

# THE ŽIŽEK REPORT

## ŽIŽEK!

Dir. Astra Taylor, 2005

The first question that we must ask when attempting to evaluate a documentary on Slavoj Žižek is: could this documentary *really* fail? Bill Maher's quip about pizza and sex might as well have been coined apropos Žižek's work: even when it is not that good, it's still pretty good. Even if wholly irritated by blatant self-plagiarism, we can always count on a new Žižek book to produce high-powered intellectual entertainment. Astra Taylor's *Žižek!* makes use of this paradox to bring the "Elvis" of cultural theory" to a new medium, one which he seems naturally at home.

Taking advantage of a singular style that has attracted a sizeable academic and non-academic fan base, *Žižek!* manages to rivet us to the screen by having him show off his kitchen drawers (which not only contain silverware but also clothes, of course), play with his son's toys, buy DVDs, all the while producing some impressive off-the-cuff analyses. The film is a very amusing 71 minutes of our favorite hyperactive, shabbily-dressed, bearded-and-sweaty Slovenian philosopher doing what he does best. It features, either through Žižek repeating them in interviews or through elaborate animations which deftly present long quotes from his books, most of Žižek's better-known irreverent applications of psychoanalysis. Like any well-trained rock star, Žižek knows to regale us with his greatest hits in live performance, and we his fans are pleased to see most of them here: we get his analysis of the ideology of European toilet construction, of chocolate laxatives, and the

superegoic paradox associated with a plethora of modern consumer goods—decaffeinated coffee, non-alcoholic beer—which have been sapped of their primary (and malignant) force. Astra Taylor knows exactly what she wants from Žižek, and he, in perfect form, delivers a great performance. The film is full of his signature philosophical twists and turns: he tells us, in the first minute of the film, that love is "formally evil"; he humorously suggests that the proper method for permitting suicide in biopolitically regulated modern capitalism is to employ medical examinations in order to determine if it is a case of a "genuine metaphysical crisis," after which point the patient can, for a nominal fee, pay for a suicide; he explains to the makeup-frosted anchor of a tabloid news program that tolerant fathers are far more insidious than honest harsh disciplinarians because, at least, they do not demand enjoyment.

But what do we make of this irreverent amusement? When Žižek dedicated *The Ticklish Subject* to his copy editor at Verso, he not-so-secretly provided us with the criteria by which we should judge all of his work, up to and including this film: Žižek is immensely entertaining, but does he channel this wit into something substantial? In the profound tradition of the Freudian witz, the genius of both Lacan and Žižek is to demonstrate that we can have wit and philosophy together and, indeed, on some level, they necessarily supplement each other. Although we no doubt enjoy the movie on the most basic level, we need to pick apart, as good followers of Žižek, the very conditions that structure this enjoyment.

After a second viewing, the shortcomings will become much more visible for the careful viewer. The luster of seeing Žižek smartly edited and projected onto a big screen fades a bit; and it decreases with each subsequent viewing. We must ask: what were the filmmakers trying to accomplish? We can easily discern the basic problem with the film's framework if we examine the contradictory nature of the major newspaper reviews of the film. They essentially fell into two camps. The first camp relied on a hypostatized subject supposed to know to gain enjoyment of the film: these reviewers freely admitted that they had no idea what Žižek was talking about in the film, but that they still found it amusing nonetheless, as they were sure someone else, steeped in the mysteries of the cult of Žižek, would indeed understand it. The other camp freely admitted that they had no idea what Žižek was carrying on about in the film, and found the enjoyment they assumed a Žižek-initiate to be deriving from it to be obscene, distasteful, and elitist. That the basic facts assumed by both parties remain the same should indicate to us that we here encounter the structure of ideology.

There are two homologous positions from which someone who is familiar with Žižek's work can enjoy this film. The first position is that of the elitist who believes in the stupidity of the naïve laymen walking into this film for the first time and having no clue as to what Žižek is saying. This position relies on the accessibility of the philosopher's secret treasure only to we-the-savvy: we enjoy the film because the idiot-other is incapable. The other position is that of the populist

intellectual: we enjoy because we alleviate our guilt about narcissistically carrying-on in the ivory tower, ignoring the plight of the oppressed; now we are sharing our enjoyment with the common man! The problem here is that both positions tacitly assume that, although we are familiar with Žižek's work and will find nothing new or interesting in the actual philosophical framework of the film, the other will be frustrated or charmed by the shine of the philosopher-celebrity that is so well represented. The disavowed belief of both positions requires one to assume that someone, somewhere, understands or does not understand Žižek and, therefore, can or cannot enjoy him.

It should not be difficult to guess that this structure defines the coordinates of that strange term with which Žižek has been characterized in the past decade: "academic rock star." Employing the key feature of any other rock star, the film's basic premise is that proximity is the most important end. The actual content of the performance is irrelevant; it matters only that we are, for a brief moment, close to the star (and indeed, proximity's most extreme actualization is the murder of the star himself—hence perhaps the staging of Žižek's death at the end of the film!). This particular film even features the requisite groupie, who is none other than the director herself: she appears from time-to-time in her modish bangs and frilly black shirts as if she just emerged from a Brooklyn rock-show, coyly eyeing Žižek and giggling at his irreverence, all the while making sure that the camera is there as a record of her encounter.

In writing this review I, in part due to my own weakness for such spectacle, tried endless alternatives to skirt the major problem that the film incessantly enacts: in various scenes, Žižek expresses his distaste, even contempt, for his status as a philosopher-celebrity. He hides from fans outside a lecture, he is irritated when one unexpectedly comes up and hugs him, he laments not practicing philosophy as an anonymous discipline. Astra Taylor in one instance becomes somewhat irritated at Žižek for his affront to the basic position from which she herself relates to her idol: “she was a fan, Slavoj!” she exasperatedly shouts after Žižek expresses disdain for a woman who asked for his autograph. Her plea to Žižek blatantly reveals how the film itself is fundamentally indebted to this structure.

The filmmaker’s wager here is that sheer devotion—naïve, admiring, amateurish love—for the philosopher will come through to the audience and, in some mystical fashion, make the film magically work. Unfortunately, in the case of *Žižek!*, it does work: Taylor produces a flawless homage to the celebrity status of Žižek. It goes without saying that the task of a documentary filmmaker (and several reviews have already faulted *Žižek!* on this account) is not to trust the subject matter to auto-produce the film, but is rather to adopt a critical, even hostile attitude toward the subject. A film like this should attempt to remove the hidden treasure that structures our love for the philosopher-celebrity, not reinforce it. The two recent pieces that have sought to tackle the philosopher-celebrity in documentary form have both actualized the functioning of

this surplus within their films in very classical Lacanian ways. In the case of *Derrida*, we never see the filmmaker on screen; instead, we hear her droning voice, posing inane questions or mechanically reading long passages from Derrida’s texts. The voice functions as the ineffable surplus, adding an air of mystery and depth to all of Derrida’s behavior. In *Zizek!*, the director wisely avoids such aggressive self-insertion into the film; yet it is telling that she still cannot resist a minimal level. In this case, we see the mysterious core of the philosopher supplemented through her two quick appearances in the film, both of which feature her looking awry at Žižek. No doubt her technique is far more subtle and effective, but the effect is still unmistakable. Both of these techniques fill out and supplement a lack: the lack of more substantial directorial intervention, one which would risk a real attempt at making an interesting claim about their respective subjects.

Considering that so many of the interviews in the film feature Žižek complaining about his lack of respect as a serious philosopher, the film does absolutely nothing to avoid these traps. Try as we might to justify the fact that the film merely attempts to portray Žižek as a warm “real” person beneath the hyperactive façade (despite the multiple warnings he himself offers), there are no sophisticated Žižekian dialectical reversals we can employ to extricate ourselves from this deadlock. No fancy theoretical footwork will eliminate this impasse, nor should we really try and eliminate it. The film whole-heartedly accepts the idea of the academic rock star, to the detriment of the serious work of synthesizing Žižek on film.

The most obscene aspect of the film is without a doubt the way it forces enjoyment on its audience: it literally does not allow us to dislike it; it activates all of Žižek's most seductive qualities in a desperate attempt to goad us into finding some sophisticated intellectual purpose behind it. It becomes clear, however, that none exists; the film's entire framework is tentatively supported by our own admiring gaze filling out the philosopher-celebrity's secret treasure. It would have been much more subversive to remove the philosopher-celebrity's preciousness, the support of our ineffable and inexplicable admiration, which Žižek keenly demonstrates as his little flaws and imperfections. The obverse of the master's rule is his foibles, his loveable idiosyncrasies filling out the "real person" beneath the façade, and this film presents them in a shameless way. The problem, in the final analysis, is that we are not allowed not to enjoy Žižek's antics.

Fundamentally, of course, *Žižek!* is a well-crafted film; is well-edited, tightly composed, well-scored, and thoroughly enjoyable. But a much stronger film could have been made: this film only outlines the formal conditions of possibility for a good future movie, without really internalizing and actualizing these criteria. After close scrutiny, those who have closely studied Žižek's work will begin to see through the façade constructed by our initial sympathetic goodwill toward its importation of Žižek to the cinema: we leave *Žižek!* with the feeling that the film was entertaining, clever, and well-shot, but that nonetheless something was missing.

It is to the film's credit that it provides the tools to articulate its shortcomings; in fact, this is its main achievement. It is difficult to fault a film for that which it did not even attempt to undertake, unless the very horizons of this possible achievement appear within the film itself. In the future, any would-be documentary film on a celebrity-philosopher should take Žižek's words about Lacan, delivered in this very film, seriously: the really subversive act would be to demonstrate how, behind the spectacle of the philosopher-celebrity, the serious work, in fact, is formalizable; beyond the flashy exterior, there is real thought taking place. The primary task of any future endeavor to film the Slovenian cyclone should be to bring out the intellectual implications of Žižek's philosophical comedy, that is, not to disavow the work of formalization and systematization for the cinema. At an astounding number of points in the film, Žižek laments the lack of interest in his serious work, and it is almost tragic when we realize that this frenetic personality, this hyperactive comic façade, is really little more than Žižek's day job. Žižek, too, finds the popular enjoyment of him disgusting. If we witness here the film version of Žižek's less focused works, please perspective documentarians, bring us *The Ticklish Subject: the Movie*. *Žižek!* succeeds in the modest goals it sets for itself, but we should demand more from those who film the philosophers we study. Intelligent directors of the world unite! Put down Hitchcock, and remake *Žižek!*

— Shane Herron