



A roving mind lands in Telluride



By Courtesy photo Slavoj Žižek

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His philosopher brain devours anything you throw at it. He knows Chinese history and global warming, life and death, matter and void, torture and *The Sound of Music* (although those last two may be synonymous). But skiing? Skiing is something that flummoxes Slavoj Zizek.

“I have kind of a natural aversion to skiing — it’s like, What does skiing mean?” he asks. “You climb up the mountain only to come back down. Why not stay down and read a good book? I’ve never had sympathy for skiing.”

Well. Skiing and nothingness is a question the Slovenian superstar thinker can ponder as he flies into these craggy mountains, to serve as guest director of this weekend’s Telluride Film Festival.

Zizek is a protean philosopher whose lectures and writings have inspired movies and transformed the bearded Marxist into a kind of rockstar-thinker, one who riffs about public toilets and modes of being, who dashes convention and orthodoxy like Townsend smashing a guitar. He’s on YouTube. He’s highly Googled. He’s a scruffy polymath who can bewitch a 10-minute phone interview into an hour-long discourse on the meaning of meaning and the nature of nature.

But first, the requisite blah-blah about why Zizek is coming this weekend — what old timey journalists call a “nut graf.” As the festival’s guest director, he’s selected a half-dozen films to screen during the weekend, and he’ll introduce each with his accessible inscrutability and boyish cynicism. The movies include three dark-and-disturbing film noirs, a 1949 Soviet epic that celebrates Stalin, and “*The Great Sacrifice*,” lovely melodrama made by a notorious Nazi propagandist.

“It was made in ‘44 by the ultimate bad guy,” Zizek says. “It’s easy to criticize the Nazis when they’re bad guys. It’s more difficult when they’re at their best.”

He contemplated showing *The Sound of Music*, that much-beloved Julie Andrews musical, which Zizek has highlighted as an acme of perversity. He had a devilish idea to show the movie, and then argue that you could draw a line from the von Trapps and the nuns to that crazy Austrian guy who locked his daughter up in the cellar for 24 years.

“The basements are alive with the sound of music,” he says.

Zizek is like this in interviews — playful and provoking, deliberately contradictory, kinetic and gnomic. He is a faithful atheist whose philosophy is grounded in Lacan, Marx and Hegel, and he’s written dozens of books on Christianity, the Sept. 11 attacks, ideology and violence, Hitchcock and David Lynch.

Nearly 60 years of facts and books and ideas are zigging around his mind like pressurized hydrogen molecules, and you get the feeling that he has to open the release valve, or else the unstoppable process of thought-mitosis will cause his head to explode, leaving the world without anyone to reconfigure the way we see elevator buttons, chocolate laxatives and ourselves.

“If you look a little bit around,” he says, “you’ll find madness everywhere.”

His life, according to biographies and magazine articles: He grew up in Communist Yugoslavia, an only child who read voraciously and, like Toto in *Cinema Paradiso*, spent rapt hours at the movies. He studied emerging giants like Derrida and Lacan, lived in France, got involved in the opposition movement as the Communist bloc tattered, ran for president of Slovenia, found an academic position, got discovered by the West, got famous, got his own Wikipedia page.

We were going to ask him about all of this, about the flesh-and-guts Zizek versus the ink-and-celluloid man who’s been profiled in *The New Yorker*, who starred in the movie “Zizek!”, about whether he’s overexposed and overhyped, but he led us away like the pied piper of Ljubljana.

After dispatching with the topic of skiing (remember that?) he fondly recalled a trip to Boulder (“The hippie Buddhist politically correct capital — I have no sympathy for them, they are fake fake fake.”) and mused about the Democratic circus parading through Denver.

In the *New Yorker* profile, Zizek demeaned the two-party system in a Western democracy like this one because he said it offered mostly the illusion of choice instead of real choice, but as is often the case with him, it’s not so simple. He said he sees something in Obama, but it doesn’t have much to do with Yes We Can.

“I think he is doing something which is important, although to a cynic it does not appear important,” Zizek says. “He does say publicly, in his polite educated way, things which are taboo. I think all big narratives are in crisis. And it’s very important at such a moment to have a guy who enlarges the space of what you can talk about ... Words are never only words. When you start to talk about problems in a different way, it opens up something new. My God, words are never only words. Words are all we have, in a way.”

He can spot glints of perversity or hypocrisy like gold flakes in a pan of mud. The West rebukes China’s treatment of Tibet but ignores the government’s treatment of Chinese people.

Right-wing survivalists in the West are adopting the same anti-government ideals of the Black Panthers. Protectionism united the American right and Communists. The same politicians who refused to accept global warming are now trying to spin

it as a positive force (fresh peaches in the Yukon!). Humility is arrogance in disguise.

He has more to say, about magicians and Cuba, about Japanese immigrants living in Brazil, about the grandeur of Iceland and graveyards for airplanes, and even though it's now nighttime in Slovenia, you get the feeling that Slavoj Žižek could talk forever.