

Sublime Illusion in Literature: Žižek's post-structural Criticism of *Antigone*

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Abstract—From Slavoj Žižek's post-structuralist perspective, the notion of the sublime in literature is not a genuine elevation of the human spirit but an ideological illusion. Žižek argues that the sublime is constructed through sentimentally charged ideological frameworks that transform political irrationality into seemingly noble ideals. In his post-structuralist literary criticism, Žižek deconstructs literary sublimity into two interrelated components: the *sublime object* and the *site of the Thing* (das Ding). He views the aesthetic impact of literary imagery as emerging from the dynamic interaction between these two elements. Furthermore, Žižek highlights the significance of literary characters who actively resist or traverse the sublime illusion, as their actions expose and dismantle ideological deception. Through an analysis of Sophocles' *Antigone*, Žižek explores how the sublime illusion is ideologically constructed within the civic sphere, focusing particularly on Antigone's defiance as a form of resistance. By applying the concept of the sublime illusion, Žižek bridges post-structuralist theory with ancient Greek tragedy, offering fresh and critical insights into literature, ideology, and politics.

Index Terms—Žižek, sublime, illusion, Antigone, action, post-structuralism, Greek tragedy

I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of the sublime is central to Žižek's philosophical and literary critical inquiries. Žižek argues that the transcendental dimension Kant associates with the sublime—namely, the supersensible “idea”—is not an ontological reality but an illusion generated by subjective imagination. For Žižek, the sublime does not elevate humanity to a higher spiritual realm; rather, it exposes the void beneath appearances and transforms the discomfort of confronting that void into an illusion of pleasure. This mechanism sustains ideological hegemony, as it allows irrational ideological systems to rationalize sacrifices and other flaws through the illusion of the sublime.

The post-structural critique of the sublime illusion by Žižek is best exemplified in his analysis of the ancient Sophocles' *Antigone*. Through his analysis of the characters in the play, Žižek combines the post-structuralist aesthetic thoughts with the ancient Greek tragedy. Not only Žižek deconstructs the sublime beauty in literature and reveals its ideological dimension, but he expands the literary criticism into modern political critique and other themes, adding diversity to it. Therefore, this article will focus on Žižek's critique of *Antigone* to sort out his reinterpretation of the sublime and its theoretical value.

II. AESTHETICS AND IDEOLOGY: ŽIŽEK'S THOUGHTS OF SUBLIME ILLUSION

In Žižek's view, the sublime—which evokes feelings of grandeur—produces an aesthetic effect that draws people

toward a transcendent dimension. This enables ideology to co-opt such aesthetic qualities, transforming irrational political actions into ostensibly noble goals. In other words, aesthetics and its critique form the basis of Žižek's theory of the sublime illusion.

A. Žižek's Aesthetic Theory of the Sublime Illusion

In Žižek's view, the sublime illusion is a kind of “perspective-illusion” caused by the subject's positing of a transcendent existence. Žižek argues that traditional aestheticians like Kant defined the sublime as an object that cannot present an idea, rendering the Idea a “supersensible” entity beyond empirical phenomena. The sublime, in this view, allows us to infer this transcendent realm of Ideas. Žižek opposes this notion, contending that it is essentially an illusion stemming from a “perspective-illusion”: “This notion—that, in the experience of the Sublime, phenomena prove unfit to render the Idea—results from a kind of perspective-illusion” [1]. For Žižek, if the sublime means we always sense something not fully presented, the transcendent dimension truly exists is debatable. When we gaze upon the sublime, our vision leaps directly beyond phenomena to the posited “beyond”, imagining an absolute Idea existing there. In fact, the sublime does not function as a special object prompting us to infer a “supersensible” existence. Instead, once we artificially posit such a transcendental entity, our cognitive world fractures, and no object can adequately present this transcendence. To clarify this, Žižek creatively appropriates Hegel's concept of the “appearance qua appearance”. For Hegel, an appearance is a phenomenon within sensory perception, which can itself generate a new phenomenon within human senses—a “appearance qua appearance”. Žižek explains: “The appearance implies that there is something behind it which appears through it; it conceals a truth and by the same gesture gives a foreboding thereof, it simultaneously hides and reveals the essence behind its curtain. But what is hidden behind the phenomenal appearance? Precisely the fact that there is nothing to hide. What is concealed is that the very act of concealing conceals nothing” [2]. In other words, for Žižek, the sublime—as a perspectival illusion—makes us feel that something exists where there is actually nothing. It compels us to fantasize about an existence beyond phenomena itself, leading us to believe that beyond appearances lies an idea, and beyond this world lies another. Compared to the reality we presently possess, that which escapes perception and sensation seems more perfect. This property of the sublime illusion perpetuates our perspectival delusions, veiling ordinary objects with a sublime illusion.

B. From Post-Structural Aesthetics to Literary Criticism

After reviewing Žižek's theory of the sublime illusion, the next question is how Žižek transforms this aesthetic and political-philosophical idea into a theory of literary criticism. Žižek primarily accomplishes this through 2 key transformations: first, he analyzes the internal structure of the sublime illusion and identifies the generative logic of the sublime illusion within literary works; second, he seeks out affirmative actions within literary texts that dismantle the sublime illusion, finding in the characters of classic literary works ideal solutions to ideological problems.

Let us first examine the first point. In Žižek's discourse, he divides the internal structure of the sublime illusion into the "sublime object" and the "place of the Thing" (or "site of the Thing"), explaining the generative logic of the sublime illusion as the process by which the sublime object occupies the sacred site of the sublime. The sublime object is the concrete manifestation of the sublime illusion—an ordinary object that has been accidentally elevated to a special position. On the other hand, the "Thing" (das Ding) is a key concept in psychoanalytic theory, referring to the traumatic kernel within the subject's psychic structure. It reveals, on the one hand, the primal desires prohibited by social norms, and on the other, it represents traumatic pain. This makes the Thing unspeakable and thus able to function only as a false object of desire within the fantasy. When Žižek discusses the sublime, he employs this concept to denote the transcendent dimension that cannot be directly represented within the sublime. For Žižek, this transcendent dimension is essentially a blank space left in the subject's psyche due to traumatic encounters—namely, the "place of the Thing" within the sublime. Žižek states: "What renders an object sublime, turning it into a sublime object, is its structural position" [2]. In other words, Žižek defines the sublime object here starting from its formation process. By occupying a special position, the sublime object causes the subject to perceive it differently from ordinary objects. The subject's gaze must always undergo a transformation or refraction when looking at this object, thereby endowing the sublime object with a perspectiveal illusion of the sublime. Žižek's specific analysis of the sublime object is most clearly manifested in his examination of "images" in literature and art. In literature, many special figures occupy unique positions and thus acquire a kind of sublime illusion.

Now let us turn to the second point. Žižek seeks to uncover, through his own interpretation, actions within literary works that traverse the sublime illusion—actions that allow literary texts to offer concrete models for critiquing the sublime illusion and that hold the potential to guide real-world action. Žižek identifies the hero in Greek tragedy with such traversal in which the characters within the work themselves traverse the sublime illusion, as seen in *Antigone*. That is why Žižek interprets this Greek tragedy especially, and we will talk about his post-structural criticism later.

More crucially, Žižek argues that the sublime illusion is not merely a subjective hallucination but can also function as an ideological fantasy that deceives the masses. The sublime, in its ideological dimension, possesses an evil essence, which means it establishes a "superego"—an Other forever towering above us, scrutinizing, humiliating, and oppressing us. Natural dangers and brutalities pale in comparison to the

superego's demands, which shame us and force us to violate our instincts: "The logic at work in the experience of the dynamical sublime is therefore: true, I may be a tiny particle of dust thrown around by wind and sea, powerless in face of the raging forces of nature, yet all this fury of nature pales in comparison with the absolute pressure exerted on me by the superego, which humiliates me and compels me to act against my fundamental interests!" [1]. Žižek illustrates this with fascism's anti-Semitism: In fascism ideology, the hate about Jews becomes integrated into the story of German national revival, thus acquiring an absurd sublimity. Meanwhile, those who oppose or against this ideology are denounced as enemies and traitors. This is the logic of the sublime illusion: compared to the failure of reviving the German nation, the horror of massacring Jews seems acceptable. When the sublime is utilized by ideology, fascist actions can be veiled by a sublime illusion, becoming the way in which erroneous ideologies deceive the masses.

III. THE POLITICAL CONSTRUCTION OF THE SUBLIME ILLUSION IN *ANTIGONE*

Žižek identifies *Antigone* as the work that most fully embodies his thoughts of aesthetics and political philosophy. His analysis of the tragedy revolves around the concept of the sublime illusion. In Žižek's reading of *Antigone*, Creon—rather than *Antigone*—occupies the central role in the tragedy's underlying logic. For Žižek, Creon represents the precondition for the tragedy's emergence: as the king, he functions as the agent of order who constructs the sublime illusion through his decree. This construction unfolds in 2 stages: first, the occupation of the sublime position within the sacred; second, the construction of the sublime illusion through violence.

A. Occupy the Sublime Place of the Sacred

Creon's kingship is not a result of merit but a contingent event. After the death of Oedipus and his sons, Eteocles and Polynices, the place of king becomes vacant, and Creon assumes power as king's brother-in-law. This agrees with Žižek's analysis of how sublime objects acquire their sublimity—not through intrinsic qualities, but through their positioning within the symbolic order. A king's sublimity does not stem from the individual but from the position itself, whether political (the king) or otherwise. Žižek further examines how a ruler internalizes this sublime illusion, invoking Lacan's assertion that the true madness lies not in "thinking" oneself a king, but in "actually believing" one is a king simply by occupying the position. For Žižek, a king's sublimity derives not from the subject but from the "place"—and when a subject fully identifies with this illusion, absurd sublime arises. This is evident in Creon's insistence on enforcing his law against *Antigone's* burial of her brother. When he demands that the Chorus elders support him, the elders response that Creon should leave the responsibility to younger men instead of them. Here, a subtle parallax gap emerges between the king's perspective (as the agent of order) and the Chorus's (as subjects who see kingship as contingent). For Creon, he is the embodiment of the polis, and thus his decree carries both duty and authority. But for the Chorus, who view kingship as arbitrary, the law is external to them, and they resist bearing its burdens. Žižek concludes: "Being-

a-king' is an effect of the network of social relations between a 'king' and his 'subjects'; but-and here is the fetishistic misrecognition to the participants of this social bond, the relationship appears necessarily in an inverse form: they think that they are subjects giving the king royal treatment because the king is already in himself, outside the relationship to his subjects, a king" [2]. Yet, like all sublime objects, Creon remains trapped in the void between "2 deaths". Despite his self-perceived sublimity, he is excluded from the symbolic order's true functioning, becoming a political living dead.

B. Construct Sublime Illusion with Violence

Creon's evil lies not in his character but in his attempt to impose his sublime illusion as brute force upon the polis. For Žižek, a king's authority derives not from wisdom or justice but solely from kingship itself. The law's sacredness is not in its content but in its enforcement—its violence ensures obedience. As Žižek argues: "If someone says, 'I obey the king because he is wise and just,' they are guilty of insubordination. The only legitimate response is tautological: I obey because he is the king" [3]. In *Antigone*, Creon embodies this violent logic. When Antigone challenges his decree, he does not justify it rationally but threatens punishment. This reflects Žižek's critique of ideological violence: "The necessary structural illusion which drives people to believe that truth can be found in laws describes precisely the mechanism of transference: transference is this supposition of a Truth, of a Meaning behind the stupid, traumatic, inconsistent fact of the Law" [2]. This is precisely the sublime illusion: the violent, chaotic force of raw power transforms into transcendent beauty when we posit a higher meaning behind it. Such aesthetic fascination risks becoming complicity with ideological violence. Thus, Creon's decree exemplifies how the sublime illusion—initially destructive—can be aestheticized into a justification for domination.

IV. ACTIVE ACTION AGAINST THE SUBLIME ILLUSION IN ANTIGONE

From Žižek's perspective, Antigone embodies the archetype of active resistance to ideological sublime illusions. By rejecting the sublime illusion of Creon's decree, she traverses and undermines it, causing his edict to collapse upon her defiance, and this constitutes a powerful critique of the ideological construction of the sublime illusion.

A. How Antigone's Action is A Triumph

Žižek argues that Antigone's actions dismantle Creon's sublime illusion in 2 ways: first, by exposing the inherent contradictions within his decree, and second, through her unwavering persistence. On one hand, Antigone does not recognize the legitimacy of Creon's tyranny. To her, Creon's so-called sublime decree is no more than worthless paper compared to the eternal, unwritten laws of the gods. In other words, Antigone's actions expose the internal inconsistency of Creon's sublime illusion—that is, how the laws of the polis can infringe upon natural law. This inconsistency makes her resistance not only possible but inevitable. Žižek contends that Antigone actively intervenes in the ideological construction of the sublime illusion, traversing its attempts to obscure the decree's inherent contradictions. Her actions "put in question the Good embodied in the State and common

morals" [2]. For Žižek, Antigone exemplifies the active agent who rejects the ideological construction of sublime illusions. On the other hand, Žižek highlights Antigone's "obstinate persistence", which renders her ethical stance an absolute threat to political harmony, causing her to transcend the boundaries of humanity. This makes Antigone a figure of disruption to the existing order. Žižek describes her as "non-human", signifying a rejection and interrogation of the false society. When the existing order—especially its ethical framework—ceases to apply to such an actor, she becomes an "evil" from the perspective of order. For Žižek, this represents the authentic stance of those marginalized and silenced by the order: individuals without legitimacy, without a place within the order, and without advocates. Antigone's significance lies in her ability to express all these: "Antigone undermines the existing symbolic order not simply from its radical outside, but from a utopian standpoint of aiming at its radical rearticulation" [4]. This represents a future-oriented stance—a space yet to emerge. Only through active resistance can such hidden populations and unrecognized demands be brought to light, creating the possibility for changes of society.

Žižek's radicalism in analyzing Antigone lies in his hope that active agents can pierce the deceptive veil of sublime illusions, leading us into a de-sublimated real world that confronts painful realities.

B. What is The Inner Drive Behind Antigone's Actions

Žižek also explores the source of Antigone's inner drive. Her radical traverse of the sublime illusion retroactively constructs its historical significance, leading Žižek to construct the philosophy of action. He emphasizes Antigone's attitude before taking action—her awareness of a higher law surpassing Creon's polis. This higher law is often irrational. However, what this higher law signifies for her, and what she should do, remains unclear to Antigone. Žižek argues that the true inner drive of Antigone's actions—and their meaning—can only be retroactively constructed after she acts, specifically after burying Polynices: "it is crucial that Antigone was able to formulate this in Sight only after she accomplished her act: only then did she become aware of what she had done, of what had really motivated her" [5]. In a sense, when confronted with ideological tyranny like Creon's—wrapped in sublime illusions—we often comply due to Žižek's "law is law" mentality. Without a sufficient and safe justification, why break the prohibition? Thus, we often lack the motivation to question or resist. For Žižek, the inner drive to traverse this illusion is not preordained. It is not that we first know what to do or where to go before acting. We cannot interpret the retroactive construction of Antigone's actions as her simple "becoming-aware of what was already there in her unconscious, of what unconsciously she always already knew" [5]. Instead, it is through action—through attempting to uncover the ideological essence behind the sublime illusion—that we come to understand what compels us, much like Antigone. At first glance, Žižek appears to absolve the agent of responsibility. However, his logic reveals a deeper truth: if we truly wish to forge new paths, traverse the sublime illusions constructed by existing ideological orders, and reach the empty place where the new things are born, we cannot rely on blueprints or assume that sublime ideals will spontaneously fulfill themselves. Instead,

the sublime ideal acquires its embodiment through our real actions.

V. ANTIGONE'S DEATH: THE BIRTH OF A NEW SUBLIME ILLUSION

From Žižek's perspective, Antigone not only critiques the sublime illusion underpinning ideological tyranny but also reveals another dimension of sublimity—namely, her own sublimity. Žižek argues that Antigone's sublimity emerges in the space between two deaths: her symbolic death precedes her physical death, allowing her to traverse Creon's sublime illusion while simultaneously constructing a new sublime illusion around herself. Furthermore, Žižek contends that the uniqueness of Antigone's sublime beauty lies in its entry into history through her death, endowing it with a more eternal sublimity. Her death repeats the deaths of the oppressed throughout history, imbuing this repetition with a higher ethical value. This is where the aesthetic category of the sublime, for Žižek, harbors its redemptive potential.

A. Antigone's New Sublime Illusion between "Two Deaths"

Antigone's sublimity arises from her occupation of the sublime position between 2 deaths, and her sublimity becomes a new sublime illusion that replaces Creon's sublime decree. To uphold her resolve to bury her brother, Antigone enters the cave that will lead to her death. Žižek emphasizes that the uniqueness of Antigone's death lies in the fact that her symbolic death precedes her physical death, placing her in a unique position. Fundamentally, Antigone's symbolic death represents her expulsion from the polis's political system, casting her into a "void" devoid of structural symbolism: "in Antigone's case, her symbolic death, her exclusion from the symbolic community of the city, precedes her actual death and imbues her character with sublime beauty" [2]. Thus, Antigone occupies an indescribable zone of ambiguity and emptiness. In this unique position, we witness the specificity and sublimity of a literary figure. Antigone's actions not only lead to the rejection and exposure of the ideological sublime illusion but also result in her heterogeneity within the collective order. Žižek argues that this state of exclusion is precisely what grants her sublimity. On one hand, Antigone rejects Creon's sublime illusion; on the other, she attains a different form of sublimity through her active actions and symbolic death. Therefore, in some sense, Creon and Antigone serve as mutual foils: as the opposing poles of this tragic work, they are both "both blinded by their one-sidedness and thus each unable to recognize the moment of their own truth in the other" [5]. The tragedy can thus be read as a struggle between Creon's secular, political, ideological sublime illusion and Antigone's divine, ethical sublimity that traverses ideological illusions. Ultimately, through her death and "failure," Antigone transforms her sublime illusion into a more eternal form of sublimity.

B. Antigone's New Sublime Beauty as a Response to Historical Oppression

Žižek observes that Antigone's new sublime beauty responds to the deaths of the oppressed throughout history, elevating her sublime illusion beyond the tyranny of ideological sublime illusions and into a more eternal historical realm. Revolution, for Žižek, is fundamentally

about death—and this death is precisely the symbolic death that Antigone brings upon herself through her active actions: exclusion from the symbolic order and entry into the void of the sublime illusion. Thus, in Žižek's view, Antigone embodies the mystery of sublimity in revolutionaries, addressing the question of how revolutionary action is situated within an eternal historical perspective. If we are to distinguish between the new sublime beauty created by Antigone's symbolic death and Creon's decree-based sublimity, it lies in the fact that Antigone's sublime illusion operates on a grander historical scale. To this end, Žižek incorporates and transforms Benjamin's philosophy of history. He argues that the meaning of Antigone's actions and her sublimity resonate with Benjamin's reflections on history and revolution: "the perspective of Benjamin is that of Antigone-for Benjamin, revolution is an affair of life and death; more precisely: of the second, symbolic death. The alternative opened by the revolution is that between redemption, which will retroactively confer meaning on the 'scum of history' (to use this Stalinist expression)-on what was excluded from the continuity of Progress-and the apocalypse (its defeat), where even the dead will again be lost and will suffer a second death: 'even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins' (Thesis VI)" [2]. For Žižek, the first choice represents the victor's perspective, positioning oneself at the endpoint of history to assign meaning to the sacrifices of all the oppressed, thereby justifying Creon's tyranny as necessary for peace and order. The second choice, however, represents the perspective of the oppressed, who cannot tolerate the victors rewriting the meaning of their deaths after the fact. This is precisely what Creon does to Polynices in Antigone and why Antigone takes radical action. In Žižek's view, Antigone represents the second choice inherent in revolutionary events. She cannot tolerate Creon's erasure of Polynices's death, and her actions thus repeat the death of Polynices. This repetition signifies an attempt by revolutionary reality to "expose" symptoms and "save"—to realize within the symbolic realm—those past failed efforts. In this sense, Antigone's death allows Polynices's death—suppressed by Creon's sublime illusion—to return to history. This is what distinguishes Antigone's sublimity from mere ideological sublime illusions. Her symbolic death is not solely about herself but also about the return of the oppressed in history. Through this repetition, the sublime illusion can enter an eternal realm, attaining a beauty imbued with redemptive significance.

VI. CONCLUSION

In summary, Žižek's reflection on the sublime reveals the illusory nature inherent in it, as well as its potential to be utilized by ideology. This extends traditional aesthetics into social and political realms. By using his specific ways of reading classic literature, Žižek offers new insights into works like Antigone. However, it is also important to note that Žižek's discussion of the sublime illusion lacks a deep exploration of what happens after traversing the sublime illusion. Can Antigone, having attained a new sublime beauty, bring about a new social order, or does she become a new sublime illusion herself? This remains a question for further consideration. This is why Žižek later revisited Antigone by

rewriting its ending in a literary creation, offering a new critique of Antigone's actions. In his version, Antigone becomes an accomplice to a new ideological sublime illusion, while the Chorus, representing the masses, unites to overthrow her sublime illusion. Žižek's message is clear: traversing the sublime illusion is not a one-time event but a continuous process of change and action, leading to new historical stages. This, perhaps, is the value of Žižek's theory.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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