

Perversion or Provocation: Slavoj Žižek's Political Style

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The Provocateur's Guide

Slavoj Žižek is not a pervert. Despite starring in films whose titles openly testify to his perversion – *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema* (Fiennes and Žižek 2006) and *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology* (Fiennes 2012) – Žižek's method is one of provocation rather than perversion. The distinction between perversion and provocation is difficult to decipher. The pervert often appears as a provocateur and vice versa. When one experiences perverse acting out, the experience seems provocative as it dislodges habitual expectations. This creates a sense that provocation and perversion are perhaps just two different terms for the same phenomenon. But the political importance of the distinction demands that we resolve all possible confusion between the two positions. Perversion has a semblance of radicality that belies its underlying conservative function, while provocation appears politically insignificant in a way that hides its authentic challenge to the ruling ideology. Understanding Žižek as a figure of provocation rather than perversion enables us to grasp not just his own position but also how to differentiate the two in political terms. Properly understanding Žižek's position implies properly understanding why we should take up the position of the provocateur rather than that of the pervert.

Provocation challenges the ruling ideology by pointing out its insubstantiality, its reliance on purported solid foundation that it doesn't really have. Ideologies compel obedience by feigning an authority that doesn't exist, by obfuscating their own lack. As it highlights where the ruling ideology lacks, provocation doesn't engage in a direct confrontation with this ideology, which causes it to seem less than fully radical. Perversion, on the other hand, appears to go all the way and completely take up the position of open defiance against this ideology. As a provocateur rather than a pervert, Žižek often opens himself up to the charge that he is not a true radical, that he is just a dupe of capitalist ideology, and other related charges.¹

But provocation doesn't aim at performing radicality. Its radicality stems from its insistence that there is no non-

¹One can find a litany of such accusations against Žižek in both the secondary literature on his thought and in the numerous podcasts devoted to attacking him politically. For an especially spiteful example, see (Rockhill 2023).

lacking authority figure, that there is no guarantee for our political act, and that this absence of a guarantee is the source of our freedom. To provoke is constantly to remind people of their freedom in the face of a big Other that presents itself as fully authoritative and noncastrated but in actuality suffers from a lack that corresponds with that of the subject itself. The provocateur seeks out the point where the figure of social authority, the big Other, contradicts itself and loses its self-consistency. This is a strategy that moves in precisely the opposite direction from that of perverse acting out.

The aim of the pervert is clear. By transgressing the norms of the social order, the pervert hopes trigger outrage from some authority figure. The transgression tries to garner an outraged reaction. This outrage testifies, in the psyche of the pervert, to the existence of the big Other. Perverse acting prompts the big Other's enjoyment in the form of its outrage, which provides the assurance that the big Other is a substantial entity there to underwrite all our actions. Seeking assurance about the substantiality of the big Other drives the pervert's acting out.

Perversion is a rejection of the universality of castration. The pervert doesn't disavow its own castration through acting out but that of the big Other. The existence somewhere of a noncastrated authority is at the heart of the pervert's project and what drives the pervert to its transgressions. The point is to prompt the big Other to respond to the perverse transgression with a response that shows the big Other to be a real authority rather than a failed and lacking one. As Jacques Lacan puts it in Seminar XVI, "Perversion is a way of warding off the radical gap in the signifying order that castration represents." (Lacan 2023, p. 253) The pervert cannot tolerate the gap that undermines every figure of authority and acts out in a way that prompts an authority to respond with a response that seems to indicate the authority's completeness. This gives perversion a conversative political valence despite the fact that perverts typically don't consider themselves conservatives (nor do conservatives typically consider themselves aligned with perversion).

The great danger of perversion is that it appears (both to itself and to those observing it) as a challenge to the ruling symbolic authority. Perversion feels radical, which is why it attracts so many adherents. The way in which the pervert

acts out transgresses social rules and often violates the law, as we can see in the case of notable perversions such as bestiality and necrophilia. These activities both violate social mores and the law at the same time. The enjoyment that the transgression produces involves the perverse subject enjoying through the big Other whose norms it violates. When the Other responds with disapprobation after I have sex with a corpse, I enjoy through this outrage. No matter how extreme the perverse transgression, it always occurs with a focus on the big Other that it believes itself to disdain. Perversion involves more respect for the authority of the Other than any other psychic position. This respect severely limits any potential political value in perversion.

Unlike the pervert, the provocateur doesn't transgress for the sake of proving that the Other exists but to reveal that the Other doesn't exist. The pervert's transgression aims at facilitating the Other's enjoyment, an enjoyment that provides evidence that the Other functions as a support for the pervert's identity. Provocation has no such aim. The provocateur's act strikes directly at the point of contradiction within the big Other's explanation, the point that reveals the Other to be lacking and unable to respond effectively. This is where Žižek aligns himself, despite his prominent appearance in the misnamed *Pervert's Guide*.

It is not only the titles the films starring Žižek that might lead us to see him as a pervert. Although he lives a spartan personal life, he often transgresses the norms of academic speech in his books and his talks. This becomes most evident in his liberal use of obscene jokes to illustrate theoretical points, but it also manifests itself in dismissal of academic attire, titles, and ceremonies that others seek to bestow on him. In Žižek's view, one of the most offensive ways to address him is as "Professor Žižek," rather than just as "Slavoj." When he gives a lecture, he disdains the typical academic introduction that highlights his many accomplishments or enumerates his many publications. The point of his theoretical project is not to establish himself as an authority for followers. All his seemingly personal proclivities – such as his casual manner of dress – merely serve to dislodge him from the position of authority, to illustrate that he cannot function as a figure of the big Other. Instead, he strives to occupy the position of the gap within the social order, a position that reveals the big Other is lacking.

Žižek repeats many of Lacan's aphorisms many times. But the one he returns to more than any other – "the big Other does not exist" – reveals where the emphasis of his philosophy lies. This aphorism appeals to him because it makes clear the absence of any substantial authority that could guide our actions and thereby obviate our freedom. There is no figure of the big Other to provide a foundation for subjectivity, and provocation makes this apparent. In contrast to perverse acting out that produces the illusion that the big Other exists, acts of provocation reveal the gap within every authority. They don't lead to the authority's outrage but to the authority's befuddlement, to its inability to respond adequately. In the face of the provocation, what seems authoritative becomes visible as lacking because the provocation points out where the official explanation breaks down and contradicts itself. There is a hole within every ruling order, and the provocateur occupies the position of this hole to expose its existence.

At the beginning of his early work *Tarrying with the Negative*, Žižek lays out the path of provocation that he will maintain throughout the entire trajectory of his thought. According to Žižek, the task of the theorist is not one of direct confrontation with the ruling ideology. The theorist exposes the hole within the illusory whole. Žižek claims, "the duty of the critical intellectual ... is precisely to occupy all the time, even when the new order (the 'new harmony') stabilizes itself and again renders invisible the hole as such, the place of this hole, i.e., to maintain a distance toward every Master-Signifier." (Žižek 1993, p. 2) By occupying the position of the hole within the official explanation, the theorist will necessarily say things that seem troubling or disturbing to readers, but this disturbance is the only way to challenge the illusory harmony of the ruling order. Žižek then adds, "This maintaining of a distance with regard to the Master-Signifier characterizes the basic attitude of philosophy." (Žižek 1993, p. 2) Here, Žižek aligns his own practice of provocation – the insistence on distance from the received wisdom authorized by the master signifier – with that of all philosophy. In this vision of things, philosophy provokes because it asks the ticklish questions, the questions that in their very structure defy what seems to go without saying.

In an age of generalized perversion like ours, provocation becomes increasingly requisite. The task of the provo-

cateur is one of exposing the hidden obedience that resides within all perverse acting out. No one seems to be obeying, and yet almost everyone is. The provocative act reveals the capitulation that lurks within the perverse transgression. It replaces this performance of transgression with an act that exposes the insubstantiality of authority. This gesture runs through Žižek's entire thought and gives that thought its political relevance.

Eyes Wide Open

To grasp the difference between perversion and provocation, it suffices to look at the contrast between the married couple in Stanley Kubrick's late masterpiece *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999). Although Žižek himself comments on this film at various points in his thinking, he doesn't explore its value for laying out the difference between the position he advocates and perversion, the position wrongly associated with him. Consequently, we must do so on his behalf. The film chronicles Alice (Nicole Kidman) telling her husband Bill (Tom Cruise) a fantasy she had about leaving him and their daughter for a naval officer whom she saw while they were all on vacation at Cape Cod. She details this fantasy in response to Bill's proclamation that women, in contrast to men, are naturally faithful. In his reaction to Alice's description of this fantasy, Bill embarks on a night of sexual exploration that leads him, ultimately, to a masked orgy taking place in a mansion. Kubrick's film depicts Bill's response as a perverse acting out triggered by Alice's provocation. In his theoretical work, Žižek plays the part of Alice, while many of his opponents take up the role of Bill, convinced about the radicality of perverse acting out while missing the significance of the provocation that this acting out allows them to flee.

Alice describes her fantasy to Bill after Bill expresses total confidence in her fidelity to him. This self-assurance rubs Alice the wrong way not because she has been unfaithful or wants to sow doubt in Bill's mind but because it reduces her to a position of substantiality. From Bill's perspective, she is not a lacking subject herself who might, in a moment of weakness, indulge in an affair or betray her husband in some other fashion. Instead, according to Bill, she is identical to her feminine nature and thus not a subject at odds with herself, not a divided subject. As they talk in their bedroom after a Christmas party, Alice asks Bill to consider the desire of his

female patients as he examines their breasts. Bill struggles visibly with his answer before saying, "Women don't ... they basically don't think like that." Here, Bill shows that he envisions Alice (and all femininity) as a nonlacking big Other, a position from which she recoils. This statement prompts Alice to stand up and recount the typically evolutionary explanation of feminine monogamy. After concluding this mockery, she tells him, "If you men only knew." But Bill remains unconvinced and proclaims that he never experiences any jealousy because he knows that Alice, as his wife and the mother of his child, would never be unfaithful. She is, for him, simply a substantial being, not a subject. She reacts with an implicit proclamation of her subjectivity, which Kubrick underlines visually by shooting Alice throughout this entire conversation in nothing but translucent underwear. The film depicts Alice in a way that gives the lie to Bill's claims about her and about women.

After Bill's testament that he sees Alice as a self-identical substance, Alice doubles over laughing at his failure to see her as a desiring subject. She then articulates a fantasy that evinces her self-division and, by so doing, acts as a provocation to Bill. Although Alice doesn't look like Slavoj Žižek in *Eyes Wide Shut*, she nonetheless acts like him. Her provocation undermines the subject's assurance that the big Other is a nonlacking figure, a figure on which the subject can rely with utter certainty. All of a sudden, Bill loses his assurance about the fidelity of his wife.

As she relates the fantasy to Bill, Alice recounts how the thought of running away with the naval officer, a man with whom she never even spoke, so overcame her that nothing else mattered in relation to the fantasized relation. She imagined leaving her husband and child behind, abandoning her comfortable home, and giving up her entire life, all for the sake of the fantasized enjoyment that this officer would offer, even if for just one night. Just as she finishes her story, the phone rings, and a patient calls Bill away, which enables her narrative to haunt him without any accompanying explanation. Her provocation so completely undermines Bill's psychic equilibrium that he heads out on an adventure that evening in search of the extreme enjoyment that Alice's fantasy conveys to him. In response to the provocation of the fantasy, Bill opts to act out perversely. Everything he does during the night following Alice's revelation of her provoca-

tive fantasy life occurs in an effort to find a new substantial Other to rely on.

When initially thinking about *Eyes Wide Shut* and perversion, perverse acting out seems the province of the rich attendees at the giant masked orgy, not of Bill Harford, who merely sneaks into the orgy as an uninvited observer. But the film depicts Bill as the pervert in this scene and throughout his night of exploration. Impelled by Alice's fantasy provocation, Bill goes out in search of a transgression that will enable him to access the enjoyment that he associates with Alice. He wrongly believes that the emphasis of her description of the fantasy was its transgressive quality, when in actuality she aimed at provoking him by announcing herself as a desiring subject and not a self-identical substance. He responds to provocation with perversion because he thinks in perverse terms about enjoyment, which makes Bill an exemplary subject in the contemporary universe. It also separates him from Žižek's theoretical project.

Bill's visit to the orgy represents perverse acting out insofar as he seeks the ultimate form of transgression, which he equates with the ultimate form of enjoyment. Despite the evident danger involved for him, Bill heads into the orgy uninvited to discover how the wealthy really enjoy. They enjoy, he assumes, in a manner that far surpasses his own, in a manner that might come close to that of Alice. While at the orgy, however, Bill's behavior leads to his exposure as an interloper, but even this exposure doesn't dampen his enthusiasm for exploring the enjoyment on display at the orgy. He follows up this evening with further investigations that stem from his conviction that the big Other has a secret enjoyment that his own acting out can uncover. For Bill in the film after Alice destroys her status as the big Other for him, the wealthy represent the new form of the big Other, and his transgression strives to trigger this Other into revealing itself. Bill makes himself into a vehicle for the enjoyment of the wealthy. One can even imagine the entire orgy, with its ridiculous rituals and chants, being staged by Bill's benefit. He believes that he has accessed a secret perversion that reveals how the wealthy really enjoy themselves, but he is the pervert in this situation. It might be true that the rich attendees at the orgy are themselves perverse, but the concern of *Eyes Wide Shut* is the depiction of Bill's perversion as a pathological response to Alice's provocation. The film

forces the spectator to confront the lack in the big Other just as Bill continually attempts to obscure this lack.

According to Žižek's theoretical politics, becoming Bill Harford represents the chief danger today. Žižek takes up the role of Alice and provokes in order to lead us away from the lure of perversion. Alice's description of her fantasy appears tame when contrasted with the night of debauchery that Bill witnesses. But we should not be fooled. The perverse transgression is always a faked radical act. It stages its radicality rather than enacting it. Alice demonstrates that the real threat to the prevailing order – even to conventional ideas about sexuality – derives from provocation, not from perverse acting out.

The Offensive Joke

Žižek's jokes have achieved sufficient notoriety that an editor dedicated an entire book simply to collecting them without the larger context in which he tells them (Žižek 2014). The jokes don't just illustrate the theoretical points that Žižek is making when he introduces them, but they also serve to seduce readers and listeners who not already inclined toward his philosophical perspective to give him a more ready hearing. Žižek uses the joke as an entry point to his theoretical system for newcomers that might otherwise be resistant to it. The seductive power of the jokes stems from their ability to provoke listeners and readers. Žižek's jokes typically confront people with a contradiction that reveals the lack in the big Other. This is how they challenge the authority of this figure. The big Other's authority over us depends on our inability to recognize its contradictory status and our refusal to see it as lacking. The joke provides an easy-to-digest remedy.

One of Žižek's favorite jokes about authority targets God, the ultimate authority. In this joke, a group of Jews who died in the Holocaust sit on a bench in heaven telling Holocaust jokes and laughing together. Not wanting to be left out on the joke, God comes up to them and asks, "What's so funny?" One of the Jews says to him, "Oh, you wouldn't get it. You had to be there." (Žižek 2020, pp. 185-186) Although God is omnipresent and omniscient, the Holocaust marks a point in history where God was not there for the Jews. The joke plays on a fundamental contradiction evident in the occurrence of the Holocaust: God permits the chosen

people to suffer the worst massacre in human history while nonetheless retaining his position of authority. The fact that the joke transpires in heaven compounds the effect. God does provide salvation and defeat death, but otherwise, his power appears radically limited. He can't stop total mass devastation from occurring.

Žižek uses this joke to reveal the lacking status of all authority. The Holocaust in heaven joke undermines divine authority better than any direct attack on God or on belief. It accepts the wager of faith that God exists but reveals what one must accept if one believes in this existence while at the same time acknowledging the history of the twentieth century. The pervert would drop a crucifix in urine or desecrate the altar, but such acts of transgression do not reveal the contradiction at the heart of the divine in the way that Žižek's joke does. It is a provocative response to authority rather than a perverse one.

In addition to undermining representatives of the big Other in positions of authority, Žižek also targets those revolting against authority. He recognizes that too often theorists substantialize the position of revolt or resistance and fail to see how this revolt might actually play into the hands of the authority it contests. His provocations don't just aim at those in power but also at the hidden capitulation of those who believe that they are wholly resisting oppressive authority.

The joke that focuses on resistance and its failures testifies best to Žižek's position as a provocateur. Even his harshest critics on the Left laugh along at his jokes about God or other figures of authority. Although the joke about those who suffered in the Holocaust talking with God in heaven might not be in good taste, it nonetheless doesn't offend Žižek's political allies. It's a joke that others on the side of emancipatory politics can get behind.

But when it comes to a joke about resistance, Žižek's would-be allies tend to join his conservative critics in denouncing his bad taste and even his racism or sexism. Žižek targets those who resist figures of authority without enacting a fundamental challenge to the oppressive structure itself. This type of resistance, as he sees it, fortifies the oppressive authority rather than undermining it, which is why it becomes the subject of many of his jokes. Perhaps the most notorious

of them involves a warrior raping a peasant woman. As Žižek tells it:

In the good old days of Really-Existing Socialism, a joke was popular among dissidents, used to illustrate the futility of their protests. In fifteenth-century Russia occupied by Mongols, a farmer and his wife walk along a dusty country road; a Mongol warrior on a horse stops at their side and tells the farmer that he will now rape his wife; he then adds: “But since there is a lot of dust on the ground, you should hold my testicles while I’m raping your wife, so that they will not get dirty!” After the Mongol finishes his job and rides away, the farmer starts to laugh and jump with joy; the surprised wife asks him: “How can you be jumping with joy when I was just brutally raped in your presence?” The farmer answers: “But I got him! His balls are full of dust!” This sad joke tells of the predicament of dissidents: they thought they were dealing serious blows to the party nomenclature, but all they were doing was getting a little bit of dust on the nomenclature’s testicles, while the nomenclature went on raping the people... Is today’s critical Left not in a similar position?²

The farmer in this joke represents the leftist whose critique of oppressive authority fails to do anything to help those who suffer from its abuses. What seems offensive about the joke is its apparent indifference to the rape of the woman, but this indifference on the part of the farmer is precisely what the jokes criticizes – and is the reason why Žižek tells it.

Everyone on the Left is willing to accept that authority is lacking, but few go where Žižek does to identify the lack in those who challenge the ruling authority. This line of comedy is necessary because too often we fail to see that those

²Žižek 2013, p. 25. Although Žižek recounts this joke only in an obscure article (not in one of his books) and verbally on just a few occasions, it became one of his most well-known jokes, the joke identified with Žižek more than any other. What underlined this connection was the appearance of a 2013 satirical song, “The Perverted Dance (Cut the Balls),” performed by Klemen Slakonja, who impersonates Žižek (very effectively) in the video. The title of this song also furthers the link between Žižek and perversion that I am attempting to sever.

who revolt remain divided subjects – subjects still invested in what they revolt against, an investment that limits the radicality of their revolt. Žižek’s offensiveness as a comedian is thus integral to his incisiveness as a political thinker. He tells jokes, such as the one about the farmer and his wife, that brush up against the boundaries of acceptability, but in doing so, he provokes those on the Left into a position that doesn’t content itself with challenging the ruling authority. Žižek wants to encourage a revolutionary structural change.

Insistence on Incorrectness

One of the reasons that Žižek attacks political correctness with such vehemence stems from his efforts at provocation. He doesn’t perversely transgress the rules of political correctness by using offensive language, employing interdicted expressions, or acting inappropriately. Instead, Žižek argues against the political project that inheres in creating social change through a modification of language. The effect of such a program is not what it claims to be. In the guise of respecting the other, political correctness treats the other as a nonlacking figure. It substantializes the other and turns the other into a noncastrated big Other. This is, for Žižek, the danger that it represents. The very people it aims to respect end up deprived of their lacking subjectivity in the gesture of correctness. The problem is not that correctness changes only words and does nothing about material conditions (although this is clearly a deficit as well) but that its manner of changing words eliminates the subjectivity of those it aims at respecting. Correctness inaugurates a fundamentally reactionary critique of the oppressiveness of the ruling order. It responds to oppressiveness by obscuring the subjectivity of those suffering under this oppression, thereby compounding its nefarious effects. Žižek turns to provocation as a corrective to correctness.

His provocations concerning correctness never resort to the use of slurs or denigrating language. This is what Žižek would do if he were responding perversely to correctness. He typically stresses that he shares the basic goals of the project of political correctness – that of eliminating racism, sexism, homophobia, and other forms of oppression. Žižek is not an economic reductionist who believes that if eliminate capitalism all other social ills will miraculously disappear with it. Despite the worthiness of its goals, however, political

correctness cannot accomplish these goals because its language tends to substantialize the other that it attempts to respect.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the use of the term Native Americans to describe people who occupied North America prior to the arrival of European colonists, an example to which Žižek repeatedly returns. What is striking about this example is that it doesn't appear as a particularly egregious case of correctness run amok. Most people, even those outside the bastions of political correctness, use this term to describe the people who first settled North America. It seems like an odd choice for Žižek to insist on so incessantly. But its very ubiquity is itself revelatory.

When discussing the use of this term, Žižek usually refers to a conversation that he once had with some Native Americans who themselves disdained the term precisely for the work that it does to erect them as figures of the big Other. Unlike people of European descent who experience the alienating effects of culture as they become lacking subjects, the Native American hasn't lost the connection with the soil. It is a signifier of substantiality that describes someone not subjected to lack. The Native American is a substance, not a subject, which is what transforms this term of correctness into not just an offensive one but also a politically retrograde one. According to Žižek's interlocutors, at least the older (and surely more incorrect) term Indian has the great virtue of testifying to the stupidity of the original European colonizers, who mistakenly believed that they had reached India via a new route.

If other terms in the lexicon of political correctness don't have such theoretically dramatic shortcomings as Native Americans, each such terminological choice reflects a desire to identify the other in a way that eliminates the alienating distance inherent in the signifier itself. Correctness represents a search for the correct signifier, the signifier that really fits. But this is a political misstep. The only path toward respecting the other lies in recognizing that this other is also an alienated subject, partaking in the problem of castration just as much the most cultured European. Žižek's provocations reveal that political correctness, even when its terms successfully hit the mark, fails to speak to the universality of alienated subjectivity. It posits figures of otherness who

escape this alienation. In doing so, correctness leads us to a political dead end.

The Perverse Pseudo-Event

Many leftists look to May 1968 as the last time that a genuine revolutionary moment was at hand in the West. This is the position, for instance, of Alain Badiou, who regards May 1968 as a possible political event in the sequence that runs from the French Revolution through the Russian Revolution. Since the 1960s, politics has taken a decidedly conservative turn. The primary challengers to the mainstream capitalist parties around the world are not communist or socialist alternatives. They are right-wing populists, who inaugurate a more authoritarian form of capitalism when they come to power. In the wake of this profound defeat, it seems that all we can do is to try to restore the radicality of the 1960s or hold on to its embers before they become fully extinguished.

This is not Žižek's position. According to Žižek, May 1968 not only failed to disrupt the capitalist system in an emancipatory direction but had the baleful effect of inaugurating an epoch of generalized perversion, which is more conducive to capitalist relations of production than the system of prohibition that the militants of 1968 struggled against. The definitive slogan of May 1968 – “Jouir sans entraves!” [“Enjoy without barriers!”] – articulates a challenge to the traditional limits set up on enjoyment within the capitalist social order. In the eyes of the 1968 militants, every prohibition became a fascistic restriction of our infinite capacity for bodily exploration and spiritual flourishing. But rather than lead to an alternative to capitalist society, the ethos of this period helped to forge a massive expansion of capitalism's logic into every domain of society. The idea of enjoying without barriers is not, it turns out, an antidote to capitalism's repressiveness. It is the secret logic of capitalism itself, which this supposedly revolutionary period ushers in.

May 1968 purports to abolish the big Other, to eliminate all forms of social hierarchy and authority. But the effect of this pseudo-revolution is to install a more oppressive form of authority than existed before, an authority whose oppressiveness derives from association with transgression. According to Žižek, after May 1968 authority itself becomes perverse, so that it begins to perform transgressive actions.

Meanwhile, transgression loses all potentiality radicality. In this situation, the perverse response to authority becomes even less politically viable than it ever was historically. The pervert now plays directly into the hands of the ruling perverse authority, an authority that commands subjects to transgress. In the wake of this turn, the distinction between perversion and provocation must be sustained. Žižek is not the theorist who can provide us a pervert's guide to political transgressions. He is the provocateur who impels us to confront the contradictory points at which the big Other fails, a project he sustained constantly from the appearance of the Sublime Object of Ideology in 1989.

Given Žižek's position on the politics of perverse acting out, one cannot really imagine a more unfortunate title for his explanations of theoretical concepts than that of the *Pervert's Guide*. We might just chalk up this title to a misstep on Žižek's part or the influence of director Sophie Fiennes in order to dismiss its importance. But there is another possibility. Although provocation is distinct from perversion, the provocateur must constantly flirt with perversion and even, at times, take on the appearance of the pervert. In doing so, the provocateur avoids becoming a figure of authority, which would completely undermine the project of provocation. One must always wonder whether the provocateur is not just a pervert and thus not someone on whom we can rely. The existence of the question about whether Žižek is a pervert or a provocateur is essential to his act of provocation. To provoke is to always appear questionable.

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