

DON’T JUST SIT THERE SHOUTING AT TELEVISION, GET UP AND CHANGE THE CHANNEL

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In the end of first episode of John Berger’s 1972 television series Ways of Seeing, he closes with the request that viewers consider what he has shown them – an argument that through reproduction, images have become a form of information – but to “do so sceptically”. He tells the viewer to be wary of one-directional broadcast media, and calls for wider access to television so that the viewer can speak back. In this short monologue can be seen three ideas of what communication is and can be: dialogue, broadcast and network. This essay will discuss these different constructions and go on to ask how debt, and the subjectivities it produces, might be structured in a similar way.

Berger is aware of the power that the broadcast medium gives him, but that power is in part based on how the relationship of sender to receiver is conceived. The mathematical model of communication, developed by Claude Shannon, assumes a receptive audience and one that is already aware of what the possible messages will be. Tizianna Terranova describes how the statistical model of information relies on the exclusion of possibilities beyond what has been pre-agreed and the “reduction of communication to the resolution of such uncertainties through the selection of one of the alternatives from the set” (Network Culture 24). It is this reduction that Theodor Adorno and Max Hokheimer’s critique in their essay The Culture Industry. Contrasting it to the liberal, dialogical, two-way communication of the telephone, they see broadcast as inherently limited and limiting (112). Berger proposes a return to dialogue through wider access television but his understanding of the informational quality of the reproduced image suggests another aspect, or consequence, of mathematical communication that Terranova highlights in her critique.

Although, if properly encoded with an appropriate redundancy, a message can be accurately decoded by the receiver with a high degree of probability, information theory does not allow the possibility of being absolutely sure. Rather than being a reproduction or representation of the information source, the message received always has a probabilistic relationship to the message sent. It is not impossible to determine with absolute certainty that a signal is decoded to the same message that way originally encoded. Berger’s call for scepticism does not encourages his audience to decode the message, but to interpret the information they receive differently, just as his series invites the viewer to consider not “paintings themselves...but the way we now see them”. These words make evident a shift from the primacy of transmission to the importance of reception, which Terranova links to the development of cultural studies in the 1980s where, rather than a channel of connectionion, information is seen as a disconnection between sender and receiver. Terranova notes that the failure of cable television to allow wider access and a return to dialogue meant that “resistance to media power had to be located in the viewer” (“Systems and Networks” 117).

If the Frankfurt school of Adorno and Horkheimer focused on the transmission of culture, and cultural studies on its reception (Wark), the more recent work done by Terranova and others turns its attention to the channel. Drawing on the work of Gilbert Simondon, she describes an informational milieu in which meaning is “increasingly inseparable from the wider informational processes that determine the spread of images and words, sounds and affects” (Network Culture 2). How, she asks, “can we still believe that information simply flows from sender to receiver (or from producer to consumer) without any of the noise, indeterminacy, and uncertainty having any effect on the process at all at some level?” Simondon’s work is not only an influence on Terranova but also on other members of the Autonomist Marxist school of which she is a part. Paulo Virno takes up his notion of the pre-individual in A Grammar of the Multitude (78) while Maurizio Lazzarato explores the individuating and individualising effect of debt. In The Making of the Indebted Man Lazzarato details how debt exploits choice, decision and behaviour in the future (45). In order to do this, the same statistical methods found in information theory are applied to determine probability of an individual’s future actions. Just like communication, a debt relation is subjectivising, occurring between pre-individuals, who become determined by entering into relationships. For Lazzarato finance is a power relation between creditor and debtor (23) has the effect of fixing time and neutralising the political potential of the indeterminate future (70).

However, as Terranova describes, the statistical estimate is never an exact representation, and although Lazzarato may be right to suggest that debt functions by assuming a continuity of the present with the future, the act of granting credit is not itself a determination of future action. The model of debt that Lazzarato uses, seems far more aligned to broadcast communication and the culture industry, than it does to the networked informational milieu that Terranova adopts from Simondon. While debt can exist as a dialogical relation based in “truth and persuasion” (Terranova, “Communication beyond Meaning” 58) directly between two parties, or as a one-directional power relation of creditor and debtor akin to the sender-receiver relation in broadcast, contemporary finance seems to have far more in common with the noise, indeterminacy, and uncertainty on networked communication. Rather than direct channels of power relations, financialised debt exists in a milieu. Debt can be packaged, securitised, fragmented and resold across the financial system such that creditor-debtor relation, as well as the value of the debt, quickly become disconnected.

Terranova argues that the more we attempt to measure, the more the essential indeterminacy of the information we receive becomes apparent (“Systems and Networks” 124). The more of ourselves we make available to enter into debt relations – be evaluated as part of our creditworthiness – the more those indeterminacies multiply. Even while it attempts to foreclose the future, the subjectivity produced by finance becomes less, rather than more fixed. For this reason, rather than seeing a restricted and determined subjectivity of indebted man, a cultural politics of debt opens up the possibility for struggle around the definition and limits of alternatives. Across a network of debt, questions of which qualities are evaluated, how indeterminacies are quantified and how risks and responsibilities are distributed become the open and contestable, not just at the points of transmission and reception, creditor and debtor, but at all points within the system.

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