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Lacan Games

Slavoj Zizek, Stand-up Philosopher

By Edward Ball

THE SUBLIME OBJECT OF IDEOLOGY
By Slavoj Zizek
Verso, $60; $18.95 paper

LOOKING AWRY:
An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture
By Slavoj Zizek
MIT Press, $25

FOR THEY KNOW NOT WHAT THEY DO: Enjoyment as a Political Factor
By Slavoj Zizek
Verso, $59.95; $17.95 paper

Slavoj Zizek, the Lacanian from Ljubljana, a fast-forward philosopher of culture for the post-Cold War period, almost had to come from Yugoslavia. The region is a laboratory of the New World Order. Nation and religion return from the grave and again become motors of history. Ethnic conflict frames everyday life. American pop provides the soundtrack as the First World grabs at the spoils of the disintegrated Second. The future, in short, has arrived.

For Zizek, popular culture is not just some depoliticized realm of entertainment and fatuous sublimation. In an interview last year, he speculated that it had played a part in the collapse of what used to be known as "actually existing socialism." "The people who precipitated the revolution in Yugoslavia were those who enjoyed the influx of American pop culture, people who thrilled at horror movies, punk music, et cetera." We were talking on the phone between New York and Ljubljana, speaking across a satellite transponder. A gap opened in the transmission, his voice drifted off, then came back. "In other words, at a certain juncture, the most mindless popular entertainments had a political charge. Now this is no longer the case; but for a period of time, it was."

Zizek is a one-person culture mulcher. Flinging out readings of film noir or Hitchcock's *The Birds*, drawing maps of the unconscious, analyzing the commodity form, Stephen King, or Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, he plays the philosopher as stand-up comic.

Since moving from the Republic of Slovenia to the United States in 1991 on a Fulbright scholarship, Zizek has eased into the heated pool of Anglo-American cultural studies, a field that shares his idea of everything-is-permitted interdisciplinarity. For cultural students, all things must pass: TV, hightops, scientific rhetoric, architecture, rap, queerness, New Age spirituality. Zizek's histrionic speaking style, a kind of verbal air raid siren, elicits frequent lecture invitations. And he keeps producing books: three in English, three in French, and a whole tableful in Serbo-Croatian ("I would say about 10," he estimates, "but I don't count those").

Zizek's mentors include Hegel, Marx, and Kant, but standing over all of them, in the role of paterfamilias, is Jacques Lacan. For Zizek, Lacan contains multitudes. Embraced by critics in the 1970s, shrugged off in the 1980s, Lacan is the parent to whom prodigal thought must now return. Rejecting the humanist ego psychologies that had been misadapted from Freud, he restored desire and the unconscious to the center of psychoanalytic speculation. Lacan used a beguiling language of epigrams and meandering Freudian parables that irritated some and won over others. Zizek cuts through the mystique that surrounds Lacan and, picking up his knotty concepts ("the gaze," "the real," "*objet a*," and—everyone's favorite—"the Other") like so many commonsense tools, gleefully tries them out on every textual passerby.

In *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture*, perhaps his most useful book, Zizek bobs back and forth from psychoanalysis to Agatha Christie, Sophocles, Mickey Spillane, Mark Rothko, Patricia Highsmith, Franz Kafka, Arthur Conan Doyle, Jürgen Habermas, Peter Brooks, Mary Shelley, and Alfred Hitchcock, among others. The elusive Lacan, who cultivated an aura of indecipherability with the care of a diva, becomes a field guide to life in an age of media.

While Zizek revisits Lacan, it's not in the manner of a disciple paying respects to a sage; it's more like Abbott and Costello dropping by the oracle at Delphi. A thinker with a greater love for jokes has not walked the halls of academe. Pity the philosopher, trained in wooden writers like Dilthey and Carlyle, who stumbles on titles like *The Most Sublime Hysteric: Hegel* or *Everything You've Always Wanted To Know About Lacan, Without Ever Having To Ask Hitchcock*.

In the U.S. and Britain, Lacanian psychoanalysis has had more success in university seminars than in the consultation room. When Lacan died in 1981, he left numerous clinical followers in France, but in Anglo-American circles, Lacanians wound up in liberal-arts programs. Psychoanalytic notions like "the suture" and "the gaze" first gained currency in film studies, and were then exported to art history and other fields.

Lacan occupied notable space in universities, but he was soon abandoned by changing philosophical tides. In the late 1980s, a renewed emphasis on history came into play, abetted by the wide popularity of Michel Foucault's writings. Against the ontological questions of psychoanalysis—the identity of the human subject, the structure of the unconscious—historicist critics examined the lived experience of discourse, how people use (and are used by) texts.

Enter Zizek, who scans the cultural landscape and (presto!) sees Lacan everywhere. But the Lacan he finds is not the manipulator of an occult vocabulary; rather, it is a clearer, and at least in moments, a politicized Lacan. Zizek demystifies the analyst, who has too long been regarded as mere absinthe for precious minds. In his most recent book, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor*, Zizek shows his deft use of the joke as an explanatory lever:

> *There is a well-known true story about an anthropological expedition trying to contact a wild tribe in the New Zealand jungle who allegedly danced a terrible war dance in grotesque masks; when they reached this tribe, they begged them to dance it for them, and the dance did in fact match the description; so the explorers obtained the desired material about the strange, terrible customs of the aborigines. However, shortly afterwards, it was shown that this wild dance did not itself exist at all: the aborigines had only tried to meet the wishes of the explorers, in their discussions with them, they had discovered what they wanted and had reproduced it for them. . . . This is what Lacan means when he says that the subject's desire is the desire of the Other: the explorers received back from the aborigines their own desire; the perverse strangeness which seemed to them uncannily terrible was staged for their benefit.*

It might be expected that Zizek would give a political spin to psychoanalysis, considering his rootedness in former European socialism. Trained in philosophy in Yugoslavia before the end of the Cold War, Zizek naturally had a deep grounding in Marx. Today, Marxism is regarded as a somewhat embarrassing intellectual husk. Yet unlike some of his colleagues, Zizek does not repudiate it. "I was criticized for not being Marxist enough before the collapse of the system," he says. "Now I'm criticized for being too Marxist. I'm happy with that, because I am a Marxist."

In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Zizek puts Marx under psychoanalysis. Chapter one, called "How Did Marx Invent the Symptom?," details the similarities between the commodity form and the symptomatic content of dreams. Elsewhere, the book uses the Lacanian notion of "the real" to look at how ideology, rife in every moment of experience, persuades and compels behavior.

Various attempts have been made over the years to arrange a Freudo-Marxist synthesis. In the 1950s, Herbert Marcuse wrote *Eros and Civilization*, which tried to reconcile the atomized bourgeois individual of Freudian psychology with the broad-brush class readings of critical theory. Fifteen years later, Louis Althusser assimilated Lacan to his speculations on ideology and the state, a move that helped power up cultural studies into an autonomous discipline.

Yet such efforts suffered from their majestic belief that, as Hegel said, the truth is the whole. Zizek's Lacanized Marx is more modest, partial. Tossing out the conviction that there is some God's-eye point of view from which to observe the entire social field, he surveys the scene, seizes on things, moves on. The result is theory that gets along without rushing toward inevitable conclusions, thought that embraces the undecidable fragmentation of life in the pop-cultural maw.

That same ideological (now global) fragmentation has helped to produce new political entities, like Zizek's home, the Republic of Slovenia. When he travels to Ljubljana, Zizek is not merely the nimble academic and high theorist. Instead, he is a bit of a notorious figure, a newspaper columnist and public intellect. Last year, for a few months, he was also a national politician.

The presidency of Slovenia is held collectively by a committee of six, and in the 1991 elections, Zizek ran for one of the spots. He had no expectation of winning, he says, merely an urge to raise some issues during the civil conflict, as Slovenia plodded toward market capitalism. Yet after every speech, after every television appearance, his popularity rose in the polls. He was defeated by a single percentage point. Slovenia lost, the U.S. won. Both could use more Lacanians skimming the shoals of the popular. ■