



Slavoj Žižek

# Event

Philosophy in Transit



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# Event

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## Event Slavoj Žižek

Probably the most famous living philosopher, Slavoj Žižek explores the concept of 'event', in the second in this new series of easily digestible philosophy

What is really happening when something happens?

In the second in a new series of accessible, commute-length books of original thought, Slavoj Žižek, one of the world's greatest living philosophers, examines the new and highly-contested concept of Event.

An Event can be an occurrence that shatters ordinary life, a radical political rupture, a transformation of reality, a religious belief, the rise of a new art form, or an intense experience such as falling in love. Taking us on a trip which stops at different definitions of Event, Žižek addresses fundamental questions such as: are all things connected? How much are we agents of our own fates? Which conditions must be met for us to perceive something as really existing? In a world that's constantly changing, is anything new really happening? Drawing on references from Plato to arthouse cinema, the Big Bang to Buddhism, *Event* is a journey into philosophy at its most exciting and elementary.

## Event Details

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# From Reader Review Event for online ebook

## David Sarkies says

### Defining the Event

1 December 2012

I'm not sure why, but for some reason I seem to want to compare Zizek with Noam Chomsky. I guess the reason is that both authors have brought me around to a new way of thinking that not many other authors have done so in the past. However I'm not sure if you can really compare the two, considering that Chomsky is a political theorist while Zizek is more of a psychoanalyst. Where Chomsky explores the reality behind the political sphere, Zizek seems to be more concerned with the reality behind the social sphere. Also, Zizek has the ability to make me laugh, whereas Chomsky is always so serious.

Anyway, I hadn't had the opportunity of reading any Zizek for a while, so while I was exploring a bookshop, with the intention of writing a Yelp review on the place (I like writing reviews on bookshops, though I try to resist the temptation since it means that I have to buy more books) I decided to grab a couple of his books that I could read on the train on the way to work. This happened to be one of them (though the one that I wanted unfortunately wasn't available – might have to get it online).

The thing with Zizek is that he can actually be quite profound in some of his writings, though he can also be really confusing. In fact it is quite odd because I will be reading a part of the book, scratching my head, trying to work out what he is trying to say (since he is using some really complex philosophical statements) when all of a sudden you have this intense revelation.

Event is, well, a book about the concept of the Event. It is sort of like trying to define an abstract noun. Actually, as I was reading this I came to realise how difficult it is to define an abstract noun. I guess that is why a bunch of Greeks sat in a house 2500 years ago arguing about what love was (and not actually reaching a conclusion). That is the thing with abstract nouns – they really don't have a definition: define love, define happiness, define anger – and do it in a hundred words or less. Okay, you probably could say that happiness is when I am happy or anger is when I am angry, but that is little more than circular reasoning and never actually answers anything. The same goes with an event, though having thought about it for most of the day I have decided upon a better definition than 'something happens'. I would define an event as being an action or a state that causes an irreversible change. For instance, a junkie robs a service station – that is an event because it is an action of the junkie that changes the state of the victim, and the junkie him (or her) self. After committing that robbery there is no way that the junkie can erase or remove that action – it has happened and it remains permanently in the mind of the victim and the junkie.

As with most of Zizek's books I ended up having to take quite a few notes as I was making my way through it, namely because he does have a habit of packing a huge amount of stuff into his writings. Hey, my review of *Living in the End Times* was so long that Goodreads couldn't contain it all in one post (and as of this writing I have yet to fix it up – when I get around to it I am going to try and condense it and move the full review onto my blog. Anyway I'll try not to do that with this post though, but rather I will discuss a couple of things that I got out of this book (and I am not going to refer to my notes on this review).

### *The Fantasy Reality*

Like it or not, we here in the western World effectively live in a fantasy. This fantasy isn't just shaped by all of the rubbish that pours out of our television set, but it also is created by our interactions over the internet.

For instance I found this awesome video called The Top Ten Ways Facebook Messes with our Head. That's the thing with Facebook – we create this idealised picture of ourself that isn't actually true. In fact what it does is portrays a fantasy image of ourselves. Look, don't get me wrong, I find Facebook to be a very useful tool, however in other ways I actually hate it. Sure, it is another form of social media, but the thing with Facebook is that you are generally limited only to people that you know. Also, your friends can actually have an influence upon what you post, meaning that you will only ever post things that your friends will like, if only for fear of them unfriending you.

However, the other thing about this world of ours is that we have dreams. Due to the fact that we are actually really, really, wealthy here means that we can plan and do things. We set our aspirations high, and in many cases we don't care about what our actions might do to others. We walk into a department store and purchase clothes, without realising, or even caring about, how these clothes actually got to the store. We let ourselves become entranced by the advertising industry, believing that if we were to spend money on something then our lives would be better. In fact the self-help industry is a multi-billion dollar industry that simply peddles one slogan – believe in yourself. As a matter of fact I'm starting to get sick of people repeatedly posting such slogans onto Facebook (though I have to say that I really don't like unfriending people – I've have only done that a couple of times, and that is namely because they were scams).

The thing about events is that they have this tendency of piercing the fantasy veil that we put around ourselves, such as 9/11 or the Paris Attacks. When something horrific happens, it destroys the fantasy that we have created around ourselves, and in response we give up our freedoms bit by bit so that we may begin to rebuild that fantasy. We want this world to be a nice and pleasant place in which to live, and we simply do not want bad things to happen to us, because if they do, it undermines that false sense of security that we have created around ourselves.

### *The Fall of Humanity*

I have to say that I don't necessarily agree with everything Zizek says, however he seems to have this very interesting understanding of the nature of Christianity. Mind you, I suspect that his interpretation is a much more post-modernist view than many Christians will be comfortable with, but in a number of cases I do believe he makes some valid points. However, the idea of creation being God wanting recognition doesn't work all that well with me because it is basically using human psychoanalysis to attempt to understand the actions of God – it doesn't work simply because God isn't human, God is God.

However, the interesting thing that Zizek points out is that there are two major events in the Bible: the Fall and the Redemption. The fall, in a way, is when that fantasy world comes crashing down and all we are left with is the reality of the situation in which we live. I believe that the idea of the fall in the Bible can give us a great understanding of how we exist within the fantasy realm that is Western Society. In some cases bad things happen, but we are able to reverse that situation to rebuild our fantasy – our house burns down and the insurance company pays for a new one and soon enough that event is a distant memory. By definition, the house burning down isn't actually an Event. An Event would be more like a divorce, or a car accident that leaves us permanently disabled. Our world has been drastically changed and there is no turning back. However while the car accident may be an Event, the divorce isn't necessarily the case – it is the result of a previous Event. It is the same way with the fall: the Event wasn't the expulsion from the garden, it was the result of the event when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit. What they had done set about a chain of events that create an irreversible state.

The other Event that Zizek discusses is the redemption, or Christ's death on the cross. This was a conscious action of God that doesn't necessarily undo the effect of the fall – that was irreversible – but rather sets up a new chain of events that changes the nature of God's relationship to us. Many Christian pastors have spoken

about how the concept of God being a judgemental God in the Old Testament and a loving God in the New Testament is wrong, but I'm not entirely sure if I agree with them any more. I'm sure we have all met somebody who simply hates mess, and hates it with a passion, to the point that they will automatically clean up anything that is out of place; or the person that will befriend somebody right up until the point they do something they don't like and they will never speak to them again. Well, that is sort of what God is like – he hates sin, and he hates rebellion, and whenever somebody rebels he wants to wipe that out. This is why the ancient cultures were always trying to pacify God with sacrifices because they knew that if they didn't then God would kill them. However, in comes Christ, God in the flesh. Christ is infinite as God is infinite, and by becoming the subject of all of God's wrath through his death on the Cross, he is able to be the focus – the magnet if you will – for all that anger, which is why in the New Testament you suddenly discover a loving God. Having dealt with his anger against humanity, he is now able to have a relationship with us, which he wasn't able to do before.

### **The Wound**

Zizek really makes me want to write an awful lot, but there is one last thing that I wish to talk about before I finish this off: the idea of the wound. Okay, many of us would love our wounds to be healed, and for the Events of our past to be undone, but the reality is that is not going to happen. For instance I simply cannot go back to my childhood and say to my friends, when we were in his computer shed, "let's create a Windows operating system" as opposed to "let's play adventure games" - the choices that I made, and the path that I took are set, and I have to live with them. In fact our wounds make us what we are. Sure, if my friends and I created a Windows operating system in our parent's back shed we might be billionaires, but I wouldn't be sitting here at 11:30 at night, writing about Zizek – I know what I would rather be doing (and no, it's not being a billionaire – I have no desire to have that much wealth).

Zizek loves to use modern pop culture in his examples, and I will do the same. In Star Trek V the crew of the Enterprise encounter this alien masquerading as God, and to show his power he goes and removes the crews' pain. However Kirk resists, saying that he would rather live with his pain because his pain is what makes him who he is – it defines him. Sure, the paraplegic probably would love to be able to walk like everybody else, but there is a thing about their condition that makes them who they are, and if they weren't in that situation, then maybe there would be things about them that would be different – maybe that influence that they had will not come about.

I mentioned at the beginning that Zizek was a psychoanalyst. It made me think about modern medicine and how we seem to want to treat mental disorders with drugs. It sort of reminds me of how the medieval doctors would treat diseases. They believed that disease was an imbalance of chemicals in the system, and would cure diseases by rebalancing the chemicals through methods such as bleeding. These days we consider it to be barbaric, but isn't that what we are doing with depression? To us depression is a chemical imbalance in the brain, so we deal with it by giving the brain happy drugs. Okay, I'm no expert on depression, but sometimes I feel that we simply resort to drugs to solve all of our problems in the same way that medieval doctors resorted to leeches. My realisation, at the end of this book, was maybe that the solution to our wounds is not to try to heal them, but to learn to live with them, and to rejoice in that which we have become because of them.

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### **Jonfaith says**

**If--accidentally--an event takes place, it creates the preceding chain which makes it appear inevitable.**

After being left dazed and winded by Carlo Ginzburg's gumshoe pilgrimage, I needed a return to simply thinking. Žižek provided that sufficiently. He divines the philosophical substrata for the evolutionary entity of the Event in a host of different realizations. All of his favorite influences are visited: Lacan, Hegel, Descartes and Marx. The text felt simply invigorating, as thinking was brought to the fore, apparently it exhales as well, brisk in the frozen air. We discussed Von Trier's Melancholia, Zero Dark-Thirty, Tree of Life and a great deal of Agatha Christie and G.K Chesterton.

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### **Rhys says**

Zizek at his incoherently coherent best.

Some repetition of stories, if you have read his other books, but I thought he captured the different-but-related facets of the Event. Zizek seems to be competing with Badiou over the term, but in many ways he puts more flesh onto the notion.

My favourite is: "As such, it is an event: at its most elementary, event is not something that occurs within the world, but is a change of the very frame through which we perceive the world and engage in it."

The trauma of the event. A trauma that shifts the space of the evental horizon. The trauma of subject of the event.

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### **George Pickering says**

Jargon-heavy, incoherent ramblings, without any discernible point in sight. Purposefully designed to baffle the reader with incomprehensible and irrelevant pseudo-intellectual posturing, and to make people feel vaguely clever for having read it, despite not having actually conveyed an understanding of any issue in particular. I would call it 200 pages of pure digression, but that would imply that it had a central point to digress from to begin with. This book is the intellectual equivalent of cotton-candy: sure, it feels like you're actually eating something while you're still labouring through it, but once you're done you realise that all you consumed was a spoonful of humorous fluff, and a whole lot of hot air. Avoid.

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### **Evan Wirth says**

I enjoyed the broad jumps from pop culture, to film analysis, to historical analysis, to psychoanalysis and philosophy. Zizek has a rare talent for weaving all these pieces together in an interesting way and making an interesting point from a piece of uninteresting pop culture.

This is the first of Zizek I've read, so I'm not sure if this is just his general style, but I also felt this broadness of topic led to a lack of coherency. It wasn't clear where the book was headed except in one direction after another. It helps even less when many of the philosophers Zizek uses to explain topics don't read very clearly themselves.

In the broadness of Zizek's definition of event, the defining of the possibility of some future event remains very subjective. Was the election of Donald Trump, or Brexit, or #metoo a sufficient event?

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## Oliver Ho says

I'm still making up my mind on Zizek, even though I've read a few of his books now. I like reading them, and I think I'm hoping that if I keep reading them, I'll start to understand them a little more. I like how his sentences and paragraphs read to me like thought puzzles, and it feels good to tease them apart.

On those rare occasions when I think I've done that, I feel like one of the Pakleds on Start Trek, saying, "We are smart." Conversely, when I can't figure out what Zizek is saying, which is most of the time, I tell myself, "We are not smart."

Anyway, I liked this book--I liked how he stuck to the idea of "event" and the various meanings, derivations and connotations he built around it. I highlighted a lot, if that means anything:

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An 'Event' can refer to a devastating natural disaster or to the latest celebrity scandal, the triumph of the people or a brutal political change, an intense experience of a work of art or an intimate decision.

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This is an event at its purest and most minimal: something shocking, out of joint, that appears to happen all of a sudden and interrupts the usual flow of things; something that emerges seemingly out of nowhere, without discernible causes, an appearance without solid being as its foundation.

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At first approach, an event is thus the effect that seems to exceed its causes – and the space of an event is that which opens up by the gap that separates an effect from its causes. Already with this approximate definition, we find ourselves at the very heart of philosophy, since causality is one of the basic problems philosophy deals with: are all things connected with causal links? Does everything that exists have to be grounded in sufficient reasons? Or are there things that somehow happen out of nowhere?

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is an event a change in the way reality appears to us, or is it a shattering transformation of reality itself?

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the basic feature of an event: the surprising emergence of something new which undermines every stable scheme.

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at its most elementary, event is not something that occurs within the world, but is a change of the very frame

through which we perceive the world and engage in it.

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the Fall itself creates that from which we Fall.

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the ultimate Event is the Fall itself, the loss of some primordial unity and harmony which never existed, which is just a retroactive illusion.

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This is how, even in an empty region of space, a particle emerges out of Nothing, ‘borrowing’ its energy from the future and paying for it (with its annihilation) before the system notices this borrowing.

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the ultimate Event is the Fall itself, i.e., things emerge when the equilibrium is destroyed, when something goes astray.

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Event as the moment of Enlightenment, of getting disentangled from the cobweb of illusory reality and entering the void of Nirvana.

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the ongoing shift in the predominant libidinal economy, in the course of which the relationship to a human Other is gradually replaced by the captivation of individuals by what Lacan baptized with the neologism les lathouses: consumerist object-gadgets which attract the libido with their promise to deliver excessive pleasure, but which effectively reproduce only the lack itself.

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should, instead, ‘let oneself go’, drift along, while retaining an inner distance and indifference towards the mad dance of accelerated progress, a distance based on the insight that all this social and technological upheaval is ultimately just a non-substantial proliferation of semblances which do not really concern the innermost kernel of our being.

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The ‘Western Buddhist’ meditative path is arguably the most efficient way for us to fully participate in capitalist dynamics while retaining the appearance of mental sanity.

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Buddhism provides a kind of subjective eventualization of scientific cognitivism: the Event which takes place

when we fully assume the results of brain sciences is the Event of Enlightenment, the attainment of Nirvana, which liberates us from the constraints of our Self as an autonomous substantial agent.

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Do our acts leave good traces? The Buddhist answer is: no, when we find ourselves in Nirvana, our acts leave no traces; we are at a distance – subtracted – from the Wheel of Desire. But a problem emerges here: if moderate good acts (the elementary morality with which the Buddhist practice begins) help us to get rid of our excessive attachments, is it then not the case that, when we reach Nirvana, we should be able to perform even brutal evil acts in such a way that they leave no traces, because we perform them at a distance? Would not precisely this ability be the sign of recognition of a true bodhisattva?

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is Nirvana, the goal of Buddhist meditation, just this shift in the subject's stance towards reality? Or is the goal the fundamental transformation of reality itself, so that all suffering disappears, so that all living beings are relieved of their suffering?

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‘undeserved’ happiness is still happiness.

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We cannot escape from the clutches of Fate, but we also cannot escape from the burden of responsibility into Fate.

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the true Event is the Event of subjectivity itself, illusory as it may be.

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There are three (and only three) key philosophers in the history of Western metaphysics: Plato, Descartes and Hegel. Each of them enacted a clear break with the past: nothing remained the same after they entered the scene.

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Does this exceptional status of Plato, Descartes and Hegel not provide the ultimate proof that, in each case, we are dealing with a philosophical Event in the sense of a traumatic intrusion of something New which remains unacceptable for the predominant view?

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Remember Plato's description of Socrates when he is seized by an Idea: it is as if Socrates is the victim of a hysterical seizure, standing frozen on the spot for hours, oblivious to reality around him – is Plato not describing here an event par excellence, a sudden traumatic encounter with another, supra-sensible

dimension which strikes us like lightning and shatters our entire life?

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love not a kind of permanent state of exception?

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the violence of falling in love, the violence nicely indicated by the Basque term for falling in love – maitemindu – which, literally translated, means ‘to be injured by love’.

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Ideas are not the hidden reality beneath appearances

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Ideas are nothing but the very form of their appearance, this form as such.

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What Plato was not ready (or, rather, able) to accept was the thoroughly virtual, immaterial (or, rather, insubstantial) evental status of Ideas: Ideas are something that momentarily appear on the surface of things.

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the Absolute is a pure Event, something that just occurs – it disappears before it even fully appears.

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What one should always bear in mind when talking about cogito, about the reduction of a human being to the abyssal point of thinking without any external object, is that we are not dealing here with silly and extreme logical games (‘imagine that you alone exist ...’), but with the description of a very precise existential experience of radical self-withdrawal, of suspending the existence of all reality around me to a vanishing illusion, which is well-known in psychoanalysis (as psychotic withdrawal) as well as in religious mysticism (under the name of so-called ‘night of the world’).

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A potentiality can be inserted into (or withdrawn from) past reality.

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The subject’s engagement in the symbolic order coils the linear flow of time in both directions: it involves precipitation as well as retroactivity (things retroactively become what they are; the identity of a thing only emerges when the thing is in delay with regard to itself) – in short, every act is by definition too early and, simultaneously, too late.

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The problem is, of course, that an act always occurs simultaneously too fast (the conditions are never fully ripe, one has to succumb to the urgency to intervene, there is never enough time to wait, enough time for strategic calculations, the act has to anticipate its certainty and risk that it will retroactively establish its own conditions) and too late (the very urgency of the act signals that we come too late, that we always should have already acted; every act is a reaction to circumstances which arose because we were too late to act). In short, there is no right moment to act – if we wait for the right moment, the act is reduced to an occurrence in the order of being.

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Spirit itself is thus radically de-substantialized: it is not a positive counter-force to nature, a different substance which gradually breaks and shines through the inert natural stuff; it is nothing but this process of freeing-itself-from.

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The true horror does not occur when we are abandoned by God, but when God comes too close to us.

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the fiasco of God is still the fiasco of God.

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after the act of creation is accomplished, God loses even the right to intervene in how people interpret his law.

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The first commandment says: ‘You shall have no other gods before me.’ What does the ambiguous ‘before me’ refer to? Most translators agree that it means ‘before my face, in front of me, when I see you’ – which subtly implies that the jealous god will nonetheless turn a blind eye to what we are doing secretly, out of (his) sight.

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On 21 December 2012, it reached the magic number of one billion views – and, since 21 December was the day when those who took seriously the predictions of the Mayan calendar were expecting the end of the world, one could say that the Ancient Mayans were right: the fact is that the ‘Gangnam Style’ video effectively is the sign of the collapse of civilization.

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Many listeners find the song disgustingly attractive, i.e., they ‘love to hate it’, or, rather, they enjoy the very fact of finding it disgusting so they repeatedly play it to prolong their disgust. Such an ecstatic surrender to obscene jouissance in all its stupidity entangles the subject into what Lacan, following Freud, calls ‘drive’; perhaps its paradigmatic expressions are the repulsive private rituals (sniffing one’s own sweat, sticking one’s finger into one’s nose, etc.) that bring intense satisfaction without our being aware of it – or, insofar as we are aware of it, without our being able to do anything to prevent it.

This drive is that which is ‘in the subject more than itself’: although the subject cannot ever subjectivize it, assume it as its own by way of saying ‘It is I who want to do this’, it nonetheless operates in its very kernel.

With love it is the same as with religious belief: I do not love you because I find your positive features attractive, but, on the contrary, I find your positive features attractive because I love you and therefore observe you with a loving gaze.

when you fall in love, you don’t just know what you need/want and look for the one who has it – the ‘miracle’ of love is that you learn what you need only when you find it.

Today, it is as if the knot of three levels which characterized traditional sexuality (reproduction, sexual pleasure, love) is gradually dissolving: reproduction is left to biogenetic procedures which are making sexual intercourse redundant; sex itself is turned into recreational fun; while love is reduced to the domain of ‘emotional fulfilment’.

A speech act thus becomes a symbolic Event if and when its occurrence restructures the entire field: although there is no new content, everything is somehow thoroughly different.

This, perhaps, is the most succinct definition of what an authentic act is: in our ordinary activity, we effectively just follow the (virtual-fantasmatic) co-ordinates of our identity, while an act proper is the paradox of an actual move which (retroactively) changes the very virtual, ‘transcendental’ co-ordinates of its agent’s being – or, in Freudian terms, which does not only change the actuality of our world, but also ‘moves its underground’.

Falling in love is a contingent encounter, but, once it occurs, it appears as necessary, as something towards which my entire life was moving.

the true triumph is not the victory over the enemy, it occurs when the enemy itself starts to use your language, so that your ideas form the foundation of the entire field.

The Fall (into love) never happens at a certain moment, it has always-already happened.

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The true statement of hatred is not ‘Now I realize how much I hate you!’ but ‘Now I know I have always hated you!’ Only this second statement undoes the past itself.

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In other words, the truly New emerges through narrative, the apparently purely reproductive retelling of what happened – it is this retelling that opens up the space (the possibility) of acting in a new way. Furious about his treatment, a worker participates in a wildcat strike, say; however, it is only when, in the aftermath of his action, he counts/retells it as an act of class struggle that the worker subjectively transforms himself into the revolutionary subject, and, on the basis of this transformation, he can go on acting as a true revolutionary.

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So it's not just that the symbolic order is all of a sudden fully here – there was nothing, and a moment later it is all here – but there is nothing and then, all of a sudden, it is as if the symbolic order was always-already here, as if there had never been a time without it.

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In an Event, things not only change: what changes is the very parameter by which we measure the facts of change, i.e., a turning point changes the entire field within which facts appear.

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In capitalism, where things have to change all the time to remain the same, the true Event would have been to transform the very principle of change.

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## **Tijmen Lansdaal says**

[a full-fledged review in Dutch this time - didn't really survive its feedback so I guess it's a bad review, but still..]

In de Westerkerk mocht eenieder tijdens de presentatie van het nieuwe boek van Slavoj Žižek dromen over de enige politieke gebeurtenis die authentiek, en tevens typisch communistisch, genoemd mag worden: de omverwerping van het kapitalisme. Žižek gaf er een kritische uiteenzetting vanuit de preekstoel, die door Jan Jaap van der Wal zowel slecht ingeleid als gemodereerd werd. Het was een ongewoon schouwspel waar Žižek graag aan mee deed om wat revolutionaire gedachten te kunnen uitwisselen met de toehoorders, zijn leftist friends. De inhoud van Event valt echter, net als diens presentatie, wat tegen: lezers zullen zeer geduldig de interessante opmerkingen moeten destilleren uit een overdaad aan fraai gewauwel.

Desalniettemin heeft Žižek een originele ingang in de communistische discussie vanwege de volledig metafysische achtergrond van zijn betoog over het sleutelwoord 'gebeuren': nadat Martin Heidegger het begrip Ereignis ('het gebeuren') introduceerde om het eigenlijke denken van de metafysische traditie te

bezorgen, maakten Franse filosofen zoals Deleuze en Badiou dit begrip op eigenzinnige wijze relevant voor metafysische discussies. Žižeks argumentatie poogt aan te tonen dat de traditie van filosofie tegenwoordig schreeuwt om 'het zuivere gebeuren'. Binnen het marxistische discours is deze beoogde navolging van relevante denkwijzen een opmerkelijke omkering van interpretaties van ideologie.

De eerste vaststelling in het boek is dat aan alle gebeurtenissen te merken is dat we nog steeds niet begrijpen wat het betekent te gebeuren. Het eerste hoofdstuk betoogt daarom dat een ontdekking van juist ondoorgrondelijke, fantasmatische nieuwe werelden een dialectische inmenging in de werkelijkheid is. Vervolgens betoogt Žižek dat het emancipatoir aspect van dit type gebeuren een overgave is aan de desintegratie van een samenhang van het werkelijke. De ideologie die hierop hedendaags het hardst probeert te reageren is het boeddhisme: diens lege subjectivisme slaagt erin haar autonomie af te leggen om het 'lijden' onder het fantasme te bestrijden - en zonder succes. Immers, onthechting van de wereld blijft geconfronteerd met diezelfde wereld. Boeddhisme is paradigmatisch voor het onafwendbare subjectieve gebeuren: juist de illusoire aflegging is een dialectische inmenging.

De filosofen hebben dit subjectieve gebeuren tot in haar uiterste uitgewerkt: in Plato leest men de bezetenheid die het fantasmatische en werkelijke vermenigt, in Descartes de waanzin van het lege subject en in Hegel de noodzakelijke zelfsublimatie. Zo kan men in lijn met de psychoanalyse slechts één diagnose stellen: men moet het onmogelijke ondernemen en het lege a priori tegen de tijdsstroom in forceren, opdat het immer bevreemdende handelen werkelijk zin heeft. Een juist gebruik van de pseudo-substantiële, subjectieve leegheid maakt pas echt een communale ruimte mogelijk, alhoewel de ideologieën van de onoverkomelijkheid van deze leegheid (o.a. degradatie van het subject naar een rader in de machine) het gebeuren uiteraard glashard zullen ontkennen.

Het is zijn tegendraadsheid binnen de eigen traditie en zijn gepassioneerde en getrouwe betrokkenheid bij bekende filosofische stromingen die hem tot een interessant denker maken. Echter, zijn metafysische bouwwerk wankelt wat wanneer het de degens kruist met het heideggeriaanse denken, een domein waar Žižek als expert wordt beschouwd vanwege (onder andere) zijn uitgebreide kritieken. Nergens geeft Žižek rekenschap van de performatieve kracht van zijn eigen metafysische spreuken. Een reflexieve act ten opzichte van zijn talige exposé omrent 'het gebeuren' is wat men zou mogen verwachten van een boek dat haar onderwerp dankt aan Heideggers begrip Ereignis. Met een dergelijke verkenning van zijn eigen gedachtegang in haar wereldlijke verschijning had hij 'de lege huls van het subject' als analogie wellicht niet geponeerd.

Dergelijke eigenaardigheden kan men hem wel vergeven: Žižek is consistent genoeg, en elke filosoof lijkt wel een ingewikkelde relatie te hebben tot de intellectuele erfenis die zijn denken bepaalt. Daarmee onderscheidt Žižek zich niet. Vooral moet ook de complexiteit van resulterende posities binnen filosofische discussies geen nieuws zijn, en al helemaal niet voor geoefende filosofen als Hans Achterhuis. In zijn recensie durfde de emeritus hoogleraar (van de Universiteit Twente) het boek niet uit te leggen, alhoewel dit boek goed te volgen is voor eenieder met enige vertrouwdheid met een marxistisch dan wel hegeliaans discours (bijvoorbeeld: de gemiddelde filosofiestudent). Voor de leek is Event hoogstwaarschijnlijk te moeilijk. Rutger Bregman van de Correspondent behoort tot de tweede categorie: zijn slappe besprekking van het boek zegt meer over de stand van expertise binnen de journalistiek dan over de moeilijkheidsgraad van het boek.

Het waarlijk frustrerende is dat de opmerkelijke werken van Žižek doortrokken zijn met talloze concessies aan mogelijke lezers. Als showfilosoof wordt de kern van zijn betoog ommuurt met grapjes, verhaaltjes en filmverwijzingen. Elk opgeschreven ter illustratie, zonder ontwarbare functie voor zijn betoog. Hij draait hier zo ver in door dat de metafysische argumentatie tweede viool begint te spelen. De geveinsde noodzaak

van het 'goedkope vermaak' zouden academici als Hans Achterhuis aan moeten vechten, maar de schrijftruuks worden nu verwelkomd met gedachtegangen die vergelijkbaar zijn met het boerse 'baat het niet, dan schaadt het niet'. Als een filosofie als deze geen blijk kan geven van enige standaard voor omgang met haar volgers, dan kan men zich afvragen wat voor 'authentieke' communale ruimte het voorstelt.

Dat men Žižek de vrijheid tot Spielerei gunt bewijst dat er een totaal gebrek heerst aan enige vorm van gevoelde urgentie van academische geschriften binnen het publieke discours. Rutger Bregman en vele anderen met hem willen niet meer de aandacht opbrengen die nodig is om het belang van ingewikkelde filosofische beschouwingen uit te zoeken. Žižek dankt zijn faam aan oppervlakkige strategieën om mensen alsnog deelgenoot te maken van een retro-filosofie, die ondanks de nodige complexiteit vooral niet al te veel mag vervelen. De uiteenzetting wordt gemakzuchtig in stapjes ingedeeld met een onzinnige reisanalogie en aan het eind dienen we allemaal een bijzonder inzicht in 'het gebeuren' verworven te hebben. Voor de serieuze filosofiestudent is zijn nieuwe boek daarom weinig waardevol: hij lijkt er meer op een slim, oud opaatje dat zijn kleinkinderen vermaakt met grapjes en hersenkronkels dan op een academicus die daadwerkelijk te denken geeft.

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## Randal Samstag says

I picked up Slavoj Zizek's new book, *Event*, next to the cash register in the gift shop at the Tate Britain. Philosophy is an impulse buy at the Tate Britain. In this book Zizek takes seriously the theme of the Penguin book series "Philosophy in Transit" in which this is the second volume. His entry in the series is structured as a sequence of stops on a commuter rail line, as if a rapid reader could gobble up each chapter between stops. This may be possible for Zizek, the self-described "manic excessive," but the rest of us shouldn't despair at not finishing the book by the time we get to Central London. This book worked very well as a travel book for me, though, fitting into a side pocket of my jacket.

Zizek dashes off the key concept of the book between sentences headed elsewhere: " . . . an event is thus the effect that seems to exceed its causes - and the space of an event is that which opens up by the gap that separates an effect from its cause." This is a very good place to start. Hume is nowhere mentioned in the book, nor is Sextus Empiricus, but this definition is worthy of the sceptical tradition of these two. Yes, the Event as gap is a very good place to start. This idea may even go further than the author thinks.

His "stops" are:

- 1) Framing
- 2) Felix Culpa
- 3) Buddhism Naturalized
- 4) Three Events of Philosophy (Plato, Descartes, and Hegel)
- 5) The Three Events of Psychoanalysis (the real, the symbolic, and the imaginary)
- 6) The Undoing of an Event, and
- 7) Final Destination: "Nota Bene!"

I will present a couple of thoughts about two of these. First, on Buddhism: Zizek is famous for his debunking of Buddhism. In general he follows Nietzsche's well-worn path in this. He combines the profane with the sacred: he hurtles along from the "Stamina Training Unit" (You will have to read it for yourself. I was howling . . .) to finally arrive at his Buddhism critique; or what he thinks is his Buddhism critique, for in "Buddhism" he initially lumps all sorts of New Age philosophies that have nothing to do with Reverend Gotama's stories from the Pali Canon.

He shows some familiarity with the First Discourse, which contains the core of Gotama's ethical theory, but starts his critique with the Second Discourse, on the anatta doctrine. He quite rightly, to my mind, defends free will against deterministic fantasies from both Buddhism and philosophers allied with the "cognitive science" strain of contemporary philosophy. The Churchlands are specifically named, who he says "claim that we are not biologically wired to our everyday self-understanding as free autonomous Selves." Zizek, of course, is a "self" guy, as a follower of Freud and Lacan. He accuses the no-self crowd, including both the naturalized science philosophers and the Buddhists, of "implicit naivety."

Zizek addresses the First Discourse when he says that Buddhism is concerned with solving the problem of suffering, ". . . so its first axiom is: we don't want to suffer. (For a Freudian, this already is problematic and far from self-evident (sic) – not only on account of some obscure masochism, but on account of the deep satisfaction brought about by passionate attachment.)" He accuses Buddhism of inconsistency: "But a problem arises here: if moderate good acts (the elementary morality with which Buddhist practice begins) help us to get rid of our excessive attachments, is it not the case that, when we reach Nirvana, we should be able to perform even brutal evil acts in such a way that leave no traces, because we perform them at a distance?" Well, no, actually this seems to be a non-sequitur, at least to this reader. There is no reason to think that an arhat who had achieved Nirvana would forget the First Discourse once he got there.

But it also seems to me that Zizek has come closer to a puzzling truth of Reverend Gotama's doctrine than he realizes. For isn't the Event, as he defines it as the gap between cause and effect, the exact spot of Gotama's Nirvana? If not Gotama's Nirvana, then surely Dogen's Nirvana! For isn't this the place of being "unconditioned?" Zizek's Event is intended, it seems, in a Hegelian sense: it is a moment in time which changes the course of future events. Dogen's Event is a stop in time, an eternal moment, but an Event all the same, by Zizek's original definition.

Another stop in Zizek's commute throws off a hint into his answer to a question around which he often hovers, but doesn't always state clearly: Why did the Communist project of the Twentieth Century fail? He says, "The Chinese Cultural Revolution serves as a lesson here: destroying old monuments proved not to be a true negation of the past. Rather it was an impotent passage a l'acte, an 'acting out' which bore witness to the failure to get rid of the past." The reason the Communist regimes of the Twentieth Century failed to achieve communism is because they recapitulated structures of dominance from the previous bourgeois and even feudal periods of history. Not a bad explanation.

Or was it because they never had a good idea of the goal to begin with? Zizek actually states pretty well what that goal should have been: "Imagine a society which fully integrated into its ethical substance the great modern axioms of freedom, equality, the duty of society to provide for education and basic healthcare of all its members, and which rendered racism or sexism simply unacceptable and ridiculous – there is no need even to argue against, say racism, since anyone who openly advocates racism is immediately perceived as a

weird eccentric who cannot be taken seriously.” This flushes out Marx’s “from each according to their abilities and to each according to their needs” with some basic safeguards to human dignity. This seems like a pretty good place to end up.

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### **Krystina says**

I wish the “pre-Eventual situation” was that Zizek had thought up a point to this text before writing it. He goes off on SO MANY tangents that have little to do with ‘Event as concept’. I’ve never seen Zizek speak, but his voice really bothered me as that of a cranky old man. He dehumanizes those with autism at one point, complains about political correctness in another. He treats (and essentially dismisses) racism as if it’s a behavioral issue rather than a structural one. He only brings up single conclusions— his conclusions — to different topics and he treats them like facts. He never mentions female perspectives and seems to live in a woman-less world, or a world where women only exist as objects to bear the grunt of thrusting penises. I couldn’t have been more annoyed or frustrated with this book.

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### **Christopher Taylor says**

Slavoj Žižek has an associative rather than an analytical mind. He is alert to similarities and resonances but is less concerned about logical consistency or narrative coherence. As a result, this book is filled with interesting ideas and images that cluster but don’t quite connect. One gets the impression that the text was written in a hurry with thoughts tumbling in from all directions. Žižek gave everything a quick dusting and straightening, then left the text to fend for itself (or for the reader to fend for it on Žižek’s behalf). In other words, Žižek has done only part of the job. This is unfortunate because there can be no doubt Žižek has a wealthy mind; however, his writing, instead of being rich, is cluttered.

The theme of the book is the “Event” which is defined early on as “the effect that seems to exceed its cause”. So far, so good. The word is capitalized because it stands for something bigger than expected. There is a gap between what we thought we knew – the causes – and what we now know – the effect. This gap alerts us to the fact that something significant has occurred – the Event.

Our understanding of the Event is enhanced when Žižek suggests that “the ultimate Event is the [Biblical] Fall itself, the loss of some primordial unity and harmony which never existed, which is just a retroactive illusion”. At first glance this statement is puzzling. How can an Event consist of the loss of something that did not exist? The answer is – it can’t. The statement is, in a way, a teaser.

Žižek explains that the Fall – and presumably any other Event – reveals retrospectively the character of the pre-Event conditions. It sheds light on what went before but in a special way since the revealed characteristics were not truly knowable until after the Event. In a sense, the Event creates that preceding reality. In the case of the Fall, the preceding reality is a mythical situation of “primordial unity and harmony”. In non-mythical cases, something important about the pre-existing temporal reality is revealed.

The idea here is contorted but recognizable. An Event has an unexpected character – out of proportion to its apparent causes – while, at the same time, it demonstrates retrospectively that the conditions prior to the Event were other than they seemed to be at the time – or, at least, they have become so as a consequence of the Event. This revision of the pre-Event conditions does not explain the Event but it does illuminate both

time periods. The Event sends ripples both forwards and backwards.

One example, cited by Žižek, will suffice. Any truly new work of art will change how preceding works of art are seen. The Event of Kafka's writing changes our understanding of earlier writing while also affecting writing which takes place after Kafka. This idea is not new to Žižek – he cites T.S. Eliot and Borges in support – but a key point in the present context is that this Janus-faced aspect of an Event is not restricted to art. It can be generalized to other occurrences which may qualify as Events: falling in love, the establishment of a new religion, the introduction of a new philosophical concept, a political revolution.

The special nature of these kinds of occurrences on a personal or social level is easy to accept. And the double-sided temporal effect is also understandable. The difficulty is that in order to get this far, Žižek forces us to machete our way through a jungle of references to Lacan, Rumsfeld, Hegel, Heidegger, Hawking, Hitchcock, Plato and Descartes – Chesterton, Kierkegaard, Augustine, Wagner, Malebranche, Marx, Lenin, Habermas – and many others. Not to mention Buddhism.

Life shouldn't be that hard.

And then it gets worse. Just when you believe you are catching on to this Event thing, Žižek throws in a zinger that puts it all at risk. Marriage – true love consecrated for eternity – is an undoubted Event. Except when it isn't. If, perchance, your marriage hits the rocks and you get divorced then, according to Žižek, your marriage was never a marriage in the first place. It wasn't true love consecrated for eternity since it didn't last for eternity. And, hence, it could never actually have been an Event.

This suggestion has unpleasant consequences.

Presumably, this analysis applies to all other Events which are subject to the ravages of Time – meaning (potentially) all of them. So, while Žižek doesn't say this, it follows that no Event can be known definitively to be an Event until the universe comes to an end. Prior to that point it can only be viewed as a contingent (and possibly erasable) Event. And after that point – after the end of the universe – who will know the final answer? Or care?

It is difficult to accept this as a helpful or even meaningful perspective. Divorce or any other subsequent occurrence may have consequences for how an Event is viewed but it cannot dissolve that Event and restore the pre-Event conditions. That is, at best, wishful thinking and, at worst, childish nonsense. A four year old might huff and say that the Event never-ever counted but an adult knows better. Contrary to Žižek's suggestion the outcome of this sequence is two Events, not none.

This retroactive cancellation opportunity is but one example of the non-sequiturs and curious-but-irrelevant asides that are scattered through the pages of this book. As noted above, Žižek is an associative rather than an analytical thinker. He casts his net wide, captures many shiny things, but his ideas often do not connect. This may be intentional on his part. It is conceivable that he is purposely reserving to himself the right to slip through the holes in his argument. But that is nothing to applaud.

Clarity is a virtue. A false simplicity in the guise of clarity is not. Žižek provides us with neither. He has a mind that gathers ideas like burrs. To the extent that he wishes to communicate effectively, it would be better if he could sort through what he has collected and exercise some analytical judgment before releasing a text to the public.

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## **Thomas Semchuk says**

A good quick read, a possible good start to reading Zizek?

I enjoyed his critiques on art, however I had to do further readings when he talked about Hegel (which, really, isn't such a bad thing).

I think it's important to mention that it was also a fun read, which is rare when reading philosophy.

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## **Mark O'Neill says**

Žižek's triumph here is not of sustained argument. This is philosophy as hyperactive readings, outré jokes and dizzying film criticism, united by the central conceit of Event. Equally at home discussing finer points of Hegel and quoting from *Wrath of the Titans*, Žižek is genuinely engaged with culture in a way not often associated with academics.

To name a few of the scattered thoughts, we get love as its own retroactive creator, *The Crying Game* revealing heterosexual desire as homosexual, Gangnam Style as sign of cultural end-times, the EU as sadist superego, *Zero Dark Thirty* as deceitful normaliser of torture, Hollywood as obsessed with using defeat of an alien 'Thing' to produce a couple, politically correct language as the obverse of politicians' sinister euphemisms, Buddhism as capitalist religion, and a Holocaust haiku partaking of the 'Absolute'.

The proliferation of ideas in a short space is worth the journey, regardless of whether you agree with them; they're thrown out with such abandon as to most usefully be springboards to your own reflection.

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## **Ibrahim Abdulla says**

I've listened to, literally, hundreds of hours of Zizek's talks and lectures in the last four years or so, so I'm already familiar with a lot of the ideas, concepts, and even the examples themselves in this book.

Nonetheless, to put his thoughts on many fields under a unifying concept, that is, to look at the big bang, the notion of "self" in philosophy, love, political protests etc in the lens of "Event", is in itself insightful enough, at least for me.

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## **Arif Abdurahman says**

Saya telah mendengarkan berbagai ceramah Zizek di Youtube, jadi saya sudah terbiasa dengan banyak gagasan, konsep, lelucon dan bahkan contoh yang ditawarkan dalam buku ini. Seperti biasa, Zizek selalu ngebacot soal filsafat, psikoanalisa, sejarah, komunisme, kajian pop culture, dan sebagainya, dan sebagainya. Yang paling menarik adalah pembahasannya soal etika zen dan budhisme dalam melanggengkan kapitalisme, menyebut kalau Max Weber masih hidup pasti bakal nulis The Taoist Ethic and the Spirit of

Global Capitalism.

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### **Nathan "N.R." Gaddis says**

This would appear to be another in the series short-and-probably-decent-entry-level-Zizek=book. The chapter "The Three Events of Philosophy" (ie, Plato, Descartes, Hegel) can be read online right about here :: <http://zizekstudies.org/index.php/ijz...>

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