

Theory: How Can Media Studies Make “The T Word” More User-Friendly?

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For this panel I'd like to look at the relevance to media studies of three ideas associated with the work of Slavoj Žižek: cynical reason, apocalypse as utopia, and the theological turn. As I started putting this paper together, I realized that Žižek himself is actually not the originator of any of the three concepts, which were pioneered, respectively, by Peter Slotterdjick, Fredric Jameson, and Alain Badiou (among others). But Žižek is a useful figure around which to frame these ideas, for two reasons. First, because Žižek, as a public intellectual, has been particularly effective at elucidating these ideas through films such as *A Pervert's Guide to Cinema* and its sequel, *A Pervert's Guide to Ideology*, which drop Žižek right in the middle of the scenes he's discussing. The second reason is that Žižek is an exemplary dialectical thinker, a theoretical omnivore eager to assimilate a range of ideas into an always-expanding worldview.

At a time when Web 2.0 technologies seem to be democratizing culture more than ever before, Žižek's ideas are valuable exactly because of his bracing skepticism over the limits of democracy. His having lived through one alternative, growing up behind the Iron Curtain in Communist Slovenia, makes this skepticism particularly credible.

Žižek is the great philosopher of complicity and disavowal, making his work an invaluable counterpoint to media studies' tendency, still, to fetishize moments of resistance. The hugely influential model of Cultural Studies developed by Stuart Hall and John Fiske, among others, proposed a dialectic between hegemonic media producers and resistant media audiences. But the 21st Century empowerment of what Jay Rosen has called “the people formerly known as the audience” has failed to transform, or even much challenge, neoliberal ideology and capitalist relations of power. What Žižek helps us understand is that ideology isn't just out there - it's in us - shaping all of our sense of the possible.

In his first English-language book, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek distinguished two models of ideology: the classic model of false consciousness - “the know not what they do” - and Slotterdjick's alternative of “cynical reason” - “the know what they do, but they do it anyway.” Cynical reason captures how we all navigate an exploitative capitalist system. We all know how our iPhones are made - but we buy them anyway, because we see no practical alternative. Cynical reason also helps explain so-called “slacktivism” - we know clicking Like on a friend's activist message doesn't accomplish much, but we do it anyway.

Cynical reason is the result of our stunted political imaginations. Visiting Occupy Wall Street in 2011, Žižek borrowed (without attribution) an observation of Fredric Jameson's: that these days, it seems easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. This insight helps explain the boom in zombie culture in the last few years: only by envisioning the slate wiped clean through apocalypse can we free our

imaginings to consider a world fundamentally structured differently from ours.

This interest in envisioning utopia has led Žižek in recent years to participate in a third theoretical development: the so-called “theological turn.” Žižek, while remaining an atheist, has argued that theology is one of the few systems of thought available as an alternative to the totalizing power of capitalism’s drive for ever-increasing profit. Again, Žižek’s insight helps explain contemporary popular culture - not just the few explicitly religious hits like *Heaven Is Real*, but the fantasy boom represented by *Harry Potter*, *Lord of the Rings*, and now *Game of Thrones*. As I have argued elsewhere, the trope of magic in these texts rejects science fiction’s rigid materialism, instead envisioning a world that is ensouled. The shamans in these texts - Dumbledore, Gandalf, Bran Stark - gain their power by tapping into the spirit of nature, transcending the conventional limits of human perception.

It is here, in understanding the power of this pop mysticism, that I find the limits of Žižek’s postmodern Marxism. In the documentary *Examined Lives*, Žižek, filmed in a garbage dump, argues that crises of capitalism such as global warming force us to acknowledge that nature is a human invention, and that we should embrace that constructedness rather than fetishize a pristine fantasy of uncontaminated nature. But I would suggest that pop mysticism instead demands of us modesty in the face of a natural world far more powerful and complex than our conventional models can comprehend.