

An Aesthetic Criticism of the Media: The Configurations of Art, Media and Politics in Walter Benjamin's Materialistic Aesthetics

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The digital revolution has in general terms taken place – and it has already been appropriated and trademarked by big business on and off the World Wide Web (WWW). Maybe the revolution has taken place but has capitalism once again won the battle and even appropriated some of the revolutionary energy and rhetoric? Today when one hears an echo of the late 1980s and early 1990s largely utopian, humanistic reflections on the liberating potential of networked computers, Virtual Reality, hypertext, and Cyberspace it is often an advertisement from an Internet provider, a computer manufacturer, or a politician echoing a lobbyist from the computer industry. The terminology of the visionaries has been turned into effective marketing where keywords such as *interactivity* are used to sell home-shopping modules for your TV. On the other hand, a nuanced humanistic criticism of the media is still much needed in order to find out how technology works culturally and how it may empower the networked masses instead of just empowering big corporations.

I will be discussing here a way for aesthetics to interfere critically with the current discussions surrounding media, to acknowledge simultaneously the potential features of the digital media and at the same time bring them into aesthetic history. I will suggest that we can learn about how technology and culture develop and interact by looking at aesthetics, and in order to make this feasible, my theoretical pivotal point will be the materialistic aesthetics of Walter Benjamin. But since I am at the same time dealing with aesthetic history and with the new technology as a break with tradition, first I shall present a few considerations on how to deal with aesthetic history in light of new media.

Media Archaeology

If one accepts that we are already past the early phase of the digital media revolution, it gives us the possibility to establish a historical perspective that looks for parallels in earlier revolutions within the media matrix. This means a break with regarding history as a linear progression in which new technology succeeds the older technology in a gradual evolutionary process, yet it also means that we cannot focus only on digital technology as a rupture that frees itself and its culture from tradition. Put

briefly, it means creating a history of the revolutionary while at the same time revolutionising history. In Walter Benjamin's words, it means creating a constructive history that seeks out 'the configurations pregnant with tensions' in order to 'blast open the continuum of history' or to 'blast a specific era out of the homogeneous course of history'.² In fact, Benjamin believes in looking precisely at the points of fracture ['Bruchstellen'], which he defines as the technical revolutions, in order to find what he calls the inherent tendency ['Tendenz'] of art history.³ His historical method is described as 'literary montage' in *Das Passagen-Werk*,⁴ and he thereby acknowledges the original principle of montage; that is a constellation of ruptures.⁵ In other words, his concept of history is paradoxical or even chiasmic, forming unique constellations between present and historical points of fractures and creating the simultaneous conjunction and disjunction of the montage.

Media Aesthetics

Central to the notion of media aesthetics is Walter Benjamin's *Artwork Essay*.⁶ It is precisely situated at a 'point of fracture' in the history of art and media, which is the moment where the new technologies of the film medium stop being new. As described by Miriam Hansen, the open continuum of possibilities discovered in the early cinema and re-investigated in 1920s avant-garde cinema is being curbed so that the cinematic medium can be used in the creation of the fatal phantasms of fascism.⁷

The fact that Benjamin saw this dangerous potential clearly gives his *Artwork Essay* an apocalyptic tone, but although Benjamin describes the dangers of cinematic technology and propaganda in the light of Nazism, the essay is still not overwhelmed by this powerful apocalyptic rhetoric.⁸ He keeps an open, dialectically critical perspective by redeeming marginal perspectives in the history of media, and in this way he unfolds a utopian perspective unrealised in the current situation. Between the utopian and the apocalyptic reading he creates a field for a new materialistic aesthetics, what I propose to call media aesthetics.⁹ By looking at the tensions of the mid-1930s or the fractures that the cinematic media revolution of his time had created, he reinterprets aesthetical history in a materialistic perspective; that is, in terms of reproduction and media. This leads to a new understanding of the cognitive, political and social functions of aesthetics, which has not become less relevant in relation to the current developments in media aesthetics.

The *Artwork Essay* opens up a critical space through its reflections on media, which are neither technologically deterministic – a path many formalistic technological thinkers seem to take – nor blind to the revolutionary effects of media on the political and cognitive levels, on the basic level of experience. In this way Benjamin succeeds in criticising the media, the politics, and the configuration of the two in the actual political situation of the mid-1930s. But while he was aware of the dangerous political situation, he simultaneously worked on his unfinished project on the nineteenth century.

Panorama & Panopticon

The nineteenth century brought forth many diverse new visual technologies such as the panorama, the diorama, photography, the stereoscope, and the kaleidoscope, as

well as moving images in various forms such as the phenakistiscope, the zootrope, and the thaumatrope. Benjamin is well aware of this multiplicity, which he investigates in his writings on Paris and Berlin in the nineteenth century.⁹ Parallel to this development of new visual media, scientific and social thinking was discussing how to cope with chance, how to integrate unique occurrences into the general field, and how to construct a disciplined mass society. A key example of this development is the rise in statistical thinking, and Benjamin connects the two fields of visual and social organisation in his writing on Baudelaire, where he combines the emergence of the urban mass and the mediated perception. He quotes Baudelaire's characterisation of the man in the crowd as 'a kaleidoscope, which is provided with consciousness'.¹¹ In the *Artwork Essay* he is even more explicit:

Thus is manifested in the field of perception what in the theoretical sphere is noticeable in the increasing importance of statistics. The adjustment of reality to the masses and of the masses to reality is a process of unlimited scope, as much for thinking as for perception.¹²

These two parallel fields of social organisation and media converge in Bentham's panopticon and the panorama. Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) developed his concept of the panopticon as a way of reforming prisons towards institutions of education. In short, the panopticon prison functions through the prisoner's internalisation of the guard's surveillance as discipline, which is also the general point of Michel Foucault's *Surveiller et punir*. Foucault uses the panopticon as his starting point to write about a general 'panoptism', which becomes a principle of power from the nineteenth century. Power is automatised, removed from the royal and princely, and infinitesimally spread out to all areas of society as discipline, and Foucault sees, following Bentham, panoptism as a political technology useful in both prisons, hospitals, schools, mental hospitals, factories etc., leading to a new type of disciplinary mass-society.¹³ Furthermore, Bentham began spreading his ideas on the panopticon in 1787; the same year that Robert Barker started his experiments with the panorama.¹⁴

As architectural forms the panorama and the panopticon look alike and are both visual machineries limiting the relationship between observer and observed to the purely visual, and they also both (but perhaps most significantly in the panopticon) work by creating a distinction between seeing and being seen. The observer in the centre of the panopticon or panorama is able to see the prisoners or the painting respectively from an all-seeing god-like perspective, and in the panopticon prison the prisoners in the periphery cannot see the central observing guard because of the way the light is directed and the building is constructed. Therefore the prisoners cannot see whether they are surveyed.

The panorama is a painting without frames, a rotunda with a general view without windows. In this way it is a totally mediated experience. The panorama provides a 360°, quasi-stereoscopic, poly-perspective seen from a centre platform. As opposed to the monistic central perspective, the panorama is a true mass perspective with an infinite number of vanishing points connected on the horizon line; consequently, it also had an infinite number of viewpoints from which the painting could be seen.

The panopticon prison offers generally the same perspective from the guard's point of view but reversed from the prisoners' point of view, as the prisoners are placed in the periphery of the building. In this way the general view or the surveillance of the guards gradually becomes internalised and mediated as discipline by the prisoners who are subjects to this new panoramic perspective.

Stephan Oettermann precisely points out how the panorama and the panopticon are placed in a dialectical opposition as both parallels and antithetical figures: 'As "schools of vision", the panorama and panopticon are at the same time identical and antithetical: in the panorama the observer is schooled in a way of seeing that is taught to prisoners in the panopticon'.¹⁵ Both of them are visual machineries that shape a new kind of perspective. Furthermore, Oettermann sees the panopticon and the panorama as dialectical poles, between which bourgeois life is carried out: The panorama visualises leisure, mobility, mastery of one's surroundings; the panopticon as its dialectical opposite models work, control, surveillance and the surroundings' mastery of you, as in the panopticon prison.

The above quotation from Oettermann is also precise in the way it suggests that the medium of the panorama can be used to learn what happens in the parallel field, that of discipline and the ordering of the mass society. The medium can be used to see the shape of what happens to the formation of power. The panorama demonstrated the new social order, but displaced, like in a dream or a phantasmagoria. To awaken from the dream demands a media-conscious use of the medium that does not mask its own techniques behind the projection of a seemingly coherent reality. In other words, this demands a politically conscious artistic treatment of the medium whereby the artist consciously investigates the new form, learning from it and controlling it, instead of letting it control him. This could be what Benjamin means when he ends the *Artwork Essay* with the demand for a 'Politisierung der Kunst' as an answer to the fascist 'Ästhetisierung der Politik'.¹⁶

Cinema & Nazism

At about the time the cinema got underway at the beginning of the twentieth century the multiplicity of diverse media died out. During the first decades of the new century, the cinematic medium develops. In the *Artwork Essay*, Benjamin points out that around 1900 technical reproduction had reached a standard where it 'captured a place of its own among the artistic processes'. In film, technical reproduction had reached a stage where the authority of the object was jeopardised and the tradition thus shattered faced with this new simulacrum. Film is to Benjamin 'the obverse of the contemporary crisis and renewal of mankind' ... 'intimately connected with the contemporary mass movements.' As such, film is the most powerful agent of these changes but 'Its social significance, particularly in its most positive form, is inconceivable without its destructive, cathartic aspect'.¹⁷

The first movies were mere movies of attraction, such as today's IMAX and 3D experiences. Movies investigating how to make fantastic, illusionistic and magical effects with the new technology. But these experiments with the medium were quickly

suppressed with the standardisation of the narrative film.¹⁸ Later in the 1920s avant-garde artists tried to redeem the experimental tradition in order to investigate a new cinematic reality and show the defamiliarising, surreal effects of cinematic technology, as for example in Luis Buñuel's and Salvador Dalí's *Un chien andalou* (1928). But in 1935 Leni Riefenstahl made *Triumph des Willens*, where she staged and portrayed the 1934 Nazi party convention in Nuremberg. The two fields of control and media technology converge again in the mass ornamental scenes of the Nazis.

In *Triumph des Willens* Riefenstahl employ the cinematic medium using cinematic techniques such as montage, different camera angles and focalisations with great virtuosity. In this sense the film is without doubt an impressive artwork. However, it is of course a problematic film from a political point of view, and these political problems are not independent from the aesthetics of the film. Leni Riefenstahl and the propaganda of her time created a new, powerfully manipulated and metaphorically united reality by using the medium and carefully covering the traces of the discontinuous techniques of the cinema. She uses cinematic technology to create a coherent space, but from a perspective that is not human although she ingeniously reconciles the non-human perspective by installing Hitler as the spectator. Nazism models its power through appropriating the new media and Riefenstahl delivers the technology.

After setting up a chronology of important German events leading up to the *Reichsparteitag* in Nuremberg, which it claims to be the 'Dokument' of, the film begins with a birds-eye view. After the clouds have cleared one sees Nuremberg and its Gothic church, and the shadow of the photographer's airplane is cast like a Christian cross or the German eagle on the ground. Subsequently, one descends into Nuremberg, and we see Hitler's airplane arriving, which thus links the camera perspective with Hitler. Thereafter the film shows the endless parades and uniformed masses from all over Germany and throughout the film is crosscut with scenes showing Hitler on an elevated platform inspecting the masses. The elevated camera perspective showing the patterns of the giant masses is thus associated with Hitler: The parading masses – which cannot be seen from the parading individual's perspective – are seen through Hitler's cinematic perspective as it is constructed by Riefenstahl.

Space is ordered through a funnel-shaped central perspective without breaks, moving from the heavenly perspective to the individual persons, who are uniformed parts of a keenly structured mass ornament, down to their emotionless, naked faces. Likewise time shows no ruptures with the clear link from the Christian tradition of the church and the German mythological symbols to the modern technology of the airplane carrying the camera. Different spaces, such as the territory, the individual, the mass, and the nation, and different spaces of time are seamlessly mapped upon each other by this cinematic perspective that constructs Hitler in its viewpoint. Hence, both space and time are homogenised, closed and centred around the Führer – or one could argue that the film almost creates the unifying principle of the Führer, that the perspective and figure of the Führer are cinematographically constructed. And as a clever manipulation he simultaneously functions as a reconciliation of the fractures of modernity and technology. He is thus both the product of the technology

and at the same time the point where it is repressed, as the camera perspective and technology are disguised as his perspective.

This is parallel to some of the speeches we hear, for example, the often repeated ‘ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Führer’ or ‘You are Germany’ addressed to the Führer. The Führer is the giant metaphor that heals the ruptures of modernity – he is the cinematic eye in the sky that descends to Nuremberg, the personification of the parading masses: the German nation and people as phantasmagory.

Riefenstahl’s perspective is thus a mass perspective creating a technological panoptic space, a mass ornament ‘giving these masses not their right, but instead a chance to express themselves’.¹⁹ In continuation of this statement, Benjamin writes a footnote, which is clearly affected by Riefenstahl’s film, about how mass movements are created to be seen through the apparatus. Susan Buck-Morss develops this aspect, arguing that it has become possible to alienate the masses from themselves as individual humans to the extent that they could see their own destruction with enjoyment.²⁰ Riefenstahl conceals it as a ‘Dokument’ in the anaesthetising, pleasing patterns of the mass ornament and she gives the Führer the panoptical viewpoint.

The Space of Criticism: From the Book to Media Aesthetics

From this it should be obvious that critical investigation into technology and use of the media is important. But this criticism cannot be an autonomous critique, that is not influenced in its own forms by what it explores. In this respect Benjamin offers some important points that are still highly relevant to modern humanistic criticism.

Benjamin’s *Einbahnstraße* (1928) can be considered as an early attempt to write a book about urban forms and urban textuality. The book is a series of rather different writings whose ‘panoramic multiplicity’²¹ or configuration of extremes is organised under street signs that appear as headings. The connections between heading and text are often not immediately apparent, but many of the texts can be read as contemporary reflections on modern, urban textuality. This urban textuality is different from the textuality of the printed book, and not only the form, but often the very content of many of the writings resist an autonomous, book-like, contemplative reading. In general as ‘sense concretions’, which are neither descriptions nor simply impressions but rather ‘studied products of reflection’ [*Denkbilder*]²² these writings indicate a textuality that aims to bring the materiality of urban signs into the book. In the opening piece Benjamin argues that ‘true literary activity cannot aspire to take place within a literary framework’ but has to be ‘a strict alternation between action and writing’ learning from the ‘prompt language’ of ‘leaflets, brochures, articles, and placards’.²³ As Benjamin argues under the heading ‘Vereidigter Bücherrevisor’ [Attested Auditor of Books], writing has taken to bed in the book and found ‘a refuge in which to lead an autonomous existence.’ Instead, writing now has to learn from the dictatorial perpendicular of the cinema and advertising, the ‘brutal heteronomies of economic chaos’.²⁴

Einbahnstraße in this way presents a reflective construction of an absent-minded reading of urban signs, resembling more the way of reading acted out by the modern

urban dweller than the reading of a book. It is a literary montage of urban textuality, a configuration of extremes. Simultaneously, and in continuation of this argument, *Einbahnstraße* can be seen as a criticism of the traditional book and its 'pretentious, universal gesture'.²⁵ ['anspruchsvolle universale Geste'²⁶]. In this sense it is about the end of the book as a medium in keeping with the times.²⁷

If the universal gesture of the book is dying, then the same thing is happening to the Western tradition of critical knowledge built up around the medium of the book. Benjamin writes without sentimentality about the decline of criticism and the fools that regret this development in *Einbahnstraße*:

Fools lament the decay of criticism. For its day is long past. Criticism is a matter of correct distancing. It was at home in a world where perspectives and prospects counted and where it was still possible to take a standpoint. Now things press too closely on human society.²⁸

But *Einbahnstraße* itself presents a new form of criticism by the simple and simultaneously complex fact that it uses urban forms within the very form whereby it criticises urban textuality. Just as Mallarmé, who in *Un coup de dés* incorporated 'the graphic tension of the advertisement in the printed page',²⁹ the book incorporates urban writing in its own writing. Instead of 'the optical illusions' of 'isolated standpoint[s]',³⁰ the book literally moves through the space that it reads and writes. In this sense *Einbahnstraße* is an attempt to redeem the book and criticism. It is a book which is in accordance with the times [*zeitgemäß*] which is what Benjamin demands of good literature in his 1934 speech 'Der Autor als Produzent' [The Author as Producer], delivered at the Institute for the Study of Fascism in Paris. In this context literary quality becomes literature with the right political and literary *Tendenz* [tendency], and *Tendenz* should be understood here as both an issue of form and (political) content. More than giving political content priority over literary form, as it tended to happen during the European ideological criticism of the 1970s, this indicates that Benjamin focuses on political aspects of form. Or to put it differently: the form, or how the artist engages the medium of the artistic work, has profound political significance.³¹

To return to the important 'Ästhetisierung der Politik' – 'Politisierung der Kunst' chiasmus at the end of the *Artwork Essay*, it is obvious that Benjamin perceives the crisis of fascism as a crisis which intimately concerns aesthetics. Art has a redemptive potential, but at the risk of turning into a phantasmagoria, a dream image. Art has to engage in the mediations and machinations of its (historical) context – it must reflect how reality is produced and represented – otherwise it would not be in accordance with the times. There would be no shock effect to awaken the masses from their phantasmagorical dreams. But art should not persist in the dream world, it should not remain 'pure', spiritual art, or it risks entering into the service of the fascist 'Ästhetisierung der Politik'. Art has to be infected with the machinations of capitalistic dream reality in order to become a serum against it, but it should subvert the phantasmagorical dream image.

In 'Der Autor als Produzent' Benjamin is influenced by Brecht's epic theatre, and he quotes Brecht for saying that artists who do not formally investigate the new

forms of media instead risk losing control of their artistic expression. Thus what should be means [Mittel] for the producers – such as the medium, technology, and form of their artistic work – instead turn out to be means against the producers. The epic theatre, on the contrary, seeks an ‘Auseinandersetzung’ [an argument, a clash, an explanation, an arrangement] with its contemporary forms of media: ‘It is, based on the contemporary level of development of film and radio, in accordance with the times’.³²

The *Artwork Essay* is where Benjamin comes closest to a formulation of his new materialistic aesthetics. Even though it is written with an awareness of the Nazi exploitation of film, Benjamin does not participate in the humanistic tradition of accusing media technology of being uncritical compared to the book. Instead he tries to redeem the media and criticism by re-thinking criticism through the media. Miriam Hansen points out that the ‘belated moment of the Artwork Essay only enhances the utopian modality of its statements, shifting the emphasis from a definition of what film *is* to its failed opportunities and unrealised promises. Thus, the cinema becomes an object – as well as a medium – of “redemptive criticism”’.³³ Instead of directly accusing the cinematic medium of fascist or reactionary tendencies, Benjamin carefully distinguishes between the possibilities within the technological, formal structure of the cinematic medium and the historical formation around the uses of the cinema of his time. This is not the death of criticism but rather its emergence in a new form: that of media aesthetics.

In his topical re-reading of the *Artwork Essay*, Bill Nichols writes that ‘Benjamin argues for correspondences among three types of changes: in the economic mode of production, in the nature of art, and in categories of perception’.³⁴ In this way a hermeneutic investigation into the nature of art – its form or *Tendenz* – has the potential of unfolding as criticism. To be more specific, Benjamin places the cinematic technology and modern society of the 1930s within a dialectical field delimited by the apocalypse of Nazi control and technological warfare on the one hand, and the utopia of a revolutionary redemption of collectivity through technology on the other.³⁵ It is a dialectics parallel to the nineteenth century dialectics between the panopticon and the panorama presented by Stephan Oettermann, and viewed as a dialectical image it demarcates the field for a criticism achieved through media aesthetics. Simultaneously, it paves the way for a discussion of the possibilities of technology as such, as well as within certain historical, social and aesthetic conditions: Of how media change – maybe even revolutionise – the structures of power while given powers simultaneously appropriate and shape the new media in an attempt to serve and reinforce their own power structures.

This dialectical field is, as shown by Benjamin and his historical context, an important field for political struggle. With his criticism of the media Benjamin aimed to redeem the open continuum of possibilities of the cinematic medium. These were possibilities rendered marginal in Nazi mass society in order to construct a coherent, controlled space (Riefenstahl). Though the new media were far from innocent in the development of the fatal historical situation, it would be too easy, too naive and above all too ineffective just to posit one’s criticism outside of the media sphere. It

would leave the power of the media in the hands of reactionary manipulators, in this case the fascists.

To sum up the field of media aesthetic criticism, Benjamin sees film as the projection of a new form of consciousness, as a technology for perceiving this new consciousness, and as an important means of exercising the modernisation of perception.³⁶ In this way, film with the right *Tendenz* is an important vaccination against the dangers that the alienating potentials of the technology present. In the first version of the *Artwork Essay* he writes about a sort of cathartic effect whereby certain films with a forced development of sadistic or masochistic fantasies can hinder a dangerous outgrowth of such urges in the masses.³⁷

These changes in sense perception – and especially the fact that people were not prepared for them – led to a crisis in cognitive experience, which in turn led to an alienation that allowed the powerful manipulation of the nazi propaganda. In this light Nazism becomes simultaneously modern in its use of media and anti-modern in its conception of it, which is perfectly illustrated by *Triumph des Willens*.³⁸ It is in order to catch up with this lack of sensuous awareness and to understand what is happening with modern sense perception and experience that media aesthetics becomes essential as a potential criticism of a mediated reality.

Internet & Microsoft

During the last decades the computer medium has opened a new space of reality. If the sound cinema and especially television have become media in which we see ourselves as masses and nations, then a hypertext network such as the Internet definitely provides for a different construction of its audience and individual users. Instead of the urban mass it might be relevant to talk about networks, as suggested by Andreas Kitzmann, who compares the hypertextual networks of computers to other organisational changes, e.g. of the mind or of postsuburban cities with the disappearance of the local and the ‘mall’ of experience.³⁹ From being spatially governed communities tend to become governed by interests – interests that are sometimes more or less commercially constructed and motivated, such as commercial websites with chat facilities and other facilities for user interaction within the commercial domain.

What is generally at stake is a change in the configuration of the market and the masses, and it seems crucial these years to discover how to capitalise on, govern or simply just understand and describe these new forms of organisation. It can be boiled down to a problem of form that is crucial in contemporary aesthetics, politics and perception; and if film was the most powerful agent of the change in the 1930s, it seems as if the computer and the Internet play this role today. The Internet highlights features of modern society such as globalisation, the multilinearity and non-static web structures, cybernetic control and feedback mechanisms, and information overload involving multimedia – features that are not only recurrent themes but are inherent to the form of the Internet, just as the shock effect and the montage were, according to Benjamin, inherent to the form of film.⁴⁰ This is why it is instructive

to analyse how these features are dealt with: Either used and taken advantage of, or masked, disguised and hidden in order to suit more traditional forms of organisation.

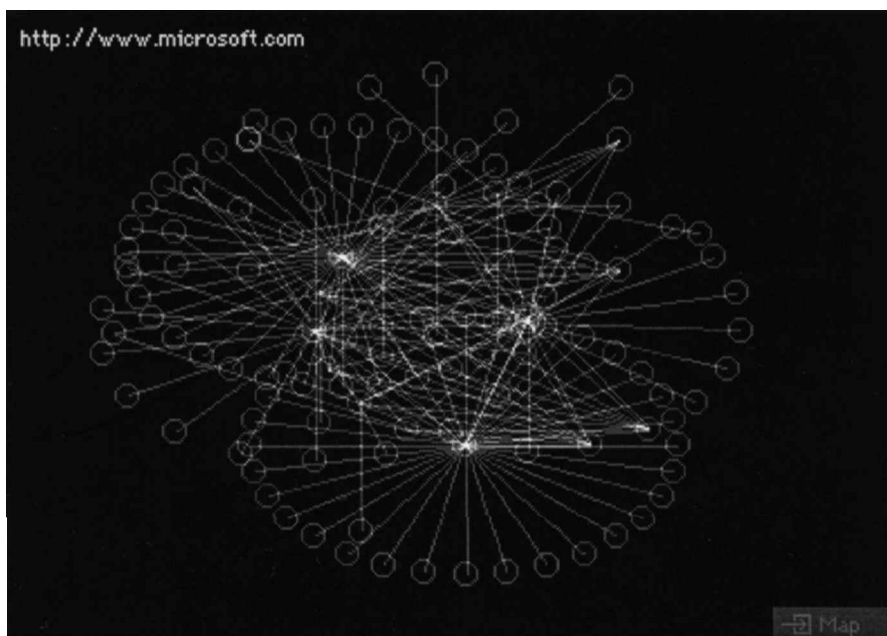
Hypertext theoreticians have celebrated how through its de-central, multilinearity 'hypertext does not permit a tyrannical, univocal voice'.⁴¹ And the democratic potentials of the Internet as a 'narrow-casting', 'many-to-many' medium instead of the mass media's broadcasting 'one-to-many' mode has also been emphasised. The multiplicity of media based on the computer and the Internet bear some resemblance to the multiplicity of strange spectral devices in the nineteenth century. Internet has opened up a wealth of opportunities and a space for entrepreneurs, and many competing new technologies and media have emerged. Whereas the new media of the nineteenth century were given names with combinations of *-orama* or *-scope*, the media of the last two decades has been named with combinations of *cyber-* or *virtual*. But the history of cinema, as outlined above, shows us that the democratic structures of the medium must struggle with more hierarchical structures of social and economical power. And recent developments on the Internet suggest that American companies such as Microsoft and the Netscape/Sun/America Online consortium continue to find ways to dominate the realm of the computer and the Internet to an unprecedented extent. Instead of reflecting multiplicity, the reality on the computer screen is increasingly getting trademarked by Microsoft and other large corporations. In many banks it is currently impossible to access one's bank account through the Internet without a computer that uses Microsoft's Windows and Internet Explorer. The major corporations are constantly developing ways to capitalise and standardise the rhizomatic space of the World Wide Web. One example could be Microsoft's (and other companies') plans to merge digital television and the WWW (Web-TV) so that the multilinear medium of the WWW will become grafted with television – the unidirectional mass medium par excellence.

The celebrated keyword *interactivity* has more or less come to mean *customisation*; that is, a medium which may be adapted to the single customer but not commanded or controlled by the user in any real, significant way. Instead of giving the Internet surfer the possibility of exploring truly different websites, one increasingly sees standardised, commercialised websites that through dynamic HTML are able to deliver a version customised for the individual user, and with the 'What's related' feature of Netscape Communicator 4.5, Netscape is potentially able to statistically map out the movements of millions of websurfers using their browser.⁴² Even multilinearity is getting trademarked now that WWW portals are a booming new business with customisable search engines such as Yahoo, Snap (NBC), Infoseek (Disney), and Excite as the current market leaders. A tough battle for domination is taking place, and it has become obvious that a seemingly revolutionary technology can be appropriated by the commercial powers, that are furthermore successfully aiming to disguise its liberating potential for empowering the user in order to empower the corporations instead.

A work of art such as *The Web Stalker*, made by the British artist group I/O/D, is excellent at demonstrating these issues of the formal, political and aesthetical problems of the Internet.⁴³ The currently popular browsers (version 4.5 of both *Netscape Communicator* and *Internet Explorer*) aim to integrate and homogenise everything

on the Internet under the metaphor of the page, whereas *The Web Stalker* lets the user control which aspects of the WWW he wants to see and thus delivers a less integrative view of the WWW. It starts with a blank, black space where different windows can be opened, such as a window displaying the HTML code, the text, the link structure of the page, or the link structure of the whole website. In this way it lets the user control what he wants to see and relieves him from being controlled by portals, frames, cookies, Java script, and advertisements. The web is shown in a new way; as, in fact, a web connected by hypertextual links, something split into different functions or nodes and allowing for different perspectives controlled by the user.

The Web Stalker thereby allows for a totally different and absolutely eye-opening conception of the web, which in turn might lead to another and more empowering concept of user-interaction than the net surfing to which we are already far too accustomed today. *The Web Stalker* and especially its map function also gives the user a view into the normally hidden structure of a given website. It depicts the link structure of a site as lines between circles and it lets the user investigate this structure by pointing and clicking. The user is thus given the opportunity to reflect upon parallels between the link structure and the (social or power) structure of the institution or company behind the website. In this way *The Web Stalker* is ‘producing simultaneously “art” and power-analysis’⁴⁴ and is a brilliant example of how an aesthetic approach to media can function as criticism. What *The Web Stalker* demonstrates in a profound way is precisely how the formal problems of the World Wide Web are at the same time aesthetical and political – especially when *The Web Stalker* is seen in contrast to the dominant browsers from Netscape and Microsoft.



‘The map function of *The Web Stalker* stalking through www.microsoft.com’

Furthermore, *The Web Stalker* is more likely to be regarded as an aesthetic tool than a work of art in a traditional sense, since it is built around displaying the dynamic multilinearity of the WWW. If one starts its map function on a large enough website it will keep adding layers to the map for hours and days (until it is stopped by a bug, a Java script that it does not recognise, or a dead end), thus displaying how the WWW is fundamentally unmappable due to both its size and dynamics. In this way it incorporates features (such as the dynamics and network structure) of the WWW in its own way of functioning, which is why it is interactive, dynamic and ‘tool-like’, unlike more traditional artworks. It has, then, a critical *Tendenz* in the sense that it both represents the WWW and demonstrates some of the problems with the representation(s) of the WWW. *The Web Stalker* is a tool for an aesthetic view of the WWW, since it produces beautiful screen images that are more or less useless for a more pragmatic approach to the WWW. It is not primarily a tool useful for reading webpages; instead, it lets the user reflect upon the form and the configurations of the WWW and its critical and aesthetic features are thus interdependent. One could argue that *The Web Stalker* reproduces the WWW, but it also demonstrates that this reproduction is contingent and formed in the perspective of the user, as the WWW can be accessed through different windows and thus different perspectives (either HTML code, text, maps, etc.). Furthermore, it looks as if *The Web Stalker* has already founded a whole new art form, browser-art, with later contributions such as Andi Freeman’s *funksolegrind 1.0b4* and Mark Napier’s *Shredder 1.0*.⁴⁵

The big challenge for aesthetics, politics, the market, and other forces of reality today seems to be to perceive, grasp, conquer or disguise cybernetic network structures such as the WWW. Benjamin has advanced the following argument:

During long periods of history, the mode of human sense perception changes with humanity’s entire mode of existence. The manner in which human sense perception is organized, the medium in which it is accomplished, is determined not only by nature but by historical circumstances as well.⁴⁵

The timely work of art, its form and medium, is the historical witness of these changes and aesthetic experiments which are also fertile in the interpretation and critical assessment of current mediations of reality. The work of art functions as a probe due to its double and self-conscious sensibility towards both its own medium and how reality is configured. But art is not sacred and since it can contribute to a general rendering reality and politics aesthetic, it is potentially dangerous, as Benjamin warns at the end of the *Artwork Essay*. This was as important in the 1930s as it is now, as we are in the middle of a new media technological revolution. It does not mean that fascism will necessarily return and most certainly not in the form it adopted in Europe in the 1930s. The point is precisely that power has to adapt to new forms and new media in order to succeed. But if we study the new media closely we can see some very important aesthetical and political battles going on concerning how to represent and produce reality. And we have moved far enough from the early, utopian days of the Internet to see the different fronts and positions emerge in the field between technological utopia and capitalistic reality or worse: virtual monopoly capitalism. The question is still how to give the networked masses their right instead of just

letting them express themselves – how to empower people through technology instead of just using it to manipulate and manage. To what extent will the network transform power and to what extent will power transform the network? This question urgently needs both aesthetical, political answers and action.

Notes

¹ Thanks to Stacey M. Cozart for help with linguistic corrections.

² Walter Benjamin: *Gesammelte Schriften*, (G.S.), 7 vols (Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp, 1974-1989), hereafter referred to as G.S., I.2, pp.702-703 – translation – Walter Benjamin: *Illuminations – Essays and Reflections* (Translated by Harry Zohn) (Schocken Books: New York, 1969), p.262-263).

³ G.S., II.2, p.752 – I shall return to the notion of *Tendenz* below. All translations are mine unless otherwise stated.

⁴ G.S., V, p.574.

⁵ Benjamin defines montage in connection with Brecht's epic theatre: 'das Montierte unterbricht ja den Zusammenhang, in welchen es montiert ist' (G.S. II.2, pp.697-698) [that which is mounted interrupts the connection into which it is mounted].

⁶ *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*. The first version was written in 1935 and is printed in G.S. I.2, pp.431-469; the third version was finished in 1939 and is found in the same volume, pp.471-508. The second version did not turn up until the 1980s and is printed in G.S. VII.1, pp.350-384. The third version of the essay is translated as the somewhat imprecise 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' in *Illuminations* (pp.217-251). I will generally refer to the essay as the *Artwork Essay*.

⁷ Miriam Hansen: 'Benjamin, Cinema and Experience: "The Blue Flower in the Land of Technology"' *New German Critique* 40 (Winter 1987), pp. 179–224.

⁸ Benjamin observes in the 'Nachwort' that fascism means rendering politics aesthetic, and he continues: 'All efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war.' (G. S. I.2, p.506, *Illuminations*, p.241). See also Miriam Hansen and Susan Buck-Morss: 'Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered' *October* 62 (Fall 1992), (pp. 3–42) for discussions of this.

⁹ In a letter Benjamin calls the essay an attempt to give the questions of art theory a truly present shape [eine wahrhaft gegenwärtige Gestalt] (G.S. I.3, p.983). Concerning media aesthetics see Norbert Bolz' outline of the field through Nietzsche, Benjamin, McLuhan, Luhmann and others. (Norbert Bolz: 'Abschied von der

Gutenberg-Galaxis – Medienästhetik nach Nietzsche, Benjamin und McLuhan' in *Armaturen der Sinne – Literarische und technische Medien 1870 bis 1920*, Jochen Hörisch/Michael Wetzell (ed.) (München: Fink, 1990), pp.139-156.)

¹⁰ See for example the 'Konvolut Q [Panorama]' in *Das Passagen-Werk* (G.S., V, pp.655-665). For an account of the panorama (in Danish), see my 'Panoramisk urbanisering', *Passage*, 22, (1996), pp.49-78.

¹¹ G.S. I.2, p.630.

¹² G.S. I.2, p.480 – translation: *Illuminations*, p.223.

¹³ Michel Foucault: *Surveiller et punir – naissance de la prison* (Gallimard 1975) – translated as *Discipline And Punish: The Birth Of The Prison* (Vintage Books, 1995), e.g. p.239.

¹⁴ Cf. Stephan Oettermann: *Das Panorama – Die Geschichte eines Massenmediums*, (Syndikat: Frankfurt/M, 1980) – translated as *The Panorama – History of a Mass Medium*, (Zone Books: New York, 1997), Oettermann, pp.34 ff.

¹⁵ Oettermann, p.36 – translation p.41.

¹⁶ G.S. I.2, p.508. In English: 'This is the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic. Communism responds by politicizing art' *Illuminations*, p.242.

¹⁷ G.S. I.2, pp.475, 477-478 – translation: *Illuminations* pp.219-220, 221.

¹⁸ Miriam Hansen, p.180.

¹⁹ 'zu ihrem Ausdruck (beileibe nicht zu ihrem Recht) kommen zu lassen' (G.S. I.2, p.506, *Illuminations*, p.241. Siegfried Kracauer writes about the mass ornament in *Das Ornament der Masse* (Suhrkamp: Frankfurt/M, 1977). Furthermore Kracauer writes about *Triumph des Willens* as a film producing mass ornaments 'symbolizing the readiness of the masses to be shaped and used at will by their leaders' in his *From Caligari to Hitler – a psychological History of the German Film*, (Princeton University Press, 1974 (1947)), p.302. He notes how the Party Convention, according to Riefenstahl, was prepared in concert with the preparations for the camera work, and he concludes: 'Triumph of the Will is undoubtedly the film of the Reich's Party Convention; however, the Convention itself had also been staged to produce *Triumph of the Will*, for the purpose of resurrecting the ecstasy of the people through it'

(p.301). And: 'This film represents an inextricable mixture of a show simulating German reality and of German reality maneuvered into a show', p.303.

²⁰ Cf. Buck-Morss, p.37.

²¹ Bernd Witte: *Walter Benjamin – An Intellectual Biography*, (Wayne State University Press: Detroit, 1991), p.95.

²² Cf. Dorte Jørgensen's postscript to her Danish translation of *Einbahnstraße* (*Ensrettet Gade*, Århus: Modtryk, 1993, p.71).

²³ G.S. IV.1, p.85 – translation: *One-Way Street*, p.45. Walter Benjamin: *One-Way Street – and Other Writings* (Translated by Edmund Jephcott & Kingsley Shorter) (NLB: London, 1979).

²⁴ G.S. IV.1, p.103 – translation: *One-Way Street*, p.63

²⁵ *One-Way Street*, p.45.

²⁶ G.S. IV.1, p.85.

²⁷ Cf. Norbert Bolz: *Am Ende der Guttenberg Galaxis*, (Fink: München, 1993), pp.202 ff. See also Hartmut Winkler's criticism of Bolz in 'Flogging a dead horse?' <http://www.rz.uni-frankfurt.de/winkler/flogging.html> (accessed 09/12/98).

²⁸ G.S. IV.1, p.131 – translation: *One-Way Street*, p.89.

²⁹ G.S. IV.1, p.102, translation: *One-Way Street*, p.61.

³⁰ G.S. IV.1, pp.98-99 – translation *One-Way Street*, p.58.

³¹ G.S. , II.2., pp.683-701, especially pp.684-685.

³² G.S. II.2, p.697.

³³ Miriam Hansen, p.182.

³⁴ Bill Nichols: 'The Work of Culture in the Age of Cybernetic Systems' in *Electronic Culture – Technology and Visual Representation*, Timothy Druckrey (ed.) (Aperture: New York, 1996), pp.121-143, p.122.

³⁵ Cf. also Nichols, pp.121-122: '...those systems against which we test and measure the boundaries or our own identity require subjection to a double hermeneutic of suspicion and revelation in which we must acknowledge the negative, currently dominant, tendency toward control, and the positive, more latent potential toward collectivity'.

³⁶ Cf.: G.S. II.2: p.752. and G.S. I.2, p.505: 'Die Rezeption in der Zerstreuung, die sich mit wachsendem Nachdruck auf allen Gebieten der Kunst bemerkbar macht und das Symptom von tiefgreifenden Veränderungen der Apperzeption ist, hat am Film ihr eigentliches Übungsinstrument.' 'Reception in a state of distraction, which is increasing noticeably in all fields of art and is

symptomatic of profound changes in apperception, finds in the film its true means of exercise.' (*Illuminations*, p.240).

³⁷ G.S. I.2: p.462.

³⁸ Cf. also Edgar Reitz' TV series *Heimat*, in which Reitz deals with Nazism as both modern and anti-modern in this sense. This leads to the attempts of the more thorough 'internal' modernisation of the grandchildren in *Zweite Heimat* through the avant-garde art of the 1960s.

³⁹ Cf. Andreas Kitzmann: 'Parables of the Network: The Lures and Spoils of Global Economics', *Convergence: the journal of Research in New Media Technologies*. Autumn 1998.

⁴⁰ Most clearly stated in the 'Zweite Fassung' of the *Artwork Essay*, e.g. in the note on p.356 (G.S. VII.1).

⁴¹ Cf. George P. Landow: *Hypertext – The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology* (Baltimore, London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), p.11.

⁴² Dynamic HTML (DHTML) is a general concept indicating the fact that the programming language of the World Wide Web (HTML – Hypertext Markup Language) has become dynamic and thus able to read features of the user and his/her interaction through e.g. Java script and cookies. In this way the specific website can learn about your interests, password, computer, software, nationality, your last visit, how you move about in the site, and so on. About the potential implications of Netscape's 'What's related' feature, see Matt Curtin, Gary Ellison & Doug Monroe: "'What's Related?'" Everything But Your Privacy', <http://www.interhack.net/pubs/whatsrelated/> (accessed December '98).

⁴³ *The Web Stalker* can be downloaded and sampled for free at <http://www.backspace.org/iod>. It is made by Matthew Fuller, Colin Green and Simon Pope.

⁴⁴ Tim Jordan on the Eyebeam mailing list. Archived at <http://www.thing.net/eyebeam/msg00234.html>

⁴⁵ Andi Freeman's work can be downloaded at <http://www.channel.org.uk/sHrd/> (accessed March 99) *Shredder* works through 'normal' browsers and it is accessible at <http://www.potatoland.org/shredder/> (accessed January 99).

⁴⁶ G.S. I.2, p.478/translation: *Illuminations*, p.222.

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