



**Žižek and Media Studies: A Reader.** Edited By Matthew Flisfeder & Louis-Paul Willis. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. 299 pp. ISBN 9781137366245.

*Žižek and Media Studies: A Reader* attempts to establish the bombastic philosopher Slavoj Žižek's political insights, inspired by his specific blend of Jacques Lacan and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, as a sustained approach to media studies that offers up new potential for social and political commentary. A call for a return to a psychoanalytic approach, which has been at times guilty of the confusion and conflation of its philosophical concepts, and for a critique of ideology that has seemingly been exhausted can appear anachronistic to those unfamiliar with the Slovenian philosopher's work. However, Matthew Flisfeder and Louis-Paul Willis argue for precisely this—to expand an updated perspective into the field of media studies, where a particular psychoanalytic approach has gone very much out of fashion, and to advance an ideological critique of a potentially post-ideological world.

Indeed, Flisfeder and Willis justify the need for such a reader by outlining the somewhat flawed history of psychoanalysis's previous intervention in media studies, which relied on an incomplete reading of Lacan with an oddly Foucauldian turn and an acknowledgement of the staid nature of a more traditional *Kulturkritik*. Their refocus on the discussion of symbolic efficiency both corrects for the oversights of previous psychoanalytic approaches and gives an entry point into modern political and cultural analysis through a discussion of a more complete Lacanian register, which emphasizes the interrelated real, imaginary, and symbolic, concentrating often on fantasy. The book then, is an open introduction to what a future “Žižekian” school of psychoanalytic interrogation of modern media could be.

Divided into four sections: Media, Ideology, and Politics; Popular Culture; Film and Cinema; and Social Media and the Internet, the volume explores a range of topics, such as trauma and the war on terror (p. 53), analogue filmmaking versus digital filmmaking and their relation to the psychoanalytic categories of anxiety and desire (p. 185), the gaps between 80s movie songs and their referent films (p. 91), and an aural approach to the rethinking of Lacanian discourses through record production (p. 103). It also puts Žižek in conversation with Stanley Cavell, proffering an exchange between skepticism and psychoanalysis via film analysis (p. 161). The text is a broad attempt to establish some material examples of an applied Žižekian analysis and make an overarching argument for its place in the field.

*Žižek and Media Studies* commences with the suggestion that Žižek's approach does not begin with the objective traditional consciousness raising, but rather comes from a “post-ideological” perspective. The claim of being overly enmeshed in a network of ideology with the inability to see the “real” truth of our situation and situatedness has lost the force of conviction it once had. It is no longer that we are incapable of seeing through or perceiving beyond our ideology to our true subjective position—

what Žižek calls “fetishistic disavowal” indicates that the problem is not simply one of knowledge. Flisfeder and Willis remind us that we are always already imbricated in an ideological presentation of images that cut between reality and ideology itself.

The assertion that analysis centred on how the truth of politics may be occluded by the medium misses the point of how, despite differences in manifestation, the critique of a society saturated in images needs to occur at the level of the image itself—not in an outdated structural critique or with the approach that the image is merely a symbolic analogue. Rather than seek the “root” of the problem, perhaps one must consider that not only is ideology skin deep, but it is really all there ever is; our relationship to reality can only ever be “media”ted. There is no truth behind the illusion. Thus to not take images seriously as constitutive of our experience of reality, but instead view them as inhibitive of reality, is to miss an opportunity for real engagement. As Flisfeder comments, there are those who believe that ideology is synonymous with false truth, “[f]or Žižek, however, truth itself has the structure of a fiction” (p. 2).

If reality is structured as a fiction, then it is via fiction we can hope to tangentially reveal the surface of our reality, rather than presume to penetrate to deeper and more metaphysical truths. It is the insight and approach of Žižek, and by extension this edited volume, to suggest not simply that films can be interpreted as direct commentary of everyday life and ideology, but rather that the structure of film or other media mimics life itself and utilizes the networks of desire and fantasy that are the central components of a seemingly intractable ideological circle.

Already having a journal and conferences dedicated to Žižek’s thought, it seems to follow that a subfield of Žižekian media studies would emerge, given the eccentric philosopher’s predilection for the incorporation of both highbrow and lowbrow art forms into his revamped Lacanian-Hegelian philosophical analysis. This eponymous reader can be seen as an addition to the swelling legion behind Žižek, which can at times verge on the sycophantic. However, the fact remains that few current academics can claim to be engaged public intellectuals in the way Žižek is. Alongside a few notable others, particularly Joan Copjec (2000) in her essay “The Orthopsychic Subject: Film Theory and the Reception of Lacan,” Žižek has done much to rehabilitate both a Lacanian conceptual register and the political potential of a postmodern ideological critique. Despite this, the now commonplace attempts to depoliticize Žižek via a mocking “celebrification” are arguably a continued injustice that few, if any, current academics are subjected to.

The edited volume itself does address these issues in several essays, most notably in discussing Noam Chomsky’s disregard for Žižek’s work, which he calls lacking in content (p. 17), and Žižek’s oft-critiqued indulgent use of examples (p. 67). Both turn their defenses into a foundation for an expansion of larger theoretical points, though the discussion on Chomsky occasionally seems overly defensive. Those who perceive Žižek as pure performance bereft of philosophical rigour are unlikely to be convinced by the well-argued responses, and while one does not simply wish to start from a premise of only preaching to the converted, the points take space in an edited volume that

is meant to proffer a new perspective on media studies, not defend Žižek's own intellectual legitimacy.

As mentioned previously, covering wide-ranging topics allows for essays employing different aspects of Žižek's philosophical thought to reside comfortably alongside each other, such as Louis-Paul Willis' discussion of the 2012 Quebec student uprising (p. 39) and Tim Walters' discussion of a Žižekian perspective on the World Cup (p. 115) (particularly the prescient given the furor and added political complexities that are on the horizon with World Cup 2018 in Russia and World Cup 2022 in Qatar).

Fabio Vighi's exceptional composition explores contingency and retroactive signification as it applies to the potential for a revolutionary, emancipatory politics. Weaving a discussion of Kant and Lacan into Hollywood disaster films and ending in an insightful reading of Javier Bardem's Anton Chigurh of *No Country for Old Men*, the essay demonstrates the political potential of this analytical approach to reading film and offers insight into the radical freedom and ontological significance displayed via the re-signification of "symbolic contexts" (p. 137).

The final section on social media and the internet is strong as a whole, with Tara Atluri's discussion of how the social mediafication of Guantanamo prisoners is leading to the displacement of larger political vision by the "experiential narratives" of the individual (p. 244). She teases out the problematic of obfuscating objective violence through an over-determining focus on subjective violence. This focus turns to technological (social and political) mediation of real embodied trauma and the effacement of objectively violent structures. The discussion and dissonance between Jodi Dean and Matthew Flisfeder is equally as productive. Dean's (2010) novel drive-centred focus on communicative capitalism, developed in great detail in her book *Blog Theory*, exemplifies the modern application of the Lacanian register. It establishes the loss of the "big Other" as leading to desire and giving way to drive as the imperative Lacanian analytical concept for understanding modern politics within the realm of social media and networking. Matthew Flisfeder's insightful article challenges a politics of communicative capitalism, questioning the separation of virtual and real identities and the temporal and spatial bases for a communicative capitalism. He argues that despite a convincing "characterization of communicative capitalism" (p. 239), we remain subjects of desire within social media and thus it offers a different political prescription.

Without a restrictive intransigence that proscribes the boundaries of how a "Žižekian media theory" should be applied, *Žižek and Media Studies* extends beyond topics covered by the book's namesake, broadening the applicability of this text to courses outside the discipline itself. The text thus presents a broad topology of a potential field of interrogation. I would therefore highly recommend this book as both an introduction to the proposed field of Žižekian media studies itself, but also as an important overview of the evolution of psychoanalytic theory for a postmodern present. Matthew Flisfeder and Louis-Paul Willis have ultimately assembled a valuable interdisciplinary contribution to the field of media studies, amounting to a sustained and convincing argument for the growth of a Žižekian media studies within the discipline of media studies. An admirable job is done in the introduction to make the reader as a whole quite accessible and to present the current state of psychoanalysis

and media studies in a historical and philosophical context. Inevitably, however, those with deeper understandings of Lacanian psychoanalysis and Hegel in particular will have access to a deeper appreciation of much of the insight presented by the essays therein.

### **References**

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