

The Meaning of the Epistemological Situation: Reading Douglass Rushkoff's *Program or Be Programmed* with Slavoj Žižek's *A Pervert's Guide to Ideology*

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Douglas Rushkoff's *Program or Be Programmed* (2010) presents a set of rules about how to navigate the contemporary, digital world, when considering the sentiments in the book's subtitle "Ten Commands for a Digital Age." To be sure, through how he outlines his understanding of the contemporary, digital world, Rushkoff proposes a hermeneutical exercise, dictating an understanding of the human situation. Similarly, Slavoj Žižek's *A Pervert's Guide to Ideology* (2012), as a film, aims to confront what is occurring in the world situationally that might not be understood in the human situation itself. If we compare Rushkoff's and Žižek's by the hermeneutical methods employed in their respective works, they share a common understanding and approach to the human "situation," though Rushkoff suggests how we come to understand the Internet, and Žižek wants us to understand cultural artifacts—nonetheless, both contend that there is an underlying "situation" that mediates what we experience situationally.

The “situation” in Douglas Rushkoff’s *Program or Be Programmed* and Slavoj Žižek’s *A Pervert’s Guide to Ideology* are delineated as epistemological situations, whereby the hermeneutical exercises/methods Rushkoff and Žižek present to us, as readers, are ways of interpreting what can be respectively known about the contemporary, digital world such as the Internet and cultural artifacts such as film. In Rushkoff and Žižek alike, the “situation” requires hermeneutical exercises/methods, not just to make meaning out of what we can know about what we encounter, either through the Internet/technology or culture, but to make another meaning out of what we know about ourselves in the encounter itself. That is to say, both Rushkoff and Žižek recognize, at a fundamental level, that the interpretation of the situation—by way of certain hermeneutical exercises/methods, of course—involves an interpretation of The Otherness of the Internet/technology and culture, if we can conceptualize, in the Hegelian recognition of The Other, that we must embark on a hermeneutical exercise/method of varied meaning-making of contingent relevance. The contingency of the hermeneutical exercise/method allows us a way to define The Otherness of the Internet/technology and culture in terms of difference and deference about “a meaning”: on one hand, there arises “a meaning” in the difference between us and the Internet/technology and culture, but on the other, there is a necessary deferring needed to project “a meaning” upon the Internet/technology and culture. Essentially, hermeneutical exercises/methods make it possible to interpret the meaning of The Other, the meaning of ourselves as The Self, the meaning of The Self when in contact with The Other, and the meaning of The Other when in contact with The Self. At each of these “modes” of meaning—by “modes,” I mean to propose that the meaning-made is not necessarily hierarchical or even linear, but a simultaneous assemblage of meaning—The Otherness of the Internet/technology and culture similarly provide The Self with epistemologies of immanent value.

For Rushkoff and Žižek, the way in which we come to “know” how the Internet/technology and culture respectively work—that is to say, the way in which we make meaning from/out of The Otherness of both in relation to The Self—is mediated subconsciously through how we understand ideology. Rushkoff and Žižek have similar conceptualizations of ideology, particularly how the Internet/technology and culture create Althusserian Ideological State Apparatuses, or I.S.A. The “State” that the Internet/technology and culture construct dictates not just how we think, as members of the Apparatus, but what we know. Rushkoff and Žižek agree, more importantly, that we are consumed by the Internet/technology and culture as

ideologies, because we are unknowingly consuming them ideologically in their respective I.S.A.'s. For Žižek especially, to which Rushkoff would certainly conclude, “the material force of ideology makes me not see what I am effectively eating.” In other words, because we can “not see what [we are] effectively eating,” we are ultimately incapable of recognizing that “the material force of ideology” is “eating” us as well (Fiennes 2012). Culture, as an I.S.A., consumes/eats us with the same vigor with which we consume/eat it. Rushkoff makes this case, too, about the Internet/technology in the assertion: program or be programmed. Rushkoff contends, as Žižek does about culture, that there is a “material force of ideology” with the Internet/technology, where we, as users, must choose to program or be programmed. In a vein similar to Žižek’s, Rushkoff warns: “choose the former, and you gain access to the control panel of civilization [or] choose the latter, and it could be the last real choice you get to make” (Rushkoff 2010: 7-8).

Rushkoff’s warning, however, marks a subtle but rather poignant divergence between Rushkoff and Žižek’s handling of “the material force of ideology.” Even as I.S.A.’s, the meaning that can be made from/out of culture is fundamentally different from the meaning that can be made from/out of the Internet/technology. On one hand, while Žižek suggests that the extent to which we consume and are consumed by culture is based on a perverse, inescapable subconscious connection we have with culture, Rushkoff proposes, on the other hand, that we can “choose” to program or be programmed. That is to say, Rushkoff views this “choice” as pivotal to *the meaning of the Internet/technology*—this “meaning,” to be clear, certainly has a “material force of ideology,” but it is a “force” that we can either program or be programmed by. Though Rushkoff and Žižek both agree about the presence of a “material force of ideology” in the Internet/technology and culture respectively, the difference between the two, in general, is grounded in how both individually negotiate *the meaning of the Internet/technology* and *the meaning of culture*. We can be independent from the former, but not the latter. The ability to “choose,” in a concrete way, to program or be programmed gives us a power over or powerlessness towards what we know about *the meaning of the Internet/technology*. In Rushkoff’s warning about what it means “to program” and “be programmed,” he is undoubtedly highlighting an autonomy of “choice” we have in the I.S.A. of the Internet/technology, which we do not have in culture’s I.S.A. We make a “choice” to use the Internet/technology or have the Internet/technology use us, which requires, at a minimum, recognizing the superstructure and

infrastructure of the Internet/technology's I.S.A., then “knowing” that, when in the infrastructure, the superstructure is programming us. To some degree, Žižek would agree with this, following that culture is something we program, is something that programs us, and is something out of which we can “choose” to make meaning. However, Žižek would describe what we “choose” as an illusion—we are simply believing we are choosing, which places us in a perpetual situation of powerlessness when encountering *the meaning of culture*. What this means for Žižek is that we are always being programmed by culture, even when we assume we are programming culture.

Bibliography

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