

Media Theory After Benjamin and Brecht: Neo-Marxist?

"Being determines consciousness!" This ontological dualism expressed by Karl Marx appears to have been outdated for a long time. It is well known that Marx grasped this ominous *being* primarily in economic terms in order to deduce from this deep structure the surface of the "superstructure." Interestingly, Walter Benjamin's *Artwork* essay follows this tradition. The Preface tells us that the "present conditions of production" shape not only the "developments and trends in art" but also those in all other cultural spheres. This occurs, however, with a certain delay caused by the fact that a "radical change in the superstructure will take much longer than one in the substructure" (471).¹ But it is just this temporal difference between being and consciousness, between sub- and superstructure, that provides Marxist theory with its prognostic powers. Benjamin's futurology arises from the analysis of the actual conditions of production, which prompts him to make "certain prognoses" (WB35 435).

Paul Virilio, the media theorist, recently declared that "Marxism has become the expiatory sacrifice of high technology."² My argument against this point of view is based on the fact that the latest reflections on media theory—following Benjamin's *Artwork* essay—reformulate this specific Marxist distinction between being and consciousness, even if the radix of this model cannot always be identified easily. In order to be able to categorize "postmodern" media theorists such as Norbert Bolz or Friedrich Kittler (although, of course, entirely against the way

1. *Editors' Note:* Two versions of Benjamin's *Artwork* essay are discussed in this article: unmarked parenthetical references in the text are keyed to the 1936 edition listed in the Bibliography as: Benjamin, "Das Kunstwerk" (*Gesammelte Schriften*, 1974); parenthetical references marked (WB35) refer to the 1935 edition listed in the Bibliography as: Benjamin, "Das Kunstwerk (1935)."

2. Virilio, *Krieg und Fernsehen*, p. 70.

they see themselves), I will first examine the Benjaminian method of prognostication and the direction of its impact; then I will raise the question as to what the *new school* of contemporary media studies inherits from it.

I

Without a doubt, Bertolt Brecht also belongs to the *old school*. As early as 1931—that is, well before Benjamin—Brecht links the analysis of the new medium of film to utopian expectations. "A film must be the work of a collective," he demands.³ Brecht goes on to add that a film could not be produced by anything but a collective, because technology forces financiers, directors, technicians, writers, and others to submit to the division of labor—implying modern symposium instead of individual authorship. This, according to Brecht, rules out "art" in the conventional sense, because art in a capitalist society implies the unique creation of an individual author usually estranged from his audience. The new technology, he says, has abolished bourgeois art: "These apparatuses are predestined to be used for the *surmounting* of the old untechnological, anti-technological 'auratic' art, which was closely related to religious practices. The socialization of these means of production is a vital matter for art."⁴ The suitability of film for socialism lies not only in its collective production but also in a new mode of reception. Only a collective, Brecht explains, can "create works of art which transform the 'audience' into a collective as well."⁵

Benjamin takes off from this starting point in 1935, although without even mentioning Brecht. The original and unique, auratic, and autonomous work of art created by an individual author, he argues, has been liquidated by modern "means of reproduction" (WB35 441–42). The "illusion of autonomy . . . has ceased to exist forever" (WB35 447). Art as it has been known since the end of the eighteenth century becomes obsolete by a new technical medium. Like Brecht, Benjamin replaces the autonomous system of communication by the expected reorganization of society with the help of a collectivizing technology.

At the same time, Benjamin expects the abolition of the typically modern, quantitative and qualitative asymmetry between producer and

3. Brecht, "Der Dreigroschenprozeß," p. 172.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 158.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 173.

recipients, between sender and receivers. The differentiation of communication into these functional roles, he says, is abolished for two reasons. First, members of the audience assume the same attitude toward the actors in the film as an editor or a cameraman (488). They do not feel with the actors, as they once did while watching a play on stage, but copy the "perspective" of the "apparatus" (ibid.). The technical apparatus of film establishes a symmetry between the perceptions of the audience and those of the producers. Secondly, Benjamin does not forget to point out that film, as a matter of principle, gives "everyone a chance to be promoted from a mere passerby to a walk-on part. . . . Today's people have every right to expect to be filmed" (493). Benjamin stresses that the newspaper industry had already leveled the centuries-old asymmetry between author and reader because, "with the expansion of the press . . . an ever-increasing part of the readership changed—at first cautiously—into writers" (493). He has already abandoned his hopes of 1929 concerning the surrealists, whose works were intended to lead to a collective "innervation" and, consequently, to a revolutionary eruption, because the audience received even the avant-garde both contemplatively and distinctly.⁶ Yet the "most reactionary" viewer of pictures will be the "most advanced" cinema-goer (496). This is, Benjamin explains, because film inevitably gives rise to a "simultaneous collective reception" (497) and, therefore, to the progressive self-organization of the masses into a collective (498).

At this point, Benjamin again follows Brecht, whose "radio-theory" provided the essential motivation for Benjamin's essay on the work of art. At first (in 1927), Brecht merely smiled at the invention of the radio: "It was a gigantic triumph of technology to be, at last, able to open up both a Wiener waltz and a kitchen recipe to the whole world. . . . A sensational affair, but what for?"⁷ By 1932 he had discovered its revolutionary potential, and he hoped that art and radio would be capable of curing—therapeutically, so to speak—the deficit capitalist society, which he thought was based on the alienation and isolation of man.⁸

"Art must start work where something is defective."⁹ Consequently, Brecht says art must oppose isolation and develop collective forms. For the radio, this means that it no longer be allowed to expose a host of

6. Benjamin, "Der Surrealismus," p. 310.

7. Brecht, "Radio—eine vorsintflutliche Erfindung?" p. 119.

8. Brecht, "Der Rundfunk als Kommunikationsapparat."

9. Brecht, "Über Verwertungen," p. 124.

individuals to a constant stream of nonsense, but rather include all members of the audience and weld them together into a collective. In 1932, Brecht notes:

[T]he radio has only *one* side where it should have *two*. It is an apparatus of distribution, it merely allocates. Now, in order to become positive—that is, to find out about the positive side of radio broadcasts—here is a suggestion for changing the function of the radio: transform it from an apparatus of distribution into an apparatus of communication. The radio could inarguably be the best apparatus of communication in public life, an enormous system of channels—provided it saw itself as not only a sender but also a receiver. This means making the listener not only listen but also speak; *not to isolate him but to place him in relation to others*.¹⁰

Today, the magic formula would be *interaction*. With the aid of this concept, Brecht wishes to abolish the gap between one single sender and numerous receivers. Such a symmetrization, he continues, is revolutionary and directly implemented in technology itself: "Being *unfeasible* in this particular social system but *feasible* in another, these suggestions, which are really a *natural* consequence of technological development, serve to propagate and form a *different* social system."¹¹ While other artistic media, such as literature, stand out due to the fact that they remained "without consequences" for the existing social system, the radio presses for its revolutionary change by means of a collectivization of senders and receivers.¹²

In the same year, Benjamin writes in his "Reflections on the Radio" ["Reflexionen zum Rundfunk"]: "Only the present time with its unrestrained development of a *consumer mentality* in the operetta-goer, the novel reader, the tourist, and similar types has created the mindless, inarticulate masses which form the audience in the narrow sense."¹³ This passive and incapacitated attitude of the audience, he says, can be changed for the better by an adequate use of the radio. But, still, it is the "*crucial error of this institution to perpetuate in its work the fundamental split between performers and audience, which is belied by its technical foundations*. Any child could tell you [not to mention Brecht] that the aim and object of radio broadcasts is to put all kinds of people at any time in front of the microphone."¹⁴ In the Soviet Union, Benja-

10. Brecht, "Der Rundfunk als Kommunikationsapparat," p. 129.

11. Ibid., p. 134.

12. Ibid., p. 130.

13. Benjamin, "Reflexionen zum Rundfunk," p. 1506.

14. Ibid.

min argues, people have for a long time drawn the “natural conclusions from the functioning of the apparatus” and installed an infinite, critical public discourse while the mindlessness of *one-way broadcasting* still dominates in Germany.¹⁵ Benjamin follows Brecht exactly in his opinion that old media are responsible for the attitude of consumption that is replaced by interaction—treating consumers and producers as equals—fostered by new media (such as radio or film) as the natural and immediate consequence of technological development. The new technology and conditions of communication “change . . . the attitude of the masses,” and it must be emphasized once more that meanings or messages are not important here.¹⁶ Accordingly, it is “the technical and formal side alone that should be able to train listeners’ expertise and make them grow out of barbarism.”¹⁷ The alternative between “socialisme ou barbarie” is decided by technology, which—by its very essence—influences the consciousness of the masses.

II

Anyone who looks into things more closely, cannot possibly overlook the most obvious matter, namely technology (Walter Benjamin, “Theatre and Radio,” 1932)¹⁸

Media define our situation, which . . . deserves a description (Friedrich Kittler, *Grammophon, Film, Typewriter*, 1986)¹⁹

A person wishing to look into things closely will be unable to avoid technology, the most obvious matter. But it is precisely because technology is so close to us that we find it so difficult to analyze. Friedrich Kittler articulates the paradox: “Despite the title of McLuhan’s book, *Understanding Media*, it remains impossible to understand media; on the contrary, it is precisely because, at any given time, the prevailing communications technology controls all understanding and creates illusions.”²⁰ The technologies dominating us prevent us from understanding them because they themselves generate the modes of their own understanding.

In “Theatre and Radio,” Benjamin speaks of a “re-transformation

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid., p. 1507.

18. Benjamin, “Theater und Rundfunk,” p. 773.

19. Kittler, *Grammophon*, p. 1.

20. Ibid., p. 5.

of the methods of montage, so important in radio and film, from a merely technical event into a human one,” so that “the individual eliminated by radio and cinema” is “in the way of the technology he himself invented.”²¹ Sixty-five years later, Norbert Bolz puts it this way: “In the technology-dominated reality of the new media, man is no longer the master of data but is himself installed into feedback loops.” The astronaut functions, he says, as “cyborg of his capsule,” the computer user has for a long time been turned into “the servo-assisted mechanism of his computer.”²² Technology is so closely related to our physical existence that it has become a part of our bodies. Bolz goes on to explain: “When Benjamin speaks of technology as an organ he means the same concept Ernst Jünger defined as organic construction, and what McLuhan called an *extension of man*: there is no longer any difference between the mechanical and organic world.”²³ This new unity of body and media, continues Bolz, facilitates the reorganization of social life in the medium of a collective body: “In the same way, Marx has already connected the revolutionary abolition of private property to the formation of *social organs*, where interaction is thought to have been turned into the organ of the individual.”²⁴ According to Bolz, an understanding of Benjamin is possible only against this background: he stresses the fact that Benjamin does not take the organization of the masses by the media to be a “revolutionary possibility” but a “necessity” taking place “with the elemental force of a second nature.”²⁵ Social revolution naturally follows technical evolution, and that is why media theory proves to be a theory of society with prognostic powers.

Media theory examines technology, the “most obvious matter,” and Benjamin’s preference is also adopted by Friedrich Kittler: “Consequently, those messages or meanings with which communications technologies literally fit out so-called souls for the duration of a technical epoch do not count; all that counts, strictly according to McLuhan, is their switchings, this schematism of perception in general.”²⁶ Our “situation becomes recognizable” if we “succeed in hearing the circuit diagram itself in the synthesizer sounds of a compact disc or in seeing the

21. Benjamin, “Theater und Rundfunk,” p. 775.

22. Bolz, *Am Ende der Gutenberg-Galaxis*, pp. 114 and 117.

23. Bolz, *Theorie der neuen Medien*, p. 98. The Benjamin citation refers to the *Art-work* essay (507), while the Jünger reference is to *An der Zeitmauer*, pp. 134–35.

24. Bolz, *Theorie der neuen Medien*, p. 98.

25. Ibid., p. 99.

26. Kittler, *Grammophon*, p. 5.

circuit diagram itself in the laser storm of discotheques." Like Marx and Engels, who had to work through the ideologies of superstructure in order to find out about the basic structures of economic and technical conditions, the media theorist—over all the sounds and colorful images of semantics—must not forget "what is real"—namely, the media itself.²⁷ Of course, these are no longer just radio or film: by means of computerized and worldwide integrated data processing, the evolution of media technology has given us a multimedia system that integrates, and thus finally abolishes, "individual media."²⁸ Kittler writes of these new developments: "In the general digitalization of news and channels, distinctions between individual media disappear. Sound and image, voice and text exist only as a surface effect, also well-known to consumers under the pleasant name of the interface. Human senses and meanings become illusions."²⁹ All that remains of the "real" is a circuit diagram, and only the "illusions" created by those "surface effects" are able to distract from its analysis. If computers "remodel any algorithm you like into any interface effect you like," what is to become of a society consisting of "people who have lost their senses?"³⁰

Brecht and Benjamin expected a new social system from the new media. Symptom and cause of this change was the conversion of the conditions of communication—forced by media-technologies—from asymmetrical broadcasting to symmetrical interaction. Recent media theory repeats these utopian hopes with surprising redundancy. Norbert Bolz, for instance, predicts that the asymmetry and distance between producer and recipients will be electronically liquidated in the hypermedium of the hypertext: "For the first time in history, it is technically possible to implement the *old utopia*, i.e. to do away with the difference between author and reader." The datanauts in the *docuverse* communicate interactively within a network to such an extent that "literary work becomes recognizable as a collective process." Hypermedia fulfill the old "dream" of media interaction through a "two-way cable network." The "fascist tendencies" in the "media reality of broadcasting" are replaced by the "new possibilities of a reversible, two-way communication inside a network." The aim of this development is an interactive paradise, in which participants are no longer alienated from themselves and their environment, but are quasi-organically interlocked

27. *Ibid.*, p. 10; in this passage Kittler refers explicitly to Bolz.

28. Bolz, *Am Ende der Gutenberg-Galaxis*, p. 111.

29. Kittler, *Grammophon*, p. 7.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

in the medium of a new immediacy: "The limit of this obsession is electronic telepathy, the total *interface*." In the near future, biocybernetic systems of communication will directly network "the central nervous system and the computer" in order to carry out the medieval concept of "angels communicating without language."³¹ If society and communication can solve the problem of mediating between *alter* and *ego* via media, then the development of the media is about to result in their own abolition. Angelic telepathy makes all mediating systems of symbols superfluous, and eliminates all differences between inside and outside, between self-reference and external reference; mind-reading permits no lie, no mask, no role, no hypocrisy, no illusion, and no distinction between information and message.³² The very last medium abolishes the object of all media—that is, to mediate—and, at the same time, to preserve differences.

Already in 1990, Bolz wrote: "The media-technological demystification of man . . . provokes revolutionary, romantic, and immediate utopian dreams in collectives communicating in a reciprocal relationship. Baudrillard . . . has conjured up the revolutionary romanticism of immediate inscription: the very concept of the medium, he says, must disappear and give way to the *parole échangée*: only the destruction of a medium makes reciprocity possible."³³ At this point, Bolz himself crosses "the borderline which separates ages" when he writes: "Today, we say goodbye to linear writing systems, which were called culture or mind," in order to venture into the "age of algorithms."³⁴ New telematic technology "liberates the individual from his prison of subjectivity, and forces open the shield of the other. This may be called proximity: the prefix *tele-* implying intensity, closeness, and the intersubjectivity of a dense network. At last, we can recognize our neighbor behind the veil of otherness."³⁵ Now the eschatological note is unmis-

31. Bolz, *Am Ende der Gutenberg-Galaxis*, pp. 223, 226, 180, 118, 119.

32. Kittler, *Die Nacht der Substanz*, p. 34. Kittler refers to John von Neumann's *Automatentheorie* and draws the following conclusion: "Human beings as observers will become superfluous" because the computer neutralizes every distinction "between fact and observer." This is the abolition not only of the Old European difference between subject and object, but also—very explicitly—of the essential differences among "biologically inspired system theories"—namely, the difference between self-reference and external reference. It must also be emphasized that—according to Kittler—the "theory of mechanical self-reproduction" passes "*inevitably* into technical practice" (Kittler, *Die Nacht der Substanz*, p. 34).

33. Bolz, *Theorie der neuen Medien*, p. 111.

34. Bolz, *Am Ende der Gutenberg-Galaxis*, p. 180.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 182.

takable, for the “telepathic perfection of telecommunication” creates a sympathetic neighbor out of the alienated other.³⁶ So, in the medium of immediacy, all human beings shall finally be brothers after all.

III

The media are new, the utopian dreams old. The fact that the structure of the hopes of Brecht and Benjamin are so exactly repeated can be seen to support our opening statement that the theory of new media inherits from its Marxist fathers not only the priority of technology as the motor of history but also its Messianic horizon. On no account do I insist on denouncing the capacities of media theory. Benjamin’s proposition—that the interplay of technical conditions, human collectives, and their modes of perception determine history—is as convincing as ever. I would like to plead, however, for giving up this hierarchical relationship among media technology, social system, semantics, and sensuousness, and also giving up the primacy of technology. Anyone who believes the evolution of media technology is the key to an understanding of social processes risks being transformed from an analyst into a prophet. Even if the new conditions of communication greatly influence our perception of reality, they do not lead to an intelligible interactive, angel-like community, to man/machine couplings, or to the submission of “so-called human beings” to the power of “nameless Supreme Commands,” hidden beneath interfaces.³⁷ In the best sense of info-tainment: the actual situation is far more boring.

—Translated by Almut Müller (Bochum)

36. *Ibid.*, p. 119.

37. Kittler, *Grammophon*, p. 3.

HISTORY

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 (222)

The film corresponds to profound changes in the apperceptive apparatus—changes that are experienced on an individual scale by the man in the street in big-city traffic, on a historical scale by every present-day citizen (250)

Mechanical reproduction of art changes the reaction of the masses toward art. The reactionary attitude toward a Picasso painting changes into the progressive reaction toward a Chaplin movie (234)

The extravagancies and crudities of art which thus appear, particularly in the so-called decadent epochs, actually arise from the nucleus of its richest historical energies (237)

The mass is a matrix from which all traditional behavior toward works of art issues today in a new form. Quantity has been transmuted into quality. The greatly increased mass of participants has produced a change in the mode of participation (239)

However hard Walter Benjamin tried to present himself as a Marxist (or as a “Materialist,” as he preferred to say), his vision of history never completely adapted the Hegelian mood of tracing smooth—ascendant or descendent—lines of change through time. It has indeed been part of Benjamin’s success, especially during the more recent stages of his work’s reception history, that he seems to have favored forms of discontinuity in his ways of experiencing and representing history—which converges with an emphasis on and an enthusiasm for techniques of montage in his analysis of the medium “film” and its receptive apparatus. On the whole, Benjamin’s option for discontinuity has given new intellectual appeal to our worn-out metaphors of redemption and revolution.

On the other hand—and this second aspect of his history writing is not necessarily in contradiction to its elements of discontinuity—Benja-