

## Lacan revisited by Žižek

ŽIŽEK, Slavoj. **How to Read Lacan**. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007. 132 p.  
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Slovene philosopher Slavoj Žižek wrote this book for the W.W. Norton & Company series *How to Read*. However, the book is not only an introduction to some ideas and concepts of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1901-1981) but an appropriate introduction to Žižek's own thinking. The fact is that Jacques-Alain Miller, Lacan's student and afterwards son-in-law, was the one who devoted his entire life to the publishing of Lacan's *Seminars*. Actually most of his scripts needs careful reading and a lot of interpretation, since Lacan himself never cared much for structuring his prose didactically, defining concepts and keeping the definitions rigorously throughout the books. Lacanian commentators such as Bruce Fink are most careful when discussing his ideas, because Lacan's thinking might be described as brilliant, albeit mercurial. He uses very complex concepts and abandons them after a few years (like the Freud-inspired *Das Ding*, The Thing); or apparently changes some of the concept's original features.

Žižek and other philosophers, like Alain Badiou, realized that the seemingly hazardous Lacanian texts were important tools for formulating a post-modern philosophy of politics. After the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe, every thought based on traditional Eastern logic (and language), or rather, based on well-defined binary oppositions, was doomed to fall into the same Manichean factor that paralyzed the discourse of the Left, leaving, according to Žižek, no option but the choice between Hitler's and Stalin's crimes. Thus, the openness produced by Lacan's thinking, together with his brilliant analysis of phenomena, made his ideas a **third option** for Leftist thinkers, allowing them to re-locate humanism at the center of the political discussion.

Lacanian materialism has already been of good use in the literary field. Researchers use it in order to deal with different angles: Phillip Rothwell, for instance, uses the concept of *Nom du Père* in the history of Portuguese Literature, in *A canon of empty*

*fathers*. The reading of literary texts that deal with the contradictions and paradoxes of contemporary societies also benefit from Žižek's reading of totalitarianism and its hidden forms. Even Feminist Theory, having been at odds with Lacan's ideas for decades, started to revise it and understand better the scope of his work. Elizabeth Grosz started to publish her works on Lacan's contributions to Feminist Theory in the 1990's.

*How to Read Lacan* is divided into seven chapters, each one more or less centered in one or more of Lacan's basic concepts. The first focuses the Big Other, the invisible all-seeing Eye to which every human being answers even in his or her private thoughts. Žižek uses a lot of interesting analogies, ranging from Mexican soap operas to Shakespeare, to clarify Lacan's meanings.

The second chapter discusses the paradoxical relationship between the Symbolic order and social **truth**, invoking some other Lacanian concepts, namely the phallus, hysteria and desire.

The third chapter still focuses the Other and the Symbolic order, recalling Lacan's ideas about desire (it is not one's own desire for pleasure or fulfillment, but always a complicated triangulation between the desire for the Other, the will of being desired by the Other and the desire for what the Other desires) and its monstrous underside, its insufferable impenetrability and intensity, which opens the discussion for the concepts of The Thing (*Das Ding*) and the Real, which we cannot reach or understand and whose encounter is always traumatic for the subject.

Chapter four recalls the myth of the *lamella* as the Lacanian image of libido, developing the previous discussion about Lacanian Real and introducing the *objet petit a*, the indescribable cause that makes us desire certain objects, but at the same time guarantees that desire will not be quenched if we get them. Žižek uses metaphors from Quantum and Relativity physics to convey his meanings.

Chapter five explains Lacan's *jouissance*, using

references ranging from *Casablanca* to the Iraqi war prisoners' tortures at Guantanamo.

Chapter six discusses Lacan's position on the Death of God. In fact, it is, by far, the one where Žižek shows his ability to jump from theme to theme, without losing the thread. He goes from Dostoevsky to Judaism, from Kierkegaard to Gnosticism, from politically correct ideas on necrophily to harassment and the banishing of cigarettes, in order to denounce the falsity of some current notions on **permissivity**.

The seventh chapter features a careful analysis of a letter from a Muslim terrorist to Hirshi Ali, a lady of Somali origin, member of the Dutch Parliament and a fighter for the rights of Muslim women. The elegant and precise textual analysis leads to a discussion of perversion, not exactly at the original Lacanian meaning, but to its utilization by contemporary Lacanian materialists to discuss politics, totalitarianism and fundamentalism.

Žižek is at his best when applying Lacan to discuss contemporary political issues; his prose is always enthusiastic and seductive. But the contribution of his book to Literary Studies is far

from small: by discussing Lacan's difficult, diffuse concepts, Žižek allows the reader to grasp them. The Big Other, the *objet petit a*, *jouissance* and perversion, for instance, are useful tools for re-thinking many fundamental aspects of literary representations, from Balzac to Jose Saramago and from Hawthorne to García Marquez.

The book is pleasant to read, but presupposes a certain familiarity – or at least a quick research – on some of the psychoanalytical concepts mentioned, albeit not developed. Needless to say, it is impossible to condense Lacan in a mere 130 pages. Žižek, however, is successful in arousing the reader's interest in Lacanian studies. All in all, a thought-provoking reading.

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