
Shovah's Reality (Re)Construction: A Žižekian Reading of Ideology in Phil Kelly's *Farsight*

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the logic behind Shovah's ideology of the Greater Good and how his fantasy helps him reconstruct his reality in Phil Kelly's novel *Farsight*. The primary data of this research was obtained by means of close reading of the novel, notably the narrations and conversations which concern Shovah and his overall attitude. The analysis of Shovah's ideological journey employs Slavoj Žižek's theory of ideology. The study reveals that the Greater Good acts as an ideological quilt, an empty signifier that unifies particular attributes. However, at the same time, the Greater Good as an ideological quilt is unstable because there is nothing behind it. According to Žižek's theory, Shovah's devotion to the Greater Good can be seen as a process of satisfying the traumatic abyss of the big Other, which is analogous to nothingness. To elude this traumatic abyss, Shovah constructed a fantasy, a screen against the desire of the big Other, to keep living in reality.

Keywords: *ideology, fantasy, reality construction, T'au Empire, Warhammer 40,000*

INTRODUCTION

Phil Kelly's *Farsight* (2015) is a novel and part of the *Warhammer 40,000* (hereafter *W40K*) fictional universe set in a dystopian far-future between the 39th and 41st millenniums. *Farsight* is specifically set on planet Arkunasha. Arkunasha is a colony under the T'au Empire whose dominant inhabitants are an alien species called the T'au. Central in the story is a T'au military commander named Shovah, who was assigned to the colony for a mission of repelling alien invaders that belong to the Ork species. After a series of battles against the Orks, he achieved victory. In the process, however, he grew some doubts about the Empire's ideals. Yet, ultimately, he stood still and reinforced his belief to function normally in his everyday life. This is a form of inner struggle concerning ideology in which Shovah underwent possible displacement of values. This research aims to uncover how Shovah's ideology operates and how his reality is being reconstructed according to Slavoj Žižek's concept of ideology.

Before further discussion on the specific literary aspects of *Farsight*, it is necessary to note that its setting belongs to a bigger fictional universe called *W40K*. This universe is originally a tabletop war game and has lately gained more popularity proven by its expansions in other media such as video games, audio dramas, comic books, and indeed, novels. Yet, as indicated by Baumgartner (2015: 38) the amount of research on *W40K* is still limited. Discussions about this vast fictional universe oftentimes focus more on the game, that is its design and rules, rather than its narrative. This is due to the frequent approach coming from the lens of game studies which frequently excludes narratives, let alone novels. This fact can be seen in the work of Carter, Gibbs, and Harrop (2014a) which investigates a tabletop game tournament. In another paper, they focus on the roles of dice (Carter, Gibbs, & Harrop, 2014b).

Baumgartner (2015: 38) demonstrates why the

narrative aspects of *W40K* should not be neglected. It is not only the tabletop war game that contributes to the *W40K* universe, but also the various narrative styles, genres, and tropes found in other media. Indeed, by other media, it means the smaller media such as video games and novels mentioned earlier, including *Farsight*. Baumgartner's idea of smaller versus main media is a concept coming from transmedia storytelling, a form of storytelling that "... represents a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience (Jenkins, 2007: para. 2)." In that sense, *Farsight* is one of the multiple delivery channels of a unified and coordinated *W40K*. The authors believe that an investigation of *Farsight* could contribute to the study of *W40K*.

Meanwhile, Ryder (2021) has asserted the relevance of *W40K* in the realm of science fiction studies. He argued that the speculative nature of *W40K* filled with issues of the state, sovereignty, and law is useful to inquire about more general cultural practices, even in real-world situations. Apropos of that, this study can contribute to the study of science fiction particularly on how ideology works in the fictional universe of *W40K*.

The T'au Empire, one of the many factions in *W40K* and the state Shovah pledged his allegiance to, believes in an abstract concept called the "Greater Good (Games Workshop, 2018: 3)." It does not refer to the clear or single agency such as God or someone who wields unlimited political power. It is simply a way of life centered around the idea of self-sacrifice for the benefit of the Empire. The ideal of the Greater Good divides the T'au society into several castes. The ones who actualized the Greater Good's abstract concept into practical commands are the Ethereal caste, the leader of the Empire. The Ethereals have a powerful jurisdiction over other castes and state affairs. Throughout *Farsight*, there were clashes between the Ethereals of Arkunasha and Commander Shovah regarding the operations to repel Orks invaders. The Ethereals preferred risk-free methods. On the contrary, Shovah's plan was experimental, due to the different military tactics he employed during his cadet days. Shovah was criticized by the Ethereals and was demoted from the Arkunasha emergency council. Nevertheless, he was still allowed to operate. Shovah himself did not want to disobey the Ethereals

completely as it would make him disobey the Greater Good. This later created an inner struggle in Shovah's mind relating to his ideology.

Ideology here is seen as a personal matter. It refers simply to one's internalization of doctrines or thinking characteristics. This is one of the three moments of ideology explained by Žižek (1994), the spontaneous and everyday activities, with the other two being the doctrines themselves and their materiality (state apparatuses, for example). Another point of interest is, following Žižek's *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, that ideology is personal because it operates at the unconscious level. Žižek (2008) further elaborates that ideology revolves around a certain traumatic impossibility. Participants of ideology can only function properly in their immediate reality by constructing ideological fantasy to conceal that impossibility. This concept is a useful tool to uncover Shovah's personal struggle concerning his belief in the Greater Good and the Ethereals.

In explaining ideology, Žižek shows his Lacanian form. He departs from the classical Marxist notion that ideology acts as a mask that obstructs reality. In classical Marxism, ideology is a belief system that is not equally productive in a way that it is favorable to some people but harmful for others (Tyson, 2006). An ideological mask prevents someone from objectively seeing the world. One of the projects of Marxism is to remove this ideological mask so that one can experience reality objectively. For Žižek (2008), the understanding that there is an 'objective' reality is naive. Reality, he claims, is already ideological. For Žižek, ideology is a matter of a signifier, a 'nodal point', that quilts free-floating attributes. This ideological quilt has a unifying power. However, at the same time, it is also unstable because there is nothing behind it. More precisely, this nothingness is a traumatic abyss of the big Other's desire. In Žižekian fashion, the big Other can be understood as society's unwritten constitution, a part of human nature that directs and controls us (Žižek, 2007: 8). This seemingly unseen agency operates at the Symbolic level and also is the Symbolic itself (Evans, 2006). The Symbolic, in contrast, is "a yardstick against which I can measure myself" (Žižek, 2007: 9). In other words, it is a vantage point within someone from which he can see the horizon that can include law, societal rules, common sense, and such like. The big Other exists within someone as a subjective presupposition. Its

existence is only supported by the fact that he acts as if it really exists, hence the term “nothingness” mentioned earlier.

In relation to the big Other, there is a process of identification (Žižek, 2008: 117). It must be noted that it is not an identification as in when someone imitates another person. It is not excavating someone else’s traits and copying them. Rather, there is a certain gaze in the big Other. Therefore, when someone is doing a process of identification, he acts as if he is being observed by something. However, it is impossible to fully satisfy the big Other, who will ask “Che vuoi?” or in Žižekian sense: “You’re telling me that, but what do you want with it, what are you aiming at?” (Žižek, 2008: 123). In order to avoid this deadlock, there is a need to escape from it by constructing fantasy. This fantasy conceals the traumatic abyss of the big Other’s desire. By distancing himself from that abyss, he is able to keep functioning (Žižek, 2008: 132).

The abyss of the big Other’s desire can be understood as the Lacanian Real. For Žižek (Žižek, 2008: 48), there is a traumatic kernel, that is the Real, at the center of the Symbolic. The Real “resists symbolization and incorporation into the big Other of linguistic systems and shared, symbolic practices” (Wood, 2012: 48). However, it is not a reduction of a particular excessive feature that cannot be grasped and experienced fully because of the entanglement in the Symbolic. It is not a richness that is reduced by the inability of signifiers to signify something at its fullest. It differs from the logic of “this signifier is inadequate to represent myself”. It is not a “representative of the signified, of the mental representation-idea” (Žižek, 2008: 179). Rather, it is an indicator of an impossibility. Here, it can be remembered that fantasy acts as concealment of this impossibility. It offers support to reality. Without it, participants of ideology will lose a sense of balance in their immediate reality. In other words, fantasy is reality itself.

There are previous studies that utilized Žižek’s theory to analyze other works of literature. A study conducted by Asri, Utami, & Ningtyas (2019) and the one by Faisal & Setijawan (2018) apply Žižek’s Symbolic on Joyce Libra’s *The Scent of the Sake* and the Indonesian-translated Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s *Sehari Dalam Hidup Ivan Denisovich* respectively. An application of Žižek’s Real can be found in a work of Himmah (2019) that analyzes Ahmad Mustofa Bisri’s *Gus Jakfar*. Unlike those works, the current research

focuses more on reality construction through fantasy. The notion of the Symbolic and the Real is not used in isolation.

No previous research examining Phil Kelly’s *Farsight* (2015) has been found so far. However, there are some instances where *W40K* is the focus. A work of Muñoz-Guerado & Triviño-Cabrera (2018) revolves around female representation in *W40K*. Their finding of women-excluding setting is undeniably narrative-heavy and concerns a little about the tabletop war game mechanics itself. A work of Ryder (2021) investigates how war in the grim and dark world of *W40K* relates to our real-life issues of war and control. Similar to the previously mentioned work, it concerns narration instead of game mechanics. In another study, Johnson (2022) explores the sublime and the grotesque aesthetics of humanoid species in *W40K*. The work suggests that the protagonists of *W40K* offer unique characteristics that are different from just alien and horror-inducing figures commonly found in other works of literature.

The next section presents an attempt to apply Žižekian concepts of ideology and reality in analyzing *Farsight*. To be precise, the primary data for the analysis are narrations and conversations which concern Shovah and his overall attitude, obtained by means of close reading of the novel. To provide some context, the *W40K guidebook Codex: T’au Empire* (2018) is used. The secondary data are taken from books related to Žižek’s theory, particularly *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (2008) by Žižek himself which is also supported by *Slavoj Žižek* by Tony Myers (2004) and *Žižek: A Reader’s Guide* by Kelsey Wood (2012).

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

The most fundamental part of being a citizen of the T’au Empire is to believe in the Greater Good. It is an abstract concept believed by the citizens of the T’au Empire (Games Workshop, 2018: 3). It is a different concept from God who acts as an omnipotent being. It is not an entity to which T’au Empire citizens pray. Therefore, the belief of the Empire is not a model of religion as seen in real-world monotheistic traditions. The Greater Good is also not a person who wields unlimited political authority. The highest political leader of the Empire is the Ethereal Supreme (Games Workshop, 2018: 13). In theory, the Ethereal Supreme’s

word is absolute. In practice, however, overseeing an interstellar empire is too much for a single person to do. There is still the Ethereal High Council supervising the decision-making of the Empire. Furthermore, the Empire is split into several administrative divisions called sept, each having its own governing body filled with, of course, the Ethereals. Despite such a complex structure, the leaders of the Empire act in accordance with the Greater Good.

The Greater Good, despite its abstractness, has a basic pattern: if it is for the betterment of the Empire, then it is (Games Workshop, 2018: 6). Their interstellar colonization is supported by this idea—the belief that conquering the galaxy is their destiny. It can be said that the whole elements of the Empire agree with this. It is an easy order for them to follow. However, more tricky situations do emerge. For example, the means to “reach” their destiny is debatable. In the novel, there was an initial disagreement between the leader of the Arkunashan colony, Aun’Tal, and Shovah regarding the plan to repel the Orks (Kelly, 2015). Naturally, Shovah had to relinquish his plan and follow Aun’tal. There was also a disagreement between Shovah, a Fire caste member, and El’Vesa of the Earth caste regarding the use of AI to pilot a battlesuit. In spite of these disagreements, they all believed that they acted for the Greater Good. This shows that while the Greater Good seems to have a unifying power, it is also unstable. The logic behind this unifying-yet-unstable Greater Good can be explained using Žižek’s theory.

The Greater Good as an Ideological Quilt

Žižek (2008) refutes the idea of searching for the essence of ideology. In showing the problem of essentialism, Žižek points out how the supposedly-definite attributes of ideology could create confusion. To see the Greater Good from an essentialist point of view is to try to describe its definite attributes. These attributes are fixed and permanent. They are what is inside the Greater Good that makes it the Greater Good. Such a procedure might yield an illustration of the Greater Good as the bearer of, for example, true galactic peace, the pioneering spirit, or a civilized culture in the *W40K* universe. This might reveal the reasons behind the conflict between Arkunashan T’au colonists and Ork invaders. From the T’au’s perspective, they were the ones who could bring orders to the millennia-long war-torn Milky Way galaxy and thus proceeded to spread their influences by means of

interstellar colonization. Along the way, however, they must fight the Orks, the manifestation of savagery who resisted true ‘culture’. The clash between culture and savagery is portrayed during one of Shovah’s battles in a certain Arkunashan desert. Shovah and his forces operated technologically advanced battlesuits which can automatically turn on by sensing the presence of their pilots. In contrast, the Orks employed “crude walkers of dark metal ...” whose “... piston-driven legs driving them forwards with a gait so ungainly [was] almost comical” (Kelly, 2015: 4-0 section).

However, the Orks could do the same. They could “seize” the fixed and permanent attributes of the Greater Good. For them, then, it was the T’au who delayed the peace of the Milky Way galaxy. If it was not because of the T’au, the Orks could have expanded their reach to every fringe of the galaxy. Diplomatic negotiations would only result in the T’au galactic exploitation. The T’au’s arrogant attitude thus could only be eradicated through military confrontations. If the way of the Orks was also justified, then it is uncertain who was the true bearer of peace, pioneering, and culture. This is what Žižek means by confusion caused by essentialism.

Žižek’s (2008) proposition is that it is only a matter of signifiers. The features that describe the Greater Good, in Žižek’s (and thus Lacanian) terms, are floating signifiers. Žižek (Žižek, 2008: 95) described these signifiers as “proto-ideological elements” that are non-bound. The chain of signifiers is endless and only through a certain intervention can it be halted. This intervention is what Žižek calls a ‘nodal point’, something that quilts free-floating signifiers. A real-life example of this would be ‘Kurdism’ as such a nodal point that quilts proto-ideological elements such as nationalism, socialism, feminism and environmentalism over the course of history (Kerîmî, 2017). Similarly, the very descriptions of peace, pioneering, and culture are unified by the idea of the Greater Good, according to the T’au. However, ideological quilt at the same time is unstable because it has nothing behind it. Thus, it can be said that they are empty signifiers—they do not refer to any signified. The conflicts between civilizations are struggles to seize those floating signifiers and to quilt them with their respective nodal points. As it can be seen in the novel, the bloody battles between the T’au and the Orks were such an attempt.

The Ethereals as the Guarantors of the Greater Good

The citizens of the Empire, including Shovah, believed in the Ethereals. Thus, for them, the Ethereals guaranteed the meaning of the Greater Good. They were at the highest point of the Empire's social structure. They were the ones who 'actualized' the abstract concept of the Greater Good into practical uses. When adherents of the Greater Good bring the Ethereals into mind in their everyday experiences, it is not that the Ethereals give birth to law. To borrow Lacan's (Lacan, 1998: 113) anecdote regarding man and God, it was man who begged God not to be anthropomorphic. It is, therefore, the adherents of the Greater Good who ask for the Ethereals to do so, to give birth to the law—announcing the Ethereals as one of the constitutive elements of the big Other.

The relationship between Shovah and his big Other is not just "the Ethereals as the big Other" or "the Greater Good as the big Other". Rather, the big Other here is constituted by some elements that include "the Greater Good guaranteed by the Ethereals" and "the Ethereals mandated by the Greater Good". This is because, in Shovah's subjective presupposition, the two are inseparable: the two support each other, guarantee each other. Moreover, there is still the Empire's caste system that acts as a part of the Symbolic. Those all constitute a point from which Shovah can see the horizon and the domain of law. Shovah's process of identification relates heavily to this.

Throughout the novel, Shovah was not cynical towards the Ethereals, especially the leader of Arkunasha Aun'Tal. However, he was confronted by several disturbing moments involving them. Firstly, it was his 'banishment' from biodome 1-1 after his first battle against the Orks (Kelly, 2015: 5-0 section). Previously, Shovah's forces marched to intercept the Orks, during which Shovah's strategy was to slay the enemy leader. However, after a risky move of spearheading the enemy line and killing the Ork leader, Shovah did not see any sign of the Orks retreating. He decided to withdraw his forces altogether. Later, it was revealed that the slain enemy leader was not the true leader of the Arkunashan Orks. This was where the members of the emergency council started to doubt Shovah's capability. Aun'Tal ultimately ordered Shovah and his forces to leave Biodome 1-1. Shovah felt disgraced, yet he was able to keep his composure.

He believed that it was not a time to stop fighting.

The fact that Shovah accepted his 'banishment' from biodome 1-1 was a way to satisfy his big Other. It was a process of identification that involved a certain gaze. Shovah tried to prove (to the big Other) that he was a loyal citizen of the T'au Empire by following the order of Aun'Tal. It did not stop there as Shovah tried to prove that he was a worthwhile commander. His risky collaboration with El'Vesa reanimating an Ork dead body was to gather information so that it could be a weapon against the Orks themselves.

However, just because those are breaches of protocol, it does not mean that Shovah violated the big Other. It has to be remembered that Shovah was a member of the Fire caste and a commander. He was hailed by the big Other as such, as an individual who could contribute to the Empire and the Greater Good through military achievement. Furthermore, he was "more" than just a Fire caste member. He bore the name of Vior'la, a sept associated with exceptional warriors (Games Workshop, 2018: 13). This was why he was very confident at the beginning of the story. Sha'vastos even praised him for being the brightest student of a legendary strategist, Master Puretide. Shovah thought he could end the Arkunashan conflict without major problems. Shovah already knew the nature of the Orks and predicted their possible demise in Arkunasha by "the Way of the Broken Sword... Divide and slaughter" (Kelly, 2015: 2-0 section).

However, his first battle (which he lost) shook him. His assassination of the (fake) enemy leader failed to rout the Ork horde. This put a doubt inside Shovah's mind whether he was fit to be a commander or not. He was on the verge of hysteria: "Am I really what I am (a commander)?" Ultimately, he regained his composure because of a fantasy-scenario construction. He decided that he was indeed a commander by putting his duty above his personal priority of meditating:

"Part of him longed to head straight for his quarters, to rally and to meditate until he found a measure of peace. Then, like a dawn, inspiration rose inside him" (Kelly, 2015: 5-0 section).

Shovah concealed the impossibility of the desire of the big Other. Because of this fantasy, he reconstructed his previous perception of reality: he constructed a new desire. Thus, it was possible for Shovah to keep desiring, that is to keep satisfying

the big Other without falling into the abyss of its emptiness. This was also the moment Shovah started to breach protocols. Shovah's breaches of protocol, then, were a part of the further effort to satisfy the big Other: a small risk he took so that he could achieve a victory. It may look unfair to treat them as just a small risk. After all, Shovah did not know what might happen if he lost his reputation. He did not know what might lie ahead if he was slain by the Orks. He might fail and die in shame, not honored as a hero but as a traitor. Yet, he kept following his plan. Not only was he ready to sacrifice his current name, but also his posthumous self. This is a huge endeavor to satisfy the big Other.

Another key moment of Shovah constructing a fantasy was during his meeting with Sha'vastos. During the meeting, Sha'vastos theorized that the Arkunashan Ethereals were hiding the truth about the sandstorm from the general populace. Shovah quickly dismissed that disturbance. He, without a prolonged delay, reassured himself and Sha'vastos that the Ethereals did such an action for the better: "[the Ethereals] have judged this [emphasis added] the most appropriate course for the [Greater Good]" (Kelly, 2015: 9-0 section).

Shovah's dismissal indicated that he knew very well what the Ethereals were practicing, that they were suppressing the truth. Shovah acknowledged Sha'vastos' theory by saying, "[the Ethereals] have judged this...". Nevertheless, in what Shovah was doing (his dismissal), he acted as if the Ethereals did nothing. It was not that Shovah's knowledge about the Ethereals was blocked by a certain illusion and thus Sha'vastos needed to free him from it. It was that the illusion was on the side of reality, inside the dismissal. To recall Žižek (Žižek, 2008: 28), Shovah was a fetishist "in practice, not in theory". Even though this dismissal seemed straightforward, it was the fantasy Shovah needed for him to keep functioning properly. It had to be done so that he could act as a commander serving the big Other. Without this fantasy, Shovah would be no one and could not do anything, let alone serving someone.

Shovah's Traumatic Encounter

Outside of his service to the Ethereals, Shovah also used fantasy to conceal something. It was about his relationship with Kauyon-Shas, a fellow student under Master Puretide. She did not really exist in the story, only appearing in one brief mention and two of

Shovah's dreams. In the first (day)dream during his first battle in Arkunasha, Shovah thought of Kauyon-Shas teaching him a combat technique. He "suppressed the memory with a shudder" and continued his fight (Kelly, 2015: 4-0 section). At first, it may seem like the repression of thoughts was normal: he thought that he should focus on the battle instead of her. However, the fact that he repressed his thoughts with a shudder showed that something was bothering him. This 'something' might be answered by looking through the second dream.

In the second dream, which was actually a flashback, Shovah and Kauyon-Shas slept together (Kelly, 2015: 8-0 section). Perhaps it was a hint that they had an intercourse. However, the important thing is not the meaning of the dream, or the truth behind the hint; whether they had a romantic relationship or not, whether they had an intercourse or not. Rather, it is why the dream was there. At first, it seems like it was just a flashback having nothing significant to the plot. On the one hand, if looked at without further inspection, the first dream seemed more useful. Without the first dream, Shovah might not have escaped from the Orks cornering him. On the other hand, the second dream was like a displacement of Shovah's Arkunashan expedition. It was an "anomaly" that took place during an important event. It was anomalous because Shovah, who was supposed to be a commander with pride, dreamed of something unrelated to the war. However, there was more to this anomaly.

The second dream was a traumatic event. When the eighth chapter ended and so did the flashback, Shovah "woke up" and found himself back in reality. In order to wake up properly, he needed fantasy to support his reality. What was being concealed, then, was his very relationship with Kauyon-Shas. However, it must be noted that this was not simply Shovah wanting Kauyon-Shas as a sexual partner, as a friend, as his subordinate, and so on. More precisely, Shovah knew there was something more inside his relationship with Kauyon-Shas that he did not understand, an impossibility that the big Other asked "che vuoi?" This impossibility was unbearable that Shovah wanted to distance himself from it. The fantasy used was that Kauyon-Shas was just a fellow student of Master Puretide and a fellow Fire caste member fighting for the Empire. This fantasy allowed Shovah to be reminded of his duty and continue

fighting in the Arkunashan war, which was part of his previous fantasy. The dream, even though it was a displacement or anomalous, became an important part of his Arkunashan expedition. It strengthened why Shovah was assigned to aid Arkunasha in the first place. This was why Shovah acted “normally” as a commander after the second dream at the beginning of chapter nine, despite encountering multiple problems previously.

This traumatic dream is similar to Žižek’s (Žižek, 1991: 16, 2007: 57, 2008: 44-45) explanation of Lacan’s reading of the Freudian “burning child” dream. The dream was dreamt by a father who slept near his son’s coffin. In the dream, the dead son stood beside him, grabbed his arm, and said, “Father, don’t you see I’m burning?” (Freud, 2010: 513). The father then woke up and noticed that there was a fallen candle burning his son’s arm. The usual interpretation of this dream, argued Žižek (2008), is that the dream functioned to prolong the sleep. There was a disturbance (of smoke) that might interrupt the father’s sleep. The dream then incorporated elements of the disturbance so that the father could continue his sleep in peace. When the disturbance became very strong, he woke up. For Žižek (1991, 2007, 2008), the Lacanian reading should be that the dream presented the father with traumatic guilt and thus he escaped into reality by waking up. Nevertheless, this traumatic “something” is unknown, just like what is inside Shovah’s relationship with Kauyon-Shas.

The impossible unknown relationship between Shovah and Kauyon-Shas was the thing that bothered Shovah. There was a lost object inside the relationship. The problem was, Shovah could never reclaim it. In his everyday experience, if he tried to search for it, the result would not be the actual thing. If he found something, he would just say, to borrow Žižek’s (2008) repeated words, that it is not it.

Beyond Shovah’s Fantasy

It has been repeated multiple times that Shovah concealed a certain impossibility, a traumatic abyss, of the big Other or the Symbolic itself. However, how does Žižek explain the concept of this emptiness further? What precisely is this emptiness that Shovah desperately wanted to conceal, or to escape from? Žižek (2008) explains that the Symbolic tries to keep a homeostatic balance. However, at the center of it, there is a persisting force of a kernel, something that

resists symbolization, that disturbs the balance. This traumatic kernel is the Lacanian Real, something “impossible to imagine, impossible to integrate into the symbolic order, and impossible to attain in any way” (Evans, 2006: 163). It “resists symbolization and incorporation into the big Other of linguistic systems and shared, symbolic practices” (Wood, 2012: 48). Fantasy, then, appears as a kind of defense mechanism to “make a peace deal” with this unbearable thing.

If the discussion returns to Shovah’s relationship with Kauyon-Shas, and even his relationship with the Empire, there is a traumatic kernel in the relationship. For Žižek (2008), such a position is impossible to occupy because it is inherently nothing. It is also difficult to just escape from it directly. To avoid it, Shovah could not just distance himself from it directly. There is a need to form a replacement for the unknown-thing in the relationship. Thus, Shovah woke up from the dream and “reminded” himself that both of them were fellow commanders. This reminder is not a reduction of a particular excessive feature in the relationship, of a characteristic that cannot be grasped and experienced fully as it is because Shovah was entangled in the Symbolic. It is not a “representative of the signified, of the mental representation-idea...” (Žižek, 2008: 179). Rather, this reminder is an indicator of an impossibility.

Žižek (2008) explains the trauma as the Real, in the sense that its material existence in everyday reality does not matter. What matters the most is that it has a series of effects, that it “exercises a certain structural causality” (Žižek, 2008; 183). However, precisely because of these effects, the impossibility of trauma can be traced. Indeed, it is impossible to occupy its “space” but for Žižek (2008), it is possible to circle it around so that the distortion at the center of the Symbolic, the hard kernel resisting symbolization, can be noticed. In other words, one method to recognize the Real is to notice when the Symbolic seems off (Myers, 2004). The procedure one could make sense of the Real is through its “track” in the Symbolic. It is, then, not important whether Shovah really slept with Kauyon-Shas or not. It does not matter whether the dream as a flashback was accurate or not. What matters the most was what the trauma ultimately produced: the fantasy of relationship between commanders or former students.

It can be said, then, that prior to Shovah’s Arkunashan expedition, before his horizon changed

even if only slightly, Shovah could not notice his relationship with Kauyon-Shas. It previously did not exist, or to put it in simple words, Shovah could not make sense of it. Only after Shovah left his home system and experienced an actual battlefield did he feel a sudden intrusion of the Real, putting his sense of balance at stake. Then, after Shovah constructed a fantasy and found himself in reality once again, he could trace back the trauma. To trace it back is to construct it retroactively. Therefore, Shovah's fantasy is not just a one-way attempt to represent a certain impossibility. Rather, it is two-way because the product, that is fantasy, is the reason why the cause could be noticed.

Another reason why Shovah could not bear the unknown-thing, the Real, in the relationship is that it is damaging to the Symbolic. Žižek (2008) explains that the Real disrupts the Symbolic. The traumatic event experienced by Shovah in the dream has the potential to destroy his Symbolic, which strives to keep a sense of balance. That is why Shovah desperately tried to hide from such a traumatic kernel, by constructing fantasy, in order to function properly in his immediate reality. This does not mean that the Symbolic is always consistent. It could perish, but since it is also the location of identity, Shovah would always return there (just in a different "form"). However, that kind of destruction of the Symbolic needs an extraordinary shock. As can be seen in the novel, Shovah did not dramatically change his world-view. Indeed, his method did change little by little, but it was not strikingly different from what he previously followed. Therefore, what he experienced during the Arkunashan war was not enough to shake him.

Being continuously entangled in the Symbolic should not be seen as a form of oppression. In some previous studies that utilize Žižek's theory to investigate works of literature, entanglement in the Symbolic is often underprivileged. An article examining Joyce Libra's novel *The Scent of the Sake* does agree with the status of the Symbolic as the subject's ultimate destination, that no one is capable to fully escape the big Other (Asri, et al., 2019). However, the article has an emancipatory nuance. It implies that the main character's failure to free herself from the Symbolic is a tragedy. A similar report is found in an article analyzing *Sehari Dalam Hidup Ivan Denisovich*, according to which a normal subject is the one that has broken free from the Symbolic (Faisal & Setijawan,

2018). In fact, and to repeat identity formation, the Symbolic was the very thing someone needs to step on so that he can continue his everyday reality.

Shovah, indeed, could "realize" too much to the point that his world-view dissolved. However, at the end of the day, Shovah would return to the Symbolic, not overcome it. If Shovah slipped off beyond the Symbolic, he would become what Žižek called a "sociopath". In the activities of sociopaths, the Symbolic, that is language, is used as a "purely instrumental means of communication" (Žižek, 2007: 13). These sociopaths are not entangled in language, but overcome it. In another instance, Žižek (2008: 186) shows that someone who distances himself from the Symbolic is actually "psychotic". This can be seen in a study by Himmah (2019) in which the main character of Mustofa Bisri's *Gus Jakfar* has reached the final level of Sufism claimed to resemble the Real. If the claim is true that the main character can constantly occupy such a space, then he is a good example of a Žižekian psychotic individual.

What must be emphasized is that the Symbolic is not consistent. Even though it seemed like Shovah always found his place in the Symbolic, it was him who persisted and not the Symbolic. Even if the Symbolic strives to keep homeostatic balance, there is a drive at the center, the kernel resisting symbolization, that moves towards the destruction of the Symbolic (Žižek, 2008). Shovah can persist because Shovah is a void itself, similar to the logic of the Real (Myers, 2004; Žižek, 2008). Taking Žižek into account, Shovah as a subject is not a richness that is reduced by the inability of signifiers to signify its "true form". For Žižek, the subject is precisely a void. If the notion of the Empire and its principle are removed from Shovah, there is him in his originality. This original void persists, it will stay even though the Symbolic world disappears. Even if the T'au Empire itself vanishes, even if Arkunasha were to be destroyed by the Orks or sandstorms, for example, Shovah would persist in his originality.

What makes Shovah really Shovah in the immediate reality, then, is the relationship between the Symbolic and the Real. For Žižek (Žižek, 2008: 207), the Symbolic can only be established if there is an irruption within it or as he called it, "a little-bit-of-Real" disrupting the homeostatic balance. If there is only the Symbolic in the form of the Empire's ideology, laws, societal rules, caste system, and such like, without a traumatic kernel at its center, Shovah would

have been a rigid puppet. Shovah would have been following the Symbolic not as himself. At the same time, if there is no Symbolic, the Real would not have been able to be noticed, for it is a void. Shovah in his original void, then, would not be able to “realize” itself. The way the Real could be “realized” is through its traces in the Symbolic. Ultimately, Shovah could only be Shovah because there is a kind of communication between the Symbolic and the Real.

CONCLUSION

This study explains how Shovah’s ideology, that is the belief in the Greater Good, functioned. The Greater Good should not be seen from an essentialist point of view, because it raised confusion regarding the ideology of the Orks. Both ideologies could claim the same objectives, yet they had disagreements on how to get there. Through Žižek’s theory, the abstractness of the Greater Good can be seen as an ideological quilt unifying floating signifiers.

Furthermore, this research regarded Shovah’s behaviors and actions as an identification. Later, Shovah constructed a fantasy, a reconstruction of his previous perception of reality, that allowed him to continue functioning properly. Shovah’s fantasy also strengthened his identity as a military commander. Lastly, what makes Shovah really Shovah in his everyday reality is the interconnection between the Symbolic and the Real.

STATEMENTS OF COMPETING INTEREST

The authors herewith declare that this article is totally free from any conflict of interest regarding the data collection, analysis, and the editorial process, and the publication process in general.

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