

Film Review - *Žižek!*

Dir. Astra Taylor.

Zeitgeist Video production, 2005, 71 minutes¹.

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If departments of cinema studies have long been interested in political analysis, those of social sciences have so far been more reluctant to turn to cinema as textual artefacts. However several thinkers started to link those disciplines. Slavoj Žižek, a philosopher at the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Ljubljana (Slovenia) and a major thinker in cultural studies in the United States, is one of them. The situation became paradoxical at the point where Slavoj Žižek – who politically reinterprets the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan – is more known or studied in departments of communication than in those of political science. One of the reasons for this is probably that his books are replete with references from films, from the smallest example embedded in the curve of a logical argumentation, to the rigorous cinematographic analysis of a scene or an image: sometimes cinema supports the sociological matter, at other times the social situation bears the aesthetical discourse. This academic posture – between social science and cinema – is suitable to the cinematographic treatment of an author's thought and Astra Taylor's documentary *Žižek!*

combines both the cinematographic study of political thought and the political study of the cinema. If this documentary reveals a Slavoj Žižek interested by cinema, something his books have already taught us, it provides us with a cinematographic look on Žižek.

Taylor's documentary aims to expose Žižek's thought. By following him in his lectures, one witnesses his whole biography: a visit of his university (which is the occasion for him to talk about his past as a dissident in the former Yugoslavia) and a meeting with his publisher at Verso (where he talks about his publications translated in several languages). With his lectures the academic star attracts crowds (often beyond a thousand people attending). Through the media his popularity grows unceasingly. Today Žižek signs autographs and even participates in documentaries... Through disseminated quotes, the movie makes it possible for one to discover his main interests – the role of ideology, of belief and illusion, of the political and psychological movement of consumption, of irony and cynicism in thought. Disparate and bondless, these quotations seem to mimic Žižekian texts: eccentric as one would like them to be. They also give a glance at the regular themes that run through Žižek's books, allowing him each time to repeat (himself). As François Théron nicely put it elsewhere:

His process of writing with copy-and-paste, back and forth, constant re-using of material already present in preceding works, books, interventions, altogether with a writing of the recovery. The sense of déjà-vu, sometimes felt with the reading if this work in spiral is not due to the carelessness of the publisher, but to the movement of the writing which aims, each time, to reconfigure by the assemblage of its enunciation the situation of its own reception: retroactive performativity of the communication or of the Hegelian dialectic.

François Théron, "Slavoj Žižek. Un philosophe inclassable," in *Le Nouvel Observateur*, special edition No. 57, Dec. 2004/Jan. 2005, p. 50.

I use the word "character" to indicate the Slavoj Žižek the movie shows us. It is because, in this documentary, Žižek acts like one. Or better, conversely, he tries to remove himself from the public image that one gave him: Slavoj Žižek became a media character who lives through conferences and, now, cinema. The intelligence of the documentary *Žižek!* is to present the phenomenon *while* taking part in it. In fact the media entertains Žižek's popularity, not its academic fame nor the depth of his thought. It is because one talks more of his celebrity than of his philosophy that Žižek has had this reputation. His thought is often diffused without being understood or even simply considered. Žižek has, according to his own words, a clownish aspect, saying even that the media are "*making [him] popular [as] a resistance against taking [him] serious*" [sic]. But media popularity may not blend well with academia, especially the domain of thought. Hence, Žižek is sometimes rejected by his

academic peers, whereas his publisher, as he states in the movie, rejects some of his manuscripts because one cannot find any jokes in them.

This situation is interesting on many levels, because it reveals the thin bond between the thought and its mediation, between the scientific community and the circulation of the discourse, between the intellectual and its public. The case of Žižek – where the medium takes the whole place of the message – teaches us that one and the other are not to be distinguished. An idea is not dissociable from its diffusion: inasmuch as the university cannot be isolated from the society to which it belongs, the writer cannot be dissociated from its reader. Social sciences have a lot to learn from this. Beset by the doubt about his own thought and wishing to survive intellectually, Žižek might well want to give up the image he is projecting (his character), yet he has not the power to do it. The pathetic aspect of his media “suicide” committed at the end of the movie will not change a thing. Žižek indeed “plays” its own death: lying on the ground, he wants to convince us that he jumped from the top of a spiral staircase, as if he were saying that the end of the mediated life coincided with the end of his life (and with the end of the movie). The end of the movie (with the credits) should correspond to the end of the transmission. It would also mean that the end of the documentary is the birth of something else – the credits as a genesis: from the movie, the spectator would be interested in the *true* Žižek, would *truly* understand his thought, would buy his books, would want to go to his lectures. (Maybe one would want to meet him and obtain his autograph?) The *suicide* would thus be a birth, but what would flow from it would be the return of the *same*. This end of a media is simply the beginning of another. And in the particular case of Žižek’s philosophy (I could extend the reasoning to all philosophies deemed “popular”), the medium takes all the place of the message, it feeds it and expands it unrelentingly.

That Žižek tried to flee the media with a filmed suicide shows that without camera, he would be nothing, that we would not talk about him, and that this film review would not even be written. Žižek is the victim of that which keeps him alive. Wishing to put an end to this situation by filming the absence of mediation captures well the double bind which Žižek is the producer/product. To film the opposition to the image, one might try to commit suicide while hoping that something will be born from it; one would use a media while hoping that it might develop itself against oneself. This vain enterprise was well explained elsewhere, in the realm of archives. Against Georges Bataille who proposed the destruction of the archives, the philosopher Boris Groys answered that this destruction as *the* event shall itself be archived if it were to be worth something. The archive is not negligible, quite to the contrary: as a medium/message, and like the cinema, it possesses its own life, and this life, in its drive, can only grow.

In order to make a parallel with cinema – as Žižek would do – this media's life is a strong theme of the movies released in the Nineties. In one of the final scenes of Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers* (1994), a dialogue reveals the sense of the movie. The mass murder couple who was renowned for killing only in presence of witnesses escapes from jail with the assistance of a journalist temporarily turned into a cameraman. The final scene is particularly revealing: they plot to kill the journalist. To stay alive, the journalist convincingly argues whether the killer couple should dare to lose its only witness? The action unfolds and the answer is decisive: the camera is already the witness of the scene. The whole movie takes a new meaning as it is only then that the audience understands that the main character of the whole story was the camera that was filming the action. The final scene of *Žižek!* is similar: allegedly dead, Žižek rises and leaves the room where he has "committed suicide" while only the camera remains. If one must think of the subject of the movie (in its philosophical sense), then it can only be *this* camera which remains, because when it ceases to film, it signals that the thought of Žižek has stopped.

What remains behind the veil? What remains of thought if it is a representation without form? It is a question asked by Žižek in the movie, and it is certainly the question one would ask on Žižek's thought after watching the documentary. "It's all fake," said the host of the cabaret Silencio as he introduces a singer on stage in David Lynch's *Mulholland Dr.* (2001). The Spanish interpretation of the Roy Orbison's song *Crying* makes the spectators cry. Suddenly the singer falls on stage, but the voice remains nevertheless. This voice, one believes to be hers, continues, alone, without its support. But one had believed it to be true, had believed this representation to be true, the spectator of the movie just like the public of the Silencio. This scene is often evoked by Žižek in his books; one can hence turn it against him. Once disappeared from the scene (here, from the screen), the thinker must leave the room which he occupied with his voice. But once the illusion reveals itself as illusion, and the simulacrum shows itself as it "is," can emotion and thought be maintained? It was all fake, it was only an illusion – one should have known it: from the very beginning one had been warned. If there is nothing to say on Žižek or on his thought behind the popular image it has, then why does one speak about it that much?

¹The following film review was published twice in 2007, initially in French. A first time in the French journal of sociology *Sociétés* (*Revue des sciences humaines et sociales: «L'image filmique»*, No. 96, 2007/2) and a second time in the Canadian philosophical journal *Symposium* (*Canadian Journal of Continental Philosophy*, Vol. 11, No. 2, Fall 2007). The translation was revised by Prof. David Grondin (University of Ottawa).