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When Old Media Were New: Revisiting the Benjamin-Adorno Exchange

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Contrary to popular expectations in the 1990s, the Internet has not drawn significantly more people into the political process (Boogers and Voermann; Delli Carpini and Keeter; Katz and Rice; Wilhelm). Nor has it visibly enhanced public debate (Jankowski and van Selm; Norris; Rojo and Ragsdale). Online forums, polls, communities and pressure groups proliferate, but with no perceivable effect on decision-making at the institutional level. The White House home page today is just another bland government site, equivalent to a visitor packet or automated phone tree. Although it is easy to send an email to the President, chances are small that the President will read it or deputies will pass it on.

Yet only a decade ago, many observers thought that an altogether new type of democracy mediated by the Internet loomed on the horizon. In his influential book *The Virtual Community,* Howard Rheingold proclaimed that we now had "access to a tool that could bring conviviality and understanding into our lives and might help revitalize the public sphere"; that, through the construction of an "electronic agora," we would be in a position to "revitalize citizen-based democracy" (Rheingold 14). In *Digital McLuhan,* Paul Levinson suggested that with the advent of the Internet, we now had the technological wherewithal to bring into operation a direct voting process, opening "some avenues to global implementation of Athenian local democracy - or at least, national expression of the directly democratic city-state" (Levinson 71). In "Techno-Politics, New Technologies, and the New Public Spheres" Douglas Kellner argued that the pluralism of the Internet as mediated communication offered uniquely new opportunities for dissident, marginal and critical points of view to circulate:

> Democracy involves democratic participation and debate as well as voting. In the Big Media Age, most people were kept out of democratic discussion and were rendered by broadcast technologies passive consumers of infotainment. Access to media was controlled by big corporations and a limited range of voices and views were allowed to circulate.
>
> In the Internet Age, everyone with access to a computer, modem, and Internet service can participate in discussion and debate, empowering large numbers of individuals and groups kept out of the democratic dialogue during the Big Media Age. (Kellner 6)

The cover of the inaugural European edition of the technology magazine *Wired*, published in April 1995, provocatively captured the utopian excitement surrounding the Internet at the time. The cover had a fluorescent image of Thomas Paine, the radical eighteenth-century intellectual, with the famous line from his pamphlet, "Common Sense": "We have it in our power to begin the world over again." The magazine sought to reclaim Paine for the age of the Internet as a "patron saint" of the new world of cyberspace, forging connections between his vision and the potential of the Internet as a new means of democratic global communication. Paine's words were resurrected for a new age born out of technological revolution, one in which the free flow of information could "spread ideas, ... allow fearless argument, ... challenge and question authority, [and] set a common social agenda" (Katz 64).

As the antiestablishment rhetoric employed by *Wired* makes apparent, there was in the 1990s almost a countercultural fervor surrounding the Internet, one that traced its ideological roots to the collective historical experience of the American counterculture of the late 1960s. "It is a well-known fact (though not a well-theorized one)," writes Thomas Streeter, "that the historical experience of the anti-Vietnam War movement and the counterculture left its mark on various segments of the computer-engineering community, the 'invisible colleges' within which the technology was developing" (Streeter 766). According to Streeter, with the collapse of large-scale political activism in America in the 1970s, the utopian impulse did not just die with it, but migrated elsewhere, in particular to the world of computing, where a generation of software developers with countercultural sympathies redeployed the ideas and tropes of the late 1960s for the emerging digital culture.

Today we can no longer share the adolescent hyperbole that surrounded the Internet in the 1990s. Cyberspace is hardly the seamless techno-utopian public sphere imagined by internet boosters like Rheingold. More cautious scholars have pointed out, for instance, that the Internet has been dominated by the United States from its very inception in terms of infrastructure, servers, users and content. Reinhold Wagnleitner has argued that while it is based on the "supposedly genuine American values of open access to information, liberalization, and privatization," this access "is provided, guided, and controlled by multinational media and telecommunications companies" (Wagnleitner). Nor is cyberspace necessarily a safe space – there is the ever-present reality of flaming or obscene conversations in chat rooms, added to the justifiable fear of viral contamination through file exchange and download. Some even contend that the Internet may be "only the latest medium for the global transmission of a culture crucially cast in an American mold. Rather than being a vehicle for a multiplication of people's affiliations, it may narrow their options, subjecting them to an Americanization by stealth" (Kroes 236). This is not to argue that the Internet is not revolutionary: it clearly is. The anti-globalization and anti-war protests from Seattle to Quebec to Genoa to Cancun in the late 1990s and early fall of 2002 were largely organized through alternative media sources on the Internet, demonstrating the technology's capacity to empower marginalized and disenfranchised people. One need not be a technological determinist à la Kittler to recognize that the changes wrought by the Internet will continue to

press themselves on all aspects of the ways we generate and disseminate information. And although it is anyone's guess how deep these changes will cut and what specific transformations they will engender, the momentousness of the shift is not. But insofar as computer-mediated communications constitute only part of our experience of public space rather than the whole of it, the Internet can hardly be said to be transforming the entire public sphere. Tellingly, in the second edition of The *Virtual Community* published in 2000, Rheingold tempered his earlier euphoria regarding the utopian potential of the Internet, conceding the possibility "that virtual communities may be bogus substitutes for true civic engagement" (Rheingold 379). And he frankly acknowledged that:

> ... most of what needs to be done has to be done face to face, person to person - civic engagement means dealing with your neighbors in the world where your body lives. ... Discourse among informed citizens can be improved, revived, restored to some degree of influence - but only if a sufficient number of people learn how to use communication tools properly, and apply them to real-world political problem-solving. (Rheingold 382)

The quite remarkable claims made on behalf of the Internet in the 1990s were based upon the technology's capacity for "interactivity." Where "old" media technologies like radio, film, and television offered only passive one-way communication, the Internet offered two-sided or multilateral communication, whether between user and machine/database or between user and user. By potentially making for an equivalence of senders and receivers, the Internet appeared to open unprecedented possibilities for social and political communications to function in a more democratic fashion that more closely approached the ideal conditions of the public sphere as envisioned by thinkers like Jürgen Habermas. It appeared to offer the possibility of sidestepping hierarchical modes of communication through the creation of a decentred system of information flow.

In retrospect, the utopian terms in which the Internet was embraced were hardly unusual. As scholars have pointed out, new technologies as diverse as telephones and airplanes have always generated utopian hopes (Agre 1998, 2000; Healy 1997; King 2000; Miller 1995; Sardar 1996; Sobchack 1996). "The basic conceit is always the same," writes Langdon Winner, "new technology will bring universal wealth, enhanced freedom, revitalized politics, satisfying community, and personal fulfillment" (Winner 1001). Indeed, it is a striking matter of record that whenever a significant new media technology emerges, the responses of contemporaries are cast in uncannily similar terms. The quite provocative claims made on behalf of film in the 1930s by the German-Jewish thinker Walter Benjamin are illuminating in this regard. Examining his response to the emergence of film, in conjunction with his friend Theodore W. Adorno's riposte, we can begin to grasp just how deeply ingrained our habits of thinking, talking, and writing about new media technologies actually are.

In 1936, Benjamin published a now famous essay entitled "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Production," which sought to theorize the progressive possibilities of new media technologies such as photography and film. The essay concentrates upon defining the

aura - the sense of originality, uniqueness, and authenticity - of traditional art, and analyzes its inexorable decay under the impact of successive technologies of mechanical reproduction. According to Benjamin, much of the aura of the unique artwork derives from its embeddedness in ritual tradition. Once the artwork becomes reproducible and multiple copies can be substituted for its unique existence, the artwork is severed from its ritual context. He gives the founding and stamping of bronzes, terra cottas and coins as the first historical examples of this process. Woodcuts, printing, lithography and photography are identified as later instances. Emphasizing that the historical meaning of art changes with the character of its technical production, Benjamin diagnoses the emergence of film, which depends upon distribution to the masses, as a point of no return, marking the final destruction of art's auratic spell. Now, he alleges, art is a potential instrument in the emancipation of the masses.

Benjamin was addressing the question of how art, traditionally elitist and more or less exclusively restricted to higher social classes, could realize its progressive potential in the consciousness of the masses. He believed that the destruction of the aura of the artwork could reduce the distance of art from ordinary consciousness and liberate a critical and active imagination among the masses. And in his view, it was film that could best achieve this task. This had to do, first of all, with the very mechanism of film production. Where an actor in the theater gives a performance all at once and in one place, a film, while giving the illusion of a single performance, actually requires of the actor that his or her performance be broken up in time and space. The effect of unity is achieved by technology and not by the immediacy of the actual human presence on the stage:

> The artistic performance of a stage actor is definitely presented to the public by the actor in person; that of the screen actor, however, is presented by a camera, with a two-fold consequence. The camera that presents the performance of the film actor to the public need not respect the performance as an integral whole.... Also, the film actor lacks the opportunity of the stage actor to adjust to the audience during his performance, since he does not present his performance in person. (Benjamin 228)

Consequently, the audience, Benjamin argued, assumes the role of a tester vis-à-vis film, since it and the camera and projection apparatus might be said to subject film's performances to optical tests. This resulted in the elimination of the actor's actual unique aura. Here, Benjamin acknowledged that the capitalistic movie industry resists this destruction of aura by building up the cult of celebrity artificially outside the studio, but he insisted that this was an attempt to resist the implications of film's inherently progressive mode of production.

As for the reception of film, Benjamin emphasized the positive value of the less concentrated and more distracted state of mind with which the mass audience views cinema, as compared with the more contemplative state of mind with which the individual beholder experiences paintings. Traditional auratic artworks invited the spectator into a state of contemplation, to enter its pseudo-religious domain and merge with its deity in a spirit of devotion: "A man who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it. He enters into this work of art the way legend tells of the Chinese painter when he viewed his finished painting"

(Benjamin 239). The contemplative attitude demanded by traditional art robbed the spectator of his or her freedom, bringing the spectator under the influence of the pseudo-religious powers that dwell in the artwork.

The typical movie audience, by contrast, was no longer the one single spectator. The audience was a mass public, a collective subject free from all domination. And the attitude of active concentration characteristic of the response to traditional art gave way to a type of distractive awareness, a kind of automatic apperception more characteristic of the habitual. This had to do first of all with the constant montage-like shock effects of film which disallowed a subject's constitution of itself. This also had to do with the emotional effects of film, which depend upon motion and viewer-involvement, rather than with stasis and contemplation. Benjamin turned to architecture for his example here. Buildings are appropriated both by use and by perception. Such appropriation cannot be understood, he argued, in terms of the attentive concentration of a tourist before a famous building. It is governed more by habit, both optical and tactile; by the kind of attention that the individual gives to a familiar building such as his own house. In everyday life, buildings are noticed in incidental fashion rather than studied with rapt attention. Benjamin associated this distractive process, in which a great deal goes on below the level of explicit awareness, with a heightened degree of participation. Noticing the object in incidental fashion, in an almost absentminded state of distraction, the observer could tacitly appropriate the material as a matter of habit. For Benjamin, this was "a progressive reaction," characterized by the "direct, intimate fusion of visual and emotional enjoyment with the orientation of the expert" (Benjamin 234). And he claimed that this distracted reaction "finds in the film its true means of exercise" (Benjamin 240). As with spectators of sports events, who were discriminating judges of athletic activity, able to criticize and analyze plays, athletes, and so on, Benjamin alleged that a similar active awareness fuses with visual and emotional enjoyment in the movie-going public when seeing, for example, a Chaplin film. As Benjamin observed:

> The film makes the cult value recede into the background not only by putting the public in the position of critic, but also by the fact that at the movies this position requires no attention. The public is an examiner, but an absent-minded one. (Benjamin 241)

This new form of "expertise" in which critical and receptive attitudes of the public coincide was most advanced in Russia, Benjamin argued, citing the experiments of "worker correspondents" in the press, a literary acknowledgment of the technical expertise of the readers-turned-writers.

> For centuries a small number of writers were confronted by many thousands of readers. This changed toward the end of the last century. With the increasing extension of the press, which kept placing new political, religious, scientific, professional, and local organs before the readers, an increasing number of readers became writers - at first, occasional ones. It began with the daily press opening to its readers space for "letters to the editor." And today there is hardly a gainfully

> employed European who could not, in principle, find an opportunity to publish somewhere or other comments on his work, grievances, documentary reports, or that sort of thing. Thus, the distinction between author and public is about to lose its basic character. The difference becomes merely functional; it may vary from case to case. At any moment the reader is ready to turn into a writer. As expert, which he had to become willy-nilly in an extremely specialized work process, even if only in some minor respect, the reader gains access to authorship. In the Soviet Union work itself is given a voice. To present it verbally is part of a man's ability to perform the work. Literary license is now founded on polytechnic rather than specialized training and thus becomes common property. (Benjamin 232)

Likewise, in Russian film workers are not so much actors as people who play themselves in the context of their particular occupations: "Some of the players whom we meet in Russian films are not actors in our sense but people who portray themselves—and primarily in their own work process" (Benjamin 232). For Benjamin, all these interlocking changes heralded the eclipse of "distance" in the production and reception of art and its transformation from an unapproachable and unique object of worship (facilitating submission to authority) to an instrument of the ordinary consciousness of ordinary people. Needless to say, Benjamin's argument has its counterpart today in the claim by numerous new media enthusiasts that interactive media technologies like blogs and YouTube blur, if not eliminate, the boundaries between creators and audiences. Chris Anderson, the current editor of *Wired* magazine, argues in *The Long Tail* that because the tools of production - digital video cameras, desktop editing suites, Wiki applications—have entirely democratized, "the distinction between 'professional' producers and 'amateurs' is blurring and may, in fact, ultimately become irrelevant" (Anderson 78). In the words of Sabeer Bhatia, the founder of the web-based e-mail service Hotmail, and more recently BlogEverywhere.com, "It's about democratization, where people can participate by writing back" (Kluth 6). It is worth mentioning in passing, because it is so infrequently noticed, that in a 1936 essay on radio theory, Benjamin's friend and artistic collaborator Bertolt Brecht anticipated all this in his call for reconstructing the apparatus of broadcasting from one-way transmission to a more interactive form of two-way, or multiple communication:

> ... radio is one-sided when it should be two. It is purely an apparatus for distribution, for mere sharing out. So here is a positive suggestion: change this apparatus over from distribution to communication. The radio would be the finest possible communication apparatus in public life, a vast network of pipes. That is to say, it would be if it knew how to receive as well as submit, how to let the listener speak as well as hear, how to bring him into a relationship instead of isolating him. (Hanhardt 53)

Although Benjamin was composing, almost simultaneously, other essays which suggested the irreplaceable losses to human experience in the destruction of the auratic tradition, there is no doubting the positive signs under which he reviewed the disintegrating

process in the "Work of Art" essay. He subscribed to this event without nostalgia. He even viewed the "comprehensive liquidation" of the cultural heritage, of the bankrupt bourgeois-humanist notions of art and experience that goes hand in hand with the loss of aura, as a cathartic event: "for the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual" he proclaimed (Benjamin 224). With ritual and cult values radically severed from the artwork, a new era had arisen in which art would be "based on another practice, politics" (Benjamin 224). It was an entirely positive event for Benjamin—an event in which the masses would be liberated—and Benjamin welcomed it without regret.

It is clear from the correspondence between Benjamin and Adorno that the latter disagreed profoundly not merely with specific facets of Benjamin's theory but with his treatment of modern avant-garde art as a whole and especially his valorization of film. In a letter of March 1936 to Benjamin, Adorno agreed that the "aural element of the work of art is declining," but he charged that his friend had overestimated the technicality of popular "dependent art" while underestimating that of avant-garde "autonomous" art. The autonomous work of art which Benjamin appeared to view as mystical and auratic (and therefore counterrevolutionary), Adorno described as decreasingly so as a result of the technical self-liquidation of its aura through the anti-magical exhibition of its own "formal laws." Citing Kafka and particularly Schoenberg, he stressed how artists were gradually transforming avant-garde art by opting to reveal how works were "consciously produced and made." On the other hand, film, the allegedly revolutionary art exalted by Benjamin, far from being necessarily non-aural, was in fact typically mimetic and infantilist:

> When I spent a day in the studios of Neubabelsberg two years ago, what impressed me most was how *little* montage and all the advanced techniques that you emphasize are actually used; rather, reality is everywhere constructed with an infantile mimetism and then 'photographed.' You underestimate the technicality of autonomous art and overestimate that of dependent art; this, in plain terms, would be my main objection. (Adorno 124)

Adorno rejected the argument that modernity had somehow brought about a destruction of aura. The "star" principle at the very heart of the film industry—the worship of glamour and celebrity - was marked by precisely that type of cultic and fetishistic attitude on the part of film audiences that Benjamin had attributed to the conventional reception of traditional works of art. If anything has an auratic character, it is film, Adorno wrote, and has it "to an extreme and highly suspect degree" (Adorno 123). The American film industry, in particular, was a vehicle of bourgeois ideology even in its apparently most "progressive" expressions, as for example in a Chaplin film. As for the reception of film, the laughter of the audience at a cinema is "anything but good and revolutionary; instead, it is full of the worst bourgeois sadism" (Adorno 123). The theory of distraction developed by Benjamin, although a seductive one, Adorno found particularly unconvincing:

> ... despite its shock-like seduction I do not find your theory of distraction convincing

> - if only for the simple reason that in a communist society work will be organized in such a way that people will no longer be so tired and so stultified that they need distraction. (Adorno 123)

Adorno also strongly objected to Benjamin's appeal "to the actual consciousness of actual workers who have absolutely no advantage over the bourgeois except their interest in the revolution, but otherwise bear all the marks of mutilation of the typical bourgeois character" (Adorno 125). Adorno urged Benjamin to completely "liquidate" such allegedly Brechtian motifs as the assumption of a clear-sighted and "spontaneous power of the proletariat in the historical process" (Adorno 123).

The theoretical and historical force of Adorno's objections remains pertinent today. It is clear, for example, that Benjamin's theory of the positive significance of distraction was based on a specious generalization from architecture. And his naïve optimism about the revolutionary potential of a Chaplin film seems almost laughable today. But where Benjamin manifestly overestimated the progressive promise of the commercial-popular art of his time, Adorno no less clearly underestimated it. In the same letter, Adorno cites his own recent essay on jazz. His brief comments reveal the ethnocentric provincialism of one reared within the traditions of European classical music and unable to see much beyond it:

> It arrives at a complete verdict on jazz, in particular by revealing its "progressive" elements (semblance of montage, collective work, primacy of reproduction over production) as facades of something that is in truth quite reactionary. I believe that I have succeeded in really decoding jazz and defining its social function. (Adorno 125)

Less than ten years later, Adorno was to continue this line of argument in the "Culture Industry" chapter of *Dialectic of Enlightenment,* which he co-wrote with Max Horkheimer, his associate at the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research. The book famously argues that the so-called "culture industry" dominated by film, radio broadcasting, newspapers, and magazines is, in fact, controlled by commercial imperatives and exerts power over the audience, serving to produce subservience to the system of consumer capitalism.

Undoubtedly, as long as the full implications of the decay of the auratic spell of art in modern times remains unclear, it is pointless to discuss whether Benjamin or Adorno was more farsighted regarding the emergence of film. But while Benjamin celebrated the utopian potential of new media developments, and Adorno argued the reverse, both thinkers developed rich and penetrating analyses of mass-mediated modernity that speak to the concerns of our digital present. The problems they articulated vis-à-vis film and mass culture persist—in different forms and on a different scale, but with no less urgency and no more hope for easy solutions. But whatever close parallels can be found between our digital present and a steam-powered or newly electrified past, it is important to remember that what gives rise to that sense of déjà vu, that feeling that we have been here before, is not so much the actual historical repetition of technologies as the repetition of deeply ingrained ways in which we think, talk, and write about new technologies.

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