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## ***Interpassivity and Misdemeanors: The Analysis of Ideology and the Žižekian Toolbox<sup>1</sup>***

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### **Introduction - Abstraction and ascetism in philosophy**

Philosophy often tends to regard itself as dwelling in the "icy deserts of abstraction" (Kant) or starting its flight at "dusk", painting everything "grey in grey" (Hegel). Thus it is suggested that philosophy has to do with matters remote not only from concreteness but also from daily life and, consequently, from the pleasures that a colourful life can bring about. In short, by positioning itself as a theory of the abstract, philosophy also tends to design itself as an ascetic practice, dealing only with most serious things, far away from any pleasure or, at least, humour. In contemporary philosophy, this image has even been reinforced, not only by a more and more rigid analytical philosophy but also by a good part of the deconstructivist tradition which may well appear more playful than the former yet still hardly funnier. Of course, this ascetic spirit is that of postmodern culture itself, and philosophy may be seen as too constrained to this culture or too weak to do otherwise; or even condemned to sadness by its very nature (despite the striking models of good humour presented by philosophers such as Kant and Hegel themselves).

Slavoj Žižek's philosophical writings, however, appear as the most striking opposition to these tendencies, by their style alone. Since Žižek obviously connects the most elaborated concepts, for example of German Idealism or of Lacanian Psychoanalysis, with the most down-to-earth jokes, thus not only making fun with the jokes, but also letting the concepts appear comical through their connection with the jokes. The pleasure thus provided by Žižek's texts has attracted readers in many countries of the world, and it has

made people interested in philosophy who would otherwise probably never have crossed its path.

It is no wonder, then, that within an ascetic culture this is not always regarded as a philosophical merit. Even if people appreciate Žižek's works and are amused by them, they sometimes do not recognize their philosophical quality. Žižek's jokes sometimes obscure his philosophy, at least for some of his admirers, not to mention his enemies. One may therefore, as a first reaction, feel inclined to attempt to dig out the philosophical part in Žižek and go for the "serious" philosophy behind the jokes. Yet this may turn out difficult, if not impossible; by very good, structural reasons (just as impossible as to find the "true artichoke" somewhere behind its leaves, to use an image given by Wittgenstein). So one has to go one step further here and take a closer look at the relationship between the concepts and the jokes: What is their actual "division of labour" in a Žižek text? Is it true that the hard theoretical work is done by the concepts whereas the jokes do the funny part? Or is it possible that there is a theoretical function to the jokes themselves? Is it possible that the jokes in Žižek's text are doing theoretical "joke-work" (to misuse the Freudian term)?

Since Žižek does not only operate with jokes but also with a whole variety of other concrete material - examples taken from everyday life, film, literature etc. -, this puts into question the entire relationship between the abstract and the concrete in this philosophy, if not in philosophy as a whole. What is, then, the theoretical role of this massive presence of examples? What can we learn from Žižek's examples - apart from the specific matter they exemplify, but on examples in general? Do Žižek's examples make a point about what examples can do in philosophy? In what sense are his examples precisely examples of what examples can be good for?

### **Materialism in philosophy and the role of the example**

The fact that Žižek's theory is a philosophy which proceeds through examples is a significant characteristic that jumps immediately to eye of any reader. This philosophy has its turning points and finds its crucial highlights in elements like the Rabinovitch jokes (see: below, footnote 8), the Hitchcockian McGuffin or the obscenities exchanged between soldiers of the former Yugoslav people's army. Such a way of proceeding has, in particular in the psychoanalytic tradition, been referred to as "phenomenological",<sup>2</sup> and since this "phenomenological" method is one of the constant points of philosophical disagreement with regard to Slavoj Žižek's theory, I want to take advantage of this specific occasion (the kind invitation by the British Society of Phenomenology), in order make a few considerations about the characteristic features and the specific stakes of Žižek's "phenomenological" method.

My first claim here is that proceeding through examples in philosophy is a necessary, never missing mark of materialism. Žižek's way of proceeding has to be compared with those pertaining to the great materialist tradition in philosophy: with the methods of philosophers such as Epicurus, Spinoza, Pascal, Marx, Freud, Wittgenstein, Althusser and - not to forget - Lacan. Yet, as Ferdinand de Saussure (another materialist, with great examples) has remarked, it is always easier to find a certain truth than to assign it to the right place. The truth that materialism in philosophy necessarily proceeds through examples does not explain why this is necessary and what the role of the example is.

A first catch here may be the idea that the example stands for the particular, as opposed to the general, and that the role of the example is to illustrate the general idea that it exemplifies. From this idea one could be inclined to draw the conclusion that materialism would, by its nature, always take the side of the particular, as opposed to the general. This would bring materialism close to nominalism or empiricism; yet, as materialist philosophers like Louis Althusser have proved, empiricism is not necessarily materialist; it can be precisely its opposite. (Since empiricism, according to Althusser, often presupposes the idea that the real explains itself; that there are no theoretical tools and no theoretical operations necessary in order to gain knowledge from the raw material of theoretical practice.)<sup>3</sup>

Yet not only the conclusion is misleading here; already the first concept of the example as a concrete illustration of an abstract idea has been completely wrong with regard to Žižek. In Žižek's theory the example fulfills a completely different function. In order to sum up this very special, paradoxical function of the example in Žižek's theory, one may recall here the structure of the well-known "Radio Erewan" jokes that Žižek sometimes refers to, and ask: "Was Žižek's example a concrete element that illustrated an abstract idea presented before?" - Radio Erewan would then answer: "In principle: Yes. But, first, the idea was not totally abstract, second, the example was not more concrete than the idea, and, third, what the example did to the idea was not to illustrate it at all."

### **What Žižek does with examples: an example**

Let us look for instance at one of Žižek's classics, one of his most brilliant key passages: the development of thoughts concerning the "objectivity of belief" (cf. Žižek 1989: 33-35). Starting from Marx's formulation of commodity fetishism, Žižek directs his argument along a chain of connected examples:

#### 1. the Tibetan prayer wheel

"you write a prayer on a paper, put the rolled paper into a wheel, and turn it automatically, without thinking [...]" (Žižek 1989: 33);

## 2. the Lacanian interpretation of the role of the Chorus in Greek tragedy

"[...] we feel the required emotions through the medium of the Chorus: 'You are then relieved of all worries, even if you do not feel anything, the Chorus will do so in your place' (Lacan [...])" ( Žižek 1989: 34-5);

## 3. the function of "canned laughter" in contemporary TV Sit-Coms

"[...] the Other - embodied in the television set [...] - 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 1989: 35);

## 4. the joke about the fool and his fear to be a grain of corn

"[...] After some time in a mental hospital, he was finally cured: now he knew that he was not a grain but a man. So they let him out; but soon afterwards he came running back, saying: 'I met a hen and I was afraid she would eat me.' The doctors tried to calm him: 'But what are you afraid of? Now you know that you are not a grain but a man.' The fool answered: 'Yes, of course, I know that, but does the hen know that I am no longer a grain?'" ( Žižek 1989: 35)

First, it has to be stated that the idea which Žižek in his elaboration points at is far from being there at the beginning. Marx's theory of commodity fetishism does not at all include this idea. On the contrary, Žižek uses his first example, the Tibetan prayer wheel, in order to dismiss the idea usually connected with Marx's formulation - the common understanding of it as an argument situated on the level of economy, the humanist criticism of economic relations in capitalism ("we have become the objects of our objects"). Instead, Žižek suggests to read Marx's argument not as an economic criticism but as a theory of ideology - yet in a sense in which ideology has hardly ever been conceived of; not in the Marxist tradition, and not outside of it. The theoretical twist, the new meaning that Žižek, with the help of Tibetan prayer wheels, gives to Marx's formulation is: things are able to believe instead of us.

It has to be remarked, though, that even this second element, Tibetan prayer wheels, is far from containing the new idea clearly and without ambiguity. The idea that religious people in Tibet may indulge in obscene phantasies while "objectively" praying through their ritual instruments is an idea that European theorists have hardly dared to conceive of (despite some statements by the Dalai Lama which appear to testify the paradoxical "detached" status of this ritual practice<sup>4</sup>) - be it by reasons of intercultural respect alone.

Therefore, in a third step, a new example, connected with conceptual support by Lacanian theory, has to be introduced: Lacan's idea that our most intimate feelings, beliefs and convictions can assume an "external existence" and that the chorus in Greek tragedy had precisely such a function (cf. Lacan 1986: 295): to feel fear and compassion vicariously, on behalf of the spectators. Yet, again, Lacan's idea may appear as an audacious, highly speculative and arbitrary interpretation with little empirical support and even less plausibility. It is no wonder, then, that this passage in Lacan has for a long time passed unnoticed; nobody made any use of it or referred to it, not even within Lacanian theory.

It is here that, in a fourth step, Žižek makes Lacan's historical assumption for the first time clear, plausible and justified by connecting it with an example from our own contemporary culture. The phenomenon of canned laughter in television (connected with the observation that usually we do not laugh when this laughter appears) allows Žižek to give full credibility and concreteness to the idea of Lacan which had until then remained a kind of theoretical "sleeper". Žižek's merit here is considerable: just as in ethnology, also in this case the element belonging to another culture is not understandable as long as we are not able to overcome our strange blindness for its precise counterpart in our familiar context. The Greek chorus remains an enigma as long as canned laughter is treated as going by itself. Only by "estranging" and problematizing our own practice, i. e. by recognizing its strangeness and by transforming its previous evidence into a question, we get a key for replacing our astonishment and the respective assumptions about foreign phenomena by theoretical concepts. (Ludwig Wittgenstein proceeded the same way when, in his critical objections against Frazer's theory of "savage" magic, he pointed out that there exists a magic of the "civilized", and that precisely this "civilized" magic, which is not based in magic assumptions or convictions, has to be taken as the model for understanding its counterpart in foreign cultures. cf. Wittgenstein 1993: 140, 124)

By adding a fifth element, the fool-hen-joke, Žižek finally points out the remarkable power our beliefs assume once we have delegated them to things: delegating one's beliefs makes them even stronger than they were before. Believing "objectively", through external objects or vicarious agents, does not provide any release from the constraints exerted by our beliefs; on the contrary, as soon as we have transferred these beliefs onto external agents, they become "ontologically" relevant. Now these illusions determine the objectivity of the outer world, thus transforming our "enlightened" knowledge about how this world "really" is into a purely subjective abstraction. This reinforced status of the illusion, precisely through "detachment", better knowledge and delegation onto things, is the reason why, as Žižek points out, laughter and ironical distance are far from helping us out of ideology (as Umberto Eco had assumed, cf. Žižek 1989: 27) and why, after the "end of all narrations" and the arrival of "cynical reason" in postmodernity, we are far from being post-ideological.<sup>5</sup>

### **The bending of the stick**

As can be seen in this sequence of theoretical steps, performed through certain crucial examples, there is no initial "abstract" idea that would become "illustrated" by a "concrete" element. If there is an abstract idea at all (for example, a first Marxist concept of fetishism), then the example presents another abstract idea (a different Marxist concept of fetishism). Yet what the example in Žižek's texts usually refers to is in itself already another example, another concrete element. Žižek proceeds by connecting one concrete element with another: for example, "canned laughter" in TV with Lacan's idea of the role of the chorus in Greek Tragedy.

The function of the example is therefore not to illustrate or to exemplify its - in most cases equally illustrative and exemplary - counterpart, but to displace it; to drag it away from its initial position; to "estrangle" it (in the sense of Bertolt Brecht); to shed a different light on it; to comb it against the grain, as it were - in other words: to interpret it, against its common understanding and against its self-understanding (this is the violent sense that Nietzsche gives to the notion of "interpretation"<sup>6</sup>).

In Žižek's texts, the example is not there in order to illustrate what can be seen in the exemplified; on the contrary it is there in order to make visible what, at first, could not be seen in it. Instead of being an *illustration of an idea*, the Žižek example is rather a *caricature of another example* - and a criticism of the idea usually connected with that example. Žižek's examples comment upon each other;<sup>7</sup> therefore they seem to function just like the "myths" about which Lévi-Strauss remarked that one myth can function as the interpretation of the other.

The typical Žižek example does not present an instance to which an abstract idea could be easily applied. It is not a *passive* material that visualizes something which has already been *included* in the abstract idea. Its function is rather to make something appear which was completely *foreign* to the first idea and which this idea could only be connected to with considerable theoretical effort. The example is therefore highly *active*. It is not just the object or the raw material of a theoretical explanation, but it functions as its theoretical *tool*: it makes visible a theoretical structure in the original idea which, before, was not easy to discern or which was even hidden by another structure that appeared evident. Due to its active nature, there is a certain *retroactive force* proper to a Žižek example: After you have heard the example, you can perceive something in the exemplified element that you were not able to see before. Yet, after having heard Žižek's example it is probably difficult to understand the exemplified ever again the same way you had understood it before.

For example, when Žižek uses the joke about Rabinovitch's two reasons for emigration to explain the structure of Hegelian dialectics, Žižek makes clear that, in Hegel, the antithesis is

in itself already the synthesis, yet seen from another perspective.<sup>8</sup> This had never been visible or clear to me before I came upon Žižek's example. Yet now I can hardly think of Hegelian dialectics without conceiving it like this and recalling Rabinovitch's *chuzpe* as well as Žižek's brilliant idea to connect it with Hegel's dialectics.

One could say here: precisely by using the example, Žižek makes clear that what appeared as the "idea" of Hegelian dialectics (just as in the case before the idea of Marxian commodity fetishism) had actually not been an idea *but an example in itself*. Since what Žižek's example makes visible had not been visible in the idea itself. (And what is an idea if not something in which, by its very name, the visible should be visible.) Žižek's example therefore *de-centers* a presumed idea; it refuses its claims for universality and self-transparency and reveals its true nature, which is that of another example.

Just as psychoanalysis, according to Freud, makes the analysand say what he does not know,<sup>9</sup> the Žižek example makes another thing say *what, until then, it did not know*. A Žižek example is not just a particular instance of a general concept or law to which it can be subsumed. The example is not there in order to match an abstract description or concept. Finding an example is therefore not a matter of *judgement*, as in Kant<sup>10</sup>. Rather, this requires a kind of *witty philosophical reticence*: the ability to discover a given phenomenon's power to contradict a previous idea that we had about another phenomenon. The use of examples becomes here what Gilles Deleuze calls a "concatenation"<sup>11</sup>: Example and exemplified can be connected because they are logically equal elements dwelling on the same level of generality. Yet the example has the advantage of coming later, and has thus the chance to work upon the previous element, to transform it. Or, to put it in a Lacanian terminology: the example is a master-signifier which retroactively gives a new interpretation to a previous signifier.

For Žižek's examples goes therefore what Wittgenstein describes as the role of the "picture" in his philosophy. Wittgenstein's pictures change the previous understanding one had about a certain case:

"I wanted to put that picture before him, and his *acceptance* of the picture consists in his now being inclined to regard a given case differently: that is, to compare it with *this* rather than *that* set of pictures. I have changed his *way of looking at things*." (Wittgenstein 2001: 49e (§ 149))

Wittgenstein's pictures are there in order to change a previous understanding, an understanding that had, itself, already been determined by certain other (maybe unacknowledged) pictures. Therefore Wittgenstein's pictures do not give an illustration where there was nothing (or only abstract ideas) before; rather, they are *counter-pictures*. They break with previous pictures; they destroy a previous understanding which, due to the imaginary

power of unquestioned pictures, had presented itself as self-evident. The Wittgensteinian picture has its crucial moment precisely when another picture "holds us captive" (cf. Wittgenstein 1980: 80 [§ 115]).<sup>12</sup>

Here we find the reason *why materialist philosophy cannot do without pictures*: in order to break free from the imaginary captivity in which we are held by certain images, we need other images, counter-images; since, as Spinoza has stated, something can only be limited by something else which is of the same nature.<sup>13</sup>

Such a concept of the theoretical space is thoroughly materialist: it conceives it as a field not just of ideas but of pictures that hold us captive, of evidences that blind us, of considerable forces that keep us down; and of other forces, that have to be developed: counterforces, able to break with the former. Louis Althusser has formulated this materialist idea of the theoretical space, using another example - that of the bending of the stick:

"It follows that if you want to change historically existing ideas, even in the apparently abstract domain called philosophy, you cannot content yourself with simply preaching the naked truth, and waiting for its anatomical obviousness to 'enlighten' minds, as our eighteenth-century ancestors used to say: you are forced, since you want to force a change in ideas, to recognize the force which is keeping them bent, by applying a counterforce capable of destroying this power and bending the stick in the opposite direction so as to put the ideas right." (Althusser 1990: 210)

This idea that the theoretical space is such a physical field of forces did, by the way, not stem from philosophical speculation. It has been developed by one of Althusser's teachers, the scholar in the history of sciences Gaston Bachelard. Investigating the history of sciences like physics, chemistry and mathematics, Bachelard found out that a science, in order to establish itself, has not just got to find some knowledge where previously there had been none, but to break with previous, spontaneous evidences, with "epistemological obstacles" that keep the theoretical space of this very science blocked from the outset.

This is important to mention since it refers to an fundamental epistemological problem pointed out by Bachelard - a problem that can be called the problem of the *initial narcissism of theories*. When a theory does not succeed in breaking with the first spontaneous evidences provided by sources like common sense, then it does not even have an object. Whenever such a theory thinks to speak of an object, it speaks in fact about nothing but itself. What a theory "sees" when it actually sees nothing, is itself - i. e. its own expectations, presuppositions and prejudices. As Bachelard puts it,

"It suffices us to speak about an object to make us believe that we are objective. But, through our first choice, the object rather designates us, than us designating it, and what we consider our fundamental ideas of the world, often are nothing but confidential



revelations about the youthfulness of our spirit." (Bachelard 1974: 134; translation: Astrid Hager and Robert Pfaller)

Breaking with first evidences of common sense is necessary for any theory in order to obtain an object. Before being able to say something right or wrong about an object, a theory has to leave that starting zone in which everything is neither right nor wrong and where it speaks about nothing but itself.

Providing science with an object, and breaking with its inevitable initial narcissism, is a thoroughly materialist task. This is not only so because in the history of philosophy many schools which called themselves materialist have stressed the importance, or even the primacy, of the object. There is a much more systematic reason for this (since materialism is, in the first place, not a theory of cognition). Following psychoanalytic theory,<sup>14</sup> we can say *that the secret, yet most general name for philosophical idealism is - narcissism*. In today's culture we can discern this narcissism in the underlying philosophical matrix that governs many discourses, creating the typical preferences of these very discourses: for example, a preference for being a subject, instead of being an object; a preference for what is constructed as opposed to what is seen as essential; a hymnic hailing of "immaterial work" (for example by Maurizio Lazzarato as well as by Hardt and Negri<sup>15</sup>); and, correspondingly, a fundamental distrust in materiality (for example, in art: be it physical materiality or the materiality of a determinate form that cannot be "interactively" altered or arbitrarily interpreted); distrust in the materiality of political and ideological apparatuses, neglect of the question of political organization, etc.

The fundamental philosophical disease of our time can therefore be seen in these spontaneous choices which are made, unaware of their underlying idealism and narcissism. As Richard Sennett has noted in 1974, this narcissistic attitude can be resumed in the formula "Be yourself! And do not tolerate anything that appears foreign to your precious self." Today, under neo-liberal conditions, it can be seen, how this categorical imperative of our culture leads to most affirmative forms of pseudo-emancipatory politics, and even of self-exploitation.

As opposed to this, proceeding through examples the way Žižek does, means to break with first narcissistic evidences of theory, to allow theory to accede to an object, and to recognize the materiality of the theoretical space. As a consequence, this points to a crucial philosophical perspective: not to seek one's freedom beyond the sphere of materiality.

### **The filthy examples and the beautiful souls**

Žižek's examples constantly show a surprising aptitude to break with given evidences. This is, to my view, what belongs to Žižek's greatest merits in philosophy: the proofs of his amazing ability to discover a certain theoretical structure, a transformative force, in a given

element - in any element that culture can provide. Just like the proverbial wise man, Žižek is able to learn something from everybody and everything. Nothing is too stupid or too trivial in order to teach him something - that's probably the best one can say about a philosophical intellect. This means also, in the first place, that nothing human is foreign to Žižek; no existing phenomenon is able to blame his theories as a naive, blue-eyed idealist dream. Whereas other philosophers' ideas (for instance, Habermas' concept of non-hierarchical communication) appear funny at the very moment that you try to imagine them in comparison not just to ordinary petty-bourgeois Western academics, but, for example, to equally Western sado-masochist leather-gays, Žižek's theory appears able to face any particular challenge exerted by an existing practice - no matter how strange, kinky, awkward, dirty or cruel it may appear.

Again, this does not go by itself - and for the least in contemporary culture. Are we not surrounded by "beautiful souls" who do not allow themselves (as well as others) the use of bad words or thoughts? Is cultural theory today not totally subverted by a "childhood disease" that, at any price, tries to stay away from "adult language" as well as from the realities that this language designates? (We should not forget here that THE childhood disease, according to psychoanalysis, is (secondary) narcissism.) Is there not a sort of "enlightenment" and "pure reason" in power that does not hesitate to call for the police - or even tries to become that police - in order to prevent itself from acknowledging "filthy" matters? The problem is, of course that, in the last instance, narcissism by its very nature perceives every matter as filthy<sup>16</sup> (since matter represents the symbolic order which, by its rules and laws, puts constraints upon the "pure" narcissistic ego). - As opposed to this, we should remind ourselves that materialism in history has always revealed itself by its dirty, sarcastic way of speaking. Ancient authors such as Chrysippos, Diogenes and Epictetus, and their modern counterparts such as Spinoza, Mandeville, Marx or Brecht have taught us lessons of sarcastic laughter with regard to unpleasant realities. These authors have not hesitated to play the role of the black sheep, of the *bête noire* that speaks out the dirty truth nobody wants to acknowledge or to take into his own mouth.

Compared to the background of contemporary "newspeak", the presumptuous cleanliness that characterizes today's academic and non-academic theorists and policemen of discourse, Slavoj Žižek has taken a quite unique stance. Here in particular it becomes clearly visible that his examples function in order to brush something against its grain. In his choice of subjects, matters and ways of speaking Žižek has never cared whether he himself would appear advantageously pure or virtuous. Following the "plebeian" tradition of philosophical materialism (cf. Žižek 1989: 29), he did not hesitate to speak of bad things, and he called things by their names - preferably by their worst names: since only this can prevent theory from painting reality pink and becoming an idealist, "apologetic" narrative. "The cleaner you are, the dirtier you are" is the rule one could hear Žižek say sometimes. This position can be

reformulated in Lacanian terms: If there is any chance to show respect or decency under disrespectful and indecent conditions, then this chance is not to be looked for on the level of the *enunciated content*. The level of *enunciation* alone - the fact that things are actually called by their names - is the only level where an utopian wish can inscribe itself without becoming immediately ideological: the wish that things may become better than their outspoken names.

As a consequence, Žižek's discourse never showed the least attempt to appear "politically correct". As opposed to that, most contemporary theorists as well as artists today in a narcissistic way constantly seek to look good when they speak about certain things (and keep silent about others). Yet this non-dialectical way of proceeding does not leave any room to move for their listeners. The latter cannot do more than agree with what has been stated ("Yes, the author is right, this minority really is in a deplorable situation"). This keeps the audience in a totally resignative, yet at the same time presumptuously satisfied position ("we are on the good side").

Unlike Rabinovitch, contemporary politically correct authors do not have "a second reason" when they speak. They never start speaking ironically or sarcastically, from a position opposed to what they mean in order to trigger a movement of thoughts, affects and responses in their audience. Therefore this discourse produces nothing but the tacit satisfaction of bourgeois classes that they are not to blame for the bad state of affairs in the world (which they, according to an obscene aesthetics of the sublime, love to observe in a safe theory or art space). Žižek on the contrary never followed this pattern. He willingly assumed the role of the *bête noire*. With regard to this gesture of his, we may feel reminded of Nietzsche's remark about the nobility of the Greek gods who did not execute punishment but rather, more elegantly, assumed guilt themselves.<sup>17</sup>

A constant awareness of the "extremes" pushes Žižek's thought forward and allows him to take his very "impossible" positions which are necessary in order to render theoretical thought possible.<sup>18</sup> This non-naiveté of Žižek is a proper materialist stance. Louis Althusser has coined for this stance a formula which he called "the only definition of materialism": "*not to tell oneself stories*" ("ne pas se raconter d'histoire", Althusser 1994: 247). Precisely by his examples, which are often stories, Žižek succeeds in preventing his philosophy from becoming a story.<sup>19</sup>

### **Dirty matters as sharp tools**

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.

Yet this egalitarian spirit does not stem only from the fact that these mass culture elements are allowed to enter into "highbrow" philosophy (as they were before, for example in Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes or Umberto Eco). What makes Žižek's proceeding so egalitarian is the fact that these elements are not just there, but that they are also regarded, by Žižek, as equally apt to serve him as theoretical tools - as "synthetic aprioris", as it were. The commercial is not just there in order to be analyzed by elaborated theoretical means; on the contrary, it may very well be used to analyze a given theory, as its object. And the artwork is not just there as a more or less enigmatic raw material to be interpreted by refined psychoanalytic devices; on the contrary, Hitchcock may become the theoretical tool and tell you what you always wanted to know about Lacan (but did not dare to ask).

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 at a distance from the self-understanding of the reality he deals with. This corresponds to what Louis Althusser has once called the "Golden Rule" of materialism: "Do not judge a given reality according to its self-understanding."<sup>20</sup>

This may also explain why Žižek appears to show little love for his cultural objects. He uses mainstream Hollywood movies, but rarely refined or extravagant productions. He refers to novels, but, as has been remarked, almost never to lyrics.<sup>21</sup> Yet Žižek's theory is not film theory, but theory that works with film; not theory of literature, but theory that works with literature; not theory of everyday culture including its dark sides, but theory that works with phenomena from everyday culture including its dark sides. Precisely because his cultural objects serve him as tools, Žižek does not make his choices according to their refinement and cultural value, but to their explanatory and interpretative value.

Therefore Žižek's way of dealing with examples is not the kind of sympathetic, orbiting meditation about certain phenomena that essayists such as Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes, John Berger or Stephen Greenblatt have presented. Žižek takes his objects directly and with force, just like a hammer in order to hit against an epistemological obstacle, and he does not care about the hammer's colour, history, provenance, inscription etc. More refined objects would not serve him equally well in the role of such a tool, therefore Žižek obviously hesitates

to use them - and, if we remember Kant, it is not the worst one can do if one hesitates to use somebody "just as an instrument".<sup>22</sup>

The frequently made observation that Žižek completely "flattens" his examples out is not wrong here. Yet one has to remember their status as theoretical tools. In the field of theoretical vision, one has to make a choice: either the object is what you look at, or the object serves you as the lens through which you look at something else. And if serves as your lens, then you do not have to care for the variety of its qualities, but for one quality alone: its ability to sharpen your view on something else. In the good Spinozean tradition of producing optical lenses, Žižek sharpens the "definition" of his examples in order to get a sharp view on another object. Only in a second step one may reverse this setting. What has been, until then, the object of elaboration can then become its instrument and serve to treat the former instrument as an object. A lensmaker, for example, wearing his glasses, can make new glasses by which he, later, can sharpen his old ones. (This is the way how, for example, Freud proceeds when, in his essay "Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices" [Freud 1907b] he first uses religion in order to make obsessional neurosis understandable and then, reversing this explicative relationship, sheds new light on the dynamics in the history of religion with the help of his insights into obsessional neurosis.)

Since Žižek's examples are his tools, one has got to learn his examples in order to understand him. It is not enough just to know them; one has to be able to have them present in the toolbox and to master them skilfully: one has to be able to remember quickly how and where they have to be applied in order to produce an unexpected insight. This is the way how the ancient philosophers such as the Pyrrhonian sceptics or the Kynics exercised the use of their examples (which they called their "tropes"). Therefore they were so fit and quick to refer to the examples of dogs or noble Persians in order to dissipate imaginary formations such as the tragical lure of the Oedipus myth - by stating sarcastically, for example, that creating children with one's mother need not necessarily be regarded as such a sad thing.<sup>23</sup>

At this point, it can easily be shown why a recurrent objection against Žižek's examples is besides the point. One can often read that, first, Žižek would shift too fast from one example to another, and, second, that he would often repeat his examples. In a way, this argument looks quite funny already by itself. It reminds a bit of the one that Freud calls the "borrowed kettle"-argument. ("You blame me for having returned your kettle with holes in it? - But, first, I did not borrow your kettle; second, it had holes in it already when I borrowed it; and third, I gave it back without holes in it." cf. Freud [1900a]: 138s.) The two reasons in this argument seem to contradict each other just the same way: since if Žižek was too quick the first time, then one should be glad to get the chance of a repetition.

But what counts more is the fact that this kind of objection misrecognizes the theoretical

status of Žižek's examples. It takes the narrative role of the example for its logical role. It may be impolite to tell a joke a second time, given the fact that the action is about narrating jokes. Yet in Žižek's texts the jokes have a strictly logical function, and nobody would blame a philosopher like Hegel for repeatedly applying his notion of "mediation", to most diverse realities; or a mathematician for repeatedly using a formula he has invented. This status of the theoretical tool is precisely that of the joke in Žižek's text. Thus we can understand Wittgenstein's idea of a philosophical book that consisted only of jokes, yet being completely serious in itself.<sup>24</sup> (Apart from Žižek's texts, "Capital" by Marx appears to come closest to this Wittgensteinian utopia.)<sup>25</sup>

We can sum this up by saying: The more materialist a philosopher is, the less he is disgusted by silly or dirty examples, and the less he gets bored by their repetition. Yet there exists another structural reason for the necessity of coming back to the same examples again and again: As Althusser has emphasized, it is not sufficient to break with an epistemological obstacle and to open up a new theoretical field. This cannot be done just once. Since the obstacle exists by reasons different from theory, it continues to exist and to accompany the new science, constantly menacing it, even from its inside. As Althusser puts it,

"... not only does ideology precede every science, but ideology survives after the constitution of science, and despite its existence." (Althusser 1994: 22)

Therefore theory has got to keep its instruments in its hands. The "epistemological cut" has to be made again and again. Its opponent is too sticky to let science go alone. Blaise Pascal has observed this necessity of the repeated effort and gave a beautiful formula to it:

"These great mental efforts on which the soul occasionally lights are not things on which it dwells; it only jumps there for a moment, not for ever, as on the throne." (Pascal 1995: 251 [§ 829])

<sup>1</sup>This paper has been presented at the annual conference of the British Society of Phenomenology, St. Hilda's College, Oxford, April 7th, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> cf. for example O. Mannoni 1985: 33.

<sup>3</sup> cf. Althusser 1990: 226.

<sup>4</sup> cf. <http://www.dharma-haven.org/tibetan/digital-wheels.htm>: "His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, has said that having the mantra on your computer works the same as a traditional *Mani* wheel. As the digital image spins around on your hard drive, it sends the peaceful prayer of compassion to all directions and purifies the area."

<sup>5</sup> Žižek 's analysis has been extremely productive. Apart from the discovery that beliefs and convictions can have an external existence, which has been crucial for a theory of ideology, it allowed another important conclusion with regard to art theory. At a moment when in art an ideology of interactivity appeared predominant, the example of canned laughter pointed into an opposite direction: it was an artwork that contained its own observation. Here, the artwork did not leave some creative activity to the observers; on the contrary, it kept all for itself, even the "passivity" of the observers. And apparently (as Žižek 's own example seemed to prove) there were observers who wanted it to be like that: they did not want to observe, but preferred to delegate their observation to the artwork. Together with further examples (such as the use some TV-freaks make of their videorecorders) this lead to a general theory of "interpassivity": the wish for delegated consumption in art as well as in everyday culture (cf. Pfaller 1998, (ed.) 2000; Žižek 2004).

<sup>6</sup> cf. Nietzsche [1887]: 269: "[...] alles Überwältigen und Herr-werden [ist] ein Neu-Interpretieren [...]"

<sup>7</sup> This is the way Octave Mannoni has conceived of a "phenomenological" use of examples: "d'essayer de présenter des exemples de façon, pour ainsi dire, qu'ils s'interprètent les uns par les autres." (Mannoni 1985: 33)

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Žižek 1989: 175s.: "... a well-known Soviet joke about Rabinovitch, a Jew who wants to emigrate. The bureaucrat at the emigration office asks him why; Rabinovitch answers: 'There are two reasons why. The first is that I'm afraid that in the Soviet Union the Communists will lose power, there will be a counter-revolution and the new power will put all the blame for the Communist crimes on us, Jews - there will again be anti-Jewish pogroms. ...' 'But', interrupts the bureaucrat, 'this is pure nonsense, nothing can change in the Soviet Union, the power of the Communists will last forever!' 'Well,' responds Rabinovitch calmly, 'that's my second reason.' The logic is the same here as in the Hegelian proposition 'the spirit is a bone': the very failure of the first reading gives us the true meaning." - Žižek has given an excellent new version of this joke in 1991, showing that after the disintegration of Communism the same joke could be told again, just by reversing the sequence of the two reasons (cf. Žižek 1991: 1).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Freud 1940: 212s: "Mit den Neurotikern schließen wir also den Vertrag: volle Aufrichtigkeit gegen strenge Diskretion. Das macht den Eindruck, als strebten wir nur die Stellung eines weltlichen Beichtvaters an. Aber der Unterschied ist groß, denn wir wollen von ihm nicht nur hören, was er weiß und vor anderen verbirgt, sondern er soll uns auch erzählen, was er nicht weiß."

<sup>10</sup> cf. Kant: "[...] ein Beispiel [ist] nur das Besondere (concretum), als unter dem Allgemeinen nach Begriffen (abstractum) enthalten vorgestellt, und die bloß theoretische Darstellung eines Begriffs." (Kant [1797]: 620 [A 168], footnote); see also: Kant [1781/1787]: B 171s.

<sup>11</sup> cf. Deleuze 1980: 59ss.

<sup>12</sup> The counter-image makes visible that already before we had to do with an image. If an image "holds us captive", this happens because its nature as image is not acknowledged, and mostly

because the logic of this image in itself is not taken by its letter. This has been emphasized by Nietzsche, in his criticism of the use of the optical metaphor in widespread notions of theory: "But let us, forsooth, my philosophic colleagues, henceforth guard ourselves more carefully against the mythology of dangerous ideas, which has set up a 'pure, will-less, painless, timeless subject of knowledge', let us protect ourselves from the tentacles of such contradictory ideas as 'pure reason', 'absolute spirituality', 'knowledge in itself' - in these theories an eye that cannot be thought of is required to think, an eye which ex hypothesis has no direction at all, an eye in which the active and interpreting functions are cramped, are absent, those functions, I say, by means of which 'abstract' seeing first became seeing something: in these theories consequently the absurd and nonsensical is always demanded of the eye. There is only a seeing from a perspective, only a 'knowing' from a perspective." (Nietzsche 1910: 153) - From this remark we can draw the conclusion *that there exists no philosophy which does not think in examples*. Yet some make believe that they did otherwise since they do not present and treat their examples as such. They do not stick to their own letters but treat them as "sleeping tropes".

<sup>13</sup> cf. Spinoza 1955: 45

<sup>14</sup> See for this especially Grunberger/ Dessuant 2000.

<sup>15</sup> cf. Hardt/Negri 2002: 305; Lazzarato 1998: 40.

<sup>16</sup> cf. Grunberger/ Dessuant 2000: 203.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Nietzsche [1887]: 281: "Dergestalt dienten damals die Götter dazu, den Menschen bis zu einem gewissen Grade auch im Schlimmen zu rechtfertigen, sie dienten als Ursachen des Bösen - damals nahmen sie nicht die Strafe auf sich, sondern, wie es *vornehmer* ist, die Schuld..."

<sup>18</sup> See for this Althusser 1990: 209.

<sup>19</sup> Kasimir Malevich has, in his theories of painting, developed beautiful tableaux in which he analyzed what he called the "inspiring environment" of any given painters' movement: the inspiring environment of the Academic painter is a farm, with peasants and peaceful animals in front of it; the inspiring environment of the impressionist is a feudal garden; that of the futurist consists of ocean liners, locomotives and factories; and that of the suprematist are skies filled with airplanes in geometrical formations. It would probably be revealing to do the same with philosophers. Only very few would stand such a test equally well as Žižek does. (Cf. Malevich 1980)

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Althusser 1993: 234: "Ne pas juger de l'être par sa conscience de soi !"

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Clemens who remarks that Žižek's appetite "finds its limit in poetry, more precisely lyric poetry" (Clemens 2005: 15).

<sup>22</sup> cf. Kant [1785]: 61.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Hossenfelder 1996: 29.

<sup>24</sup> cf. Maruschi 1976: XIII.

<sup>25</sup> One could even imagine that, as Žižek once suggested, the examples in one of his texts were just the same as in another text, yet the complete theory was different.



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