



Illustration: Paul Newman

THE MODEST MARXIST

On the eve of his visit to Australia, controversial thought machine Slavoj Žižek tells **John Thornhill** why he believes capitalism is incapable of resolving the biggest challenges of the day

Agent provocateur: Below right, Slavoj Zizek in a scene from *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema*, a critical look at popular films, which he narrates

Picture: AFP

ON my way to Ljubljana to meet Slavoj Zizek, I read two differing interpretations of the man and his work. One describes this cult Slovenian Marxist philosopher (I appreciate the unlikelihood of that description as I write it) as a thrillingly bold intellectual who revolutionises the way we understand the world. The other suggests he is a deadly jester whose sly humour and "disorienting dazzle" conceal his intent to excuse totalitarianism and to rehabilitate many of the most evil ideas of the 20th century.

Whichever way you view him, Zizek certainly has a talent for stirring intellectual controversy. The author of a string of provocative books on politics, psychoanalysis, ideology and cinema, he delivers startling lectures around the world juxtaposing Marxist theory, Freudian psychoanalysis and pop culture. The hero of one film, *Zizek!*, recording some of his zanier lectures, he is the narrator of another, *The Pervert's Guide to the Cinema*, a helter-skelter critical interpretation of 43 popular films.

Now installed as the international director of the Birkbeck Institute for the Humanities at London University, Zizek was voted one of the world's top 25 intellectuals by the readers of *Foreign Policy* magazine's website last year. He is also celebrated in the *International Journal of Zizek Studies*, an online magazine launched in 2007 by a group of admirers to debate his ideas and seek respite from "the cultural tinnitus of pervasive soundbites".

Zizek is a bundle of ruffled charm as he arrives at the Pri Vitezu restaurant in the heart of Slovenia's picturesque capital, where he was born. Dressed in jeans and a blue, checked shirt, with unkempt hair and a straggly beard, the 59-year-old philosopher is a perpetual thought machine in manic motion. With his Slavic accent, profane language and occasionally tortured syntax, words pour out of him in a torrent of stream-of-consciousness commentary. Even before we pick up the menu, he has discussed his incipient diabetes and heart palpitations, the demands of raising his nine-year-old son, the unacceptable lack of "good bourgeois fun", edible food or attractive toys at Disneyland in Paris, his student days in Paris, and his favourite haunts in Berlin. "My life is totally confusing," he says.

We try to simplify our lives by ordering some food. But Zizek is puzzled by the mix of standard international cuisine and local Slovenian specialities on the menu at this one-time meeting point for Yugoslavia's communist intellectuals, now transformed into a bourgeois wine bar with vaulted brick ceilings and antique portraits of be-medalled army officers. "To put it in my Stalinist terms, it does not have a clear ideological profile, this restaurant," he jokes. He recommends the soup made from tasty local mushrooms and picks the medallions of veal. I pass on the horse and opt for lamb with thyme instead. We stick to sparkling water.

I ask him about the financial crisis, hoping for some political pyrotechnics about the death throes of capitalism. Does the crisis herald revolution? "No, no, no. I am an extremely modest Marxist," he replies, rather disappointingly. "I am not a catastrophic person. I am not saying that revolution is round the corner. I am fully aware that any old-style communist solution is out."

However, he insists, the financial crisis has killed off the liberal utopianism that flourished after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and all the grand talk about the "end of history". The terrorist attacks of September 2001 and the financial meltdown have exploded the myth that the market economy and liberal democracy have all the answers to all the questions. In the short term, at least, governments will introduce more state regulation and global co-ordination strengthening the capitalist system. In this sense, he suggests that the liberal Barack Obama may one day be counted as among the best conservative presidents in US history.

But even if capitalism is temporarily repaired,

Zizek says, this will do nothing to resolve its inherent contradictions. The alarming breakdown of society will lead to new forms of apartheid and emergency states. He highlights the growing militarisation of Italy, where the Government has sent the army into Naples to deal with the mafia. He claims that Sao Paulo in Brazil is mutating into a real-life version of the film *Blade Runner* (1982). The city now has 70 heliports, with the rich travelling on another level to the poor.

Capitalism is, he believes, incapable of resolving the biggest challenges of the day: environmental catastrophe and the abuse of information technology, intellectual property rights and biogenetics. Societies must invent new forms of

way we lead our lives. "I don't mean big ideological schemes. All that's dead, I know. What interests me is ideology as part of everyday life," he says. "My interest is: what's the message? I like to find a different texture which gives another story."

Take *Titanic* (1997). Most viewers see it as a straightforward love story. Not Zizek. Many critics noted the anti-establishment tone of the film: how the rich passengers are cruel while those on the lower decks are far more sympathetic. But, according to Zizek, the film reinforces the social order rather than subverts it. The true narrative concerns a spoiled, rich girl who has lost her identity. She takes a lower-class lover to restore her vitality, to put her ego image

determined by objective market forces rather than subjective beliefs. "The importance is in what you do, not in what you think. I love this dialectical reversal."

Zizek then segues into a riff about obscene military marching songs, which he came to relish during his time in the Yugoslavian army. He sings one from the film *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), temporarily silencing all other conversation in the restaurant. "I don't know but I've been told / Eskimo pussy is mighty cold." He continues regardless: "What I learned from my own military service was that all these obscene jokes, these apparent forms of rebellion, are exactly what the power needs to reproduce itself. There is nothing subversive about it."

But what of Zizek's own use of humour? In a damning article last year in *The New Republic*, Adam Kirsch, one of its senior editors, accused Zizek of moral corruption, asking whether his audience was too busy laughing at his jokes to hear what he really had to say. Under the cover of comedy, Kirsch argued, Zizek was trying to "undo the achievement of all the post-war thinkers who taught us to regard totalitarianism, revolutionary terror, utopian violence and anti-Semitism as inadmissible in serious political discourse". What, after all, are we to make of Zizek's apparently absurd argument in his recent book *In Defence of Lost Causes* (Verso) that Stalin, author of some of the most monstrous crimes of the 20th century, "saved the humanity of man"?

Clearly bruised by Kirsch's assault, Zizek denounces his US critic as "stupid". He then sets about trying to clarify his apparently ambiguous attitude towards Stalinism. First, he readily acknowledges all the human suffering that occurred in Stalin's time and trots out a series of "nice, horrible" stories illustrating the exceptional cruelty of the times.

But, he insists, we should make more efforts to understand Stalinism. "One can argue that there was more violence than under Hitler," he says. "But Hitler was a bad guy who announced he would do bad things and did them. The true tragedy of Stalinism is that it started as a popular explosion of emancipatory equality. We don't have a good theory as to why this turned into an even worse nightmare."

What we often fail to understand, he argues, is how Stalinism was a counter-revolution, reacting against the extreme "post-human" utopian ambitions that were championed by Bolshevik leaders in the 1920s. Communist extremists predicted the day when workers would live in a perfect society with no need for emotions, or even names, and all sexuality and family life would be suppressed. But Stalin was far more conservative, reacting against experimental art and insisting on the sanctity of family life. "Stalinism reacted against these negative dystopias that were even more terrifying. Stalinism was, in that sense, a return to normal life. People forget that."

But should the likes of Zizek be spending so much time trying to understand the world, when the point is — as Marx insisted — to change it? Zizek the modest Marxist says our times are so extraordinary that we need to understand fully what is happening before we can sensibly act. "We need to withdraw and reflect and think," he says.

The role of philosophers, as he sees it, is to help clarify the questions that societies should ask and force us to think, rather than conjuring up ready-made solutions to all our problems. "I feel like a magician who is only producing hats and never rabbits," he says.

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John Thornhill is news editor of the *Financial Times*.

Slavoj Zizek will visit Melbourne this week to address Parallax, the national conference of the Australian Institute of Architects, which takes place from April 30 to May 2.



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property ownership and common goods or perish. "My main criticism of liberal capitalism is not that it is bad but that it cannot last indefinitely. Communism has to be reinvented," he says.

As we munch on our copious green salads and tuck into our delicious meat courses, Zizek says that what particularly fascinates him is the ideological battle over how to interpret the financial crisis. The ruling ideology is trying to shift the blame from the global capitalist system as such on to its accidental deviations, such as overly lax regulation or the corruption of big financial institutions. In some respects this has allowed capitalists to assert their values even more aggressively: while bailing out Wall Street they are shredding collective bargaining agreements at General Motors and relegating the problems of global warming, AIDS and hunger.

"The problem is today that when you have chaos and disorder, people lose their cognitive mapping. So it is an open struggle as to whose interpretation will win," he says. "Never forget that this is how Hitler won."

According to Zizek, the reason Hitler came to power in the 1930s was because he offered the most attractive interpretation of disastrous events. He simply flattered the Germans by claiming that their army had been betrayed in World War I and by laying all the blame at the feet of the Jews.

We order fruit salad.

Zizek is obsessed with the way that societies interpret events and the belief systems that underpin politics. One of the most powerful ideological "factories", he argues, is Hollywood, which is influential in forging our understanding of the world. Zizek admits he enjoys many Hollywood films and says that the best, such as Robert Altman's *Short Cuts* (1993), deserve to be called art and are superior to many "fake" European films. But, he suggests, Hollywood also serves an ideological purpose, shaping the

together, he says. The lover literally draws her picture. "And then, after his job is done, he can f--- off and disappear.

"He is — what I would call in theory — a pure vanishing mediator. It is not a love story. It is vampiric, egotistic exploitation."

After discussing the ideological "messages" of *Batman* (1989), *Kung Fu Panda* (2008) and *The Lives of Others* (2006), which all — in their very different ways — explore how we can happily live with deceit, we arrive at the similarities between the Hollywood disaster movie *Armageddon* (1998) and *The Fall of Berlin*, the great Stalinist movie of 1949. This sets Zizek off about the mutual fascination of Hollywood and high Stalinism: how the producers of *King Kong* (1933) stole the idea of a giant gorilla on top of a skyscraper from the futurist architects who wanted to place a giant statue of Lenin on top of the Palace of Soviets; how Stalin's favourite film stars were Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire.

What particularly intrigues Zizek is how films that seemingly resist the prevailing ideology, such as *Titanic*, often serve to strengthen it. It was a similar story, he suggests, in communist times when people who told seemingly subversive jokes only succeeded in spreading cynicism and indifference, which was exactly what the party nomenklatura needed to sustain their rule. A member of the ruling Communist party in the dying days of Yugoslavia, Zizek well remembers how the country's leaders sustained the regime by exploiting the population's passivity.

"If you asked me at gunpoint what I really like, I would say to read German idealism, Hegel. What I like most, what I love the best, is this objectivity of belief," he says. Although people may claim not to believe in the political system, their inert cynicism only validates that system. This is all explained, according to Zizek, by Marx's theory of "commodity fetishism", the idea that the way we behave in society is