INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ZIZEK STUDIES

ISSN 1751-8229

Volume One, Number One - *Why Žižek?* pp 58 - 67

Serious Theory

Todd McGowan, University of Vermont, USA

Slavoj Žižek is known above all for his jokes and his ability to popularize high theory. His much-noted rock star status among graduate students in the humanities undoubtedly owes much to his proclivity for explaining difficult theoretical concepts in an accessible and humorous way. This reputation is not at all undeserved. In his hands, Lacan ceases to be an obscure psychoanalytic oracle and becomes a key for unlocking the secrets of innumerable cultural texts. As Robert Boynton puts it in his *Lingua Franca* account of Žižek, he has developed a "trademark synthesis of philosophical verve and rhetorical playfulness" (Boynton 1998: 42-43). Žižek is known more for his popularizing and his jocularity than for the content of his thought. We might see this as a fetishistic response to that thought, an attempt to disavow its traumatic impact on the business as usual of academic theory. But rather than lament this response and insist on highlighting what Žižek thinks rather than how he thinks, we might instead investigate the content of the style itself and try to uncover what this style indicates about his theorizing. Why does Žižek dwell in the popular and the playful? Does it mean, as an interview with Žižek on Radio France has suggested, that Žižek's thought is "pop philosophy"? It is my contention that, to the contrary, the chief contribution of Slavoj Žižek to contemporary thought lies in his reintroduction of a level of seriousness to that thought.[1]

A general lack of seriousness predominates across the spectrum of theorizing today. The lack of seriousness manifests itself most clearly in the emphasis on construction and contextualization at the expense of truth. We exist in a theoretical epoch that has internalized Nietzsche's idea that "everything has become: there are *no eternal facts*, just as there are no absolute truths" (Nietzsche 1986: 13) and that accepts Michel Foucault's claim that "the problem is not changing people's consciousness—or what's in their heads—but the

political, economic, institutional regime of the production of truth" (Foucault 1980: 133). Addressing the question of truth in this way allows both Nietzsche and Foucault (and contemporary theory in general) to gain critical distance from the question itself. If truth is the product of a historical and cultural construction, if truth is nothing but the result of a discursive procedure, then we no longer have to concern ourselves with the truth-status of our theoretical endeavor, which relieves the theorist of truth's burden. But amid this prevailing constructivism and historicism that contextualizes and thereby brackets the idea of truth, Žižek affirms truth as an irreducible component of any theorizing whatsoever. On this question, he occupies the same position as Alain Badiou, who insists, "*The category of truth is the central category, be it under another name, of any possible philosophy*" (Badiou 1999: 119). Though Žižek openly considers himself to be (in Badiou's terms) an anti-philosopher, he resembles Badiou's model of the philosopher through his serious foregrounding of the question of truth and asserting of truth-claims.

One can continue to think seriously today—that is, one can continue to make truth-claims—because no amount of historical and cultural knowledge can eliminate the fundamental gap within knowledge that is the space that truth occupies. All knowledge has a point at which it fails not on account of any limitation but through its inability to posit successfully a limit that would allow the system of knowledge to define itself. All knowledge, to put it another way, is totalizing, and this totalization gives rise to a failure to grasp its own failure. Knowledge can know everything but what it can't know, and this failure—this absence of knowledge at the point of too much knowledge, this lack emerging out of excess—is the limitation that haunts every project of knowledge, a limitation that dooms every attempt at historicist explanation. Our ability to make truth-claims is itself a function of this limitation that restricts our knowledge. Contrary to what we typically think about truth as a culmination of our efforts at knowledge, we have truth only insofar as we don't know it all.

A serious insistence on truth today does not involve making direct and straightforward truth-claims that fit comfortably within a regime of knowledge. This is, for instance, the position of philosophers such as John Rawls and his followers, who believe that some idea of justice as fairness can be sustained as a transhistorical truth and can provide the basis for an ethico-political system.[2] The problem with this claim is that it fails to recognize the distinct status of truth in relation to knowledge and thus remains susceptible to a procedure of historical reduction. Even though this is exactly what Rawls wants to bracket in his philosophy, one could easily show how the very idea of justice as fairness can only emerge under the specific conditions of advanced capitalist production and how this historical specificity produces a blindness to the importance of who enunciates the doctrine of justice as fairness. But there is another sort of truth that remains irreducible to history and historicization.

For Žižek, the theorist arrives at truth not by constructing an edifice on which to hang a regime of knowledge—or a basis on which to construct an ethical truth—but by showing the holes that exist within our knowledge. As he puts it in *Tarrying with the Negative*, "the duty of the critical intellectual [...] is precisely *to occupy all the time*, even when the new order (the 'new harmony') stabilizes itself and again renders invisible the hole as such, *the place of this hole*, i.e., to maintain a distance toward every Master-Signifier" (Žižek 1993: 2). To occupy the place of the hole within the social order or within the regime of knowledge is to occupy the position in which truth might arise as that which is subtracted from knowledge.[3]

One only gets at the truth subtracted from knowledge through the act of knowing, but it is a knowing that pays attention to and takes as its point of departure what knowledge represses. This is why Žižek focuses on areas that high theory has traditionally denigrated. He locates his theorizing within popular culture, engaging it not just for examples or applications but for its fecundity in moving theory forward. On the face of it, this is a dimension of his thought that Žižek shares with cultural studies, the movement that often receives some of his most scathing criticism.

The dramatic innovation of cultural studies was its turn to the study of low and popular culture. Historically, critical and theoretical energy had focused on great (and largely unpopular) works of art at the expense of popular ones. Cultural studies moved away from this model by emphasizing the importance of context instead of text. The text became significant not for its own sake, for its aesthetic greatness, but for what it could reveal to us about the cultural context from which it emanated. This idea led to a change in focus away from great works of art, though these works did not simply disappear from critical consciousness. The approach to the great work of art underwent a transformation: the category of greatness disappeared, and all works of art—high art and popular art—began to exist on the same level. The cultural studies critic continues to study *Moby Dick*, but does so in order to understand the culture's attitude toward homosociality rather than to grasp Melville's unique insight into our existential plight. Cultural studies treats every work of art as if it were a phenomenon of popular culture—and thus not worthy of analysis on its own merits.[4]

In one sense, Slavoj Žižek as a theorist belongs to the movement engendered by cultural studies. His thought obsesses over the popular: from John Gray's *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* to Mimi Leder's *Deep Impact* (1998) to Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*. But Žižek approaches the popular from the opposite direction. Rather than treating, in the manner of cultural studies, the great work of art as if it were popular art, Žižek treats the popular work as if it were great. Such a claim directly contradicts Žižek's own statements on his interaction with what is popular. For instance, in the preface to

Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture (perhaps Žižek's most well-known and widely disseminated book), he insists, "If, now and then, the book […] mentions great names like Shakespeare and Kafka, the reader need not be uneasy: they are read strictly as kitsch authors, on the same level as [Colleen] McCullough and [Stephen] King" (Žižek 1991: vii). Here, Žižek appears to locate himself in the cultural studies movement and to embrace its rejection of the very idea of high art. But this is not the final word of the preface.

When he presents the two possible ways that the reader might understand the reference to popular culture in the book, Žižek suggests a radically different attitude toward the popular as an object of study. Paraphrasing De Quincey's discussion of the art of murder, he outlines the two options:

> If a person renounces Lacan, soon psychoanalysis itself will appear to him dubious, and from here it is just a step to a disdain for Hitchcock's films and to a snobbish refusal of horror fiction. How many people have entered the way of perdition with some fleeting cynical remark on Lacan, which at the time was of no great importance to them, and ended by treating Stephen King as absolute literary trash!
>
> If a person renounces Stephen King, soon Hitchcock himself will appear to him dubious, and from here it is just a step to a disdain for psychoanalysis and to a snobbish refusal of Lacan. How many people have entered the way of perdition with some fleeting cynical remark on Stephen King, which at the time was of no great importance to them, and ended by treating Lacan as a phallocentric obscurantist! (Žižek 1991: viii)

Žižek presents two different ways of reading the book, but what both have in common is their insistence on the theoretical importance of popular art such as that of Stephen King. Žižek final statement in this discussion—"It is for the reader to decide which of the two versions he or she would choose" (Žižek 1991: viii)—obscures this fundamental similarity between them. He sees theoretical significance and even theoretical innovation in the realm of popular art. The point of his thought is not that every text is worth studying because it testifies to the context from which it emerges (which is the position of cultural studies) but that many texts previously thought not worth studying in fact are because in some way they transcend their context and testify to some truth that the context obscures.

Taking the popular or commonplace seriously is what links Žižek's two touchstones—psychoanalysis and Hegel. As everyone knows, Freud develops psychoanalysis by focusing on phenomena that other thinkers see as meaningless. Dreams, slips of the tongue, and jokes provide the foundation for Freud's conception of the unconscious. Rather than dismissing the dream as an insignificant product of the sleep process, Freud finds in it the

key to waking life. Similarly, the slip of the tongue and the joke become not simply detours that subjects take but the sites where subjectivity actually manifests itself. For Freud, one discovers the truth of one's subjectivity in something as seemingly inconsequential as a moment of misspeaking. By not taking such moments seriously, we relegate ourselves to missing this truth.

Hegel is the first philosopher to seek out the theoretical structure of commonly held views and to take this structure seriously—more seriously, in fact, than those who hold the views. For Hegel, speculative philosophizing exists everywhere in society, even in those areas that seem the most banal, and the philosopher must find the speculation within the banality. This approach becomes most evident with what seem to be naïve or nontheoretical positions, such as phrenology or physiognomy. Like other enlightened thinkers of his time, Hegel has no investment in the truth of phrenology. He understands that its ideological function consisted in providing a biological justification for social inequality. And yet, he not only finds a place for it in the self-unfolding of spirit that occurs in the *Phenomenology*, but he goes so far as to discover important insights about the truth of spirit within his discussion of phrenology. Phrenology's insipid claim that we can understand the nature of someone's subjectivity by examining the shape of their skull bone harbors a genuine recognition of the dependence of spirit on stupid inert materiality. The incredible speculative power of spirit transcends this materiality but ultimately cannot avoid remaining tied to it, and this is what phrenology implicitly understands. As Hegel famously puts it, "the *being of Spirit is a bone*" (Hegel 1977: 208). The link between spirit and its materiality that phrenology grasps is a truth of such profundity that it foreshadows the final moments of the *Phenomenology* in which Hegel conceives of absolute knowledge as the recognition of spirit's internal limitation. Though phrenology figures the limitation as external (as a materiality opposed to spirit), it nonetheless sees the necessary link between spirit and what limits it, which gives phrenology a genuinely speculative dimension.

Taking a text or doctrine seriously involves grasping its speculative dimension, a dimension unknowable by its proponents because of the structural position in which this speculative dimension resides.[5] The speculative dimension is found at the point where a text brings together opposed ideas and makes evident the link between them. But because the ideas remain opposed within the system that the text articulates, the text's adherents cannot themselves discover the speculative dimension without the intervention of an external force —in the same way that the analysand cannot discover her/his constitutive trauma without the psychoanalyst's intervention. Like the subject's constitutive trauma, the speculative dimension of a text or doctrine is always unconscious.

But the unconscious status of a text's speculative dimension does not require the theorist to approach the text with a combative attitude. That is to say, taking a text seriously does not involve the strategy of reading it "against the grain," in the manner suggested by Walter Benjamin. According to Benjamin, the fact that every cultural text has a bloody underside—the fact that "there is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism"—gives the theorist the "task to brush history against the grain" (Benjamin 2003: 392). Benjamin identifies the link between the great achievements of culture and the great horrors of culture, as, for instance, Thomas Mann does in *Dr. Faustus* when he indicates the implicit connection between the aesthetic triumphs of Germany (like Beethoven's Ninth Symphony) and the Holocaust. No document of culture can avow its link to barbarism, and as a result, the task falls to the theorist. When the theorist follows Benjamin (which has become common among Leftist theorists), she/he works to uncover what the text disavows.[6] Such an approach interrogates the text rather than taking it seriously, and it leaves any potential speculative dimension unexamined.

Žižek follows Hegel in the attempt to take Christianity seriously. For Hegel, Christianity has a privileged position among the world's religions because it is the only one to do away with the idea of God as a transcendent being existing in a realm beyond that of the subject. Through Christ, God descends to earth and becomes identical, in the speculative sense, with humanity. This act brings the absolute back from the beyond, while at the same time sustaining it as absolute. The otherness of the absolute becomes an immanent otherness, a foreignness within the human realm, an inhuman dimension of humanness. With the death of Christ and the emergence of the Holy Spirit, the absolute becomes embodied not just in one privileged human but in human society itself. Although few Christians would accept that the chief importance of Christianity involves its capacity for bringing the absolute down to earth and for revealing that the infinite exists within the finite rather than beyond it, this is precisely its speculative dimension and its inner truth.

On the one hand, we might wonder about the actual significance of Hegel's claim for Christianity if we can't find any Christians who would avow it. Even if Hegel is correct about the truth of Christianity, actual Christians seem to live unaffected by the idea that the doctrine they espouse eliminates the realm of the beyond. In fact, most Christians evoke the realm of the beyond and position the absolute in it on a daily basis. For instance, God's unknowable plan for our lives and for the world often functions as an explanation for the events that aren't readily explicable in the typical Christian's life. Invoking God's secret plan constitutes, at least in Hegel's terms, a fundamentally anti-Christian appeal to the absolute as a beyond, and yet few Christians hesitate to make such an appeal, which suggests that Hegel's grasp of Christianity's speculative truth, while perhaps philosophically clever, has little bearing on Christianity as an actually practiced doctrine. Where Hegel sees Christianity

as freeing us from the idea of the absolute as irrecoverably out of reach, this is precisely the idea propagated by actual Christians and the main source of its appeal for them.

On the other hand, the speculative dimension of Christianity helps to explain the persistence of Christianity's appeal in modernity. Subjects do not turn to Christianity just in order to find an authority to save them from their own freedom or to provide solace from the horrors of existence. Part of its appeal—the authentic kernel of its appeal—stems from the speculative dimension that Hegel uncovers. The fact that few or no Christians acknowledge the elimination of the transcendent beyond in their faith does not lessen the possibility of its decisiveness for them. The speculative dimension of a doctrine is always an unconscious dimension, and it thus requires the encounter with the outsider for it to become visible.

In *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, Žižek attempts to build on Hegel's insights into Christianity and to grasp further its speculative dimension, which he identifies in the Christian conception of the fall and the resurrection. Christianity depicts the fall into sin as the loss of an originary bliss and the resurrection as its restoration. But as Žižek recognizes, the fall and the resurrection are actually not distinct. He notes, "We rise again from the Fall not by undoing its effects, but in recognizing the longed-for liberation in the Fall itself" (Žižek 2003: 86). Christianity renders visible the link between the fall and the resurrection through its conception of Christ as the new Adam and through its emphasis on eternal life gained through Christ's death. Loss itself becomes the source of the triumph.[7] By grasping the speculative identity of the fall and the resurrection, we can see the true nature of liberation. Liberation doesn't free us from our fallen state but consists in a change of perspective in which we begin to grasp our fallen state itself as freedom. The liberatory power of the fall forms part of the authentic kernel of Christianity, and Žižek is only able to recognize this kernel insofar as he takes Christian doctrine seriously.

But taking popular doctrines and texts seriously is not a risk-free endeavor. It entails a substantial risk for the theorists who embark on this type of theorizing. Ironically, serious theorists often encounter blanket dismissals for the failure to be serious, for failing to adhere to the constraints that define the discipline in which they work. While Hegel and Freud have numerous adherents, they have even more opponents who question the legitimacy of their entire projects. For many, Hegel is the delusional thinker who believes that he has discovered absolute knowledge and who proclaims an end to all human history, and Freud is the pansexualist who sees phallic symbols everywhere and uncovers sexual desire at the root of all human accomplishments. Such dismissals are the direct result of the effort to engage in serious theory.

Though many dispute their philosophical conclusions, few question the philosophical legitimacy of thinkers like John Locke, David Hume, or Gottfried Leibniz. They approached

accepted philosophical problems and tried to work through them. In the case of Hegel, however, the question of his legitimacy as a thinker often arises. For someone like Bertrand Russell, Hegel, though he has a place in *A History of Western Philosophy*, violates the standards that define philosophy as such, standards that all other philosophers accept. Russell claims, "Logic, as Hegel understands the word, … is something quite different from what is commonly called logic" (Russell 1945: 731-732). Though he uses the terms of traditional philosophical inquiry, Hegel changes—and in the process, violates—their significance. This objection is not entirely without substance: Hegel *does* distort logic into a mode of thinking that other philosophers wouldn't recognize, but it is precisely this distortion that allows Hegel to discover the truths of speculative identity. Serious theorists work by extending concepts beyond their proper domain, and this impropriety is at once the source of their insights and the questions about their legitimacy.

Even more than Hegel, Freud encounters the objection that he pursues a pseudo-science that lacks all foundation. For many, his name is synonymous with overstepping the proper bounds of theory and creating a system of thought that itself borders on psychosis because it lacks any idea of a reality beyond its own conclusions. Freud uses psychoanalysis to explain everything, even attacks on psychoanalysis. According to John Farrell, "[Freud's] most egregious failing was his difficulty establishing the boundary between thought and reality" (Farrell 1998: 238). Lacking a proper sense of reality, psychoanalysis becomes a system without any potential holes, without the possibility of being proven incorrect, and thus it fails Karl Popper's famous falsification test. Because Freud extends the insights of psychoanalysis everywhere—because he approaches psychoanalysis as a serious theorist—he runs directly into this problem.

Like Hegel and Freud, Žižek exists as a questionable figure in contemporary thought. His status as the rock star or clown among theorists is not merely the result of his distinctive personality but the product of taking his theoretical pursuit outside accepted limits. No matter the extent to which he strives to be taken seriously—writing books without jokes, developing a more stoical public persona, staging the suicide of the rock star image in a documentary film, and so on—he will inevitably continue to have the reputation of a theoretical clown as long as his thought continues to be serious. Serious theory involves thinking about the ideological ramifications of the structure of toilets, but such speculations do not earn one the reputation of being a serious philosopher. Most people will appreciate the cleverness of the insight, but this appreciation is tied to the conviction that cleverness is not proper philosophy. And yet, proper philosophy or philosophy that knows its place, though it earns one a reputation for being a philosopher, lacks the ability to make an impact.

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.

EndNotes:

1. One dimension of Žižek's seriousness is his commitment to the joke. Žižek's focus on jokes is important not because it indicates his own pathological need to be considered funny —it might or it might not—but because it testifies to his refusal to relegate comedy to a position external to theory. He jokes seriously. Theory must initially take everything seriously, including especially that which seems not to take itself seriously. The problem with the general humorlessness of contemporary theory is not that it renders this theory dull and uninteresting but that it indicates its failure to be fully serious. Seriousness does not require simply ignoring humor and the comic but taking it seriously and including it within one's theoretical approach. Humor and the comic must be a part of an authentic seriousness, otherwise the seriousness attests to its failure to take everything seriously.

2. According to Rawls, "a society satisfying the principles of justice as fairness comes as close as a society can to being a voluntary scheme, for it meets the principles which free and equal persons would assent to under circumstances that are fair. In this sense its members are autonomous and the obligations they recognize self-imposed" (Rawls 1999: 12). The idea of justice as fairness appeals to Rawls because it doesn't seem to be infected by historical or cultural specificity and thus can serve for us as an ethical truth that everyone can accept, regardless of their historical or cultural position.

3. For an elaboration of the notion of truth as what is subtracted from knowledge, see Badiou, 2005, 327-343.

4. In one of the early and exemplary articulations of the cultural studies model, Jane Tompkins makes the emphasis of the project perfectly clear. She claims, "novels and stories should be studied not because they manage to escape the limitations of their particular time and place, but because they offer powerful examples of the way a culture thinks about itself, articulating and proposing solutions for the problems that shape a particular historical moment" (Tompkins, 1985: xi).

5. When one fails to pay attention to the speculative dimension of a text and focuses on its historical context or some other non-speculative quality, one not only misses its authentic kernel but also falls into the ideology of the text, which is precisely what is historically relative about it.

6. We can see the explicit attempt to take up Benjamin's project in works such as Terry Eagleton's *Against the Grain: Essays 1975-1985* (1986), Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), and Gayatri Spivak's *Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999), just to name a few.

7. Žižek rejects Badiou's reading of Saint Paul and the Christian event solely because it misses this speculative dimension of Christianity. For Badiou, Christ's death has nothing to do with the Christian event as such; it simply provides a site for that event. This line of

thought leads Badiou to miss the way that Christianity grasps the inner connection between death and resurrection, how resurrection in Christian terms is already implicit in death.

References:

Badiou, Alain. (2005). *Being and Event*. Trans. Oliver Feltham. New York: Continuum.

Badiou, Alain. (1999). "The (Re)turn of Philosophy Itself" (111-138). *Manifesto for Philosophy*. Trans. Norman Madarasz. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Benjmain, Walter. (2003). "On the Concept of History." Trans. Harry Zohn. *Selected Writing, Volume 4: 1938-1940*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Boynton, Robert S. (1998). "Enjoy Your Žižek." *Lingua Franca* 8.7: 41-50.

Eagleton, Terry. (1986). *Against the Grain: Essays 1975-1985*. New York: Verso.

Farrell, John. (1998). "Paranoia Methodized." *Unauthorized Freud: Doubters Confront a Legend*. Ed. Frederick C. Crews. New York: Viking. 228-245.

Foucault, Michel. (1980). *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings*. Trans. Colin Gordon, et al. New York: Pantheon Books.

Hegel, G. W. F. (1977). *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Trans. A. V. Miller. Oxford: University Press

Nietzsche, Friedrich. (1986). *Human, All Too Human*. Trans. R. J. Hollingdale. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Rawls, John. (1999). *A Theory of Justice*. Rev. Ed. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Russell, Bertrand. (1945). *A History of Western Philosophy*. New York: Touchstone.

Said, Edward. (1993). *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. (1999). *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Tompkins, Jane. (1985). *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Žižek, Slavoj. (1991). *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Žižek, Slavoj. (1993). *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Žižek, Slavoj. (2003). *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.