



Theory
and Media

Žižek and the Media

Paul A. Taylor

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PAUL A. TAYLOR

polity

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The unrealistic sound of these propositions is indicative, not of their utopian character, but of the strength of the forces which prevent their realization. (Herbert Marcuse, One Dimensional Man)

'If I'd known', said one of my patients, 'I'd have wet the bed more than twice a week.' (Jacques Lacan, *My Teaching*)

PREFACE

The Dog's Bollocks¹ . . . at the Media Dinner Party

The following joke is not one that Žižek has used, but it nevertheless vividly encapsulates the paradoxically serious end of his frequently comic means. In the middle of a vibrant middle-class dinner party, the host's old flatulent dog staggers into the dining room, flops down, and promptly begins to enthusiastically lick its scrotum in full view of the now suddenly quiet guests. To ease the unbearable sense of embarrassment that descends upon the party, a male guest says, 'I wish I could do that.' This produces a round of cathartic tittering . . . but only until the hostess adds tartly, 'If you give him a biscuit, you can.' In this joke, the dog represents the obscene underside of any nominally 'civilized' occasion. Behind the veneer of expensive clothes/wine/food and polite etiquette lurks the crude reality of bodily gases and sexual organs that the social mores and unobtrusive background ideologies governing our lives are designed to cover up. To apply this setting to today's mediascape, the guest's quip of 'I wish I could do that' is the socially acceptable level of

humour/ideology that conventionally serves to defuse otherwise disturbing situations. It provides discourse's equivalent of a lightning rod – to maintain decorum, an attempt is made to channel away a disruptive intrusion. By contrast, the hostess ups the traumatic ante. She extrapolates upon the guest's interjection to undermine his attempt to defuse the situation. As an analyst of the media, Žižek plays the role of the hostess. The acuity of his media analysis is reinforced by the surprise-effects achieved from mixing learned psychoanalytical and philosophical insight with filthy humour. Žižek makes us confront the true nature of those traumatic issues we were aware of all along, but have found ever more sophisticated ways to avoid thinking about.

Žižek's unique mode of uncovering the media's hidden political ideology is demonstrated by two testicular jokes he does use (slightly adapted for current purposes – see *Plague*: 46; and *Tragedy*: 7). The first is set in an Eastern European bar in which a gypsy violin player is moving between tables, singing. A customer is drinking whisky at the bar when, suddenly, a monkey jumps up, dances towards him, washes his testicles in the whisky glass, and then dances away again. The furious customer asks the bartender why the monkey did this, only to be told that he should ask the gypsy, who knows everything. When asked, 'Do you know why the monkey just washed his balls in my glass?' the gypsy replies, 'Of, course', and proceeds to sing a dirge, 'Why the monkey just washed his balls in my glass. / It's a mystery, at least it wasn't his . . .' The second, much more perturbing joke is that of a medieval Russian peasant who, whilst travelling with his wife on a country road, is waylaid by a Tatar horseman who rapes his wife. To add insult to this injury, the horseman demands that his testicles are held by the peasant during the assault in order to keep them clear of the dusty road. Once the horseman has finally ridden away, the traumatized peasant's wife

is further shocked by the sudden glee her husband exhibits. The peasant explains that he is happy because he had successfully tricked the rapist: despite the order he was given, he let the testicles touch the dust. A typical response to these jokes might be that the first is mildly obscene but essentially whimsical, whilst the second is deeply offensive and misogynistic for the way in which it subordinates for a cheap laugh a female victim's trauma (a charge Žižek vehemently refutes²). A failure to see beyond the joke's offensive content, however, results in a blindness to the profound significance of the combined form/content effect of the 'joke-work'.

These two jokes stage two diametrically opposed responses to political events – those of the *conservative knave* and the *left-wing fool*. The fool voices opposition, but in such a fashion that the real effect of those opinions is to reinforce the very system he purportedly wants to undercut. For example, the making of 'unrealistic' demands within a democracy enables politicians to claim that the very fact that even radical dissenters are allowed a voice serves to demonstrate democracy's strength. The practical fact that the political system will never allow such radicality to go beyond the merely symbolic tends to get lost in the aura of democratic *noblesse oblige*. By contrast, the conservative knave describes the conformist right-wing thinker who cynically applies her intellect to justifying tautologically the current system because of its *de facto* status as the existing system (the sentiment contained within such statements as 'democracy is the worst political system – apart, that is, from all the alternatives'). The gypsy violinist plays the role of the knave. He takes a substantive question about a real problem (the presence of monkey testicles in a whisky glass) and sublimates the problem into a song. A practical issue that needs confronting and solving is turned into an intractable problem – the mysterious workings of implacable fate. The rape story portrays the

role of the left-wing fool. In the context of Really Existing Socialism: ‘This sad joke reveals the predicament of the dissidents: they thought they were dealing serious blows to the party *nomenklatura*, but all they were doing was slightly soiling the *nomenklatura*’s testicles, while the ruling elite carried on raping the people . . .’ (*Tragedy*: 7).

This deluded sense of holding power accurately describes those who think they are dealing serious blows to Really Existing Capitalism’s own *nomenklatura*. Even at its most critical, the media commentariat who purport to hold power to account are increasingly difficult to distinguish from the corporate apparatchiks. Opposing such accommodationist tendencies, Žižekian analysis exposes the cynicism of a Western media system in which natural disasters like Haiti’s recent earthquake (the monkey’s testicles in the whisky glass) are transformed into the lachrymose sentimentality of a Simon Cowell-produced ‘Everybody Hurts’ (the gypsy’s song) by a music industry moonlighting as a philanthropic agency. Unlike the holy fool and the cynical knave, Žižek encourages us to *look awry* at the media spectacle. In the case of Haiti, looking awry helps us to reflect upon the decades of geo-political machinations that undermine poor countries’ basic infrastructures and thereby greatly (but predictably) exacerbate the human cost of disasters that are disingenuously framed by the media as unavoidable acts of God.

Žižek rejects the Panglossian fake solace offered by those who claim to find reassuring evidence that resistance and empowerment still flourish in the heart of capitalism – the Pyrrhic victory of allowing the rapist’s balls to become dusty. A latter-day Diogenes (‘the dog’³), Žižek continues the philosophical kynic tradition of exposing power’s pretensions by exposing the nether regions the powerful prefer not to think about. He acts out the Shakespearean role of Tray, Blanch, and Sweetheart, who barked their warning to King Lear that

his authority was empty; he also shares with Brutus the sentiment that he would 'rather be a dog, and bay the moon, / Than such a Roman' (*Julius Caesar*, Act 4, Sc. iii). Žižek combines the quick wit of the mischievous dinner party hostess with her dog's ability to disturb those sitting comfortably at the table. So, now, to repeat the simple but rousing opening words with which I witnessed Žižek energize a crowded public talk at the University of Leeds: 'Let's do theory!'

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INTRODUCTION

'The Marx Brother', 'The Elvis of Cultural Theory', and Other Media Clichés

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. (Arendt 1993 [1954]: 207–8)

Slavoj Žižek burst on to the international academic stage with his 1989 book, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. Highly entertaining, he has become an undeniably major international figure in cultural theory who regularly lives out the possibilities of Arendt's open question. Now widely read both inside and outside academia in disciplines as disparate as theology and film studies, he is distinguishable from conventional academics not only for the extent to which his scholarship is informed by and applied to the media, but also for how often he appears within its purview. He is: the subject of a documentary movie (*Žižek!*); presenter of a TV series (*The Pervert's Guide to Cinema*); a regular contributor

of journalistic articles; and conveniently viewable in a host of YouTube snippets. A typical Žižekian performance, whether vocally or in text, can appear as a discombobulating skein of conceptual threads. He is frequently scatological in nature – his sphincter-orientated discussion of the elasticity of theoretical concepts and his literally lavatorial examination of the cultural significance of national differences in toilet design are just two particularly memorable examples.¹ Beyond this superficial impression (one that is exacerbated by the media's soundbite-driven agenda), however, the following chapters will examine how Žižek provides a finely calibrated account of what lies beneath the surface level of a mass-mediated social experience – ideological processes paradoxically hidden by their very explicitness and natural feel.

Capitalist media form a collective system which is premised upon the dominance of the particular by the universal (the commodity is capitalism's universal, society-defining category). The individual properties of any individual medium hence tend to be dominated and suffused by that medium's role as a subordinate part of an overarching media *system* – our newly digitalized society of the spectacle. The term 'media' is thus deliberately used throughout this book as a singular collective noun, the better to describe the systemic qualities individual media are both influenced by, and serve to reinforce. Acting systemically, the media system reduces the innate tension between the general and particular that attends any act of communication. The key features of Žižek's compensatory critical analysis include:

- the consistently accessible manner with examples garnered from the mass media to uphold and illuminate the central tenets of such otherwise intimidatingly difficult thinkers as Hegel and Lacan, resulting in innovative new perspec-

tives on both previously abstruse theory and everyday media content;

- the constant use of jokes and examples from popular culture to illustrate complex theoretical issues – the ultimate seriousness of laughter, or, as Todd McGowan succinctly points out, when considering Žižek, we need to recognize that ‘the path to seriousness is strewn with jokes’ (McGowan 2007: 66);
- a bracing, iconoclastic interpretation of the ubiquitous and deeply naturalized nature of ideology today – more than most contemporary thinkers, Žižek is willing to mine the (only apparently) obvious and prosaic in order to produce startling insights into the true nature of our media-saturated age.

Notwithstanding the unprepossessing media figure he presents at first glance, by dint of his sheer presentational enthusiasm, Žižek, with his unkempt ursine affability, has become an unexpectedly mediagenic embodiment of Freud’s return of the repressed – abstract thought in a media age. Hirsute, prone to physical tics, and with a heavy, lisping Eastern European accent, he contrasts starkly with more typically urbane media commentators (see Chapter 5) and well-coiffured intellectuals such as Bernard-Henri Lévy.² He is also highly unusual for the ironic and reflexive manner in which he is prepared to engage directly with the innate artificiality of media formats. Thus, during the documentary film *Žižek!* (Astra Taylor 2005), he conducts part of an interview lying in bed, wrapped in sheets, horizontally suggestive of the toga-wearing philosophical figures of antiquity; amongst a number of intellectuals interviewed whilst walking or travelling in *The Examined Life* (Astra Taylor 2009), typically, he is the one filmed at a rubbish dump (at one point picking up a piece of a discarded porn magazine and saying, ‘My God,

and you call this porn?'); and finally, within a *New Statesman* article, he is photographed lying on the ground, grinning with his hands behind his head, amidst artfully scattered autumn leaves (Derbyshire 2009).

The visual shock value of Žižek's physical presence and mischievous posing complements the radical nature of what he presents for our consideration; whether he is talking about Homer's Springfield or Ithaca, Žižek's *joie de théorie* is infectious. He stands out forcefully from the standard media commentariat in his unrivalled ability to express scholarship-infused thought within the intellectual constraints of various media formats. Whilst being conscious of the need to avoid indulging in 'the reverse racism which celebrates the exotic authenticity of the Balkan Other, as in the notion of the Serbs who, in contrast to inhibited, anaemic Western Europeans, still exhibit a prodigious lust for life' (*Fragile Absolute*: 5), it is still necessary to appreciate the value of Žižek's vivacious scholastic engagement with mass culture and the full extent to which it goes against the grain of the conventional intellectual, throwing into sharp relief academics' more usual 'curious passion for the mannerism of the non-committed' (Mills 2000 [1959]: 79). He skilfully avoids the common communicational failures of both unqualified talking heads who purvey execrably simplified theory and their flip-side – woefully earnest scholars who are not always averse to 'making Homer sound like balance sheets and balance sheets sound like Homer' (Davies 1996: 23). His success may appear to stem from his media-friendly 'antic disposition', but it really derives from his inimitable ability to convey taxing conceptual questions via a wealth of jokes, anecdotes, and shocking illustrations. As likely to refer to Virgil from *Thunderbirds* as the classical Roman poet, the latter's admonition: 'Dare to disturb the underground of the unspoken underpinnings of our everyday lives!' (*Violence*: 143) acts as a useful motto

for, *pace* Freud, Žižek's psychopathology of our contemporary mediated life. The underpinnings remain 'unspoken' because of the way in which today's ideology is embodied in mediated forms with which familiarity has bred consent. Žižek provokes us into taking a fresh, much more critical, look at the consensually over-familiar.

Žižek's willingness to engage with the mass media through a spate of personal appearances and topical journalism, even when unsuccessful, demonstrates an edifying commitment to Samuel Beckett's maxim from *Worstward Ho*: 'Try again. Fail again. Fail better' (cited in *Lost Causes*: 210). In his best performances the audience enjoys a Damascene revelation about something they didn't realize they knew about all along. In his worst, when his cascading thoughts are circumscribed by the media's grammar, one is left with an almost equally instructive sense of what pre/proscriptive formats castrate as part of their natural mode of operation. In stark contrast to contemporary anti-intellectual versions of Hamlet's 'There are more things in heaven and earth . . . Than are dreamt of in your philosophy' (Act I, Sc. v) as well as the countervailing tendency of those po-faced intellectuals who view popular culture as a 'sterile promontory', Žižek, full of strategically focused mirth, uses theory to tarry with the only apparently mundane content of our mediated lives. Resourcefully using the culture industry's detritus, like Freud, Žižek recognizes that the creators of fiction 'are valuable allies and their evidence is to be prized highly, for they are apt to know a whole host of things between heaven and earth of which our philosophy has not yet let us dream' (Strachey in Freud 2003 [1899–1919]: viii). The indisputably entertaining nature of Žižek's project repays deeper consideration – if only to exorcize such tired and facile ghosts as 'The Marx Brother' and 'The Elvis of Cultural Theory'.

1

THE MEDIATED IMP OF THE PERVERSE

INTRODUCTION: THEORETICAL SHORT- CIRCUITS

The *depth* which Spirit brings forth from within . . . and the *ignorance* of this consciousness above what it is really saying, are the same conjunction of the high and the low which, in the living being, Nature naively expresses when it combines the organ of its highest fulfilment, the organ of generation, with the organ of urination. (Hegel 1977 [1807]: 210)

The highest and the lowest are always closest to each other in the sphere of sexuality: 'vom Himmel durch die Welt zur Hölle'.¹ (Freud 2001c [1901–5]: 161–2)

Žižek's self-styled notion of perverted analysis is manifested in the title of his UK TV documentary series *The Pervert's Guide To Cinema* (Sophie Fiennes 2006). The fact that Žižek's analysis of the contemporary mediascape is laden

with perverse jokes and topical examples creates the risk that its deeply serious political and philosophical importance will be obscured and displaced by a knee-jerk misunderstanding of the theoretical importance of perversion. Like Hegel and Freud above, Žižek recognizes the mutually constituting nature of the high and the low, and his conceptual legerdemain shifts between high philosophy/psychoanalysis and low culture to create sparking contrasts illuminating our normally unexamined, everyday assumptions (Roland Barthes's 'what goes without saying' [1973] and Gramsci's 'common sense' [1971]). This chapter explores the various ways in which Žižek's apparent unconventional perversity is in fact a highly useful method well suited to addressing the deceptively naturalized forms in which we tend to encounter mediated ideology. His use of obscene examples needs to be considered as part of his wider intellectual project, which draws upon a critical philosophical and psychoanalytical tradition to uncover the Heaven/Hell, high/low, dichotomies that structure our symbolic and psychological environments.

In Lacanian psychoanalytical terms, *perversion* is more of a technical than a moralistic category. It refers to a disproportionate² attachment to a particular ordering or structure of desire; as Karl Kraus so pithily expressed it: 'There is no unhappier creature under the sun than a fetishist who longs for a woman's shoe but has to make do with the whole woman' (Kraus 2001 [1923]: 13 n105). This attachment is typically manifested in the pervert's reliance upon a fetish, of which the sexual variety is just one kind. The result is that, in everyday language, the term 'perversion' has moved away from its original sense. It now tends to denote an exclusively sexual fixation – the familiar figure of the pervert who psychologically over-invests in highly specific substances/objects (e.g. rubber/high-heeled shoes,

etc.) or highly structured behaviour (e.g. sado-masochistic domination scenarios). For the dedicated pervert, the fetish become desirable for its own sake. It assumes more importance than any overarching personal relationship with another person, of which sexual activity is 'normally' just one aspect. Žižek's patented form of perversion needs to be distinguished from this now standard association with highly specific, 'depraved' forms of sexuality. It can be better understood in its historical context; as Nobus relates: '... the term was appropriated by the medico-legal discourse on sexuality during the nineteenth century ... the term was transferred from its original socio-religious context, in which "to pervert" (from the Latin *pervertere*) meant to "turn around", "to turn upside down"' (Nobus 2006: 5). To the extent that Žižek is a pervert, he is an old-fashioned one. He is a theorist whose primary *raison d'être* is to turn conventional understandings upside down by the unremitting application of theory. The multitude of examples he draws upon from popular culture, no matter how entertaining, are all subordinated to radical, counter-intuitive theoretical purposes. He shares with Lacan a recognition that 'an essential step was taken in the present age when psychoanalysis undertook the interpretation of the fantasy in its very perversity' (Lacan et al. 1977: 14).

In psychoanalytical terms, rather than a pervert, Žižek can be more accurately described as a hysteric. The hysteric/theorist knows only the truth that knowledge is inherently ambiguous whereas the pervert (tautologically reinforced by his fetishistic practices) knows that he is correct. The pervert is thus '[t]he subject caught in the closed loop of perversion' (*Ticklish Subject*: 248). It is for this reason that the charge of perversion can be turned back on to those of Žižek's detractors who fail to see beyond the surface level of his obscenities – the importance of his theoretical insights is missed due to

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