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## Why Žižek? Why Now?

Dr Paul A. Taylor, Institute of Communications Studies, University of Leeds.

### Introduction

The International Journal of Žižek Studies (IJŽS) is a scholarly outlet for a diverse range of perspectives and disciplinary approaches to the work of Slavoj Žižek, a hard-to-categorize Slovenian critical philosopher and cultural theorist who, with an inimitable blend of provocation and deep insight, has imaginatively applied his mix of German Idealist philosophy and Lacanian psychoanalytical theory to a stunning range of cultural and political topics. (For a mere sample of this eclecticism please see the list of online Žižek resources available on the Information page). The original idea for the Journal grew directly from the similar online *International Journal of Baudrillard Studies* edited by Gerry Coulter at Bishops University in Quebec. This publication suggested a constructive solution to the ironic situation of scholars studying radical thinkers, but exhibiting conservative attitudes to the practicalities of disseminating their work. The online format of IJŽS is designed to suit the topical nature of his output (see David Gunkel's "Why Žižek, Why Online?" in Vol. 1.1) and creates a space for scholarly discussion to help avoid the co-optation of his critical edge by the sound-bite culture of the mainstream media.

Žižek's dishevelled ursine affability has made him a highly successful counterpoint to the media's more typically urbane choice of talking heads ranging from the precisely-coiffured representatives from US think tanks to the more strategically unkempt Gallic hirsutism of such figures as Bernard Henri Levy. The media's apparent need to caricature him as one part Rasputin and one part Groucho Marx is perhaps a strategic distraction from the disturbing implications his work has for our interpretation of popular culture's explicit and implicit ideologies and the typically unchallenged amour-propre of its purveyors. Widely admired for his highly energised discourse of

otherwise off-puttingly esoteric material, his irrepressible joie de théorie is, nevertheless, vulnerable to recuperation. Jean Baudrillard uses the phrase the 'mortal dose of publicity' to describe the tendency that all too often kills off the substance of radical thought. In the movie *Žižek!* the eponymous theorist admits that: "My big worry is not to be ignored but to be accepted". This is the tightrope he walks in the media spotlight. His work garners great attention but with the constant risk that the full complexity of his thought will be lost in the glare.

In *Crisis in Culture* Hannah Arendt memorably observed: 'There are many great authors of the past who have survived centuries of oblivion and neglect, but it is still an open question whether they will be able to survive an entertaining version of what they have to say.' Later in *Žižek!* Slavoj speculates "I'm almost tempted to say that making me popular is a resistance against taking me seriously". It may strike some readers as hypocritical that a thinker who resorts so much to jokes should make such an observation, but as both Pfaller and McGowan show in their Vol. 1.1 articles, Žižek's humour is merely a means to a much more significant end. More than this, and paradoxically, it may well be that the true flippancy resides in his accusers' own lack of humour:

Without seriousness, theory becomes nothing but the bad conscience of the ruling ideology. It offers questions but never approaches truth. Only a serious theory can permit us to recognize the truth that we are living without being aware of it. Only in theoretical seriousness does the possibility exist for us to give up the quest for a truth based on knowledge and to embrace a truth of non-knowledge that structures our being. But first we must recognize that the path to seriousness is strewn with jokes. (McGowan, IJŽS Vol. 1.1: 66)

An important aspect of IJŽS, therefore, is to reaffirm Žižek's intellectual credentials without neurotically resenting his jouissance! Žižek is possibly disliked in some of the more po-faced quarters of the intelligentsia for the frequently qualmsome, scatological nature of his analyses and his literally lavatorial sense of humour (e.g. his sphincter-orientated discussion of the elasticity of theoretical concepts and his examination of the cultural significance of national differences in toilet design - see article links for both below). He is indubitably unwilling to say the unsayable and thereby avoids the "Beautiful Souls" syndrome of thinkers who shirk from walking their talk. He does not shy away from the full implications of the unwavering certitude and willingness to act in the world of such disparate historical figures as St. Paul and Lenin.

## The method in Žižek's madness

*This theoretical familiarity with all kinds of realities, as remote as they may be from academic life or horizons, allows Žižek to build up that unique field of theoretical operation that characterizes his work. As many observers have remarked, the most heterogeneous realities become part of Žižek's theory. From "Matrix" to Marx, from one balls joke to the other, from fistfucking to Flintstones, from CIA torture to children's toys, from Coca Cola commercials to Communist party secrets; nothing is too high or too low in order to be excluded from the scope of his philosophy. This creates an extremely egalitarian atmosphere in Žižek's approach. (Pfaller, IJŽS Vol. 1.1: 43)*

Apart from his rejection of the more timid tendencies of most cultural theory, Žižek's work is informed by an unusually perceptive and catholic appreciation of the particularities of both the mediascape's content and forms. Despite his penchant for seemingly abstract theory, this appreciation makes him a fascinating illustrator of Hegel's paradoxical formulation "the spirit is a bone". With seeming effortlessness, he switches from abstruse philosophy to a myriad of everyday references culled from the mediascape, with a familiarity ironically alien to many cultural populists more overtly and uncritically celebratory of popular culture. He thus avoids what C. Wright Mills pejoratively described as the "abstract empiricism" of more nominally grounded approaches to contemporary culture. His modus operandi constantly confronts his readers with the irreducible complexity of the relationship between high theory and its manifold manifestations in the mundane - for their better mutual illumination.

One of Žižek's most appealing characteristics is this incredibly fruitful borrowing from both popular culture and the literary canon to engage creatively with the excessively explicit mechanics of what Kracauer calls the 'strike against understanding' created by both a social surfeit of images and their tendency within modern media systems to produce, in terms of meaning, either tautology or impressionistic contiguity. Žižek shares a proud lineage with critical thinkers who share an aversion to an uncritical accommodation to the one-dimensional identities of dominant social forms. His innovative quality, however, stems from the imagination and ingenuity of the linkages and associations he makes with his hi-energy speculations. Žižek manages to reach the parts that other theorists cannot by successfully avoiding the tendency of academics (perhaps fueled by middle-class guilt) to glorify popular culture as emancipatory even when such assertions begin to stretch even Panglossian levels of credibility to their breaking point (e.g. Mark Poster's interpretation of such exploitative cosmetic surgery "make-over" shows as *The Swan* as empowering illustrations of the Foucauldian notion of *care of the self* [1]). What distinguishes Žižek as a critical theorist par excellence, is the way in which he neatly side steps the tired and lazy accusation of elitism leveled at figures such as Adorno, by getting down and very dirty in his extremely inclusive approach to popular culture.

As Laclau puts it in his preface to *The Sublime Object of Ideology* Žižek's work:

... contains an implicit invitation to break the barrier separating theoretical languages from those of everyday life. Contemporary criticism of the notion of meta-language has paved the way for a generalized transgression of boundaries, but Žižek's text - with its movement from film to philosophy, from literature to politics - is especially rich in this respect. No one who attaches a 'super-hard transcendentality' to their own theoretical perspective or who continues to live in the mythological world of 'case studies' will feel comfortable reading this book. (Žižek 1989: xiii)

Whilst his often ingeniously examples may not always have their intended effect (much like his peristaltically debateable assumption that chocolate is a constipatory agent), his underlying purpose seldom strays from an admirable commitment to challenging dominant perspectives with his trademark contribution to proceedings - his advocacy of *looking awry* and the imperative to adopt a *parallax view*. His non-identity, critical thinking is inspired by:

...The Lacanian thesis according to which truth has the structure of a fiction: in those confused months of the passage of 'really existing socialism' into capitalism, *the fiction of a 'third way' was the only point at which social antagonism was not obliterated*. Herein lies one of the tasks of the 'postmodern' critique of ideology: to designate the elements within an existing social order which - in the guise of 'fiction', that is, of 'Utopian' narratives of possible but failed alternative histories - point towards the system's antagonistic character, and thus 'estrangle' us to the self evidence of its established identity. (Žižek 1994: 7)

It is this methodological commitment to the non-present, the future possibility of the currently impossible, that we find in other 'postmodern' theorists of ideology, such as the pataphysical underpinnings of Baudrillard's critique of the totalitarian semiotic order and Badiou's conceptualization of the *event* explored in detail in IJŽS Vol. 1. 2.

### **A Man with Qualities - Žižek the public intellectual**

*... the group that has gained power certainly does not abandon the idea, even though it has in fact deserted the idea and is now just floating along in reality (one thinks, for example, of the church during the Renaissance). An infallible instinct teaches it that the idea is an excellent ally on whom it can always rely, if ever its right to exist were put in question. It therefore negotiates a daring tightrope of a dialectic in order to deduce all its undertakings in reality from the idea, so that naive sensibilities can believe that the group is acting as its executor. But its relations to the contents of should-being that once constituted it are in truth now only of a superficial sort, the idea having become pure decoration, an ostentatious facade for a partly rotten interior which represents, together with this facade, a unity that is nothing short of a mockery of spirit.* (Kracauer 1995 [1922]:167)

Another significant factor in Žižek's standing out so forcefully in the current intellectual climate resides in the manner with which he manages to embody the virtues of a *public intellectual* without apparent compromise to the powerful inhibitory pressures created by the environments of

both the heavily-mediated public sphere and the more insulated world of universities. Kracauer's 'ostentatious facade' that hides a 'partly rotten interior', and the 'mockery of spirit' that results, is directly applicable to the present day combination of bureaucracy within universities and conceptually-enervating grammars of media discourse that act the part of Kracauer's 'excellent ally' in the promotion of instrumental thought, at the expense of authentic intellectual inquiry.

In terms of the mediated public sphere, those interested in radical thought are forced to seek it in the interstices not dominated by a predominantly uncritical, alarmingly self-referential and mutually back-slapping media corps, who, despite the fact that, 'if they believed something different they wouldn't be sitting where they're sitting' (Edwards and Cromwell 2003: 90) still pride themselves upon their professional and intellectual integrity. Meanwhile, one keenly felt, but little discussed (at least in any official capacity), current aspect of excessively managerialized university life is the degree to which the exploration of ideas for their own sake increasingly has to be argued *for* rather than simply assumed as the default mode of an academic. Truly inquisitive intellectuals now frequently find themselves in a situation akin to that of a devout Catholic at the time of the Borgias, struggling to find space to say the rosary in the midst of a papal orgy.

Well-armed as he is from his early career experiences of Communist bureaucracy in the former Yugoslavia, and having apparently perfected a highly successful peripatetic scholarly existence to be envied by the average chalkface scholar, Žižek is an inspirational figure for the manner in which he makes light of the these difficulties faced by critical thought. Built as we have already seen upon frequent humour, Žižek's work combines intellectual chutzpah and brio with a level of theoretical complexity that provides a welcome antidote to not only the inherent intellectual limitations created by the media's insular culture and pre-inscribed grammars, but also the stereotypical communicational failures of scholars who are not always averse to "making Homer sound like balance sheets and balance sheets sound like Homer" (Davies 1996: 23). "A daring tightrope of a dialectic" is perhaps an apposite summary of Žižek's revitalizing mix of Hegel, Marx and Lacan and his willingness to walk across the chasm between the apparently incommensurable realms of the media and scholarship. Steering between the Scylla of scholarly myopia and the Charybdis of an etiolated media discourse, Žižek is a much-needed reminder that it is still possible to undermine the predominantly glib acceptance of Kracauer's "ostentatious facade" with radical conceptualizations.

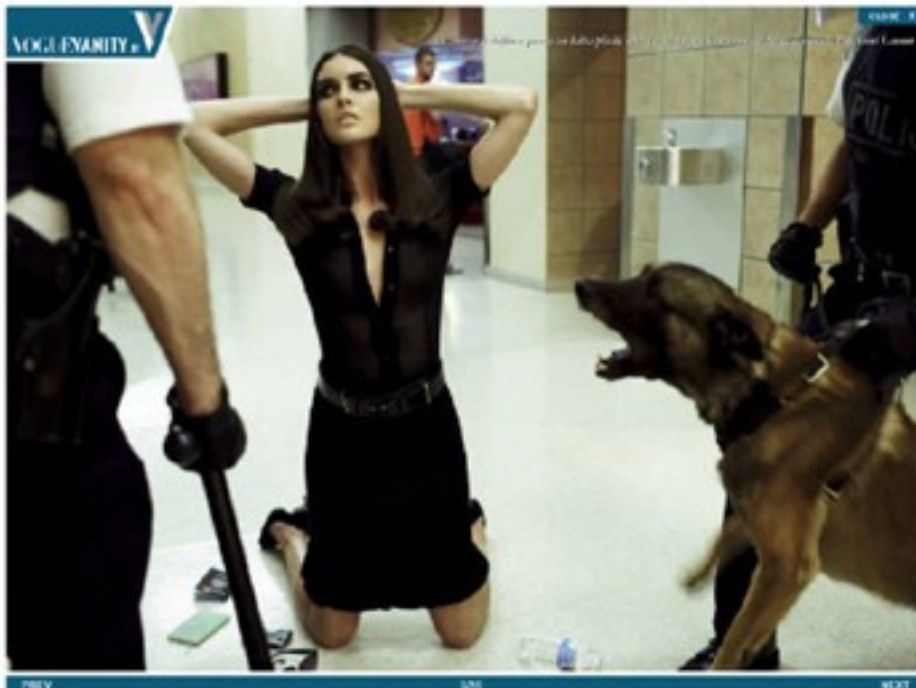
## Social Science & Žižek - the true nature of perversion

In this opening issue, Board members engage with Žižek from their own disciplinary perspectives. The self-styled *Social Sciences* have much to gain from his speculations as they frequently struggle to comprehend an ever more bizarre mediascape that brings us such surreal instances as the President of the United States carrying a plastic Turkey into a mess tent of his troops stationed in Iraq or photogenically manifesting *Top Gun envy* on board an aircraft carrier. Much media scholarship tends to either completely sidestep such instances or continues to interrogate them with inappropriate (albeit robust) methodologies. This inflexible response signally fails to address the complex subtleties of what Raymond Williams termed 'the structure of feeling' that pervades our media environment. For example, it remains unclear what a content analysis or rigorously administered questionnaire can reveal about the true nature of the President's vulcanized giblets. Although he has presented a three-part UK TV programme entitled *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema* and frequently expresses himself in a manner verging upon the coprophilic, an important feature of Žižek's work is his Lacanian-informed explanation of the true nature of *perversion* as an excessive identification with rules and regulations (the Symbolic Big Other). His work thus offers a whole new dimension to understanding the ideological workings of mass media culture. His constant willingness to speculate imaginatively enables us to see how much conventional, nominally more objective, social science scholarship is in fact based upon a perverted over-emphasis upon the investigative means they employ rather than any more substantive intellectual ends - the methodological equivalent of looking under a street lamp for keys dropped on the dark side of the street, just because that's where the light is most powerful.

This Žižekian analysis of ideology as a phenomenon of the overt, rather than the hidden, provides a fresh angle to the study of the contemporary mediascape's paradoxical creation of *explicitness without understanding*, one that adds an extra dimension to Kracauer's early insight that: "In the illustrated magazines, people see the very world that the illustrated magazines prevent them from perceiving ... Never before has a period known so little about itself. In the hands of the ruling society, the invention of illustrated magazines is one of the most powerful means of organizing a strike against understanding." (Kracauer 1995 [1927]: 58) A vividly topical example of not only the particular role of the illustrated magazines, but also, their trope-like representation of broader social trends, can be seen in the following example of how the media deals with disturbing irruptions of the *Real* into the *Symbolic*. Readers may still remember their initial reaction to the disturbing images that came out of Abu Ghraib including the following:



In the mainstream US media, any initial public disquiet was soon replaced by co-optive humour to the extent that "jokes" were made on David Letterman's *Late Show* a few weeks after the initial furore[2]. This process of the moral majority's acclimatization/mediated denial perhaps reached its nadir in September 2006 with a photo-shoot in Italian *Vogue* magazine that included a series of images showing uniformed men physically chastizing women in various disturbing states of subordination. The following picture, perhaps more eloquently than words alone are able, illustrates the validity of both Kracauer and Baudrillard's insights.



Žižek engages head on and creatively with the excessively explicit mechanics of this 'strike against understanding'. He provides consistently resonant insights into the paradoxical situation of a society in which, much like the scenario in Edgar Allan Poe's *The Purloined Letter* that Lacan and Žižek refer to in their work, understanding is undermined by too much transparency rather than too little. Žižek's use of Lacan's psychoanalytical framework provides insights into the actual lived experience of the mediascape that are precluded by the innate methodological limitations of nominally more empirical approaches.

Žižek is thus an invaluable guide for those seeking a critical understanding of a mediated society dominated by the *ob-scene* as indicated in our consideration of the above photographs. Baudrillard's hyphenated concept cogently describes the cultural rise of the "off-stage". The obscene thus describes the implosion of the traditional distance between the audience and the performance. A culture with various forms of proscenium arches is now replaced by one in which: 'Everything is to be produced, everything is to be legible, everything is to become real, visible, accountable... This is sex as it exists in pornography, but more generally, this is the enterprise of our culture, whose natural condition is obscene: a culture of monstration, of demonstration, of productive monstrosity' (Baudrillard 1990 [1979]:34-35). In the face of such extreme explicitness, Žižek's carefully cultivated means of *looking awry* creates the *parallax view* that serves to reintroduce the much-needed space for critical thought. With this distance created by theory, he consistently produces a multi-faceted interpretation of the mediated world - *through*, not just despite of, his facility for highly entertaining story-telling. In IJŽS Vol. 1.1, Robert Pfaller provides an illuminating account of how, paradoxically, 'Precisely by his examples, which are often stories, Žižek succeeds in preventing his philosophy from becoming a story'.

The example is elevated to the dignity of a theoretical tool: this is what distinguishes Žižek's theory from many efforts in contemporary cultural studies which appear equally close to their respective realities. Yet cultural studies today often lack the distance to their material. They feel most adequate when they get completely immersed into their object, the cultural or subcultural reality they describe. Žižek on the contrary never enters into the same intimacy with the elements he uses. Being taken as theoretical tools, the examples help him to get a distance from the self-understanding of the reality he deals with. (Pfaller IJŽS Vol. 1.1: 44)

Pfaller vividly describes Žižek's approach as using 'Dirty matters as sharp tools' and explains how it fulfills Althusser's "Golden Rule" of materialism: "Do not judge a given reality according to its self-understanding/Ne pas juger de l'etre par sa conscience". Žižek is always conscious of the methodological status of his examples and so, unlike so many more uncritical thinkers, avoids falling for the meretricious charms of their surface level stimulations.



## Conclusion

*Whereas it is true that a socially effective idea is cast into the world by individual personalities, its actual corporeality is produced by the group. The individual does generate and and proclaim the idea, but is it the group that bears it and makes sure it is realized. (Kracauer 1995 [1922]: 143-144)*

*Whenever an idea cultivated by an important figure embodies itself as a group, the unmistakable individuality tied to that figure gets lost in the transition, severing the connections between the idea and the manifold ranges of experience in which it was rooted while still controlled by the individual-self. Nothing indicates more clearly the change that the idea undergoes in this process than, for instance, Wagner's aversion to Wagnerians, or Marx's assurance that he was no Marxist. (ibid: 153)*

In the above two quotations from Siegfried Kracauer's essay *The Group as Bearer of Ideas* one can see both the opportunity and risk to be found in devoting a journal to the work of not just an individual thinker, but one who is very much alive and able to assure the world he is no Žižekian! IJŽS recognizes that it will be hard pressed to always do full justice to Žižek's inimitability, but feels the risk is worth taking in order to promote further the challenge his work poses for established academic disciplines. This journal is therefore designed to provide the sustained consideration his work merits whilst still appreciating the unmistakable individuality that Kracauer warns may be lost in the group's transitional translation. Notwithstanding Žižek's visceral affinity with the Judaeo-Christian intellectual tradition, there is a Buddhist saying that: "when a finger points at the moon, the foolish man looks at the finger". What draws people to Žižek's work, and continues to maintain their interest, is the way in which his theoretical endeavours doggedly interrogate the truly perverse nature of those scholars who persist in looking at the finger rather than the moon.

## Endnotes:

1. Mark Poster *Swan's Way: Care of the Self in the Hyperreal* - Keynote presentation at the *Engaging Baudrillard* Conference, University of Swansea, UK, September 4th-6th, 2006.
2. For a fuller discussion of the Abu Ghraib images see (Taylor 2007) - [http://www.ubishops.ca/BaudrillardStudies/vol4\\_1/taylor.htm](http://www.ubishops.ca/BaudrillardStudies/vol4_1/taylor.htm) , "The Pornographic Barbarism of the Self-Reflecting Sign"

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Žižek on toilet design - [http://www.lrb.co.uk/v26/n17/print/zize01\\_.html](http://www.lrb.co.uk/v26/n17/print/zize01_.html) , The London Review of Books

Žižek on stretching a concept - [http://www.lrb.co.uk/v26/n17/print/zize01\\_.html](http://www.lrb.co.uk/v26/n17/print/zize01_.html) , Critical Inquiry