Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

On Zizek

Robert Wood · Wednesday, September 19th, 2018

In the transit lounge of an unnameable airport, I see the fake leaves blowing in the air-conditioned breeze. I am happy to be traveling but right here, right now I long to feel the crunch of sand beneath my feet and the salt water in my mouth. I want to be at Honeycombs beach. I often think of airports as the travellers' rest-stand of a mall culture that knows no bounds. Of course they can be divided into zones of entry and exit with privilege attached to members' lounges and other areas, such as holding cells and interview rooms.

What we might not see in the airport, what might be our false consciousness, is that even with carbon offsetting, our collective lifestyle is harmful. I care less about the central tenant of Communism, which is to say a state based economy that implies a dictatorship of the proletariat, than I do about over-consumption and the social relations that go with it. In general, what the consumer does is less debated than class politics, which is based on outdated identities vested in the modes of production. And yet, we must rail against the lifestyle of 'suburbanites' that exploit more than their fair share of the earth's material base. This is a new lifestyle that takes as its root green capital accounting, correcting the falseness of money with a strain of thinking from John Hobson and Thorstein Veblen not Mao and Stalin. It is, of course, Slavoj Zizek who would have us continue to look to the latter as a way of doing philosophy today. What this looks like pragmatically is clear when he says:

The recurrent story of the contemporary left is that of a leader or party elected with universal enthusiasm, promising a "new world" (Mandela, Lula) – but sooner or later, usually after a couple of years, they stumble upon the key dilemma: does one dare to touch the capitalist mechanisms, or does one decide to "play the game"? If one disturbs the mechanisms, one is very swiftly punished by market perturbations, economic chaos and the rest. So how can we push things further after the first enthusiastic stage is over? I remain convinced that our only hope is to act trans-nationally – only in this way do we have a chance to constrain global capitalism. The nation-state is not the right instrument to confront the refugee crisis, global warming, and other truly pressing issues.

This might be the case when we think of the nation as it now is, but that is surely because we disagree with politicians even though democracy is our best system. There is nothing to suggest that by replacing the nation with a continental mode of government that we will somehow solve once and for all the refugee crisis or global warming or the rise of extremism. And in that way Zizek is anachronistic if not quite wrong.

When it comes to politics there are solutions that the nation state could co-ordinate if it was willing

to become more poetic. A tax on unsustainable goods, a compact not to wage wars, changed expectations when it comes to welfare and work. Being truly activist is not the sole province of a transnational elite, of citizens like Zizek, and one can, of course, become more cautious with the promises we are led to believe. This will mean we are not dimmed when they become demystified by the pragmatic choices of difficult decisions. This is where we can neither judge a book by its cover nor do away with representation, meant here as both our democratic representatives and the images we circulate in.

What is the link between representation and action, between style and content, between depicting violence and conducting it? This question has not gone away in our digital age – the caustic threats so casually levelled on the Internet, the indiscriminate everyday assault on anybody, the brazenness by which politics has become a viper's nest. This is possible only when the belief that words do not matter or change anything, that they are simply symbolic dominates. But language is all there is, and it must be used as a way and means to stop violence at the root.

Is the aestheticisation of violence then, from Andrei Tarkovsky's *Ivan's Childhood* to Yukio Mishima *The Sailor Who Fell From Grace With the Sea* necessarily pacifist? Or does that again divide the line between language and action into a false heuristic? What are we to make of private actions or when poets fail in the politics they engage in? Such boundaries are false, simply organising principles that we tell ourselves in an otherwise messy, complex and unreal world. But, some days the world stops to notice itself, stops to notice that it made it to the moon, that it saw itself through the window of a spaceship and knew that it was well rounded if fragile and blue. As Caesar Vallejo writes in 'Masses':

When the battle was over,

And the fighter was dead, a man came toward him

And said to him: 'Do not die; I love you so!'

But the corpse, how sad! went on dying.

And two came near, and repeated it.

'Do not leave us! Courage! Return to life!'

But the corpse, how sad! went on dying.

Twenty arrived, a hundred, a thousand, five hundred thousand,

Shouting: 'So much love, and it can do nothing against death!'

But the corpse, how sad! went on dying.

Millions of people stood around him,

All with the same request: 'Stay here brother!'

But the corpse, how sad! went on dying.

Then all the people on the earth

Stood around him; the corpse looked at them sadly, deeply moved;

He sat up slowly,

Put his arms around the first man; started to walk…

We need that corpse, that person beyond life. We need that death consciousness not only that class-consciousness or national consciousness or lifestyle consciousness to make sense of this life and world, and even though we can only look to the past as interested parties, it might be worthwhile stopping in the future just to check that we are still here and in love with our world and its classics as well.

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