

Techno-determinism: Benjamin & Enzensberger

Walter Benjamin and Hans Magnus Enzensberger both believe that media in itself have the possibility to transform society through changes caused or made possible by technology. Where Benjamin sees this as a phenomena caused by new technological innovation, Enzensberger mainly talks about the (latent) possibilities this 'revolution' has to offer. Both agree that new media are of potentially significant impact when placed in the field of political struggle. We will now offer a brief discussion and outline one of the most important ideas presented in their articles.

Walter Benjamin, a German-Jewish Marxist literary critic, discusses in his essay 'The work of Art in the Mechanical Age of Reproduction' (Benjamin, Walter. 1935) how art has lost its aura. According to Benjamin the aura is that what makes an artwork irreplaceable, unrepeatable and unique. To enlighten this understanding of the uniqueness of an artwork we would like to point out that the history, physical space and time in which an object exists are examples of that what Benjamin calls the aura of a artwork.

Benjamin rejects the 19th century view on art that finds only the original, authentic piece something of true value. He rejects the thought that art is something unique and unrepeatable or the thought that art should have no higher purpose than art itself ('l'art pour l'art'). Seeing that we live in a world today where constant reproduction of art is turning into a commodity, we need to examine further how the aura is linked to art and what is lost and gained by losing it.

Art finds its roots in rituals and through rituals in religion, according to Benjamin. The perfect imitation - now available to us through technology (mechanical reproduction) - blurs the boundary between the original and the copy. These indistinguishable reproductions replace an art object and convey a less weighty testimony than that conveyed by the unique original which existed before any copy was made. Since the aura is very linked to time and space and thus significant in rituals, with the aura destroyed the link to rituals become obsolete and art therefore moves into the domain of political struggles.

According to Benjamin this loss of aura isn't necessarily a negative thing. With technical reproduction, art can be reproduced identically and endlessly. It can even exist solely in the realm of the reproduction. This will make it possible to have a radically different experience of the artwork because you can take the artwork out of its original 'framework' and place it in a different 'framework'. The cult value that an object has for a group of persons decreases, but the exhibition value increases for this very reason. The artwork becomes part of the mass culture; it's becomes more accessible and thus politically useful.

Benjamin strongly feels that film is a suitable art to educate (or better say manipulate) the masses. He clearly states that the link between sender / receiver has become different with film for as '[t]he audience's identification with the actor is really an identification with the camera.' He agrees with film-critic Georges Duhamel that the continued focus that film demands the viewer in a more passive role (receiver instead of contemplator) and means that this will result in the formation of mass culture.

The main point Benjamin makes is that through the loss of aura, art in its new form will be able to unite the people into masses. From a political point of view Benjamin's text seems to point out changes in the way society values art which inevitably would lead to the preconditions required for such a thing as Fascism. Taking Benjamin's ideas into the present, one notices that the transformation of culture into mass culture has not taken

such a flight as he predicted in 1935. If we look at the current state of internet culture we see the opposite of this happening; new media have a tendency to further fragment existing groups and conversations. One thing Benjamin failed to foresee on his part is that not only the masses but also the politicians themselves would become manipulated.

Enzensberger on the other hand is a German author, a poet and essayist. In *Constituents of a Theory of the Media*, he analyzes new media as a tool for social emancipation. Namely, he states that new electronic media (radio) can potentially mobilize people by releasing self-reliance and political consciousness. This would be a direct consequence of mass participation to media production, which is made possible by the nature of the medium itself because no principal distinction between transmitter and receiver is embedded in new media.

He also underlines the idea that information is always manipulated. The key shift is then not the one from manipulated to raw information, but the one from information manipulated by few and sent to many, to information collaboratively manipulated by many in a network structure.

Another potential of new media that generates self-reliance is recording social facts for present use. These records will be social and will show how history telling always involves interpretation. Enzensberger points out a shift in media production from a structured process that results in tangible products, to an open-ended process with no finished result. Here he refers to television and radio series. Another important distinction he makes is the one between written and oral communication. While written communication follows a strict structure, oral communication has an open dialogical structure. New media exhumate oral communication in new ways and can easily show - according to Enzensberger, whether someone is speaking the truth or not, thanks to its peculiar structure. Written communication in contrast is monological. Even if it gives occasion for debate, it will never be as direct as oral communication.

Enzensberger's critical essay is innovative and visionary in many ways. Although he didn't probably expect the transformation of media to the point that is developed now, his argument of the participation of individuals through diverse media has become a reality. Examples of this phenomenon are abundant: the creation of millions of blogs, millions of videos uploaded to YouTube.com and various other on-line forms of participation by people to different informational and creative areas. Principally, his vision of a networked structure of individuals for media production is now a fact. Conceptually, posterior works illustrate the development of a networked society as well. The most noticeable work regarding the social aspects of this phenomenon is the work written by Manuel Castells. In his book *The Rise of Network Society* (1996), Castells argues that we have shifted to a new paradigm of communication and social organization. He calls this the "information technology paradigm" in which our every-day life is mediated by technology and information.

This changes in production processes into a more networked structure also imply different steps in the chain. Production becomes open-ended and users are involved in the design and improvement of the product. Nowadays we can see this in the way companies "crowdsource." Bruns (2006) describes a new production paradigm that is the result of evolving ideas about the relationships between producers and consumers. If we're talking about software these are often offered to the public as on-line services and consumers (users) are invited to make changes and give suggestions. There is no more alpha and beta version of a software, there is no finished product. Production becomes an open-ended ongoing process where the distinction between consumer and producer fades. A good example of this is Google. Google is never finished but constantly improving. To do this, Google engages users in different ways: use-logs are analyzed and users can directly judge and change ranking results when they are logged in.

Clearly, Enzensberger's prediction partly came true but in a slightly different manner, marked by the technology of the internet. We can make a parallel between Enzensberger and Henry Jenkins. For Jenkins, this is the time when a "participatory culture" has developed. Jenkins exposes that "a participatory culture is a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations [...]. A participatory culture is also one in which members believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least they care what other people think about what they have created)." (Jenkins, 2006). According to Enzensberger, this would lead to a more democratic information system and society. This very utopian vision of development is partly based on a technological deterministic view of reality. Citizen journalism may be considered as evidence in favor of Enzensberger's statement, though. Facts are "told" and shown from many different viewpoints. Not only by writing but also by posting photos and videos taken with mobile phones or web-cams. This potentially enhances self-reliance and underlines that information is never objective.

On the other hand we have to ask ourselves in which way and to which extent this influences our political and social consciousness. To answer this question it is important to take digital divide, selective use of information based on personal interest and economical influences of on-line information retrieval into account.

Some of Enzensberg's ideas have not survived time. Evidently, his political focus on new media as a political revolutionary tool seem outdated. We believe that no political revolution occurred with the democratization of means of media production (although, an economic shift has evidently occurred, and this can lead to political alterations). On the other hand, the distinction he makes between written and oral communication could be an interesting debate subject, namely when it comes to the relationship between the two and ways they could influence each other.

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