

Preaching to the perverted

Slavoj Zizek is a flamboyant philosopher with a passion for cinema – and now he wants to remake Hitchcock's 'Psycho'. **Gareth Evans** talks to him

'In order to understand today's world, we need cinema; literally. It's only in cinema that we get that crucial dimension which we are not yet ready to confront in our reality. If you are looking for what is, in reality, more real than reality itself, look into cinematic fiction.'

Fighting words indeed, care of Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Zizek, whose latest intellectual Molotov cocktail, *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema*, a three-part documentary made by Sophie Fiennes (*Hoover Street Revival*), opens at the ICA this Friday after going out on More4 earlier in the year. A high-octane close reading of some of the most familiar scenes in cinema, it's a provocative and wide-ranging declaration of the undoubted ability film has to move, arouse, enlighten and unsettle us.

For anyone who cares about film, and about its role in affecting both the psyche and society, this is an important, even remarkable, undertaking. Deploying the post-Freudian psychoanalytic thought of Jacques Lacan and the dialectic arguments of Hegel, it's unashamedly about ideas. Indeed, it is one of the very few films made about cinema itself, and not just its performers and makers.

But this is no dry thesis delivered from the dead wood of a lecture hall podium. How could it be when its writer-presenter is one of the most flamboyantly unlikely stars of the intellectual jet set? An extraordinarily prolific writer-commentator on film, politics and pop culture, Zizek is a passionate anomaly within academia. The author of numerous books and articles, he is a resident of the air, forever on the move between speaking engagements. Ceaselessly undermining tired assump-

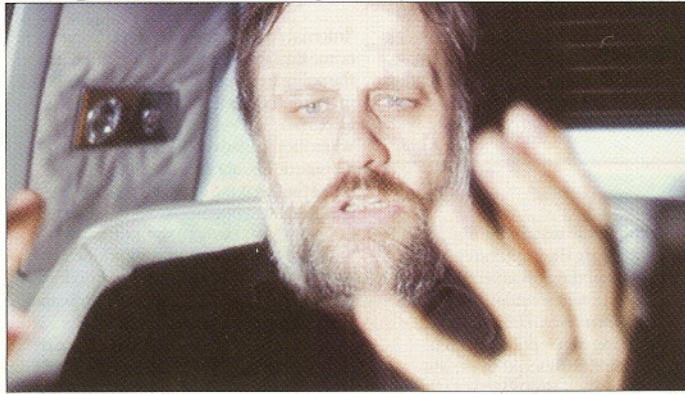
'When Hitler was burning books, one should condemn him – not for burning books, but for burning the wrong books'

tions about the workings of reality, ideology and love, not since the heyday of Jean Baudrillard has a cultural intellectual enjoyed such a threshold-crossing international reputation.

On the phone from the Slovenian capital of Ljubljana, Zizek delivers an exhilarating rush of ideas, associations and digressions; frank, provocative and often very funny, it's an infectious brew, far from shy. And yet, when asked if he is satisfied about the outcome of his latest media foray... 'I have



Thinking man's movie star *Philosopher Slavoj Zizek* in a mock-up of *'Vertigo'*



... *'Mulholland Dr.'*



... and *'The Birds'*

not seen it', Zizek declares. 'I'm just terrified by myself on screen...' For someone who has already been the subject of several films, including last year's *Zizek!*, which tracked his free-wheeling global itinerary, this is a perhaps surprising revelation. But, despite the fact that he appears in almost every frame, *The Pervert's Guide...* held a particular appeal. 'It's not about me,' he claims. 'Me and Sophie, we have a focus outside ourselves. That makes it tolerable.'

For the viewer, *The Pervert's Guide...* is more than tolerable. In an inspired delivery, Fiennes filmed Zizek in the original locations of iconic works like *The Birds* and *The Conversation*, but also created

replica sets to implant him into key scenes from dozens of films, whether *'Psycho'* or *'The Matrix'*. For the celebrity thinker, appearing 'inside' the film involved a risk not associated with the page. 'Will I be made ridiculous by showing the clips or, the utopian dream, will some people watch it and say, 'My God, it works.'

Zizek drew his onscreen improvisations from his extensive writings on cinema ('Wait for the DVD, ten hours of deleted scenes!'), but is the first to note that he has an ambivalent relationship to film.

'I like to be very ruthless and exploit movies', he admits. '70 or 80 per cent of what I write about movies is not really

about movies. I exploit them to make a theoretical point. About a third of the time I do a really formal analysis of a film with all the love of that film. So I think my honour can be saved. But I am often afraid to see the films because it may distort my theory. Nonetheless this is a game I play with something I am deeply fascinated with. Theorising intensifies the pleasure of watching a film, and it can save bad films.'

Across *The Pervert's Guide...* Zizek explores cinema's relation to sexuality, fantasy and the unconscious, seeking to inhabit the works cited all the better to understand them. But his dream is even more active. 'My ideal would be to digitally remaster some classic scenes, like in the plays of Brecht, where a character steps outside and comments on his actions. After the shower murder in *'Psycho'*, when Norman is cleaning the bathroom, I am totally on his side, the job has to be done. But imagine him doing it talking to himself, saying, "Did I have a mother fixation, am I neurotic?" This I love!'

Zizek thrives on a wilful reversal of expectation in thought and action, relishing the idiosyncratic in himself and others. On the recent, atrocious adaptation of *'Tristan and Isolde'*, he 'would love to love it,' and when I mistakenly attribute the film to Franco Zeffirelli, he is rapid in response. 'Ah, here you touch my Stalinism. When Hitler was burning books, one should condemn him – not for burning books, but for burning the wrong books. With Zeffirelli, they should all be burnt.'

On the other hand, David Lynch is central to Zizek's case. 'I am a true Lynch fan. Fuck *'Blue Velvet'*, everyone loves it. The real Lynch is not *'Twin Peaks'* the series, but *'Fire Walk with Me'*, and *'Dune'*, of course. It's this serious playfulness that gives *The Pervert's Guide...* such forward momentum.

If he has one regret, it's that 'we couldn't give more time to lesser-known films – I would really love to have looked at Capra's *'Meet John Doe'*, for example.' But he and Fiennes are already plotting their next collaboration, *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology* – a natural development, given cinema's own implication in systems of belief and control, and Zizek's constant unpicking of such processes.

For Zizek, the cultural project is indivisible from a wider political involvement, however amusingly delivered. He expresses genuine concern about the fragmentation of shared experience resulting from the rise in home-viewing of films but goes on. 'I was in New York and there were these signs, "Don't buy pirated movies, you are supporting terrorism and communism" blah blah blah. So I thought, from now on, I will only buy pirate DVDs. Maybe the spontaneous communism of the medium will finally triumph.'

'The Pervert's Guide to Cinema' opens at the ICA on Friday, alongside a season of films curated by Zizek, who will appear at two live events. See *Other Cinema*.

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