

Introduction to Cultural Studies
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Lecture - 57
Slavoj Zizek - Welcome to the Desert of the Real - II

Hi and welcome to this NPTEL course entitled Introduction to Cultural Studies. We are looking at the final text for this course, which is Slavoj Zizek's *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*. So we saw in the opening lecture for this particular text, we saw how Zizek draws on a range of popular films, popular cinema in terms of looking at how those can be connected discursively as well as stylistically. There are some of the real events in a political aspect.

Now we will just move on with that kind of analysis, this is page 14 which should be on the screen. Why it makes reference to the Hitchcock film called the birds.

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rial decay. Is not the endlessly repeated shot of the plane approaching and hitting the second WTC tower the real-life version of the famous scene from Hitchcock's *Birds*, superbly analysed by Raymond Bellour, in which Melanie approaches the Bodega Bay pier after crossing the bay in a little boat? When, as she approaches the wharf, she waves to her (future) lover, a single bird (first perceived as an indistinguishable dark blot)

were interviewed on CNN, most of them gave the expected performance: tears, prayers . . . all except one who, without a tear, said that she does not pray for her dead husband, because she knows that prayer will not bring him back. Asked if she dreams of revenge, she calmly said that that would be a true betrayal of her husband: had he survived, he would have insisted that the worst thing to do is to succumb to the urge to retaliate . . . there is no need to add that this clip was shown only once, then disappeared from the repetitions of the same interviews.

Which is one of the best films Hitchcock ever made and Zizek is a big fan of Hitchcock because he does often look on and reading on Hitchcock, those who were interested and Zizek would find out and you know dig up some of his readings of Hitchcock using the comp very, very fresh and original readings. Now in this particular section, he talks about how the scene in Hitchcock's *Birds* when the first bird appears and hits the heroine of the film.

As you know the first bird appears as a blot from the sky and becomes and becomes a bird and hits heroine as she is approaching in a boat to her lover's house. How that becomes anticipation in a certain sense of you know, the 9/11 the footage 9/11 shot of all the planes coming and turning into big planes from the little dots in the sky and then causing this catastrophe in the Western, white western space and we saw an appearance that showed how the way in which the grammar in which the catastrophe was conveyed was quite spectacular.

I am quite hyper real and it was like decaffeinated coffee. It took away the real catastrophic content. There is no, there are no dead bodies. There are no mangled bodies, no mangled flesh what we see instead is a hyper real spectacle of a massive mansion you know destroyed, decimated by a couple of planes and the way it is disseminated in the screen; it just seems to be very postmodern film.

So this is a reference to the Hitchcock film Bird, you know The Birds rather that Zizek makes. It is not the endlessly repeated shot of the plane approaching and hitting the second World Trade Centre tower of the real-life version or the famous scene from Hitchcock's Birds superbly analyzed by Raymond Bellour in which Melanie appears, Melanie heroine approaches of the Bodega Bay pier after crossing the bay in a little boat.

So Zizek is a way trying on Raymond Bellour's analysis of the scene and Birds where the heroine Melanie, she gets on aboard and moves toward see the lovers house and then she is attacked by a bird and at that particular scene, in which she is attacked by a bird seems to be an anticipation of the you know the massive spectacular scene in 9/11 way and the twin towers were attacked by a couple of planes.

When as she approaches the wharf, she waves to her future lover a single bird first perceived to be as an undistinguished talk plot you know and they, and they appear and she is attacked by the bird, okay. Now it unexpectedly enters the frame from the above right and hits her on the head.

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unexpectedly enters the frame from above right, and hits her on the head.⁹ Was not the plane which hit the WTC tower literally the ultimate Hitchcockian blot, the anamorphic stain which denaturalized the idyllic well-known New York landscape?

The Wachowski brothers' hit *Matrix* (1999) brought this logic to its climax: the material reality we all experience and see around us is a virtual one, generated and co-ordinated by a gigantic mega-computer to which we are all attached; when the hero (played by Keanu Reeves) awakens into 'real reality', he sees a desolate landscape littered with burnt-out ruins – what remains of Chicago after a global war. The resistance leader, Morpheus, utters the ironic greeting: 'Welcome to the desert of the real.' Was it not something of a similar order that took place in New York on September 11? Its citizens were introduced to the 'desert of the real' – for us, corrupted by Hollywood, the

Was not the plane which hit the WTC Tower literally the ultimate Hitchcockian plot. The animal fixed chain which denaturalized the idyllic well-known New York landscape right. So the plane which had the World Trade Center may be read in a similar kind of structural mechanism as a bitumen block, which became a big bird which attacked the World Trade Center and again if you look if you do a comparative analysis but in Hitchcock's birds and the World Trade Center even refine what is happening is a dedomestication of reality.

So both birds and planes are domestic entities, the domestic elements. What happens in Hitchcock's birds that suddenly the domestic entities have become dedomesticated. They become denaturalized, they become wild. So a similar kind of denaturalization happens in a World Trade Center event 9/11, event where a couple of planes which are powerfully domestic and naturalized entities that become suddenly denaturalized and suddenly become uncanny and the uncanny violence which is unleashed on the Twin Towers and become a spectacle of horror.

Now Zizek moves on to reference to the film *Matrix* which is directed by the Wachowskis brothers and the trilogy, but it talks about the first film. So Wachowskis brothers hit *Matrix* in 1999 brought this logic to his climax. The material reality we all experience and see around us is a virtual one, generated by uncoordinated by a gigantic mega computer to which we are all attached.

When the hero played by Keanu Reeves awakens to real reality he sees a deserted landscape, littered with burnt and ruins, what remains to Chicago after a global war. So in the real reality and the virtual reality, they constantly blend in the film Matrix and often becomes a very postmodern experience of reality as hyper realities, a reality which is sucked out of his real content and then when he wakes up to real reality, he finds this a completely abandoned landscape of ruins, a burnt-out ruins which is what as remains of Chicago after a global war.

The resistance leader maffias utters the ironic greet him, welcome to the desert of the real, you know, that is obviously the title of Zizek's book, but the point that you know he is making over here is when he wakes up to reality, real reality, it is like a desert. It is an abandoned landscape, a liquidated landscape and a liquidation of the landscape becomes very important part of the reality and that is the real reality. So hence is described as a desert.

So welcome to the desert of the real becomes a very ironic greeting to the hero who wakes up to that. It was not something of a similar order that took place on New York on September 11 as citizens were introduced to a desert of the real for us corrupted by Hollywood the landscape and the shots of the collapsing towers could not, but be reminiscent or the most breathtaking scenes on big catastrophic productions.

So this is what Zizek talks about from the very inception of this book and that is the real horror of the real collapse of the Twin Towers in 9/11, they were reminiscent in a very important way and very disturbing way of our consumption of catastrophic cinema of our consumption of catastrophic movies, which have a similar kind of spectacle and again where we are seeing, we are experiencing is a blending of reality and virtuality.

When you are watching a film, we are talking about a production set, we are talking about an artificial set, but when we talk 9/11, these are real buildings which were collapsing and yet the way the grammar or consumption that we have may know it blends the reality and virtuality in a very disturbing kind of way, okay.

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denaturalized the idyllic well-known New York landscape?

The Wachowski brothers' hit *Matrix* (1999) brought this logic to its climax: the material reality we all experience and see around us is a virtual one, generated and co-ordinated by a gigantic mega-computer to which we are all attached; when the hero (played by Keanu Reeves) awakens into 'real reality', he sees a desolate landscape littered with burnt-out ruins – what remains of Chicago after a global war. The resistance leader, Morpheus, utters the ironic greeting: 'Welcome to the desert of the real.' Was it not something of a similar order that took place in New York on September 11? Its citizens were introduced to the 'desert of the real' – for us, corrupted by Hollywood, the landscape and the shots of the collapsing towers could not but be reminiscent of the most breathtaking scenes in big catastrophe productions.

When we hear how the attacks were totally unexpected, shock, how the unimaginable impossible happened, we should recall the other defining catastrophe from the beginning of the 20th century. The sinking of the Titanic. So again you know entire 9/11 attack may be seen as an insensation of the impossible. There insensation of the unimaginable happening and something which is preceded.

And in the Titanic situation, the sinking of Titanic was an unimaginable occurrence and that was that was the beginning the 20th century. So Zizek is giving a sequence of Western horrors of Western catastrophic sinking of Titanic and then followed by 9/11. The sinking of the Titanic, this also was a shock but a space for it had already been prepared in it logical fantasizing since the Titanic was a symbol of the might of 19th century industrial civilization.

There is not the same hold also for those attacks. These attacks not only were the media bombarding us all the time, but talk about a terrorist attack, terrorist threat. This threat was also obviously libidinally invested. Just remember the series of movies from *Escape from New York* to *Independence Day*. That is the rationale of the often mentioned Association of the attacks with Hollywood disaster movies.

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Hollywood disaster movies: the unthinkable which happened was the object of fantasy, so that, in a way, America got what it fantasized about, and that was the biggest surprise. The ultimate twist in this link between Hollywood and the 'war against terrorism' occurred when the Pentagon decided to solicit the help of Hollywood: at the beginning of October 2001, the press reported that a group of Hollywood scenarists and directors, specialists in catastrophe movies, had been established at the instigation of the Pentagon, with the aim of imagining possible scenarios for terrorist attacks and how to fight them. And this interaction seemed to be ongoing: at the beginning of November 2001, there was a series of meetings between White House advisers and senior Hollywood executives with the aim of co-ordinating the war effort and establishing how Hollywood could help in the

The unthinkable which happened was the object of fantasy. So that in a way America got it fantasized about that was a bigger surprise. So this is a very provocative statement as you can understand by now and what Zizek is saying here is before the 9/11 happened, there was a series of disaster movies, which we often had similar kind of content, the collapse of America, invasion of America, attack of America.

So from Independence Day to you know all kinds of cinema, you know Escape from New York, Independence Day, it is all these movies were basically you know reliant on that cover content America has been attacked by outsiders and the outsiders could be alien, the outsiders could be for a nation, etc., but in a way America was fantastically prepared for 9/11 and I used what fantastically prepared and quite literally in terms of a fantasy that was consuming libidinally in movie screen.

It was prepared visually for the horror, which really happened. So it was unthinkable, 9/11 was unthinkable because that was the object of fantasy right. An object of fantasy that turned true and you know therein lies the unimaginable quality, therein lies the impossible quality of 9/11. It was impossible to imagine because that was fantasized and what was fantasized was becoming real and therein lay the horror. It was a horror of the fantastic subline in a way.

So the ultimate twist and this link between Hollywood and the war against terrorism occurred when the Pentagon decided to solicit the help of Hollywood at the beginning of October 2001. The Press reported that a group of Hollywood scenarists and director's specialism catastrophic movies had been established at the instigation of the Pentagon with the aim of imagining impossible, imagining possible scenarios for terrorist attacks and how to fight them.

So this becomes called literally a blending of reality and virtuality and we can see pentagon, which is a real office a real political office, military office, military intelligence office in the USA, it actually solicits helps from Hollywood directors and Hollywood cinematographers and Hollywood cameraman in terms of advising them to be better prepared against possible attacks.

So Hollywood directors, Hollywood cameraman, all the crew now team up with Pentagon officials in terms of preparing America more judiciously, more robustly, more you know muscularly against the foreign attacks in future. So that becomes quite literally a blending of the reality and virtuality situation that we have been talking about for a while now okay and this interaction seemed to be ongoing.

At the beginning of November 2001, there was a series of meetings between White House advisers and senior Hollywood executors with the aim of coordinating the war effort and establishing of Hollywood could help in a war against terrorism.

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'war against terrorism' by getting the right ideological message across not only to Americans, but also to the Hollywood public around the globe – the ultimate empirical proof that Hollywood does in fact function as an 'ideological state apparatus'.

We should therefore invert the standard reading according to which the WTC explosions were the intrusion of the Real which shattered our illusory Sphere: quite the reverse – it was before the WTC collapse that we lived in our reality, perceiving Third World horrors as something which was not actually part of our social reality, as something which existed (for us) as a spectral apparition on the (TV) screen – and what happened on September 11 was that this fantasmatic screen apparition entered our reality. It is not that reality entered our image: the image entered and shattered our reality (i.e. the symbolic co-

By getting the right ideological message across not only Americans, but also to the Hollywood public around the globe. The ultimate empirical proof that Hollywood does in fact function as an ideological state apparatus. Now if you look at this particular section we are just coming out of all Tuesday. We are just coming out of Catherine Bell sees waiting of all Tuesdays remember and this is just an extension of that.

So what Zizek is saying is quite provocative and quite it is fascinating really. So he is saying essentially the post 9/11, the Pentagon officials they solicited the help of Hollywood producers and directors and cinematographers in terms of preparing them technically against you know foreign attacks against possible attacks in future, but not just that what also happened post 9/11 was a White House you know consistently and constantly invited Hollywood producers and Hollywood you know directors in terms of this war against terrorism.

In terms of advising Hollywood on how to make movies, which would propagate this war against terrorism message in a very literal and classical sensation of Hollywood becoming an ideological state apparatus, a classic ideological state apparatus, whereby it produces ideology. It disseminates some ideology as a spectacle and obviously Hollywood is very powerful highest aim, a very powerful apparatus as you can imagine.

So any movie coming out of Hollywood which has this war against terrorism motive will be disseminated and consumed a millions of people across the globe. So in that sense it becomes a very effective instrument of ideology and also becomes a natural example, a very extremely natural example of an ideological state apparatus okay. So this bit becomes very important Zizek's analysis.

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ordinates which determine what we experience as reality). The fact that, after September 11, the openings of many 'blockbuster' movies with scenes which bear a resemblance to the WTC collapse (tall buildings on fire or under attack, terrorist acts . . .) were postponed (or the films were even shelved) should thus be read as the 'repression' of the fantasmatic background responsible for the impact of the WTC collapse. Of course, the point is not to play a pseudo-postmodern game of reducing the WTC collapse to just another media spectacle, reading it as a catastrophe version of the snuff porno movies; the question we should have asked ourselves as we stared at the TV screens on September 11 is simply: *Where have we already seen the same thing over and over again?*

And it goes on to say on the screen the fact that after September 11, the openings of so many blockbuster movies which were scenes with bare resemblance to the World Trade Center collapse were postponed you know other films were even shelved should thus be read as a repression or the fantastic background responsible for the impact on WTC collapse. Of course the point is not to play a pseudo postmodern game or producing the World Trade Center collapse to just another major spectacle.

Reading it as a catastrophic version of the snuff porno movies. The question we should ask ourselves as we stare at the TV screens on September 11 is simply where have we already seen the same thing over and over again alright. So as you can see the massive spectacle of crisis, massive spectacle of destruction or decimation of terrorism which we saw in 9/11 were reminiscent visually of our previous consumption of similar Hollywood movies.

And as Žižek quickly points out that many movies which has similar openings were shelved repressed after 9/11. So you know that kind of films suddenly became a bit of you know they were shelved in the background burner in terms of not getting productions. There was an instruction quite clearly from the Pentagon and perhaps in the White House as well of not going on, not moving all of those films.

Those were you know kept at bay, but the question becomes simply that when you watch 9/11 collapsed when you watch the entire Twin Tower collapse as spectators, as visual consumers we should have known, we should have seen that this is something we have seen before in Hollywood cinema and Hollywood films okay.

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The fact that the September 11 attacks were the stuff of popular fantasies long before they actually took place provides yet another case of the twisted logic of dreams: it is easy to account for the fact that poor people around the world dream about becoming Americans – so what do the well-to-do Americans, immobilized in their well-being, dream about? About a global catastrophe that would shatter their lives – why? This is what psychoanalysis is about: to explain why, in the midst of well-being, we are haunted by nightmarish visions of catastrophes. This paradox also indicates how we should grasp Lacan's notion of 'traversing the fantasy' as the concluding moment of the psychoanalytic treatment. This notion may seem to fit perfectly

And then Žižek goes on to say the fact that the September 11 attacks were the stuff of popular fantasies long before they actually took place, provides yet another case of twisted logical dreams. It was easy to account for the fact that poor people around the world dream about becoming Americans. So what do the well-to-do Americans immobilize and the well-being dream about. About a global catastrophe that will shatter the lives, why?

This is what psychoanalysis is about to explain why and that Mr. Well-Being, we are haunted by nightmarish visions of catastrophes. So what Žižek is saying again, this is a very, very psychoanalytical reading of 9/11. He is saying in a very psychoanalytic, psychological way of

looking 9/11, one could argue with some degree of rationale that the 9/11 attacks were actually you know nightmares of Americans.

So when the non-Americans that “third world people” the less privileged people, the dream of coming to America what did the half non-Americans, who actually live in America, they dream about. They dream about this catastrophe, the dream about this spectacular crisis, spectacular you know violence, which is unleashed with something like the Twin Tower collapse and this is a nightmare which came true. This is a fantasy which came true as I just mentioned a while ago.

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Apocalypse Now Redux (2000), Francis Ford Coppola's newly edited longer version of *Apocalypse Now*, stages the co-ordinates of this structural excess of state power in the clearest possible way. Is it not significant that in the figure of Kurtz, the Freudian 'primordial father' – the obscene father-enjoyment subordinated to no symbolic Law, the total Master who dares to confront the Real of terrifying enjoyment face to face – is presented not as a remainder of some barbaric past, but as the necessary outcome of modern Western power itself? Kurtz was a perfect soldier – as such, through his overidentification with the military power system, he turned into the excess which the system has to eliminate. The ultimate horizon of *Apocalypse Now* is this insight into how Power generates its own excess, which it has to annihilate in an operation that has to imitate what it fights

Okay next Zizek moves on to page 26. This is in a section which we will study in some details when Zizek reached *Apocalypse Now*. The very famous Francis Ford Coppola film and loosely based on the Vietnam War and it talks about how apocalypse now becomes very important culture document, a very important cultural text and also in terms of looking at it from a postmodern perspective.

So how so *Apocalypse Now*, Francis Ford Coppola's newly edited longer version of *Apocalypse Now*, the longer version of *apocalypse Now Redux* stages the coordinates of the structural excess of state power in a clearest possible way is not significant that a figure of Kurtz, the Freudian primordial father, the obscene father enjoyment subordinate to no symbolic law. The total master

who dares to confront the real but of terrifying enjoyment face to face is presented not as the reminder of some barbaric past, but as a necessary outcome of modern Western power itself.

So read the original book again. This is loosely based on Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness as well and also the Vietnam War. So Kurtz, the Colonel Kurtz in Apocalypse Now who is his primordial father, who was just noble savage, the perfect savage who has powerful enjoyment perfectly libidinal power, libidinal authority, libidinal you know position that particular person is not presented something of barbarian.

He is not presented some kind of a savage in a real sense, but ironically he is seen as an extension of the perfect product of European enlightenment, the perfect product of in a Western trade name. So he is actually an ex-soldier. He is a perfect soldier and he has now become a danger, because he is too perfect. He becomes monstrous because of his perfection. In a very frank and straight kind of the way, you can do this reading. That is what Zizek say.

He is a necessary outcome of modern Western power itself. Kurtz was a perfect soldier as such to his over identification with the military power system, it turned into the excess which the system has to eliminate. So the excess, the monstrosity comes out of perfection and that is the paradox in Kurtz. So now he has become a problem. Now he has become an aberration or has become a monster, which the Western power now, the military system now has to eliminate.

So he becomes an object of aversion because of his over identification with the military system. So the primordial libidinal father away is not really savage and a civilized soldier, has not become too perfect for a system's own good and therein lies the problem and hence he needs to be done away with by the system at the moment. So he now becomes excess and not becomes the monsters construct because of his over identification.

So the ultimate horizon of Apocalypse Now is this insight into how power generates its own excess. So you know this becomes a very important study of power and how power produces it on excess, how the power produces own monsters, which need to be gotten rid of, which it has to annihilate in an operation that has to and has to imitate what it fights.

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(Willard's mission to kill Kurtz does not exist in the official record – 'it never happened', as the general who briefs Willard points out). We thereby enter the domain of secret operations, of what the Power does without ever admitting it. And does not the same go for today's figures presented by the official media as the embodiments of radical Evil? Is this not the truth behind the fact that Bin Laden and the Taliban emerged as part of the CIA-supported anti-Soviet guerrilla movement in Afghanistan, and behind the fact that Noriega in Panama was an ex-CIA agent? Is not the USA fighting its own excess in all these cases? And was the same not true already of Fascism? The liberal West had to join forces with Communism to destroy its own excessive out-growth. (Along the same lines, I am tempted to suggest what a truly subversive version of *Apocalypse Now* would have been: to

So Willard's mission to kill Kurtz does not exist in official record. It never happened as a general who briefs Willard points out. So this elimination will not be recorded, this elimination of Kurtz who was a monster, born out of an excessive over-identification that elimination, the murder of Kurtz will not be recorded, will be eliminated even from the records. So we thereby enter the domain of secret operations of what the power does without even admitting it.

So the very interesting surreptitious operation of powers and power works in a overt way whereas covert way. So this is a covert operation of power and does not the same go for today's figures presented by the official media as an embodiment of radical evil is this one the truth behind defined Bin Laden and the Taliban emerge as part of a CIA supported anti-Soviet guerrilla movement in Afghanistan and behind the fact the Noriega and Panama was an ex-CIA agent.

It is not the USA fighting his own excess in all these cases and was the same not true already or fascism. The liberal West have to join forces with communism to destroy his own excessive out growth. So again this is a very beautiful way of looking at popular culture and then using popular culture in terms of looking at how, what happens in real political situation. So use example of Kurtz in *Apocalypse Now*.

What becomes a problem, who becomes a monster because it was over identification with power, because of his excessive embodiment of power, not because of the savage said because he is too good a soldier, because he is too perfect a soldier has become a problem, because of his perfection. So his monstrosity born out or produced out of perfection and enhanced he needs to be gotten rid of, and needs to be eliminated now, because he has become a problem.

Now Zizek is drawing parallels between that and what happens to Bin Laden, the Taliban and the U.S. So Taliban was you know emerged as part of a CIA supported anti-Soviet guerrilla warfare. So when the cold war was at its peak in Afghanistan, then bin Laden and the Taliban were actually supported in terms of funding, in terms of military ammunition by the CIA, which was obviously engaged in a warfare with the KGB, with the Russians that upon a time.

Obviously Bin Laden becomes similar of a Kurtz kind of figure in terms of his over identification with that power system and it then becomes a problem to the USA, which had actually facilitated and produced Bin Laden in the first place as a martial agent and obviously the examples to be drawn from other parts of the world as well. He gives example of fascism, which becomes example of excessive outgrowth of the liberal West which then had to combine forces with communism in order to fight fascism okay.

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behind the fact that Noriega in Panama was an ex-CIA agent? Is not the USA fighting its own excess in all these cases? And was the same not true already of Fascism? The liberal West had to join forces with Communism to destroy its own excessive outgrowth. (Along the same lines, I am tempted to suggest what a truly subversive version of *Apocalypse Now* would have been: to repeat the formula of the anti-Fascist coalition, and have Willard propose to the Vietcong a pact to destroy Kurtz.) What remains outside the horizon of *Apocalypse Now* is the perspective of a collective political act *breaking out* of this vicious cycle of the System which generates its superego excess and is then compelled to annihilate it: a revolutionary violence which no longer relies on the superego obscenity. This 'impossible' act is what takes place in every authentic revolutionary process.

So what remains outside the horizon Apocalypse Now is the perspective of a collective political act breaking out of his visual cycle or system which generates a super-ego excess and is then compelled to annihilate it. So you know Kurtz becomes a super-ego excess. Bin Laden becomes a super ego excess of the system, which generated and now the system would have to eliminate that excess, eliminate the monster born out of excess.

A revolutionary violence which no longer relies on a super-ego obscenity. This impossible act is what takes place in every authentic revolutionary process right. So this is an impossible act which takes place in revolution process, but what Zizek is saying over here is that you know we can constantly draw parallels between a popular culture between you know what happens in cinema, what happens in a virtual world and what happens in a real world in terms of reflecting each other.

So again we were looking at popular cultures not something outside of this course. It is very much at the heart of the schools and we just saw a little while ago where Zizek said you know he documented the fact that post 9/11 Hollywood became the ISA, the ideological state apparatus for American foreign policies to a large extent, where Hollywood studios were instructed and advised and funded to a great extent by Pentagon and the White House to make films, which had the content with the message of fight against or war against terrorism.

Then it obviously became a classic example of ISA or the American foreign policy. So again we are looking at a very interesting collusion between the entertainment industry and the political propaganda and which then becomes quite elusive in its quality. So I stop with this point in this particular lecture. Thank you for your attention.