in the performance of *Speak Bitterness* can be understood as a performance of interpellation; each iteration of the pronoun ‘we’ acts as a means of hailing those who will identify with its terms. Yet before the spectator responds to the content of what is said, adopting either an accomplice or witness position, the confessional form already arouses this potential ‘indeterminate guilt’ in each spectator. For Žižek such indeterminate guilt testifies to a split within the subject between their necessary adherence to the symbolic mandate and a void within the subject which is always already outside of it.

The relentless and infinite claims in the performance text to specific acts of transgression suggest the frustrating inescapability of ideologically determinate guilt. Although the all-encompassing ‘we’ repeatedly arouses the possibility of a primordial subject that is not complicit with ideology (through either transgression or judgement), the spectator and performer are always enfolded back into conformity by the determinate statement.

Simultaneously, our capacity for enjoyment, judgement and specific response is likely to erode with the passing hours of the durational exhaustion of the performance text. Through this disjuncture, what is fundamentally being critiqued here is the very injunction to ‘enjoy!’, which structures the ideological principle of Western states at the level of the subject. What is at stake in this critique is not the revelation of the ideological object but the ongoing complicity with the current state of affairs through the illusion that individual acts of transgression are a meaningful challenge to ideological sanctions. For the neoliberal subject, even the individual freedom to transgress is here exposed as an act of ideological complicity.

By confronting the spectator with his/her own enjoyment as a subjective aspect of ideological conformity, a gap potentially opens up which threatens to rupture or fissure our complicity with the Neoliberal status quo. Nevertheless, while we may perpetually revisit the uncanny



subject that precedes interpellation, its position outside of the symbolic mandate of the Law ultimately remains inaccessible. In this sense, the dramaturgical strategy at work in *Speak Bitterness* is comparable to that in operation in *Void Story* – which confronts the spectator with his/her own desire as a subjective aspect that motivates ideology from within. In *Exquisite Pain*, Forced Entertainment move beyond such inescapability by turning to another form of *jouissance* in order to glimpse the possibilities of resistance beyond ideology as it is structured into theatricality, language and identification.

### *Exquisite Pain*

*Exquisite Pain* differs from *Void Story* and *Speak Bitterness* in two significant respects: first, and uniquely, it is not original material devised and shaped by Etchells and the company, but a staging of a book of the same name by Sophie Calle;<sup>28</sup> and second, following the form of the book, it revolves around the repetition of an autobiographical story told by Calle of the events leading up to and including a break-up with her lover. The book and the staging also include other stories of personal suffering which were collected by Calle immediately after her break-up.

Forced Entertainment's staging of *Exquisite Pain* involves two performers (in the version I saw, these were Cathy Naden and Jerry Killick); each sat behind tables on either side of the stage. The storytelling moves alternately between Naden reading Calle's autobiographical text and Killick reading the additional stories collected by Calle. Before this alternate reading begins, however, Naden reads out the following statement:

Sophie left for Japan on October 25th 1984 unsuspecting that this trip would bring her to the unhappiest day of her life. She got back to France on January

28th 1985. From that moment whenever people asked her how it went she told them about her suffering. In return she started asking both friends and chance encounters: when did you suffer the most? She decided to continue such exchanges until she got over her own pain either by comparing it to other people's, or until she had worn out her own story by sheer repetition.<sup>29</sup>

Each of Naden's texts recount the same events of Calle's break-up with her lover (referred to throughout as M), a friend of her father's to whom she had been attracted for several years. The break-up occurs when M fails to attend a reunion with Calle in Delhi after a short period of enforced separation. On each telling, the basic elements of the narrative remain the same but are embellished with different, and sometimes contradictory, details. The stories collected by Calle and read by Killick cover a wide range of experiences, from the death of loved ones to other instances of break-up and betrayal. Irrespective of how traumatic these stories are, however, Calle repeats her own in response and thus never seems to wear out her own suffering, as she had hoped, by simply 'comparing it to other people's'. In fact, the failure of the collected stories to exhaust her suffering renders each one as the motivation for a further iteration of Calle's own story.

The form of the performance and its representation in Calle's book is not emotionally indulgent, however, and precludes the elicitation of empathy for the stories. Consistent with the original form of Calle's artwork, in Forced Entertainment's staging of *Exquisite Pain*, the performers retain a neutral detachment from the texts they read. Correspondingly, this dramaturgy encourages a theatrical, objective distance between the spectators and the performance material. This distance allows Calle's reiterations of her story to be read as a fetish. For Žižek 'what fetishism gives body to is precisely my disavowal of knowledge, my

refusal to subjectively assume what I know'.<sup>30</sup> In this sense, Calle's persistent reiteration of the story, the telling of pain, is therefore something she is clinging on to as a means of avoiding the traumatic impact of the actual events themselves.

Forced Entertainment's performance of *Exquisite Pain* might be read differently, however. Whilst the reader might leave and return to Calle's book, and thus potentially engage in a contemplative experience of the material, in the performance the spectator is required to endure the multiple tellings and re-tellings of the same events in one long sitting. Although the performance lasts for under two hours, without an interval or any variation in the alternating dynamic between the two readers, the seemingly endless circularity of the texts, always returning to a variation of Calle's autobiographical event, can create an experience of frustration. This backwards and forwards motion arouses a sense of shared *jouissance*, as an 'exquisite pain' aroused by the verbal repetition of the story.

This particular *jouissance* crucially differs from the 'obligatory *jouissance*' aroused through the dramaturgical structures of *Speak Bitterness*. There is no sense of social laws or taboos being crossed or, crucially, any modelling of a shameful enjoyment by the performers. In its numerous elaborations of the main events, inconsistently combining and recombining details, Calle's text (and Naden's reading of it) might be understood rather as an example of what Žižek terms '*jouissance* of the Other'.<sup>31</sup> Not compelled by the superego injunction to 'Enjoy!', *jouissance* of the Other is 'closely linked to the domain of the Other's discourse' and produces a 'satisfaction provided by speech itself'.<sup>32</sup> Rather than a sign of fetishistic behaviour, then, Calle's ceaseless reporting of the event can be understood as an inexhaustible form of such *jouissance*.

The persistent retelling is motivated by an unrelenting and determined effort to articulate her desire which is inevitably thwarted by '[t]he self-reflexivity of language'; as Žižek argues, it 'bears witness to the impossibility inscribed into the very heart of language: its failure to grasp the Real.'<sup>33</sup> This impossibility produces a gap between the enunciated and the enunciation, the gap which is maintained between the speaker's intention and what can be signified through language. Far from wearing out Calle's pain, the doomed repetition maintains the Real of her suffering, which in turn ultimately eludes the attempt to contain it in language.<sup>34</sup> The inconsistent details of the multiple reiterations are an irrelevance compared to the inaccessible Real of the scenario that is Calle's true target. Žižek argues that

[e]ven if the object of desire is an illusory lure, *there is a Real in this illusion: the object of desire in its positive nature is vain, but not the place it occupies, the place of the Real, which is why there is more truth in unconditional fidelity to one's desire than in resigned insight into the vanity of one's striving.*<sup>35</sup>

In the enduring intensity of the performance, Naden's frustrating reiterations of Calle's story are less an evasive fetish than a determined refusal to leave or substitute the place of the Real. Calle's project in this form demonstrates the unconditional fidelity to one's desire by refusing to allow the I of the enunciation to become the I of the enunciated subject whose desire is subsumed into the social fantasy sustaining the subject's relation to the status quo.

Unlike the indeterminate guilt aroused in *Speak Bitterness*, therefore, the dramaturgical structure of *Exquisite Pain* performs an obstinate dimension of subjectivity that inures itself against the inevitable fate of interpellation. Unlike the linear narrative of *Void Story*, the

enduring cycle observes an unconditional fidelity to one's desire without accommodating the subjective desires of the spectator. As such, the text is not in thrall to some big Other but rather evidences a clear separation from it. By refusing to exhaust the search for the Real of Calle's desire, and much to the potential frustration and alienation of the spectator, *Exquisite Pain* maintains a separation between the I of the enunciation and the I of the enunciated, and also blockades the possibility of an ideological, intersubjective exchange between performer and spectator. In doing so, the event is endured as a stalemate through the speaker's refusal to validate the fantasy which symbolically structures and supports reality.

Taken together, the three performances of *Void Story*, *Speak Bitterness* and *Exquisite Pain* approach the ideological problem of the neoliberal subject from varying and complementary perspectives. The narrative form of *Void Story* and the endless listing of confessions in *Speak Bitterness* recognise that a critical perspective is as embroiled in ideological adherence as is unwitting complicity. The explorations of desire, guilt and enjoyment in these performances may allow the spectator a minimal distance from the ideological fantasy, but they also frustrate the possibility of traversing it. The performers, always aware of the spectator's constitutive role in the theatrical event, bring the latter's interpassive complicity into play, and into view. The ensuing critique of the neoliberal subject, a critique which is performed through experience rather than through revelation, ultimately denies the subject access to a more radical, non-complicit position. In its uncompromising commitment to the retelling of Sophie Calle's story, *Exquisite Pain* on the other hand gives no ground to either the ideological fantasy or the spectator's desire. In doing so, the experiential critique implicit in the piece opens up the impasse of non-complicity through a performance of the subject's unconditional fidelity to his/her own desire.

## Conclusion

In pointing out that ‘there are more of you than there are of us’, Robin Arthur is not simply drawing attention to the outnumbering of the performers by the audience as a meta-theatrical reality of the performance event, he is also acknowledging the audience’s complicity and active responsibility in its progress. Forced Entertainment enfold the audience into a mode of interpassivity, through which the stage knowingly evokes, panders to and feeds off the spectators’ own engagement, reflecting the ideological scenario in which consciousness is normally separated from action: as Žižek notes, contemporary ideology understands that its subjects ‘know very well how things really are, but still they are doing it as if they did not know’.<sup>36</sup>

The dramaturgy of Forced Entertainment thus implicates spectators in the performance action in ways which trouble their disavowal of complicity. *Void Story*, unusually for a Forced Entertainment production, follows a linear narrative of cause and effect which follows the protagonists’ futile attempts to escape their fate. In separating the component elements of the performance – image, sound, language, space, performer and spectator –, the production isolates the desire of the spectator as the ultimate motivator of the stage action. In *Speak Bitterness*, by contrast, both spectator and performer are ensnared in a cycle of guilt, enjoyment and judgement that perpetually returns them to ideological complicity. Although both productions presume that a place of resistance exists and also allow for the possibility that such a place may be glimpsed in performance, the event itself does not claim to know such a place or a secure and privileged route that would lead to it.

*Exquisite Pain* operates by a different dramaturgical structure and presupposes another relationship with its spectators. It may well be seen as the inversion of *Void Story*, as the desire of the protagonist remains unbending even when outnumbered by the spectators. The resilient obstinacy of the speaker here contrasts with the performers and spectators of *Speak Bitterness*, whose perennial guilt always, in Žižekian terms, compromises the fidelity to their desire. Both *Speak Bitterness* and *Void Story* ensnare the audience through a pursuit of the objects of guilt and desire, respectively, as either the specific content of the confession or the unfolding narrative circumstances of Kim and Jackson. *Exquisite Pain*, alternatively, returns insistently and with fidelity to the *place* of desire, rather than attaching desire to any specific *object*. In doing so, it avoids both the enjoyment and the indeterminate guilt that enfolds us in the ideological trap of *Speak Bitterness* and it also allows access to an aspect of ourselves that precedes and eludes normal interpellation.

For the neoliberal subject, then, the machinations of ideology can no longer be uncovered in the elsewhere of socio-economic structures; rather, they must be negotiated, succumbed to or resisted as the subjective aspect of each moment in which the desire, guilt or enjoyment of our experience is aroused. The performance work of Forced Entertainment, in its arresting encounters with the audience, critiques ideology through a committed yet exposing confrontation in which the performer-spectator relationship is constitutive of the event in both its ideological and theatrical dimensions.

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<sup>1</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 2008), 68.

<sup>2</sup> *First Night*, directed by Tim Etchells. (Sheffield: Forced Entertainment, 2001) [Video: DVD].

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- <sup>3</sup> Summer Banks, 'Interview: Tim Etchells of Forced Entertainment.' *Exberliner*. June 15 2010, accessed October 31 2013, <http://www.exberliner.com/tim-etchells-from-forced-entertainment/>
- <sup>4</sup> Žižek, *Sublime*, 45.
- <sup>5</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2010), 686.
- <sup>6</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (London: Verso, 2010), 136.
- <sup>7</sup> David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 5.
- <sup>8</sup> Harvey, *Neoliberalism*, 41-42.
- <sup>9</sup> Žižek, *Sublime*, 116.
- <sup>10</sup> Žižek, *Sublime*, 116.
- <sup>11</sup> Elizabeth Wright, *Postmodern Brecht: A Representation* (London: Routledge, 1989), 39.
- <sup>12</sup> Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do* (London: Verso, 2008), 171.
- <sup>13</sup> Michael Stanley, Andrew Wilson and Tim Etchells, *Elizabeth Magill: Exhibition Catalogue* (Birmingham: Ikon Gallery, 2004), 48.
- <sup>14</sup> Stanley et al, *Elizabeth Magill*, 48.
- <sup>15</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *How to Read Lacan* (London: Granta Books, 2011), Kindle edition.
- <sup>16</sup> Žižek, *Lacan*.
- <sup>17</sup> Žižek, *Sublime*, 148.
- <sup>18</sup> *Void Story*, directed by Tim Etchells. (Sheffield: Forced Entertainment, 2012) [Video: DVD].
- <sup>19</sup> Tim Etchells, "'Confess to Everything': A Note on *Speak Bitterness* (2008) and *Speak Bitterness* (1994-)" In Maggie B. Gale, and John F. Deeney, *The Routledge Drama Anthology and Sourcebook: from Modernism to Contemporary Performance*. Oxon: Routledge, 2010), 741, 735.



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<sup>20</sup> Etchells, *Bitterness*, 739, 737.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 735.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Interrogating the Real* (London: Continuum, 2006), 131.

<sup>25</sup> Žižek, *For They Know*, 9-10, emphasis in original.

<sup>26</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment* 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (London: Verso, 2005), 60-61.

<sup>27</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Metastases*, 60.

<sup>28</sup> Sophie Calle, *Exquisite Pain*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 2004).

<sup>29</sup> *Exquisite Pain*, directed by Tim Etchells. (Sheffield: Forced Entertainment, 2005) [Video: DVD].

<sup>30</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *First as Tragedy, then as Farce* (London: Verso, 2009), 61.

<sup>31</sup> Žižek, *Interrogating*, 306.

<sup>32</sup> Žižek, *Interrogating*, 306.

<sup>33</sup> Žižek, *For They Know*, xiv, emphasis in original.

<sup>34</sup> Žižek, *For They Know*, xiv.

<sup>35</sup> Žižek, *Interrogating*, 339, emphasis in original.

<sup>36</sup> Žižek, *Sublime*, 29