



Enjoy your vacation!

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abstract

Questioning a view that celebrates vacation travel as a little nugget of freedom, this article analyses how workers are accompanied by a pressure to achieve happiness or personal fulfilment when they travel away for rest and pleasure. The analysis draws on the toolbox of Slavoj Žižek to examine fantasies and practices of vacation travel as they relate to contemporary neoliberal demands for self-realization. The main object of analysis is the bestselling self-help memoir *Eat, pray, love*, but also the film version of the novel, advertisements, newspaper articles and guidebooks are included. This article posits that ‘vacation fantasies’ – fantasies that portray the illusion that vacations will bring about personal actualization or wholeness in the subjects who pursue them – promise workers the self-fulfilment they are perhaps unable to achieve through their work, and by doing so, these fantasies ultimately function to keep the workers libidinally invested in their work by allowing them to be more well-adjusted to their own alienation. In this way, the mobility exercised in travelling away binds workers ever closer to their labour.

Self-realization demands in and out of the office

For ‘privileged’ workers, mobility and self-realization is now attainable through work. Or so the neoliberal promise goes. It seems though, that the ideals of ‘work as play’ that came forth in the late 1960s have not lived up to their promise that workers were now free to become whomever they wanted, as claims to self-realization have become yet another source of surplus in the capitalist economy (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005; Rose, 1999; Taylor, 1991; Willig, 2009). Rather than ‘freeing’ the worker, decentralization and anti-bureaucratization has resulted in massive work-encroachment, seemingly unsolvable issues of work-life balance, and skyrocketing numbers of people diagnosed with stress and depression (Sennett, 2006; Petersen, 2011; Honneth, 2004). Also, those who

travel as part of their work are faced with ultimately stressful allure of new avenues of self-realization (Costas, 2013).

Does the institution of vacation offer some relief in this desert of work? Well, firstly it can be difficult to get a vacation these days, as current vacation practices are also fragmented due to increasing periodic employment and growing flexibility in the labour market, and the previously well-defined boundaries between work and vacation are corroding (Anttila, 2007). Particularly in the U.S., where vacations are not a law-given right of the worker, vacations are often oblique, mixed into terms such as 'business travel' and 'working vacations'. Secondly, it seems that workers also face an ultimately stressful self-realization imperative when going on vacation (du Plessis, 2014). When the worker faces a demand for self-realization in the office as well as out of it, work comes along for the vacation even when the worker manages not to bring a laptop. It therefore seems that the institution of vacation offers no mobility when it comes to being a wage earner in the contemporary neoliberal economy.

What is under scrutiny here is 'self-realization vacations' – vacations with a focus on personal fulfilment. These vacations can pertain to workers who are seeking self-realization through their work (i.e. the kinetic elite of knowledge workers) as well as to workers with no self-realization options in their career. Emphasis is on achieving something on the vacation that is not achievable in work life, and the ideal is to be active while away, for example by learning how to cook, losing weight, getting in shape, finding oneself, challenging oneself, living primitively, finding balance in life, volunteering to help less fortunate people or reconnecting with oneself or one's family. The idea is that one can realize oneself through the vacation by finding and reconnecting with one's better, true self. We see this idea in advertisements such as for Canyon Ranch, which is labelled as 'life-enhancement resorts' (Canyon Ranch, 2014) and in the 2011 advertisement campaign for Westin Resorts with the catch phrase 'for a better you' (Communication Arts, 2011).

Beginning from the claim that vacations are now fraught with a damaging self-realization imperative similar to the one characterizing modern work life, this article will run the concept of self-realization vacations through the wringer of Slavoj Žižek's political psychoanalysis in order to challenge the idea that vacations are a benign and pleasant little intermission from work. After arriving at the concept of 'vacation fantasies', Elizabeth Gilbert's *Eat, pray, love* (2006) is presented as a quintessential case of such a fantasy. In conclusion, vacation fantasies will be discussed in relation to issues of mobility in contemporary practices of work and leisure.

Enter Žižek

The idea that vacations offer opportunities for self-realization and hence that the worker must get away in order to work on the self suggests that actual (work) life is unable to provide self-realization. This comes as no surprise when one takes a Žižekian view on self-realization. Building on the psychoanalytical work of Lacan and Freud, a view of the subject as autonomous and in control of its own happiness and self-fulfilment, which is at the forefront of much contemporary self-help and management literature (Mygind du Plessis, 2013), cannot be found with Žižek. Instead, for Žižek, realizing oneself is impossible and only something that can be strived for within the imaginary.

This rather dreary point of departure stems from the view that we as subjects are constituted by a primordial lack manifested by our inability to adequately describe ourselves, a traumatic realization that forces us into the socio-symbolic order. As Lacan puts it, ‘the human being has a special relation to its own *image* – a relation of gap, of alienating tension’ (Lacan, 1988: 323). This constitutive lack stimulates desire and in order to fulfil this desire the subject continuously tries to identify with socially available objects such as family roles, political ideologies, ideals of consumption, career, and so on. However, society and the identification it offers the subject is trapped in the same symbolic order as the subject itself and therefore it can never fulfil the desire, never complete the subject, always leaving the fundamental lack under every fantasy.

Ryan Murphy’s film version of *Eat pray love* (2010) portrays an example of this subject of lack as it pertains to travelling away, when the protagonist, Liz, played by Julia Roberts, is telling her friend why she needs to go:

You know what I felt when I woke up this morning? Nothing! No passion, no spark, no faith, no heat. Absolutely nothing. I’ve gotten past the point where I can be calling this a “bad moment”. And it terrifies me. Jesus, this is like worse than death to me, the idea that this is the person I am going to be from now on! I am not checking out. I need to change. Do you feel my love for you, my support for you? No! There’s like nothing! No pulse! I am going to Italy. I used to have this appetite for food, for my life, and it is just gone. I want to go someplace where I can marvel at something. Language, gelato, spaghetti, something! (Murphy, 2010)

What Liz currently has to identify with is ‘worse than death’ to her. She needs to ‘find herself’, find an identity she can live with, even if it means identifying with spaghetti, and she plans to do this by travelling away. The friend offers a question that is interesting for any identification act: ‘what if it doesn’t work?’ The Žižekian answer is that it is not supposed to. The subject needs to be able to constitute itself as a subject of an unfulfilled desire rather than as a subject of lack.

What the subject relinquishes upon entering the symbolic is *jouissance*, enjoyment, the (imaginary, never fulfilled, impossible) enjoyment attached to the primordial illusion of wholeness. As Žižek (1999: 291) puts it, ‘the trouble with *jouissance* is not only that it is unattainable, always already lost, that it forever eludes our grasp, but, even more, that *one can never get rid of it*, that its stain drags on forever’. This always already lost enjoyment is what structures the desire and being of the subject. As Žižek writes, ‘Desire stands for the economy in which whatever object we get hold of is “never it”, the “Real Thing”, that which the subject is forever trying to attain but which eludes him again and again’ (Žižek, 1999: 291). No object (or vacation, or job) can ever fulfil us:

What we desire are, namely, not just objects, like drinks, clothes or bodies, but the *objet a*, which is really not an object (in the sense of Anglo-American analytical philosophy) at all, but the *object-cause of desire*, that is, that which *makes* us desire concrete stupid objects like drinks, clothes or bodies. The *objet a* is the *lost object*, which we are looking for in everything and everyone around us: where is that which will make me “whole” again after entering language and a world of unpredictable surroundings, in which immediate and harmonious satisfaction is no longer possible? (Jøker Bjerre, 2014: 66)

The renunciation of enjoyment incurs a remainder/surplus of enjoyment (Žižek, 1999: 291), which means that enjoyment is always excessive – Lacan calls it ‘surplus enjoyment’. Surplus enjoyment as it pertains to the individual is thus characterized by a similar paradox as capitalism:

It is not a surplus which simply attaches itself to some “normal”, fundamental enjoyment because enjoyment as such emerges only in this surplus, because it is constitutively an “excess”. If we subtract the surplus we lose enjoyment itself, just as capitalism, which can survive only by incessantly revolutionizing its own material conditions, ceases to exist if it “stays the same”, if it achieves an internal balance. (Žižek, 2008: 54)

The surplus enjoyment compensates for the lack of *jouissance*, and although objects of desire never provide *jouissance*, they resemble *jouissance* and are experienced as excessive, as surplus-enjoyment. The ‘not it’ or ‘not enough’ overlaps the excess (Žižek, 2001b: 22). This ‘coincidence of limit and excess, of lack and surplus’ (Žižek, 2008: 54) is in the wording of advertisements from the vacation travel industry:

Up above the treetops and over rain-fed streams, we'll teach you how to fly. There are 37 unique zip lines waiting to take you on the adventure of a lifetime. Challenge yourself on our world-class bike trails, or explore the only official rainforest in the United States. Discover 12 tropical waterfalls and over 1,500 different species, 3 of which are found nowhere else on Earth. For over 500 years, people have come to Puerto Rico and the Caribbean to discover, explore and create memories. (New York Times: 2012b)

Flying, exploring, discovering, unique, world-class, found nowhere else on Earth; what is all this, what is in fact the memories one is invited to create? It is at once something – an excess – and nothing at all; something that the subject can feel it has attained but at the same time can keep on trying to attain forever. The adventures and explorations – the vacation mobility – all takes place within safe boundaries that will not question the status quo of the socio-symbolic order.

Žižek highlights that ‘enjoyment itself is not an immediate spontaneous state, but is sustained by a super-ego imperative: as Lacan emphasized again and again, the ultimate content of the super-ego injunction is “Enjoy!”’ (Žižek, 1997: 114). This is a paradox in that the super-ego injunction that orders the subject to enjoy ‘through the very directness of its order, hinders the subject’s access to it much more efficiently than any prohibition’ (*ibid.*). Thus, ‘permitted *jouissance* necessarily turns into obligatory *jouissance*’ (Žižek, 2006: 310). This injunction to enjoy comes with a message to let go of any guilt associated with enjoying, yet from a Žižekian viewpoint this is another impossible endeavour because guilt is the result whether we live up to or fail to follow the super-ego injunction. In another scene in the film version of *Eat pray love*, Liz is eating pizza with a friend in Naples, and the friend is not able to enjoy her pizza because of her guilt associated with gaining weight while in Italy. To this, Liz says: ‘what do you mean you can’t [eat it], this is pizza margarita in Napoli, it is your moral imperative to eat and enjoy that pizza!’ (Murphy, 2010), and a bit later, she continues:

I’m so tired of saying no, and waking up in the morning and recalling every single thing I ate the day before, counting every calorie I consume so I know exactly how much self-loathing to take into the shower. I’m going for it. I have no interest in being obese; I’m just through with the guilt. (Murphy, 2010)

Here it seems that Liz is trying to position her enjoyment between ‘too little’ (counting calories and loathing oneself) and ‘too much’ (being obese). Perhaps not surprisingly, Žižek claims that we hate our own enjoyment (Žižek, 1993: 204).

By way of Nietzsche, and as a comment to our contemporary consumerist society, Alenka Zupančič discusses a passive nihilism that defends the subject against surplus enjoyment by pacifying the enjoyment (Zupančič, 2003: 67). The point is not that the subject is asked to cut down on its ways of finding enjoyment, the subject is simply asked to regulate the exciting substances while simultaneously consuming them. Coffee without caffeine and sweets without sugar, (Žižek adds diet-coke, cream without fat and beer without alcohol, (2000: 23 and 2004)) are examples of products that offer regulated enjoyment because

the potentially harmful substance that offers excitement or enjoyment has been eliminated or neutralized. Products like these, Zupančič says, are the perfect answer to the deadlock of being caught in the super-ego imperative 'Enjoy' and the guilt trip 'but be aware that enjoyment can kill you'. To Zupančič, sugarless sweets and decaf coffee are not ascetic but hedonistic acts par excellence because in our time, hedonism has taken the form of self-regulation and as such, hedonism is moral: 'To "work out" regularly, to go on a diet, to stop smoking – such things are not perceived as restrictions on our enjoyment, but, on the contrary, as its forms or conditions' (Zupančič, 2003: 69). As another example, regular sexual activity is encouraged because it is good for one's health: 'Everything is permitted, you can enjoy everything, BUT deprived of its substance which makes it dangerous' (Žižek, 2004). Similarly, self-realization vacations offer regulated enjoyment: when the vacation has a purpose – getting in shape, eating healthily, losing weight, learning a new language, or getting closer to one's true self – the potentially harmful aspects of the vacation, for example being lazy, risking skin cancer, and eating and drinking too much, are deactivated. The moral imperative tells the subject to Enjoy your hike/ summer school/ health retreat/ language course/ marathon, or to Enjoy 'flying' attached to a zip-line. By all means: Enjoy your pizza (it is in fact healthy to do so), but don't become obese! Enjoyment is to remain safe, it must not disrupt the socio-symbolic order.

Vacation fantasies

In the Žižekian framework, the role of fantasy is to tell us how (and what) to desire (Žižek, 1997: 7). Fantasy fills in ideological gaps by offering the subject a means to envision a way out of the dissatisfaction with social reality, and 'In this way, fantasy bestows reality with a fictional coherence and consistency that appears to fulfil the lack that constitutes social reality' (Cottrel, 2014: 90). The fantasy operates such that the impossibility of wholeness is transformed into being perceived as only a prohibition or difficulty, thus leaving the subject with an illusion that the impossibility (primordially lost) can be transgressed (Glynos, 2008b). Keeping the desire unfulfilled, the fantasy gives us an explanation for why our enjoyment is missing; we could enjoy, if only... Žižek's main example of an ideological fantasy is the role of the Jew in the Nazi regime:

What appears as the hindrance to society's full identity with itself is actually its positive condition: by transposing onto the Jew the role of the foreign body which introduces in the social organism disintegration and antagonism, the fantasy-image of society qua consistent, harmonious whole is rendered possible. (Žižek, 2001a: 90)

For analytical purposes, Jason Glynos outlines three key aspects of the logic of fantasy:

First, it has a narrative structure which features, among other things, an ideal and an obstacle to its realization, and which may take a beatific or horrific form; second, it has an inherently transgressive aspect vis-a-vis officially affirmed ideals; and third, it purports to offer a foundational guarantee of sorts, in the sense that it offers the subject a degree of protection from the anxiety associated with a direct confrontation with the radical contingency of social relations. (Glynos, 2008a: 14)

The analysis of vacation fantasy presented in this article is based on these three aspects. As an example, an article with the headline ‘I loved everything about it, but it didn’t love me back’ on the front cover of The New York Times travel section with the subheading ‘How hopes for an intimate mother-daughter escape were dashed by clashing sleep-cycles, a cold jacuzzi and yesterday’s towels; I also couldn’t find a drink’ (Stanley, 2012), can be read against Glynos’ three aspects. The narrative is there: ‘I imagined sunrise walks on the beach, giggly mother-daughter spa treatments and intimate candlelit meals during which Emma would lean in and at long last tell me what college was like besides “fine”’ (Stanley, 2012). Through the narrative, the ideal is established. So are the obstacles – that the author’s daughter wants to sleep until 1 pm every day, as well as a range of issues with the resort that prohibits the author and her daughter from spending quality time together: ‘On our third day of so-so meals, erratic service and no Jacuzzi or bike repair, I went to a manager and complained’ (*ibid.*). The transgressive aspect is also related to the resort – the bad service is what needs to be overcome, what is prohibiting the author’s enjoyment. Finally the safe identity offered is that if it weren’t for the resort or their different sleep patterns, the author would in fact be a mother who bonded with her college daughter on a perfect spring-break getaway. She can keep that identity as a possibility, putting the resort in as the obstacle preventing its realization.

With the concept of ideological fantasies, Žižek revises the Marxian formula for ideology, ‘they do not know it, but they are doing it’, from focusing on the aspect of not knowing to the aspect of doing, by arguing that today people ‘know very well how things really are, but still they are doing it as if they did not know’ (Žižek, 2008: 30). The ideology works because everyone is acting according to it; the question of their knowledge in relation to the ideology is not the issue:

The illusion is therefore double: it consists in overlooking the illusion which is structuring our real, effective relationship to reality. And this overlooked, unconscious illusion is what may be called the *ideological fantasy*. (Žižek, 2008: 30)

Thus ‘even if we do not take things seriously, even if we keep an ironical distance, we are still doing them’ (Žižek, 2008: 30). In relation to the example of

the mother-daughter escape, even if the mother knows that the perfect resort wouldn't make her daughter open up to her, she still acts as if she believes it by writing the article as if she believes it.

Thus, we can speak of 'vacation fantasy' when a vacation is imagined as being able to bring about personal actualization or wholeness. This fantasy of a perfect, (self)-fulfilling vacation 'of a life-time' figures as the object-cause of desire, and motivates the worker to travel away again and again as a part of his or her continuous search for an always-already lost wholeness. Guidebooks speak to the vacation fantasy with phrases like 'you want to be shown those things that will make this vacation the best of your life' (Doughty, 2007: 9), and 'this region has it all: beauty, variety, and a chance of the hike or fish of a lifetime – there is nothing else like it' (Stienstra and Brown, 2009: 3). In relation to the double illusion of ideological fantasies, many workers know that their next vacation will probably not leave them happy, balanced, rested, and reconnected, that it will probably not provide meaning in their lives, and that it will probably not make them able to finish a project of realizing themselves. Still, workers can plan and go on vacations as if they believe that a vacation will fulfil these desires, and can retrospectively talk about their vacation as if it was successful, regardless of how happy and balanced they were while away. In relation to work life, the vacation fantasy offers a solution if work life itself fails to offer the fulfilment one needs: one can achieve this on vacation and bring it back into real work life afterwards. In this way, the vacation fantasy offers the illusion that one's life as a whole can be infused with meaning during the vacation, and thereby offers the illusion that one's entire life can be 'lived' in two, three or five weeks out of the year. In that sense, the vacation fantasy offers a mobility that results in sustaining the opposite of that mobility. As a travel advertisement says: 'here's to the uplifting of spirits, the re-ordering of priorities, and the unravelling of inhibitions. Live your life. Escape winter at The Cove' (New York Times, 2012a). This reader's comment to a newspaper article is another good example of vacation fantasy:

Life is too short to not appreciate every moment of it. I realize that's why I work so hard, to take these vacations. (Rosenbloom, 2006)

This excerpt from a blog provides another example of vacation fantasy:

Before the end of vacation I became more comfortable in my bikini than I did in clothes. I learned to re-love every curve, muscle, and stretch mark. I became lost in the moment and let go of all the concerns surrounding me. I fell madly in love with my boyfriend all over again, didn't care if I was out all night partying or in bed by 10:30, and re-discovered the real Meghann. It was amazing....Call it a vacation high or whatever, but I don't want this feeling of lust and pure happiness to ever end. This feeling of re-discovery is why vacations are so important.

Sometimes we need an escape from reality to remember who we really are and who we want to be. (Anderson, 2011)

Finally, this reader comment displays the notion that what was attained on vacation can be taken back into everyday life:

After a week in Grand Staircase-Escalante in Utah, where no one could care less about what you wear or what kind of shoes you have, I came home with a keener sense of self and a sharper mind. It was empowering to have a new set of skills, even if I can't make use of them on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. (Robinovitz, 2004)

Eat, pray, love

Elizabeth Gilbert's bestselling novel *Eat, pray, love* (2006) is characterized as part travel memoir, part self-help book (Gilmore, 2010), and presents an exemplary outline of the vacation fantasy. The book is a description of how the author survived her divorce and depression by travelling for a year; to Italy 'in the pursuit of pleasure', India 'in the pursuit of devotion' and Bali 'in the pursuit of balance', and reads as a manifesto that you can get over sorrow, depression and life-crises; find yourself and realize yourself; become happy, balanced, healthy and beautiful, and find true love – if you go vacation travelling. Liz obtains the psychoanalytical 'impossible wholeness' on her travel, and describes the entire process in detail to her reader, conveying a 'true story' that the vacation fantasy is obtainable. The book is an interesting case because it, in the author's words, 'went out in the world for some reason and became this big, mega, sensation, international bestseller thing' (Gilbert, 2009). The book has sold over 10 million copies, been translated into 30 languages, and as mentioned earlier, premiered as a major motion picture in 2010. A newspaper article states, 'the book has touched a chord of longing in millions of women, even if they aren't reeling from a divorce and a subsequent disastrous love affair, like Gilbert' (Marshall, 2010). The book itself is an example of blurred boundaries of work, because Gilbert is paid in advance by her publisher to write a book about her trip. It is likely that this book depicts and speaks to desires and practices recognizable in the lives (and minds) of modern workers in relation to their vacation travels. As Gilbert asks at one point, 'is this just the fallout of a post-feminist American career girl trying to find balance in an increasingly stressful and alienating urban world?' (Gilbert, 2006: 49). The situation that provokes Liz to go travelling not only speaks to the Žižekian theory of our constant attempts to identify with things to cover an existential lack, but is also no doubt familiar to many modern people chasing self-realization:

Wasn't I proud of all we'd accumulated – the prestigious home in the Hudson Valley, the apartment in Manhattan, the eight phone lines, the friends, and the picnics and the parties, the weekends spent roaming the aisles of some box-shaped superstore of our choice, buying ever more appliances on credit? I had actively participated in every moment of the creation of this life – so why did I feel like none of it resembled me? (Gilbert, 2006: 11)

Reading into Glynos' three key aspects of the logic of fantasy as described earlier, the narrative aspect of the vacation fantasy is inherent in Gilbert's narrative of one year of travel. The ideal is for her to find meaning and happiness in her life, the obstacle is her nasty past that has left her in a state of depression. Liz starts by moving to Rome, and an idealized vacation story of happiness and freedom unfolds:

These weeks of spontaneous travel are such a glorious twirl of time, some of the loosest days of my life, running to the train station and buying tickets left and right, finally beginning to flex my freedom for real because it has finally sunk in that I can go wherever I want. One night in a town somewhere on the Mediterranean, in a hotel room by the ocean, the sound of my own laughter actually wakes me up in the middle of my deep sleep. (Gilbert, 2006: 97)

The protagonist directs her desires and identification acts at food and language:

I found that all I really wanted was to eat beautiful food and speak as much beautiful Italian as possible. That was it. The amount of pleasure this eating and speaking brought to me was inestimable, and yet so simple. (Gilbert, 2006: 63)

By doing so, she manages to get to a state where 'happiness inhabited my every molecule' (Gilbert, 2006: 64). As the narrative progresses, threats and obstacles occur and the identification acts are challenged:

Depression and Loneliness track me down after about ten days in Italy....Then they frisk me. They empty my pockets of any joy I had been carrying there. Depression even confiscated my identity; but he always does that. (Gilbert, 2006: 46)

Congruent with neoliberal ideals of personal responsibility, what needs to be transgressed and the safe identity offered by the vacation fantasy are both within Liz herself.

The Italy part of the book is a testament to the idea that one can become more whole and more fully identified with oneself by travelling and indulging in simple pleasures, and, like the movie based on the book, hints at the illusion of guilt-free enjoyment. A reader with Žižekian analytical glasses on clearly sees the super-ego injunction to enjoy:

Why must everything always have a practical application? I'd been such a diligent soldier for years - working, producing, never missing a deadline, taking care of my

loved ones, my gums and my credit record, voting etc. Is this lifetime supposed to be only about duty? In this dark period of loss, did I need any justification for learning Italian other than that it was the only thing I could imagine bringing me any pleasure right now? (Gilbert, 2006: 23)

Furthermore, not feeling guilty – and stating that enjoyment is harmless – is portrayed as a way to achieve a better version of oneself:

In my real life, I have been known to eat organic goat's milk yoghurt sprinkled with wheat germ for breakfast. My real-life days are long gone. Still, when I look at myself in the mirror of the best pizzeria in Naples, I see a bright-eyed, clear-skinned, happy and healthy face. I haven't seen a face like that on me for a long time. (Gilbert, 2006: 81)

I came to Italy pinched and thin. I did not know yet what I deserved. I still maybe don't fully know what I deserve. But I do know that I have collected myself of late – through the enjoyment of harmless pleasures – into somebody more intact. The easiest, most fundamentally human way to say it is that I have put on weight. I exist more now than I did four months ago. I will leave Italy noticeably bigger than when I arrived here. (Gilbert, 2006: 116)

After Italy, India has the transgressive aspect of the fantasy at the forefront. There, Liz lives in an ashram where she works on herself through meditation, chanting, yoga and house chores:

They want you to come here strong because Ashram life is rigorous. Not just physically, with days that begin at 3:00 AM and end at 9:00 PM, but also psychologically. You're going to be spending hours and hours a day in silent meditation and contemplation, with little relief or distraction from the apparatus of your own mind. You will be living in close quarters with strangers, in rural India. There are bugs and snakes and rodents. The weather can be extreme - sometimes torrents of rain for weeks on end, sometimes 100 degrees in the shade before breakfast. Things can get deeply real around here, very fast. (Gilbert, 2006: 128)

There are many descriptions of the hardships of ashram life:

I'm so ashamed of my rage that I go and hide in (yet another!) bathroom and cry. (Gilbert, 2006: 148)

The biggest obstacle in my Ashram experience is not meditation, actually. That's difficult, of course, but not murderous. There's something even harder for me here. The murderous thing is what we do every morning after meditation and before breakfast. (Gilbert, 2006: 161)

So I went to the chant the next morning, all full of resolve, and [it] kicked me down a twenty-foot flight of cement stairs – or anyway, that's how I felt. The following day it was even worse. (Gilbert, 2006: 164)

The transgressive climax is an evening when Liz resolves the guilt and anger associated with her divorce. A fellow ashram resident shows her up to the roof of the ashram and gives her a note with sentences such as ‘With all your heart, forgive him, FORGIVE YOURSELF, and let him go’ (Gilbert, 2006: 185), and ‘When the past has passed from you at last, let go. Then climb down and begin the rest of your life. With great joy’ (*ibid.*). The protagonist then starts to meditate:

Much later I opened my eyes, and I knew it was over. Not just my marriage and not just my divorce, but all the unfinished bleak hollow sadness of it...it was over. I could feel I was free. (Gilbert, 2006: 187)

The reward for Gilbert is the safe identity of complete happiness, of having found one’s own version of ‘God’, to once again have a sense of meaning in life:

It was pure, this love that I was feeling, it was godly. I looked around the darkened valley and I could see nothing that was not God. I felt so deeply, terribly happy. I thought to myself, “Whatever this feeling is – this is what I have been praying for. And this is also what I have been praying to”. (Gilbert, 2006: 203)

After India, the story of Bali is again the story of the ideal vacation:

I am so free here in Bali, it’s almost ridiculous....In the evenings I spin my bicycle high up into the hills and across the acres of rice terraces north of Ubud, with views so splendid and green. I can see the pink clouds reflected in the standing water of the rice paddies...The unnecessary and superfluous volume of pure beauty around here is not to be believed. I can pick papayas and bananas right off the trees outside my bedroom window...I don’t mind anything these days. I can’t imagine or remember discontent. (Gilbert, 2006: 234)

Not being able to imagine or remember discontent is completely transgressing the fundamental lack. The vacation fantasy is spelled out for the reader, and also speaks to the reader’s desire by putting itself forth as a ‘true story’:

...I’ve circled the world, settled my divorce, survived my final separation from David, erased all mood-altering medications from my system, learned to speak a new language, sat upon God’s palm for a few unforgettable moments in India, studied at the feet of an Indonesian medicine man....I am happy and healthy and balanced. And, yes, I cannot help but notice that I am sailing to this pretty little tropical island with my Brazilian lover....I think about the woman I have become lately, about the life that I am now living, and about how much I always wanted to be this person and live this life, liberated from the farce of pretending to be anyone other than myself. I think of everything I endured before getting here and wonder if it was me – I mean, this happy and balanced me, who is now dozing on the deck of this small Indonesian fishing boat – who pulled the other, younger, more confused and more struggling me forward during all those hard years. (Gilbert, 2006: 329)

The attractions of Gilbert's book are exemplified by 'Eat, pray, love tours', where one could walk Liz' footsteps and perhaps find what she found, that were widespread after the release of the novel. For example, a newspaper article claims that the number of visitors in Bali more than doubled in the four years after the book came out, and that fans of the book 'yearned for some of Gilbert's hard-won equilibrium', a desire that is 'fuelling the travel industry's newest niche: spiritual tourism' (Marshall, 2010). To talk of a desire for equilibrium fuelling the travel industry is the vacation fantasy of the readers in a nutshell. For example, 'Spirit Quest Tours' offers a tour with the headline 'change your thoughts, change your life, visit Bali', and state:

You read Eat, Pray, Love. And you loved it. And you wanted to change your life, too. But who can take a year off to travel? How about a week to experience some of the marvellous changes author Elizabeth Gilbert enthralled us with in her memoir? (Spirit Quest Tours, 2012)

As the owner of Spirit Quest Tours says:

...going on these trips is a way to reclaim themselves, to bring back meaning into their lives. Denise just wanted to remember why she loved her job. (Marshall, 2010)

The idea that a vacation can bring back meaning into one's life – can give one the self-realization one perhaps is unable to attain through work – is again the vacation fantasy at work. Judging by website references such as 'the trip to Bali was life-altering', 'I have been forever changed by Bali', 'From Ubud Bodyworks to the farewell dinner on the beach, I came away with a new family and a new me' (Spirit Quest Tours, 2012), the vacation fantasy is attainable, however one wonders when these women – and Liz for that matter – will again crave another trip or another object of desire.

Within the Žižekian framework, the only feasible way to enjoy a vacation is vis-à-vis a fantasy about it, and in this sense the fantasy must remain unfulfilled. For example, it is much easier to enjoy the fantasy of an ashram than to enjoy being in the ashram yourself. As visitors say in their reviews of an ashram in India:

Rooms are tiny with a thin mattress on a wood block and bathrooms full of spiders with mosquitoes everywhere! Only plus is you can sneak onto The Atlantis premises to get a real meal. There is nothing 'spa' about it...it was a little too much like sleep away camp for me – felt really rustic. I thought it would be a tad more luxurious...I signed up for a retreat...not rehab!!! (Tripadvisor, 2012)

Everything works best if one remains safely within the socio-symbolic order and leaves the rest up to fantasies. Subsequently, the 'self-realization' sought after on vacation is self-realization without really meeting yourself. One could say that it

is the diet, decaf version of enlightenment, because true enlightenment – the realization that you will never truly realize yourself and feel whole, or the realization that you hate your job and that you are stuck in it – is dangerous.

In addition to positing that one must travel away to attain fulfilment, *Eat, pray, love* pairs the injunction to Enjoy (and to eat! and pray! and love!) with a moralistic message that personal happiness is the sole responsibility of the subject. As Leigh Gilmore writes, ‘in the packaging of the redemption narrative in neoliberal times, the individual becomes tasked with her own redemption’ (Gilmore, 2010: 660). This is very clear in *Eat, pray, love*:

You might just as well hang it up and kiss God good-bye if you really need to keep blaming somebody else for your own life’s limitations. (Gilbert, 2006: 186)

I keep remembering one of my Guru’s teachings about happiness....Happiness is the consequence of personal effort. You fight for it, strive for it, insist upon it, and sometimes even travel around the world looking for it. You have to participate relentlessly in the manifestations of your own blessings. And once you have achieved a state of happiness, you must never become lax about maintaining it, you must make a mighty effort to keep swimming upwards into that happiness forever, to stay afloat on top if it. If you don’t, you will leak away your innate contentment. (Gilbert, 2006: 260)

Zupančič notes a ‘contemporary ideological rhetoric of happiness’ – she even calls it a ‘bio-morality’ – resting on ‘the axiom that a happy person is a good person and an unhappy person a bad person’ (Zupančič, 2008: 5). There is moral value in being happy today, and ‘negativity, lack, dissatisfaction, unhappiness, are perceived more and more as moral faults – worse, as a corruption at the level of our very being’ (*ibid.*). This view is also portrayed in Gilbert’s novel:

The search for contentment is, therefore, not merely a self-preserving and self-benefitting act, but also a generous gift to the world. Clearing out all your misery gets you out of the way. You cease being an obstacle, not only to yourself but to anyone else. Only then are you free to serve and enjoy people. (Gilbert, 2006: 260)

As the above analyses point to, there can be enormous pressure on the subject who travels. Facing up to the imperatives to enjoy, be happy, and realize oneself is a lot harder than the travel industry and Gilbert portrays it to be. A way of escaping our own *jouissance* and relieving ourselves of the super-ego injunction to enjoy is by enjoying through the other. Describing what he calls a ‘paradox of interpassivity’, Žižek gives the example of advertisements that passively enjoy the product they are advertising for us, for example Coke cans with the words ‘“Ooh! Ooh! What taste!” that emulate the ideal response of the customer in advance’ (Žižek, 1997: 112f.). Žižek also describes this externalized enjoyment with an example of canned laughter as the Other,

...embodied by the television set – is relieving us even of our duty to laugh – is laughing instead of us. So ‘even if, tired from a hard day’s stupid work, all evening we did nothing but gaze drowsily into the television screen, we can say afterwards that objectively, through the medium of the other, we had a really good time. (Žižek, 2008: 33)

Perhaps one of the draws of *Eat, pray, love* is that it offers its reader enjoyment through Liz, who is so good at enjoying, thus relieving the reader of the difficulty of facing up to a vacation of trying to find true happiness through eating gelato and living in an ashram. By reading Gilbert’s book or going to Bali for one week tracing her footsteps, the reader can learn everything Liz learned on her one-year journey, without investing the time and enduring the painful self-investigation that Liz did.

Conclusion: Vacation as fetish

To Žižek, a fetish is an ‘embodiment of the Lie which enables us to sustain the unbearable truth’ (Žižek, 2001b: 13). The subject ‘rationally’ accepts the truth, yet is only able to do so because she or he has their fetish to cling to, and the subject’s acceptance of the way things are will dissolve if the fetish is taken away. So, Žižek says, when anyone asserts to be cured of any beliefs and claims to accept social reality the way it is, one should always ask ‘OK, but *where is the fetish which enables you to (pretend to) accept reality “the way it is?”*’ (Žižek, 2001b: 15). As an example of such a fetish, Žižek describes what he calls ‘Western Buddhism’, a type of spiritualism that is also advocated in *Eat, pray, love*:

Instead of trying to cope with the accelerating rhythm of technological progress and social change, one should rather renounce the very endeavour to retain control over what goes on, rejecting it as the expression of the modern logic of domination – one should, instead, “let oneself go,” drift along, while retaining an inner distance and indifference towards the mad dance of this accelerated process, a distance based on the insight that all the social and technological upheaval is ultimately just an unsubstantial proliferation of semblances which do not really concern the innermost kernel of our being. (Žižek, 2001b: 13)

I will add that the vacation fantasy is also such a fetish, in that it enables the subject to accept the reality of a whole year (minus three weeks) of work. If this little nugget of mobile ‘freedom’ was removed from the workers, they would be confronted with the reality that they are first and foremost wage-earners. In relation to neoliberal work practices, Žižek posits ‘Western Buddhism’ as ‘establishing itself as the hegemonic ideology of global capitalism’:

Although “Western Buddhism” presents itself as a remedy against the stressful tension of the capitalist dynamics, allowing us to uncouple and retain inner peace

and *Gelassenheit*, it actually functions as its perfect ideological supplement. (Žižek, 2001b: 12)

In the same way, the vacation fantasy becomes an ideological supplement for capitalist modes of work. The mobility that is practiced when workers travel away for vacation is a mobility that in essence functions to fix workers in their role as workers. ‘Excessive attachment to the part means that the fetishist “misses the bigger picture”’ (Taylor, 2014: 93). Vacations thus function to make the workers more comfortable with (or, accepting of) their own alienation, and by doing so keeps the workers libidinally invested in their work. As such, the main gap of social reality that the vacation fantasy offers a veil for is the worker’s alienation. Coupled with the neoliberal claim that it is a personal responsibility and a moral obligation of the individual to be happy and fulfilled, the vacation fantasy can keep us all tightly invested in the status quo. This makes the vacation fantasy the sugar-coating that enables the subject to swallow the (immobile) reality of work life, year after year.

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