

# Against Recycling by James Reich

written by Guest Contributor | June 9, 2016



In *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology*, the 2012 documentary companion to his 1997 book, *The Plague of Fantasies*, Slavoj Žižek constellates a series of ideological vessels, from Starbucks cups, Coca Cola bottles, the Titanic, and *Jaws*, to the corroding fuselages of commercial airliners gathered in the Mojave Desert. Žižek reminds us that the confrontation with these last containers, these landed leviathans, is essential to the critico-ideological comprehension of what I call *capitalism and its discontents*. However, in the precession of constellated ideological vessels, an essential feature of late-capitalism is missing. Žižek suggests that the purchase of, for example, Starbucks's coffee might be offset by donation by the corporation to a humanitarian cause. Yet, what he might have cited as the palliative built in to all of the above, from the coffee cup to the shark, is that engagement is offset less by charity than by *recycling*. Recycling is capitalism's greatest gift to itself, because it is not the *product*, or the ideological container, but it is our very *desire for that product* that is being recycled.

This is why the somewhat Ballardian confrontation with the abandoned airliners in the Mojave Desert is impossible. Recycling distracts us from our terminal position. Without recycling, waste would assert itself with all of its catastrophic force. Recycling conceals from us the true perception of catastrophic waste, precisely the perception that could bring consumer capitalism—were we not within its ideology—to an abrupt halt. Yet, our exaggerated sense that planned obsolescence has a *redemptive* component, in recycling, insulates us from the glacial progress of catastrophic waste, and the institutionalized behavior that sustains it. Recycling does less to delay environmental crisis than it does to negotiate the continual crisis in and of capitalism.

Before Spielberg's ideology-shark is confronted in the 1975 movie *Jaws*, the people of Amity are temporarily consoled by the killing of another, smaller tiger shark. The people believe this distraction shark to be responsible for their suffering. When Richard Dreyfuss/'Hooper' and Roy Scheider/'Brody' cut open the shark to discover its contents, they find trash: tinned food, and a mangled Louisiana license plate. Commercial waste is returned, recycled, from the corpse of what the people believe is haunting them, while the real killer continues its work.

“To say ‘I accept’ in an age like our own is to say that you accept concentration camps, rubber truncheons. Hitler, Stalin, bombs, aeroplanes, tinned food, machine guns, putsches, purges, slogans, Bedaux belts, gas masks, submarines, spies, provocateurs, press censorship, secret prisons, aspirins, Hollywood films, and political murders. Not *only* those things, of course, but, those things among others.” – George Orwell

In George Orwell’s essential essay of 1940, *Inside the Whale*, ambivalent acceptance of the ideology and products of modernity imprisons us within the leviathan, in Hobbesian and Biblical senses. The Bible embodies and elucidates a number of recyclings from its source texts to its mortal paradoxes in resurrection. And is not our recycling a secular miracle, the transubstantiation of trash in a pseudo-spiritual environmental ritual of distraction? Is it not—among other well-intentioned things—a perversely sacrificial means of concealing the nastiness of existence? Of course ‘we’ do not recycle. Predominantly, it is done *for* us, elsewhere, by others who possess the miraculous technology of resurrection, and who happen to be capitalists. Yet, we suspect that not all of the things we abject/offer to recycling are finally recycled. We suspect the narrative we reassure ourselves with is a false one. Evolution has its own component of recycling, also: only a small part of us is ever carried forward into the later, implicitly higher form. Our children carry very little of us, even as they seem to recycle our overdetermined sense of ourselves. Evolution comes at the expense of immeasurable canyons of organic waste. For better and worse, life inside the whale of pervasive ideology is relatively comfortable. There is a higher price to be paid for living to the contrary, anywhere.

But back to Spielberg’s and Žižek’s shark: The license plate retrieved from the shark’s stomach is the uncanny return of Americana. This is just as Spielberg’s *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) is a narrative of uncanny recycling, in sublimated and unconsciously distorted forms that project into its own future. The UFO abductees, returned at the end of the film, particularly the American WWII pilots, are recycled as kitsch Americana because they have been abducted/saved from the original Pacific theatre of war by a kind of extraterrestrial pacifism. Note that in *Jaws*, Robert Shaw/‘Quint’ is a survivor of the USS *Indianapolis*. Always, Spielberg returns, consciously and unconsciously, to redemptive resets of World War II, replaying its ideologies and attendant horrors: Quint’s confession of his fatal history with the *Indianapolis* demands his long-delayed punishment, in the return of the real ideology-shark to avenge Hiroshima. In *Close Encounters*, when, again, Richard Dreyfuss/‘Neary’ (punning ‘nearness’/closeness) finally encounters the UFO mothership, he steps into the sentimental machinery of recycling. *Jaws* is recycled in its sequels, and inside its genre.

The close encounter, the American(a) UFO phenomenon truly takes off after WWII, in pop culture and in psychoanalysis, in Reich and Jung. The production of their pilots—an ambivalent form, both abject and angelic, that presents us with abduction and disappearance, horrific experimentation and Kabbalistic enlightenment—depends on the modernist ambivalence to anti-Semitism. The

visitors/abductors, frequently referred to as The Grays, are produced through the trauma of the concentration camps, and horrors sublimated by their survivors and their American liberators. The UFO phenomenon recycles the Holocaust, individualizes it, and places its components within the American suburban experience, inserting it with ambivalence. We witness the projection of the new (Richard) Dreyfuss Affair, the close encounter with Nazism, fascism, and anti-Semitism. The flying saucer is an ideological, psychoanalytic vessel. It is perhaps inevitable that Spielberg would address Nazism in less sublimated or displaced forms in his later work, or that he would make the visual transfer from Nazis to flying saucers in his pulpy *Raiders* series.

Culture has always depended upon recycling, and is a medium for recycling and suspending the youth of its audience, even as it is frequently ruthless with its protagonists when youth finds its limits. The recycled elements in culture create a continuity, the return of uncanny—and thus, frequently contested—ephemeral elements of the past moving into the future *bricolages*. This process is reassuring. It is a minor distraction from the attritional aspects of culture: waste and failure. Today, the recycling of a relatively small amount of the flotsam and jetsam of capitalism, from Starbucks cups to Nirvana albums and superhero franchises, encourages us to reinvest our desire in the forms of catastrophe and to derive pleasure from them, even when we perceive the discomfort of the uncanny in recycled ephemera. Recycling/aggregation is the *modus operandi* of the Internet, of cheap viral marketing.

Historically, ivory figurines and ivory piano keys failed to signify extinction because death was recycled into art of relative permanence. Here, I must confront the question of why my most recent novel *Mistah Kurtz!* in its own manner, might be said to recycle Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Can one recycle absences, that which was never present? The reading that comes closest to my intentions with the novel is that of a "critical intervention" within the calcified structure of the canon, that landfill of imagination, now increasing part of 'the public domain'. Conrad's novella (re)presents *the horror* of the Belgian Congo, of Conrad's experience there, through abstract distraction. *The horror* in Conrad's account is homeopathic, immeasurable, and in the same instant, canonical and safer for that. There are no elephants in *Heart of Darkness*. Their absence is either an indictment of Belgian savagery, or it is the case that whatever Conrad consciously retained when he wrote the book—a decade after experiencing the Congo so feverishly—was relatively ephemeral, an impression that does not sufficiently indict, but suggests, perhaps, just enough, the waste in the colonial-capitalist project. The reader catches remote glimpses of it, enough to reassure that we know what happened, and in reading this dreamlike text, we are less complicit as we become critics of the destruction. The Congo has already been recycled for us in Conrad, and it is recycled in the militarized policing of our perversely dubbed minority-majority districts in America. In *Heart of Darkness*, only Kurtz is permitted to see it; only Kurtz is—in Orwell's sense—outside the leviathan. This is how Ahab dies, *outside* the whale, yet crucified upon it. His death gesture, beckoning, is endlessly looped. Kurtz himself is delayed and ephemeral, despite the suggestion of immense substance. Absence cannot be

recycled except in an uncanny sense. Absence, or the inability to perceive surplus, permits us to exist in relatively good conscience, even to permit ourselves spiritual feelings about the ghosts of surplus.

In the outsourcing of production, the present colonial capitalist position is concealed. We but glimpse it, blame the profligacy of foreign leaders and the ignorance of their citizens, and enjoy the products we seemingly demand from them. At home, we might complain about our lack of productivity, the absence of mass production. The work has 'gone abroad.' What we have today, in America, and Europe, is a system of consumption that is sustained by a vast—and yet unseen because offshore, or outsourced—caste of non-white women, men, and children toiling to sustain the relative leisure—the so-called lifestyle—of Americans and Europeans. The American import of cheap, toxic goods made under grotesque conditions in China is the uncanny return of capitalism that we guiltily conceal in our recycling bins, allowing conscious recycling of our desire for cheap, toxic goods. Slavery is recycled euphemistically through trade agreements. The vestiges are carried forward in other countries, suffering our environmental consequences abroad. Domestically, it exists in the paradoxical position endured by millions of undocumented immigrants who do the hard labor, the menial, and unsanitary work. The problem for many Americans is not the fact of illegal immigration, but it is the increased *visibility* of illegal immigration. This is true everywhere. We do not care about the fact of crime, only the *visibility* of crime, not the fact of waste but the *visibility* of waste. When the system works, the criminal disappears into the prison mothership, where we delude ourselves that he is recycled into a higher form, despite evidence of recidivism. We do not like to see crime or poverty for both selfish and compassionate reasons; we are haunted by them, even if we have discovered ways to negotiate with them. Distraction in fantasy is—at least for the sustaining of the larger myth-ideology—vital. My father-in-law recently evoked the metaphor of depression as existing within a fog, of not being able to see, when depression is at least as much—if not to a greater extent—a symptom of *seeing too much*, of the removal of the fog of ideology. Pharmaceutical companies regularly employ this sense of fog, clouds, not seeing, in selling us drugs. We are to be convinced that we are not seeing, when we are seeing too clearly and suffering the existential consequences. In his description of the critico-ideological sunglasses in John Carpenter's film *They Live* (1988), Žižek marks the headaches suffered by those who see too clearly the presence of the ideological frame. As Žižek points out, the giving of alms built in to the purchase of certain products, his Starbucks coffee, has a legitimate component; giving loose change to a homeless veteran outside Wal-Mart is a good deed, even if in shopping there first, even while noticing small conscientious gestures within the supermarket itself, recycles our more dangerous desires. As Edward Albee asked, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* In translation: Who's afraid of living without illusions, the sustaining fantasies of bourgeois life? It is vital that we permit ourselves to see the junk piling up. Wake up and smell the shit. Our fear should be that the Mojave Desert remains both impossible, and therefore inevitable.

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