



This movie has been designated a Critic's Pick by the film reviewers of The Times.

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## Sometimes Groucho's Cigar Is Not Just a Cigar

By STEPHEN HOLDEN

If you embrace the notion that Hollywood is literally a "dream factory," then Freud stands as a proto movie critic who taught us how to decipher the hidden meanings of its celluloid fantasies. In "[The Pervert's Guide to Cinema](#)," the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Zizek subjects more than 40 mostly classic films, by directors ranging from Chaplin to Hitchcock, to psychoanalytic scrutiny. We need movies because they hold the clues to our true selves, Mr. Zizek argues in a wildly entertaining, digressive lecture packed with juicy clips that illustrate his points.

Thus the [Marx Brothers](#) are the superego (Groucho), ego (Chico) and id (Harpo). In "[Psycho](#)," the three levels of the Bates house — top floor, ground floor and basement — embody the same unholy trinity. In Mr. Zizek's view, the raging male monsters of [David Lynch's "Blue Velvet"](#) and "[Lost Highway](#)" personify pure phallic aggression released from the shadows of the unconscious. It is no coincidence that the song that encapsulates "Blue Velvet" is Roy Orbison's eerie, impassioned "[In Dreams](#)."

Because "the ultimate object of anxiety is a living father," Mr. Zizek declares, Mr. Lynch's walking nightmares are manifestations of "the father who doesn't want to die." Anakin Skywalker's transformation into Darth Vader in "Star Wars: Episode III — Revenge of the Sith," he says, illustrates the same principle.

The clips from Hitchcock and Lynch films are so numerous and Mr. Zizek's comments so incisive that after watching "The Pervert's Guide to Cinema," you may never see these directors' movies the same way again. It is almost as if those filmmakers received instructions from Freud himself on how to visualize his ideas.

The use of "pervert" in the movie's title is a bit of a come-on. Although there is kinky behavior in a number of clips (especially those from the Lynch films), this is not a textbook in Krafft-Ebing. The word merely refers to the Peeping Tom aspect of moviegoing. In the darkness of a theater we can unashamedly gape at bodies and fantasize without being observed, and in doing so we confront our demons in a safe environment. The movies of Hitchcock, who was obsessed with emotional manipulation, repeatedly toyed with the notion of the viewer as voyeur.

In this globe-trotting documentary, directed by Sophie Fiennes (sister of Ralph and Joseph), Mr. Zizek, a blustery, excitable lecturer, is often filmed speaking on the actual locations of the films he discusses, or on recreated sets. We find him riding on a motorboat in Bodega Bay in northern California, the site of "[The Birds](#)," and prowling around the locations of "[Vertigo](#)"; those are the two Hitchcock films besides "Psycho" to receive the closest scrutiny.

Like Freud's division of the psyche into three parts, the movie unfolds in three loosely overlapping sections. The first examines how the movies arouse our desires and allow us to channel unconscious drives into entertaining thrills and chills. The shower drain in "Psycho" and the toilet bowl that backs up in [Francis Ford Coppola's](#) conspiracy thriller "[The Conversation](#)," he says, are vehicles for transporting evidence of our brute animal selves to a safe distance.

The second part examines sex and fantasy in movies and reaches some major conclusions: that sex is impossible without fantasy; that anxieties are the most authentic emotions we feel; and that fantasies, and by extension the movies that address them, are defenses against anxiety.

Part 3, which contemplates appearance versus reality in movies, explores the paradoxical scene from "[The Wizard of Oz](#)" in which the all-powerful Wizard is discovered to be an old man pontificating from behind a curtain. Even when the illusion of the Wizard's omnipotence is exposed, Mr. Zizek theorizes, there is something more real in the illusion than in the reality behind it. And so when the old man hands the Scarecrow a diploma to prove he has a brain, the Scarecrow is convinced he is smart.

Mr. Zizek is a little bit like the Wizard. If he is a compelling speaker (despite his thick Eastern European accent), he is also an academic magician and master of intellectual sleight of hand. Many of his statements, especially those rooted in contradiction and paradox, have the ring of brainy hocus-pocus.

The teachers we remember most fondly are often the ones who entertained as they enlightened, through hyperbole seasoned with grains of salt. Mr. Zizek belongs in that company.

#### *THE PERVERT'S GUIDE TO CINEMA*

*Opens on Friday in Manhattan.*

Directed by Sophie Fiennes; narrated by Slavoj Zizek; directors of photography, Remko Schnorr (in studio) and Ms. Fiennes (on location); edited by Ethel Shepherd; music by [Brian Eno](#); production designer, Ben Zuydwijk; produced by Martin Rosenbaum, Georg Misch, Ralph Wieser and Ms. Fiennes; released by Lone Star Productions. At the IFC Center, 323 Avenue of the Americas at Third Street, Greenwich Village. Running time: 2 hour 30 minutes. This film is not rated.























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