

Slavoj Zizek and Alfred Hitchcock: an unlikely alliance?

Slavoj Zizek is undoubtedly one of Europe's most important contemporary cultural philosophers. The radical intellectual complexity of his work often appears in stark contrast to his repeated use, as a topic for analysis and a cultural benchmark, the work of Alfred Hitchcock. The aim of this paper is to ask why Zizek has chosen Hitchcock as his improbable counterpoint and counterpart.

Introduction

Writing at the time of – and in resistance to – the monolithic hegemony of Stalinism, the great Russian cultural philosopher, Mikhail Bakhtin famously argued for a dialogical view of language and culture: a heteroglossic carnivalesque of answerability.¹ Bakhtin proposes “the therapeutic power of laughter”² as the most radical response to the threats of totalitarianism. The Czech novelist Milan Kundera also, in a similar context – in one of his celebrated anti-Soviet novels – espoused “the *serious* laughter of angels expressing their joy of being” as the best antidote to totalitarian oppression.³ Yet, despite Western European academic canonizations of Bakhtin and Kundera, perhaps the most internationally influential Eastern European voice in the field of cultural theory since the collapse of the Communist Bloc is a rather less joyous one: that of the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Zizek.

Zizek's vision of monological power moves beyond Bakhtin's neo-Marxian optimism and Kundera's liberalism into realms of psychoanalysis that push Freud and Lacan

Slavojus Zizekas išties yra vienas iš žymiausių šiuolaikinių Europos kultūros filosofų. Ypatingas jo veikalų intelektualinis sudėtingumas dažnai atrodo itin priešingas jo dažnai analizuojamiems ir pateikiamiems kaip kultūrinės gairės Alfredo Hitchcocko darbams. Šio straipsnio tikslas – pagvildinti, kodėl Zizekas pasirinko Hitchcocką neįtikėtina savo atsvara ir neįtikėtina papildytoju.

far beyond the pleasure principle and the mirror-stage, and into areas of semiotics that make Foucault and Derrida look like naïve idealists. Zizek's speculations take place at the edge, the cutting edge, of postmodernism and post-structuralism. One suspects that in years to come he'll be remembered as the thinker who was first past the post.

So, why – in the world of Radovan Karadzic and Slobodan Milosevic, of Osama Bin Laden and George W. Bush – why (as Zizek himself has said he is often asked) – why has so much of his work self-consciously or subliminally taken as its metaphor, its object or its model, the cinematic oeuvre of Alfred Hitchcock?

The psychotic state

While many countries in Central and Eastern Europe – Zizek's Slovenia of course included – have moved from the Soviet Union into the European Union, Zizek's philosophical meditations remind us that others have not enjoyed such a smooth post-Communist passage. The death of Communism has –

most immediately in the former Yugoslavia, but also of course in Chechnya – been followed by another death: a death of civilization – leaving individuals and entire societies in a realm which Žižek dubs “the blemished domain between two deaths”⁴ – between “natural death, which is part of the cycle of generation and corruption [...] and absolute death – the destruction [...] of the cycle itself.”⁵

For Žižek, the half-life of these unreconstructed – these semi-resurrected – regimes is little more than a perpetuation of their former totalitarian conditions: “the place of the Stalinist Communist [he writes] is exactly between two deaths [...] It is as if they are in a way ‘the living dead’, still alive but already excluded from the ordinary cycle of natural forces.”⁶ The reputed post-mortem fate of Romania’s latterday Count Dracula, Nicolae Ceausescu – buried at a crossroads to prevent his unholy return – serves to remind us that these far-fetched metaphors are not without credibility, meaning and force. Žižek himself points out, in a similar connection, the fact that, in Ernst Lubitsch’s film *Ninotchka*, the role of party apparatchik Commissar Razinin was taken by Bela Lugosi, a Hungarian actor better known for his undead roles.

The early Hungarian film theorist Béla Balázs describes moving pictures as simply “the flickering of [...] bloodless shadows.”⁷ Films are at once lifeless and (therefore) immortal: “a picture,” writes Balázs, “can only be [...] dissolved or faded out, but never killed.”⁸ The French film theorist André Bazin describes old photographs as “phantomlike.”⁹ He argues that while the plastic arts follow the antique “practice of embalming the dead”, so photography “embalms time” and cinema preserves “change mummified.”¹⁰

The film for both Balázs and Bazin appears like a reanimated cadaver. It is, according to Christian Metz, “not really its

object, it is its shade, its phantom, its double”¹¹ – a hollow double which uncannily exposes the lack within the original. It is a creature of shadows, a mere imitation of the living, a mesmeric parasite which shows itself only in the darkness, which would fade away in the light of day. Such perspectives upon the ontological status of cinema seem to go along way to explaining Slavoj Žižek’s interest in the medium – and in particular in the work of Alfred Hitchcock – and most particularly in Hitchcock’s masterpiece of posthumous persistence, his film of 1960 – *Psycho*.

“There is,” Žižek explains, “in [the symbolic order’s] kernel, at its very center, some strange, traumatic element which cannot be symbolized, integrated into the symbolic order – the Thing.”¹² Hitchcock’s great film takes place precisely in Žižek’s “place ‘between the two deaths’ [...] a place of [...] terrifying monsters [...] the site of *das Ding*, of the real-traumatic kernel in the midst of the symbolic order.”¹³

Žižek describes imaginary identification as taking place “*on behalf of a certain gaze in the Other*”, and sees the hysterical neurotic as “experiencing himself as somebody who is enacting a role *for the Other*.”¹⁴ Žižek argues that “the crucial break which psychoanalysis must accomplish is to induce him to realize how he is *himself* this other.”¹⁵ Hitchcock’s psychotic Norman Bates, of course, is precisely this Other – the most otherly of others, *Das Ding*. He has murdered not only his mother’s lover (his *symbolic* father) but also his mother, whose identity he is then forced to assume. This double crime (at once Oedipal and anti-Oedipal), this double bind, prevents his redemption by, or reintegration into, either the imaginary realm or the symbolic order.

The scene in *Psycho* involving the murder of the private detective Arbogast inscribes the viewer within a sequence of disorienting identifications, a sequence which

leads us towards this Freudian Thing. The subjective and psychological viewpoints of the detective (as he climbs the stairs to his death) are juxtaposed with a shot from above the stairwell, which then cuts to the perspective of the killer, the unbearably monstrous Other, as we watch our victim fall – from the simultaneous perspectives of the monster and the victim, of the hunter and the hunted, of Orpheus and Eurydice.

Slavoj Žižek writes of the scene of Arbogast's death:

The inherent dynamic of the entire scene of Arbogast's murder epitomizes *Psycho*'s trajectory from hysteria to perversion: hysteria is defined by the identification of the subject's desire with the desire of the other (in this case, of the viewer's desire with the inquisitive desire of Arbogast as diegetic personality); whereas perversion involves an identification with the 'impossible' gaze of the object-Thing itself – when the knife cuts Arbogast's face, we see it through the very eyes of the 'impossible' murderous Thing.¹⁶

We, the viewers or vicarious voyeurs, are caught here within what Žižek terms “a complicity between ‘absolute Otherness’, epitomized by the Other's gaze into the camera, and the viewer's look.”¹⁷ We become at once what we most desire and what we most dread: the Freudian Thing – *das Ding* – the lost and always searched-for object of Oedipal desire, the (M)other. Isn't the tragedy of Oedipus also the tragedy of Orpheus, and of Freud's grandson's playing the fort/da game of loss and gain – the tragedy that not only can we not have what we desire, but that this desire fills us with such terror that we cannot even bear to desire it – a terror born not only of the threats, laws and prohibitions of patriarchy, but out of the more primal or archetypal sense in which to enter again into the mother's body is a mode of birth-in-reverse, a return to the body of the mother earth, the impatient grave?

The desire for the mother is as impossi-

ble and as urgent as the desire for the return of the dead. Yet what happens to those, like Norman Bates, who have satisfied this desire, or at least an uncanny simulacrum of it? What happens to those who have shattered the laws of patriarchy, who have killed the father, who have inhabited the body of the mother (and vice versa), and have brought her back from the dead – and yet who at the same time, because this crime is impossible, have not done so, cannot have done so, and cannot therefore return either to the body of the mother or to the symbolic order of patriarchy? Or, as Hitchcock, while outlining a prospective scenario to Françoise Truffaut, asks: “If the dead were to come back, what would you do with them?”¹⁸

The return of the repressed

If this existential double bind represents the human condition itself – and, in particular, the condition of postmodernity – a cathexis which Jacques Lacan describes in his essay on ‘The Mirror-Stage’ as a “knot of imaginary servitude”¹⁹ – then how can we disentangle ourselves, as we must struggle to – if only because, as Lacan puts it in his essay on ‘The Freudian Thing’, “we are not here to dream between nausea and vertigo”²⁰? Žižek's answer is to dissolve the fascinating, mesmerizing, ideological fantasies from which the dreams of totalitarianism are born, and to expose the vertiginous nausea on which they are secretly founded: “the story of the Gordian knot [Žižek writes] tells us the only way to resolve such a deadlock is not to unravel the knot but to cut it.”²¹ He seems to see in the works of Alfred Hitchcock an unmasking of the defining psychical horrors of our inhumanity: a revelation which alerts us to their dangers. “If by any chance [these horrors] intrude into the fantasy-space, the effect,” he writes, “is extremely disturbing and dis-

gusting: the fantasy loses its fascinating power and changes into a nauseating object.”²² Zizek, like Hitchcock, locates this monstrosity not only within the absolute Other but also within the absolute otherness of the self. Friedrich Nietzsche advised us that “[h]e who fights with monsters should look to it that he himself does not become a monster.”²³ Zizek and Hitchcock conversely maintain that our first struggle with monstrosity must be with that which we ourselves have already become. Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* (1958) appears to induce in Zizek a liberatingly real sense of Sartrean *Nausea*.²⁴

To cut the knot of servitude is an act as violent and disfiguring as the crimes that Norman Bates commits in Hitchcock’s *Psycho*; but, as Zizek points out in an essay relating the acts of so-called ‘cutters’ (those people who choose to mutilate their own bodies) with the events of 11 September 2001, these actions may represent the most desperate attempts to ‘cut through the crap’ of the postmodern condition.²⁵ This reassertion of the brutal truth – of the brutality of truth – is something that Zizek also, perhaps disturbingly (that is, *necessarily* disturbingly), witnesses in the life and works of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin.

In an essay which attempts to reclaim the “utopian spark” of Leninism from the catastrophe of Soviet history, Zizek suggests that the difference between Leninism and Stalinism is that, while the latter ideology attempted to disguise its use of terror, the former system “openly admitted” its terroristic tactics. The later process of destalinization was, according to Zizek, a strategy by which that terror was once again revealed. He argues that Eisenstein’s banned (indeed, destroyed) film of the mid-1930s, *Bezhin Meadow*, was suppressed precisely because it exposed the very Oedipal tensions and libidinal violence that underlay the Stalinist regime. The problem with So-

cialist Realism is that it purports to represent a reality that it in fact veils. This is a problem, says Zizek, which it shares with contemporary capitalism.²⁶

Zizek’s reflections on the attacks upon the World Trade Center in New York present a similar perspective. Echoing his earlier reading of the reappropriation of the monstrous gaze in Hitchcock’s *Psycho*, Zizek cites Hegel’s dictum that Evil exists in the gaze of that which perceives Evil, and proposes that to ignore this possibility, and so to view these attacks as acts of “absolute Evil”, is to divest them of the possibility of explanation or dialectical analysis. They are thus removed from a violent, terrifying, ambiguous and problematic reality: modern capitalism’s political-media complex, like the Stalinist regime, presents a “deceptive reality” (what Baudrillard might call a simulacrum) in place of “the kernel of the Real”. It is this very ‘Real’ – the subliminal horror – which Zizek views as being portrayed in the films of Eisenstein and Hitchcock – and, for that matter, in the very act of terror perpetrated on 11 September 2001. It is therefore no coincidence that Zizek himself makes the astonishing, shocking and horrifically inappropriate (and thus appropriately horrific) comparison between the footage of the plane crashing into the second tower of the World Trade Center and a shot of a bird hitting Tippi Hedren’s head in Hitchcock’s film of 1963, *The Birds*.²⁷

Zizek similarly sees one of the ostensible consequences of 9/11, the Iraq War, in Hitchcockian terms: he describes the justification for that conflict as ‘The Iraqi MacGuffin’ – “the empty pretext which just serves to set in motion the story, but has no value in itself [...]. Do the ‘Iraqi weapons of mass destruction’ not fit perfectly the status of the MacGuffin?”²⁸

Hitchcock defined his MacGuffin as “the device, the gimmick [...] or the papers the spies are after [...] it doesn’t matter what it

is.” He added that people are “wrong in trying to figure out the truth of a MacGuffin, since it’s beside the point.” Although “of vital importance to the [film’s] characters”, to the film-maker the meaning of the MacGuffin is “of no importance whatever.”²⁹ In Hitchcock’s universe, the MacGuffin attains some of the pseudo-significance of what Jacques Lacan called a master-signifier, a sign whose symbolic importance lies in that importance alone – a sign whose internal meaning has been deferred to the overwhelming significance of its socio-political or psychical function. It is, as Zizek says, “a signifier which does not signify any reality.”³⁰ The MacGuffin claims for itself, within its own dimension, the kind of urgency which such terms as ‘freedom’ or ‘Jew’ have invoked in the United States or the Third Reich: an urgency which is today recreated in what Zizek calls “the metaphorical universalisation of the signifier ‘terror’.”³¹

Hitchcock’s MacGuffin is an empty (but weighty) sign, a simulacrum not unlike post-modernity itself. It’s about as meaningful as the Roger O. Thornhill’s middle initial in Hitchcock’s *North by Northwest* [1959], an ‘O’ which, according to Thornhill [Cary Grant] – a character of no significance in himself, one who’s only become involved in the action of the film as a result of a case of mistaken identity – *stands for nothing*. It is a signifying lack – a defining absence – an aporia which, in Zizek’s eyes, serves at once an apologia and an alibi for the acts of

power. Its deconstruction – which is crucial to the processes not only of philosophical clarification but also thereafter to those of political liberation – may be accomplished by the likes of Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida and Slavoj Zizek himself; but this deconstruction is made possible (or, at least, more accessible) by the recognition of the perverse paradox of this constitutive lack in such texts as (for Lacan) Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘The Purloined Letter’³² – or (for Derrida) Plato’s *Phaedrus*³³ or (in one improbable moment) the popular American TV series of the 1970s *Charlie’s Angels*³⁴ – or (for Zizek) the films of Alfred Hitchcock.

In an essay published on the very day of the European Union’s enlargement (an expansion which of course encompassed his native Slovenia), Zizek recalls Theodor Adorno’s argument that the modern world represents “a perverse direct pact between the punitive superego and the id’s illicit aggressive drives at the expense of the ego’s rational agency.”³⁵ It seems that, in the apparently incongruous context of the films of Alfred Hitchcock – just as Mikhail Bakhtin does in the writing of Rabelais, and just as Milan Kundera does in his explosions of human physicality – Zizek rediscovers a rationalistic exposure and exploration of this perverse reality: one which the authorized perspectives of contemporary liberal capitalist democracy – like those of Stalinism – refuse to acknowledge or even, for the most part, to afford their gaze.

NOTES

¹ Bakhtin M. *The Dialogic Imagination*. Texas. 1981.

² Bakhtin M. *Rabelais and his World*. Indiana. 1984. P. 68.

³ Kundera M. *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. Harmondsworth. 1983. P. 233.

⁴ Zizek S. *The Metastases of Enjoyment*. London. 1994. P. 2.

⁵ Zizek S. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. London. 1989. P. 134.

⁶ Zizek S. *Ibid.* P. 145.

⁷ Balázs B. *Theory of the Film*. New York. 1970. P. 280.

⁸ Balázs B. *Ibid.* P. 190.

⁹ Bazin A. *What Is Cinema?* Berkeley. 1967. P. 14.

¹⁰ Bazin A. *Ibid.* P. 9–15.

- ¹¹ Metz C. *The Imaginary Signifier*. Indiana. 1982. P. 45.
- ¹² Zizek S. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. London. 1989. P. 132.
- ¹³ Zizek S. *Ibid.* 1989. P. 135.
- ¹⁴ Zizek S. *Ibid.* P. 106.
- ¹⁵ Zizek S. *Ibid.* P. 106.
- ¹⁶ Zizek S. *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lacan (But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock)*. London. 1992. P. 249.
- ¹⁷ Zizek S. *Ibid.* P. 244.
- ¹⁸ Truffaut F. *Hitchcock*. New York. 1985. P. 309.
- ¹⁹ Lacan J. *Ecrits*. New York. 1977. P. 7.
- ²⁰ Lacan J. *Ibid.* P.136.
- ²¹ Zizek S. *The Iraqi MacGuffin* // Lacan.com. <http://www.lacan.com/iraq1.htm>, 11 April 2004.
- ²² Zizek S. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. London. 1989. P. 120.
- ²³ Nietzsche F. *Beyond Good and Evil*. Harmondsworth. 1973. P. 84.
- ²⁴ Sartre J. *Nausea*. Harmondsworth. 2004.
- ²⁵ Zizek S. *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!* New York. 2002.
- ²⁶ Zizek S. *A Plea for Leninist Intolerance* // *Critical Inquiry*. Chicago. Winter 2002.
- ²⁷ Zizek S. *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!* New York. 2002.
- ²⁸ Zizek S. *The Iraqi MacGuffin* // Lacan.com. <http://www.lacan.com/iraq1.htm>, 11 April 2004.
- ²⁹ Truffaut F. *Hitchcock*. New York. 1985. P. 138.
- ³⁰ Zizek S. *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lacan (But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock)*. London. 1992. P. 239.
- ³¹ Zizek S. *Are we in a war? Do we have an enemy?* // *London Review of Books*. London. 23 May 2002.
- ³² Lacan J. *Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter' // The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading*. Baltimore. 1988. PP. 28–172.
- ³³ Derrida J. *Dissemination*. London. 1981.
- ³⁴ Derrida J. *The Post Card*. Chicago. 1987.
- ³⁵ Zizek S. *What Does Europe Want?* // *In These Times*. Chicago. May 2004.

LIST OF LITERATURE

1. Bakhtin M. *The Dialogic Imagination*. Texas. 1981.
2. Bakhtin M. *Rabelais and his World*. Indiana. 1984.
3. Balázs B. *Theory of the Film*. New York. 1970.
4. Baudrillard J. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Michigan. 1994.
5. Bazin A. *What is Cinema? Vol. 1*. Berkeley. 1967.
6. Derrida J. *Dissemination*. London. 1981.
7. Derrida J. *The Post Card*. Chicago, 1987.
8. Freud S. *On Metapsychology*. Harmondsworth. 1984.
9. Kundera M. *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. Harmondsworth. 1983.
10. Lacan J. *Ecrits*. New York. 1977.
11. Lacan J. *Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter' // The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading*. Baltimore. 1988. P. 28–172.
12. Metz C. *The Imaginary Signifier*. Indiana. 1982.
13. Nietzsche F. *Beyond Good and Evil*. Harmondsworth. 1973.
14. Plato. *Phaedrus*. Harmondsworth. 1973.
15. Poe E. *The Complete Tales and Poems*. Harmondsworth. 1987.
16. Sartre J. *Nausea*. Harmondsworth. 2004.
17. Truffaut F. *Hitchcock*. New York. 1985.
18. Zizek S. *A Plea for Leninist Intolerance* // *Critical Inquiry*. Chicago. Winter 2002.
19. Zizek S. *Are we in a war? Do we have an enemy?* // *London Review of Books*. London. 23 May 2002.
20. Zizek S [ed.]. *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lacan (But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock)*. London. 1992.
21. Zizek S. *The Iraqi MacGuffin* // Lacan.com. <http://www.lacan.com/iraq1.htm>, 11 April 2004.
22. Zizek S. *The Metastases of Enjoyment*. London. 1994.
23. Zizek S. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. London. 1989.
24. Zizek S. *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!* New York. 2002.
25. Zizek S. *What Does Europe Want?* // *In These Times*. Chicago. May 2004.

Alec CHARLES

SLAVOJ ZIZEK IR ALFRED HITCHCOCK: NEĮTIKĖTINA SĄJUNGA?

S a n t r a u k a

Nors Alfredo Hitchcocko filmai – populiarūs Holi-vudo trileriai, kupini nežinios įtampos, – iš pirmo žvilgsnio tikrai neatrodo tinkamiausias objektas, galįs pažadinti vaizduotę ir sudominti sloveną Slavojų Zizeką, vieną iš įtakingiausių, drauge ir abstrakčių bei neiškių, postmodernių kultūros ir politikos

filosofų, bet Hitchcocko darbai vis dėlto atskleidžia ir nušviečia esmines metafizines, psichines, ideologines ir istorines problemas, su kuriomis Zizekas grumiasi savo darbuose: neišsakomumą, kurį Zizekas mėgina išreikšti, neįmanomumą, kurį jis mėgina paaiškinti.

PAGRINDINIAI ŽODŽIAI: kinas, psichoanalizė, poststruktūralizmas.

KEY WORDS: cinema, psychoanalysis, post-structuralism.

Alec CHARLES – completed a doctorate in contemporary cultural history at Oxford University in 1995. He has worked as a journalist for BBC Radio, and has lectured at universities in Britain, Japan and the Baltic States. He has served as Professor of Media and Head of Communications at Concordia Audentes University in Estonia, and is currently Senior Lecturer in Media at the University of Luton in the UK. Recent and forthcoming publications include essays on Tod Browning, internet journalism (for *British Journalism Review*) and British television (for Manchester University Press). Address: International University Concordia Audentes Narva mnt. 7, 10117 Tallinn, Estonia. Telephone: + 372 534 06757. E-mail: alec19682003@yahoo.co.uk.

Alec CHARLES – daktaro laipsnį apsigynė šiuolaikinės kultūros istorijos srityje Oksfordo universitete 1995 m. Dirba žurnalistu BBC radijuje, dėsto Britanijos, Japonijos ir Baltijos šalių universitetuose. Dėsto medijų disciplinas Estijos Concordia Audentes universitete, vadovauja Komunikacijų skyriui. Šiuo metu – vyresnysis medijų dėstytojas Didžiosios Britanijos Lutono universitete. Tarp paskutinių publikacijų paminėtini straipsniai apie Tod Browning, interneto žurnalistiką ir britų televiziją. Adresas: International University Concordia Audentes Narva mnt. 7, 10117 Tallinn, Estonia. Telefonas: + 372 534 06757. E-mail: alec19682003@yahoo.co.uk.