

ISSN 1751- 8229

Volume One, Number One - *Why Žižek?* pp 1- 8

Why Žižek?...Why online?

David J. Gunkel, Northern Illinois University

The question "Why Žižek?" asks about content. It inquires as to the reason for dedicating a journal to the thoughts, writings, and innovations marked by the name Slavoj Žižek. It asks, in particular, for scholars to reflect on the role Žižek's work plays in shaping their own research programs and investigations. And it asks for a justification. Why, for example, would anyone bother dedicating a journal to one particular individual who is still very much alive and whose oeuvre remains open-ended, indeterminate, and dynamic? These questions concerning the journal's content, although undeniably important, are accompanied by another question concerning form—"Why online?" Why, for instance, would one decide to publish this content on the World Wide Web? Why is the journal circulated through the fiber-optic cables of the Internet as opposed to being printed on paper and distributed through the usual channels? Is this merely an instrumental convenience or even a contrivance? Or are there legitimate philosophical reasons for such a decision? In the following, I take up and investigate this other question. This is not, it should be noted, an attempt to avoid or dodge the initial question. In fact, I will argue that the question "Why Žižek?" and the question "Why online?" are related and ultimately inseparable. Or as Hegel has it: "what we have presented here is the absolute correlation of content and form, namely the reciprocal turning [*Umschlagen*] of the one into the other" (Hegel 1986 [1830]: 265).

The Defensive Response

Responses to the question "Why Online?" inevitably assume a defensive posture. This occurs because of a prevailing assumption among academics in particular that the information available online is dubious, untrustworthy, and specious. Serious academic research, it is argued, can only be presented on the pages of scholarly journals and

university press books, where one can be assured of responsible editorial oversight, appropriate peer review, and accepted standards of evidence. This assumption is not only expressed in professional practices—like decisions concerning tenure and promotion, where online publications have often been discounted or subordinated to work that appears on the pulped flesh of dead trees—but is also articulated in theory. This applies not only to those self-avowed neo-luddites like Neil Postman (1999), who proudly announces disdain for everything from telephone answering machines to email, but is also evident in the writings of individuals who both understand and work with new technology. Take for example the following comment provided by Hubert Dreyfus: "If we managed to live our lives in cyberspace, we would lose a lot more than the face-to-face conversations, verbal promises, and memory power Plato saw were endangered by writing. We would lose our only reliable way of finding relevant information, the capacity for skill acquisition, a sense of reality, and the possibility of leading meaningful lives" (Dreyfus 2001: 93). For Dreyfus, as for many researchers and scholars, the problem with the Internet in general and the World Wide Web in particular is that they are saturated with hype, gossip, and unsubstantiated half-truths. Such technology cannot and should not be considered a medium for the conveyance of serious study and learning.

There are at least two problems with these arguments. The first is, for lack of a better description, a situation of the pot calling the kettle black. Writing is, from at least the time of Plato, just as problematic and suffers from the same difficulties and suspicions that are now assigned to computer technology. As Walter Ong points out, "most persons are surprised, and many distressed, to learn that essentially the same objections commonly urged today against computers were urged by Plato in the *Phaedrus* and in the *Seventh Letter* against writing" (Ong 1995: 79). Like the web, the technology of writing has been, throughout the history of Western science and philosophy, considered to be unreliable, irresponsible, and without appropriate gatekeepers. How then is it possible, without considerable inconsistency, to affirm the credibility of one writing technology while denigrating the other? The second problem results from the curious "do what I say, not what I do" logic that is already evident in the Platonic texts. Plato's critique of the technology of writing is paradoxically presented in and by writing. For this reason, what is described in both the *Phaedrus* and the *Seventh Letter* concerning the deficiencies of written texts appears to be put in question by the fact that these arguments are themselves presented and contained by writing. This apparently contradictory circumstance, whereby the operations of the text already violate the statements made in the text and vice versa, renders much of what had been advanced debatable and provisional.

Because of these complications and inconsistencies, the defensive posture is understandable and justified. It is, however, ultimately indefensible. To register a complaint

against the traditional assumptions or to attempt to defend online publication from such criticism is already to affirm the terms of the dominant system and to agree to play by the rules it has instituted. We should, therefore, proceed otherwise. As Žižek writes in a different context, "instead of adopting a defensive stance, allowing the enemy to define the terrain of the struggle, what one should do is to reverse the strategy by *fully endorsing what one is accused of*" (Žižek 2000: 2). In the case of online publication, "fully endorsing what one is accused of" involves at least two strategic maneuvers. First, instead of trying to make a case for the legitimacy of online publication by advancing statements that argue for the seriousness of web content, we should affirm that this writing, like all writing, is essentially and unforgivably illegitimate. That is, we should agree with Plato that there is much in writing that is playful and that the written word, in whatever form it appears, is a bastard of reason that is cut-off from the proper authority and support of its father. This bastard, like any illegitimate offspring, does not confront the philosophical tradition as an outsider that opposes or negates the traditional "family values" (e.g. reason, logic, truth, etc.). Instead it constitutes something of a dialectical third term that is neither simply inside nor outside the familial scene; it is the outside in the inside and the inside outside of itself. Consequently, it is the bastard that is in the best position to question, critique, and expose the family's secrets—those hidden and repressed things that, although constitutive of the Western tradition, are rarely if ever identified or articulated as such. Second, we need to recognize that this illegitimacy is not something that can be quarantined and limited to the web but is the essential characteristic of all writing, whether that consist in characters applied to papyrus with a brush, inscribed on parchment with a pen, hammered into paper by a print press, or encoded in a sequence of binary numbers. The difference here, we should note, is not a matter of material. The difference rests in the manner of our response. Instead of trying to dress-up the bastard and make it behave appropriately, we are in a position "to call a spade a spade"—to affirm the bastard as a bastard and follow through on this in a way that is rigorous and attentive. The difference is simply a matter of honesty.

The Optimistic Response

In remaining critical of the defensive posture, we need to resist the temptation and pull of the opposite side. That is, our "fully endorsing what we are accused of" must also be suspicious of simply approving this, or any other technology of communication, as such. One could, for example, advance the argument that the web constitutes the perfect medium for Žižek studies, specifically because the decentralized and apparently democratic nature of the Internet appears to be in sync with many of Žižek's own theories and practices. Theoretically, Žižek's writings on radical politics appear to have something of an analog in digital media and cyberculture. One might even be tempted to reiterate George Landow's

(1992) thesis concerning critical theory and technology and argue that Žižek theorizes cyberculture while cyberculture embodies and exemplifies many of Žižek's theories. Practically, the technology of the web, unlike print and even other forms of electronic media, facilitates and fosters the mutual contamination of what are often distinct and separate areas of contemporary culture. Like Žižek's writing, the web is able to place toilet design alongside philosophy and to make connections, quite literally in the form of hypertext, between the two.

This line of argument is persuasive. In fact, it appears to deliver exactly what was promised from the outset—the coordination of form and content. Despite this initial attraction, however, these arguments ultimately fail. Žižek in particular is critical of recent advances in information technology, which he finds to be ambiguous and indeterminate. A case in point: two books possessing the same title and arguing for opposite and seemingly incompatible theses. In 1986, James Beniger published *The Control Revolution*, a book that argued that the recent growth in information technology, like the computer and computer networks, is a response to "the crisis of control" in industrial production and the means by which both corporate and state apparatuses extend their dominance. Thirteen years later, Andrew Shapiro published a book with the same title, which argued the exact opposite. According to Shapiro, information technology, specifically the personal computer and the Internet, turns the tables on the existing social/political/economic structures, "allowing individuals to take power from large institutions such as government, corporations, and the media" (Shapiro 1999: xiii). Because of this undecidability, Žižek advocates a kind of critical restraint: "One should adopt toward cyberspace a 'conservative' attitude, like that of Chaplin *vis-à-vis* sound in cinema. Chaplin was far more than usually aware of the traumatic impact of the voice as a foreign intruder on our perception of cinema. In the same way, today's process of transition allows us to perceive what we are losing and what we are gaining—this perception will become impossible the moment we fully embrace, and feel fully at home in, the new technologies" (Žižek 1997: 130-131). Žižek therefore advocates an active engagement with new technology that at the same time maintains what is, for lack of a better description, critical distance. This is not some wishy-washy indeterminacy but, as demonstrated by the example of Chaplin, the most appropriate response to technological change—neither neo-luddite rejection nor simple enthusiastic celebration.

The Instrumentalist Response

Having just said this, however, it is important to note that Žižek by no means promotes a neutral or instrumentalist approach. The customary understand of technology, within the Western tradition, is that it is an instrument—a value-neutral device that is merely a means to an end. Martin Heidegger called this "the instrumental and anthropological definition"

(Heidegger 1985 [1954]: 10) and argued that it constitutes the default characterization that is assigned to everything from simple hand tools to complex cybernetic systems. A technological innovation, therefore, does not participate in the big philosophical, political, and social questions; its *raison d'être* is simply a matter of efficiency. "Technical devices," Jean-François Lyotard writes in *The Postmodern Condition*, "originated as prosthetic aids for the human organs or as physiological systems whose function it is to receive data or condition the context. They follow a principle, and it is the principle of optimal performance: maximizing output and minimizing input. Technology is therefore a game pertaining not to the true, the just, or the beautiful, etc., but to efficiency: a technical move is 'good' when it does better and/or expends less energy than another" (Lyotard 1984 [1979]: 44).

Clearly it would be possible to justify an online journal by appealing to this particular characterization. From the instrumentalist perspective, the technology of print and the World Wide Web are nothing more than two different techniques for reproducing and distributing textual information. The choice of one over the other is simply a matter of effectiveness and can be easily decided through a standard cost-benefit analysis. And on this account, it would be hard to ignore the fact that online publication is "more efficient." In the words of Lyotard, it does better and expends less energy than its rival. Unlike print, web publication does not depend upon expensive raw materials, manufacturing infrastructure and equipment, and costly physical distribution. As such, it is able to distribute greater amounts of information, over wider distances, to more people, at a faster speed, for a fraction of the cost. As Nicholas Negroponte (1996) argues, *Being Digital* means that it is now more efficient to exchange weightless bits of immaterial data at the speed of light than to circulate the same information in the form of slow, expensive, and cumbersome atoms.

This would be a good argument for any online journal. Unfortunately, it will not work for a journal dedicated to the thought of Žižek. First, Žižek's approach to and critical engagement with dialectical opposition complicates the simple conceptual dichotomies that are operative in and constitutive of the instrumentalist characterization. "In the development of the technology of communication," Žižek writes, "what was at first meant to serve as a means turns all of a sudden into the 'thing itself.' Computers were first used in desktop publishing as an instrument for more efficient printing—that is to say, the 'real thing' was still the printed final product; then people started to conceive the virtual text in the computer as already the 'thing itself' which, later, can be printed on paper or not" (Žižek 2006: 197-198). According to Žižek's analysis, the technology of the computer is not simply opposed to print and situated along side it as some competing alternative. The computer already inhabits its other, functioning as an effective instrument of print publication. Likewise, printing has been, from at least the time of UNIVAC to the recent proliferation of the World Wide Web, the preferred output device for reading computerized data. For this reason, print and digital

media are not necessarily competing instruments of publication but already involve and concern each other in ways that complicate a simple either/or distinction. What appears to be a simple rivalry between two forms of producing and distributing content is in fact much more complicated. It is, therefore, not simply a matter of deciding for one technology over the other and justifying this choice on the basis of some empirical cost-benefit analysis. It is, on the contrary, a matter of tracing how and in what ways these two seemingly different technologies already involve and depend upon each other.

Second, technology, whether the mechanical printing press or recent developments in immersive virtual reality can not be explained and written-off in advance as a neutral instrument or transparent medium of data exchange. The concept of transparency, in particular, is not some unchanging and eternal Platonic form; it is a philosophical construct that itself changes over time and with alterations in technology. In *The Plague of Fantasies*, for example, Žižek demonstrates that our understanding of instrumental transparency has been anything but transparent and consistent. "Modernist technology is 'transparent' in the sense of retaining the illusion of an insight into 'how the machine works'; that is to say, the screen of the interface was supposed to allow the user direct access to the machine behind the screen...The postmodernist 'transparency' designates almost the exact opposite...the interface screen is supposed to conceal the workings of the machine, and to simulate our everyday experience as faithfully as possible" (Žižek 1997: 131). For this reason, we cannot appeal to transparency as some kind of transcendent and extra-technological justification. The very definition of "transparent," as it is applied to different technologies, is itself an effect of and something that is shaped by technology. In short, transparency is not transparent; it has an opacity that needs to be investigated and accounted for.

Conclusions

So where does this leave us? Two conclusions: First, despite what might be wanted and needed at this particular juncture, we cannot, in advance of things, provide air-tight justification for the online nature of IJŽS. We cannot, in particular, offer assurances and rationalizations for publishing online by relying on accepted definitions, prior determinations, and the usual assumptions. The online character of the journal, therefore, cannot and should not be taken for granted. The place and manner of publication matters and this material must itself be made the subject matter of the journal's on-going investigations. We are, then, in that curious situation that is described by Hegel at the beginning of the *Phenomenology*. In the now-famous preface, Hegel points out that one cannot offer preliminary assurances and assertions about the nature of philosophical truth. But must make all of this the subject of philosophical investigation. Likewise we cannot supply prior assurances and justifications

that will make the case for an online journal addressing the thought of Slavoj Žižek. This is, properly speaking, a subject that matters for Žižek and must be made the subject matter of our investigations. Despite initial appearances, this is not an intellectual cop-out or a clever way to pass the buck. It is necessary for any attentive and appropriate engagement with our subject matter.

Second, although this kind of extreme self-reflexivity might also be possible in a print product, print journals, because they are already justified and supported by the established system, rarely ask about the technique, technology, and materiality of their own production. In other words, the technology of print is, more often than not, simply taken for granted. For a print journal, the material of its own publication does not matter and is essentially immaterial. An online journal does not have this (dis)advantage. Its very existence forces these questions to be articulated, considered, and addressed. Consequently, the online nature of the journal compels the material of publication to become the subject matter of the publication.

In the end, therefore, what we have is not a definitive and satisfactory answer to the question "Why Online" but an argument for the serious consideration of and engagement with this matter. It is not the case that Žižek supplies us with what would be the proper response to this question. Instead his thinking opens the opportunity for questioning it in a way that resists and is not satisfied with the usual answers, simple platitudes, and unquestioned assurances. In this way, then, the question "Why online?" turns on and into the question "Why Žižek?"

References:

Beniger, James R. (1986) *The Control Revolution: Technological and Economic Origins of the Information Society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Dreyfus, Hubert L. (2001) *On the Internet*. London: Routledge.

Hegel, G. W. F. (1986) *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag. (Translation by the author).

_____. (1988) *Phänomenologie des Geistes*. Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag.

Heidegger, Martin. (1985) The Question Concerning Technology. In *Vorträge und Aufsätze*. Pfullingen: Verlag Günther Neske. (Translation by the author).

Landow, George P. (1992) *Hypertext: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Lyotard, Jean-François. (1984) *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Negroponte, Nicholas. (1996) *Being Digital*. New York: Vintage Books.

Ong, Walter J. (1995) *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. London: Routledge.

Postman, Neil. (1999) *Building a Bridge the 18th Century*. New York: Vintage Books.

Plato. (1982) *Phaedrus*. Translated by H. N. Fowler. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

_____. (1982) *The Collected Dialogues of Plato, Including the Letters*. Edited by Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns. New York: Pantheon Books.

Shapiro, Andrew L. *The Control Revolution: How the Internet is Putting Individuals in Charge and Changing the World We Know*. New York: PublicAffairs.

Žižek, Slavoj. (1997) *The Plague of Fantasies*. New York: Verso.

_____. (2000) *The Fragile Absolute*. New York: Verso.

_____. (2006) *The Parallax View*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.