

BOOK REVIEWS

Žižek's Greatest Hits?

Interrogating the Real

By Slavoj Žižek

Edited by Rex Butler and Scott Stephens

New York: Continuum Press, 2005. 392pp.

ISBN: 0-8264-8973-7. Hardcover. \$24.95

Review by Cristina Laurita

The Giant of Ljubljana strikes again. In *Interrogating the Real*, the first volume of his collected writings, Slavoj Žižek proves that as a scholar he is as absurdly prolific as he is incorrigibly entertaining. Lauded by Terry Eagleton on the back cover of the book as “the most formidably brilliant exponent of psychoanalysis, indeed of cultural theory in general, to have emerged from Europe in some decades,” Žižek is known for his fast and loose style and his penchant for fiddling with philosophy, psychoanalysis, and cultural studies all in one fell swoop. Whether you love him or hate him, it is indisputable that Žižek has made quite a name for himself and has assumed the status of an academic rock star.

Appropriately, then, *Interrogating the Real* stands as a sort of greatest hits album. The book is an assemblage of fifteen pieces, dating mainly from the 1980's and 1990's. Of varying length and form, the pieces range from transcriptions of interviews and lectures to reprinted journal articles or book chapters. Although most of the essays have already appeared elsewhere, some of them had not yet been translated into English or were only available in journals that are not readily accessible to most readers. It is thus useful to have the pieces collected into one easy to access volume.

Žižek fans will recognize in these essays references to his favorite authors as well as many familiar themes, cultural allusions, and social or political examples. Ever the eclectic, Žižek has no problem putting the infamously difficult theories of French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan into dialogue with figures from pop culture such as Stephen King. The philosopher in Žižek claims always to remain faithful to Lacan and Hegel in particular, but his theoretical forays cover a broad spectrum ranging from such authors as Kafka,

Dostoevsky, Proust, and Mallarmé, to philosophers the likes of Heidegger, Levinas, Derrida, Descartes, and Aristotle. Holding academic positions at both the University of Ljubljana in his native Slovenia, and also the New School for Social Research in New York, this intellectual is nevertheless not one to limit himself to the theories of dead white men. Leaping outside the bounds of dusty libraries, Žižek is as likely to explore the nature of subjectivity through references to Deleuze as he is to the Merchant Ivory film *Remains of the Day*, which he does in Chapter 8, “Hegel, Lacan, Deleuze: Three Strange Bedfellows.” Bringing together strange bedfellows is certainly a common denominator in Žižek’s work, predominantly through bringing about the copulation of high and low culture. This flattening of levels and intermixing of ostensibly disparate subjects is part of his project of making the seemingly esoteric or abstruse accessible not only to academics, but also to the general public. If Mohammed won’t come to the mountain, Žižek will bring the mountain to Mohammed, in the form, perhaps, of a Warhol print.

Using examples from pop culture is a hallmark of Žižek’s style, and although some have revered this style for its capacity for making difficult concepts clearer through the use of multiple examples, some have dismissed this as a distilled version of “serious” scholarship, a sort of pandering to the masses. Well aware of the controversy, Žižek himself addressed this issue in Chapter 4, “Connections of the Freudian Field to Philosophy and Popular Culture”:

Why do I resort so often to examples from popular culture? The simple answer is to avoid a kind of jargon, and to achieve the greatest possible clarity, not only for my readers but also for myself. That is to say, the idiot for whom I endeavor to formulate a theoretical point as clearly as possible is ultimately myself. (59)

Žižek then explains that using examples from pop culture is for him analogous to the Lacanian *passe*, the procedure by which the analysand becomes an analyst by giving an account of his or her analysis to two other analysts in the field. Inevitably, the account of what the analysand learned and experienced over the course of the analysis changes through the process of transmitting it to others, and it is through the process of its very transmission, through an account which can’t but contain contradictions, gaps, and distortions, that the analysand’s knowledge is demonstrated. The fundamental point

here is twofold: the analysand must find ways to make this knowledge transmissible to others, and the form in which it is communicated, full of gaps, distortions, and so on, is its own truth. The logical extension of this is that Žižek is like an analysand attempting to transmit knowledge to his audience, but in so doing, what is important is listening to the very *process* of this attempt—the manifold uses of examples and repeated reworking of concepts to try to illuminate a point—as its own source of knowledge. That is, there isn't necessarily some sort of ultimate kernel of truth lurking beneath the surface of the examples, and if only we can dig deep enough we can access it. Instead, if we are being generous, the argument might be made that Žižek's method bears witness to and perhaps demonstrates that there is no ultimate truth, and we can only encircle that empty locus through what he refers to as a "full acceptance of the externalization in an imbecilic medium" (59). That is, there is nothing behind the external imbecilic medium. It is, perhaps, a bit ironic that Žižek attempts to defend his use of examples from pop culture and to assert his "radical refusal of any initiated secrecy" (59) and use of jargon by making references to the *passe*, which is an esoteric reference, to be sure, at least for the vast majority of American readers!

Regardless of the reasoning behind Žižek's style of moving from example to example, it seems nearly impossible to separate Žižek the person from Žižek the scholar. When I heard Žižek speak at a lecture a few years ago, he spoke vivaciously from beneath the cover of a thick beard and he wove his arms in the air in big sweeping gestures to punctuate his points, seeming at times to almost leap or tumble out of his seat. This sense of unrestrained energy is conveyed throughout his writing style, which falls somewhere between a masterful weaving of infinite webs of connections and something a bit closer to ADD. The person introducing Žižek at the lecture amusingly referred to him as someone who always has his twenty-first finger in everything, and for a scholar who not only produced countless articles and books, but who has also run for president in Slovenia and has written copy for the Abercrombie & Fitch catalog, eclectic doesn't even begin to describe him. Nevertheless, the dark side of this eclecticism is that the sheer abundance of references in his writing sometimes creates the impression of there being more of a diffusion of examples than a tying together of ideas. For instance, in exploring the difference between desire and drive, Žižek shimmies from referring to *Rear Window*, to *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, to *Dreamscape*, to *Limelight*, and then finally to Hitchcock's *Birds* within the space of just one page (177). This metonymic style sometimes occludes

more than it illuminates, and it is sometimes difficult to see how readers who may be unfamiliar with many of his references to pop culture can find such examples all that helpful.

Žižek's tendency to repeatedly refer back to many of his favorite examples and references also means that many of his essays are fairly similar. Indeed, as I read through the collection I sometimes lost track of which essay I was reading or the main thread Žižek might have supposedly been following within that essay. Although the book is divided into three parts, the essays within each section are so similar to one another that they seem more like conglomerates of themes rather than separate essays with distinct ideas being followed through each one. Depending on the reader's individual preferences, this style will seem like a fugue whose disparate notes and motifs will either come together in symphony or clash in cacophony.

Žižek's way of tangoing with examples from pop culture might provide flashes of illumination for some, but it often comes at the price of a sustained and consistently rigorous exposition of ideas. For instance, as a clinician, I was interested in Žižek's claim that symptoms are

always addressed to the analyst *qua* subject supposed to know (their meaning) and thus as it were imply, point towards, their own interpretation. For that reason, one is quite justified in saying that we have not only Jungian, Kleinian, and Lacanian interpretations of a symptom, but also symptoms which are in themselves Jungian, Kleinian, and Lacanian, that is to say, whose reality involves implicit reference to some psychoanalytic theory. (302-303)

No further elaboration of this very compelling idea was offered, as Žižek quickly shifted over into a rather disconnected discussion of politics. Similarly, Žižek offers another compelling clinical reference by noting that in *The Silence of the Lambs* there is a pseudo-analytic relationship between Hannibal Lecter and Clarice Sterling in that "he wants her to confide in him . . . precisely what the analysand confides to the analyst, the kernel of her being, her fundamental fantasy (the crying of the lambs)" (159). Before one can hope to hear more about ideas such as transference and the traversal of fantasy, however, Žižek has jumped over to comparing Kant and Foucault to Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*.

At times, however, Žižek is quite lucid and offers very useful clarifications of frequently misunderstood concepts. For instance, he reminds us

that the phallus and the penis are not synonymous:

the phallus *qua* signifier designates the agency of symbolic authority . . . it is not ‘mine’, the organ of a living subject, but a place at which a foreign power intervenes and inscribes itself onto my body, a place at which the big Other acts through me. In short, the fact that phallus is a signifier means above all that it is structurally an organ without a body, somehow ‘detached’ from my body. (286)

In “Connections of the Freudian Field to Philosophy and Popular Culture” and “The Real of Sexual Difference,” Chapters 4 and 15 respectively, Žižek is similarly at his best. In these essays, he manages again to clarify some of Lacan’s most misunderstood dictums, such as the idea that Woman does not exist. In both chapters, he also further addresses Lacan’s reframing of sexual difference by carefully explicating his formulae of sexualization. As he does this, Žižek offers a helpful clarification of the difference between masculine access to phallic *jouissance* and the once again often misunderstood feminine possibility of accessing the *jouissance* of the Other. In a film reference that is more illuminating than tangential, Žižek clarifies by way of reference to Lars von Trier’s *Breaking the Waves* that the Other *jouissance* is not necessarily a mystical immersion in some hypothetical realm beyond the symbolic:

Jan’s *jouissance* is clearly phallic-masturbatory: he uses Bess to provide him with the fantasmatic screen that he needs in order to be able to indulge in solipsistic, masturbatory *jouissance*, while Bess finds *jouissance* at the level of the Other (symbolic order), that is, in her words. The ultimate source of satisfaction for her is not the sexual act itself (she engages in such acts in a purely mechanical way, as a necessary sacrifice) but the way she *reports* on it to the crippled Jan. (333)

It is perhaps no accident that what I view to be the two chapters in which Žižek presents his clearest and most useful expositions are also the chapters in which there is a more consistent and sustained effort to follow just one or two main themes.

In contrast to the old adage that you can’t judge a book by its cover, the cover art on Žižek’s *Interrogating the Real* actually crystallizes quite well in an image what one can expect to encounter within the pages to come. The disparate and seemingly random spattering of images and words on

the cover, from a television to a hamburger to a woman's shoe, foretell the form of Žižek's text. With such a cornucopia of motifs and examples cropping up here and there across the chapters, this collection of mostly brief essays does not provide room for a careful and thorough exposition of one main argument, nor is that the purpose of this collection. For those who do want a more consistent thematic exploration, those who are more interested in the philosophical vein of Žižek's work might be well advised to begin with some of his more predominantly political texts, such as *The Sublime Object of Ideology* or *Tarrying with the Negative*. Similarly, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* or *Enjoy Your Symptom!: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and out* will satisfy those who can't get enough of Žižek's dalliance with pop culture. While die-hard Žižek devotees of all stripes will no doubt want to add this little volume to their collection, *Interrogating the Real* will probably be of greater interest to academics than clinicians. Be forewarned that although many may find it to be a useful introduction to and sampling of Žižek's work, this collection's style is quintessentially Žižekian. So for readers who find this Slovenian's style frenetic and cacophonous, this collection is unlikely to strike the right note. However, for readers who find Žižek's unabashedly eclectic and playful style symphonic, then, play it again, Slavoj.