

Core Course I
Essay block 3
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Sensible or Senseless?

Reconsidering the Anaesthetic Subject in the Age of Digital Reproduction

Introduction

Each iteration of new media technologies seems to be served with a corresponding pessimistic rhetoric, and so too with the arrival of the Internet. Just as during the inception of TV, the Internet is criticised for the common exposure to otherwise extreme stimuli such as violence or sexuality. Such exposure creates a “desensitisation” amongst users, the Internet sceptic might say, resulting in a “numbing or blunting of emotional reactions to events” (Funk et al. 25). Empirical studies show that Internet-specific characteristics create quick shots of dopamine in the brain, potentially even leading to what is now called Internet Addiction Disorder, which might lead to depression, anxiety, hostility, interpersonal sensitivity, and psychoticism (Cash et al. 294). Extreme measures such as “Digital Detox” camps promise to combat the desensitisation by removing the digital so one

can “disconnect to reconnect” (Haber) to regain their original, sensible selves. As such, modern technophobes fear the numbing impact the Internet can have on the senses.

The Frankfurter Schule’s critical theorists were early to note media technologies changing and troubling the human sensorium. Walter Benjamin argued that the medium through which the human senses are organised changes “the mode of human sense perception” and with it “humanity's entire mode of existence” (222). However, as his observations stem from Europe in 1936, relating them to the contemporary Internet age risks overlooking the historical context in which they were written. Nevertheless, attempts to revisit Benjamin’s thought for the contemporary media society are widespread (e.g. Groys, Hansen). In illustrating the relationship between the senses and the Internet, this essay provides a theoretical overview of such an attempt, firstly by drawing from Susan Buck-Morss’ reconsideration of Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” in which she reconceptualises the term “aesthetics”. It then further contemporises Buck-Morss’ rereading of Benjamin through Boris Groys’ notion of the “opinionless” digital user, which he argues is stimulated by ritualised digital reproduction. It is subsequently argued that the affordances of the Internet allow for an efficient medium to determine the senses and undermine emancipatory political action, potentially exploiting the “anaestheticised”, opinionless digital user.

Reconsidering Benjamin and Aesthetics

In “Aesthetics and Anaesthetics”, Susan Buck-Morss offers a reconsideration of Walter Benjamin’s famous “Work of Art” essay, specifically his use of the notion of “aesthetics”. In the closing section, Benjamin states that aestheticisation of politics, leading to sensory alienation and the “destruction of aesthetic enjoyment” (242), can be countered by an emancipatory “politicising art”, which restores “the instinctual power of the human bodily senses” (Buck-Morss 5). Buck-Morss argues that this thesis shifts the conceptual underpinnings of “aesthetics”, as it denotes both the core of the problem as well as the end solution to “sensory alienation” (5). This leads her to etymologise the term in order to reconceptualise Benjamin’s use of it (4-6). Nowadays, aesthetics is usually associated with art or philosophy, but the term was originally understood in an empirical way as the “sensory experience of perception” and “that which is perceptive by feeling” (*Aisthisis* and *Aisthitikos* in Ancient Greek, 6). Aesthetics therewith denoted a form of cognition that is

“prior not only to logic but to meaning as well” (6). While one can reason on why it is one senses a particular feeling, this ratio is a matter after the fact, *a posteriori*. Aesthetics thus concerned a bodily, prelinguistic encountering of reality, and hence, the notion of aesthetics was not born within the field of art but that of science (6-7). In the modern era, aesthetics has since circulated in varying academic fields.

While aesthetics seemed to denote subjectivity per definition – aesthetics is what you feel, not what you think - a recurring theme related to the concept was *autogenesis*: the ability to be self-producing, of having total control (7-8). The Kantian view of modern man was idealised because he “distances” itself from direct sensuous impulses such as fear; its “potency is in its lack of response” (8). Throughout his writing, Kant idealised the autogenetic promise of an aesthetic judgement that is “impervious to all his sense-giving information of danger” (Buck-Morss 9) where the aesthetic system blocks out the fear of our “physical impotence” in favour of an aesthetic reaction that “reveals in us a superiority over nature” (Kant 120-121). As such, idealising the rational “warrior” thrived during the nineteenth century for its “aesthetics” of being sense-dead (9-10). From this perspective, the autogenetic subject seems utterly autonomous and rational, but Buck-Morss critiques this view by contextualising being “sense-dead” as being *anaestheticised*, where the organisms senses are numbed instead of “distanced” (17-18). She notes how Benjamin drew from a Freudian thesis that regarded consciousness as shielding human from the everyday shocks in the modern society (Buck-Morss 16). In creating a shield for excessive energies (a Benjaminian blasé attitude), one is able to cope with the overloading of stimuli in modern society. As such, “response to stimuli *without* thinking has become necessary for survival” (Buck-Morss 16). This becomes a dangerous dynamic for Buck-Morss, as she argues that:

“The dialectical reversal, whereby aesthetics changes from a cognitive mode of being “in touch” with reality to a way of blocking out reality, *destroys the human organism’s power to respond politically* even when self-preservation is at stake.” (Buck-Morss 18, italics added)

The numbed anaesthetic subject blocks out reality to cope with the surplus stimuli and coincidentally gives up its political agency. Where anaesthetics in the Kantian sense would

be viewed as a precondition for rational agency, it now becomes a paralysed mode of sensing everything but registering nothing (Buck-Morss 18).

Because of the numbed senses, technology plays a crucial mediating role for the anaestheticised subject. In citing Jünger, Buck-Morss argues that technologies become new sense organs, shaping the way reality is understood (32-33). Buck-Morss proposes the “synaesthetic system” – a notion of the human perceptive system that considers both internal aesthetics as well as external objects that shape such perceptions as part of the same whole. As this subject-object leap merges sensorial internalities and technological externalities, technological mediation becomes highly determining in this system of sense perception. As such, Buck-Morss, following Benjamin, illustrates how technological objects like the camera allowed to mediate reality with a statistical, surgical perspective, providing distance to endure “the shocks of modernity without pain” (33). Instead of the self-contained, autogenetic aesthetics, technologies “provide the porous surface between inner and outer, both perceptual organ and mechanism of defense” (33). Therewith, the self-contained autogenetic subject has made way for the technological anaestheticised subject.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the concept of the Kantian autogenetic subject was further divided as collectivism and large institutions lead to thought on the human subject as being disciplined by the techno-institution it was operating in: “the “self-made man” was entrepreneur of a large corporation; the “warrior” was general of a technologically sophisticated war machine” (Buck-Morss 29). As such, it became apparent that a techno-institutional mediation had manipulative effects on the mass (Buck-Morss 29). Here Buck-Morss returns to Benjamin’s fear of the politicization of aesthetics, by illustrating how fascism tactically deployed aesthetics that provided a “reassuring perception of the rationality of the whole of the social body” (35). For instance, holistic schemas of the social body provided rational plans of society which gave the mass a role as an agency of observer of its own social body, but at the same time keeping them as subordinate citizens. Buck-Morss draws from Nazi-Germany to argue that even though the masses were politically participating, fascism’s “aesthetics allows an *anaesthetization* of reception, a viewing of the “scene” with disinterested pleasure” (38). The mass was given a sense of agency yet “remain[ed] undisturbed by the spectacle of its own manipulation” (Buck-Morss 38). This way, the inability “to respond politically” was exploited on a societal scale through the

pleasure and reassurance of aesthetics, which in fact made tactical use of the anaestheticised mind.

(An)aesthetics and Digital Reproduction

As my introductory paragraphs illustrates, the discourse on techno-institutions decreasing human agency through a numbing of the senses is still actively present in the Internet age. Boris Groys provides a contemporary account of the numbed, anaestheticised subject in the digital realm. Like Buck-Morss, he offers a reconsideration of Benjamin, but focussing on how digital reproduction can cause a decrease in human autonomy and subsequently numbing it from critical contemplation. To develop this argument, Groys first draws the quite unusual connection between religious fundamentalists and Internet users. He considers religion not as a shared set of opinions, but a set of rituals (5). Because of this, the vehement conviction in a certain religion is paradoxically disconnected from its spiritual, inner meaning as it avoids contemplating on the message's content but rather tries to repeat the form of the religious practices. As the religious tasks focus on the mere repetition of formal rituals, it justifies "the obligation to have an opinion" (5). This repetition of the form is devoid of difference in inner meaning as it is a mere *literal repetition*: "a material difference is now just a difference – there is no essence, no being and no meaning underlying such a formal difference at a deeper level" (6). As such, literal reproduction becomes a numbing ritual practice due to its meaninglessness and opinionlessness.

While at this point Groys' thesis mainly reads like a critique on religion, he makes a turn to the digital by critiquing user the Internet of the same opinionlessness. Groys laments in a society where "everything reproduces itself" (1), the constant reproduction of messages on the Internet affords a similar "opinionlessness" of ritualised religion. Drawing from Benjamin and Deleuze he states:

"The difference between the repetitiveness of religious ritual and the literal reproduction of the world of appearances disappears. One might say that religious ritual is the prototype of the mechanical reproduction that dominated Western

culture during the modern period, and which, to a certain degree, continues to dominate the contemporary world.” (Groys 7)

For Groys, the digital has only accelerated the opinionless sharing of form instead of contemplation, as “digitization seems to guarantee a literal reproduction of a text or an image more effectively than any other known technique” (8). This endless reproduction muddles the origins of digital artefacts and with it transforms digital culture into a hyperreal realm. As Benjamin himself writes, “The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity” (220). As “digital images have the propensity to generate, to multiply, and to distribute themselves almost anonymously through the open fields of contemporary communication”, the user is required to form an opinion “about what is identical and what is different, or about what is original and what is copy” (Groys 9). Because distinctions between original and fake are highly ambiguous in the digital, Groys argues that forming such an opinion is more of an “act of belief, an effect of a sovereign decision that cannot be fully justified empirically or logically” (9). One does not have to look far to find concrete examples of the problems of dealing with such trusts and distrusts in origins of digital artefacts: the muddled origins of online (fake) news, complicated copyright lawsuits over reproduced intellectual property, etcetera. This ambiguousness is even captured in “Poe’s law”, which states that sincerity and insincerity are nearly indistinguishable in the digital realm without overt indications (Aikin 1). (Fittingly enough, this ‘law’ originated through a discussion at *christianforums.org* on the sincerity of one’s religious posts, buttressing Groys’ analogy.) Dealing with digital reproduction therefore becomes a form of opinionless belief rather than critical engagement.

Conceptually, a link between the Buck-Morss numbed anaesthetic subject and Groys’ opinionless digital user arises: endless digital stimuli are perceived by the Internet user (think of “endless scrolling”), and in being highly ambiguous in their messaging, creating an overloading of the senses that requires not only an anaestheticised mind, but now also an unfounded, opinionless belief in the sincerity of digital content. Additionally, as Groys laments, digital interfaces seem to anaesthetise the mind just as drugs and spectacle can do, for instance by unloading cognitive strain on the user. In drawing from Groys, Benjamin Bratton illustrates this cognitive pleasure by arguing how “we, the Users of Google, need

not exercise our faculties of memory to remember anything, it seems, and so the mind is free to wander through a vast flat moment, presented as an endless archive” (240-241). While the digital user might still be an observer,

“Without the necessary and difficult investment of interpretation and an exacting self-transformation into the position of faith through the physical training of repetition and memorialization, however arbitrary it may be, [...] the rebinding (and the religion itself) is empty.” (Bratton 241)

This way the offloading of the cognitive strain creates both an emptiness in personal observation and interpretation (Bratton 240), anaesthetising the digital dweller of any need for critical thinking.

However, the paradoxical outcome of this digital anaesthesia is not a disappearance of politics, but rather what could be called a techno-institutionally determined politics. Bratton articulates this point by arguing how sense perception through the mediation of digital interfaces is mostly determined by its institutional owners, not its users (241). Its generation of surplus data makes the digital user the perfect target for micro-targeting, nudging their behaviour at interfacial touchpoints, be it for commercial or political ends (Bratton 241). While the infinite digital stimuli and the ambiguity of authenticity makes the digital user develop an anaestheticised, numbed mind, digital interfaces still invite this desensitised user to politically participate because of a low barrier to political action; one merely has to click a like-button for instant political participation. Such online action has often been criticised as lethargic substitutes for meaningful political resistance, mockingly called “clicktivism” or “slacktivism”: minimal political agency though responding to calls such as “Click here to sign the petition!” or “Like and share if you agree!”. For Groys, this form of political action would be seen as literal, opinionless reproduction instead of contemplation on the inner message because such form does not invite to falsify a party’s claims but rather invites participation in the mere reproduction and sharing of the message. As such, this lower barrier of political engagement on the Internet affords the anaestheticised user to “act politically” even though critical thinking or political struggling is not necessary. While in no way are fascism and the digital equalised here, following Groys argument, the digital user does take up a similar double role of “both an observer

and an inert mass being formed and shaped” (Buck-Morss 38) seen in fascism because “the experience of faith, now without opinion or interpretation, is outsourced to cognitive prostheses”, most often owned by commercial tech-institutions (Bratton 240). “Responding politically” (Buck-Morss 18) has this way become just easy enough to perform in an instant, even while being anaestheticised by the digital ambiguity and overwhelming stimuli.

The Internet as anaestheticising, crippling the ability of political action might seem contradictory, as the Internet was initially heralded as democratising political action: everyone was free to have a say on a level playing field, reviving the image of the Kantian autogenetic subject. This optimist rhetoric of the Internet’s infant era is echoing Benjamin’s argument that technological reproduction decreased the dependence on rigid ritualised forms and favouring “another practice – politics” (224). Benjamin called for equilibrium between humans and technology, in which technology gave emancipatory tools to the viewer to contemplatively deal with a vast societal and technological apparatus (Hansen 393). However, accepting Groys’ and Bratton’s theses on the ritualised messaging on the Internet, this wish has not yet been fulfilled, as technology or its corporate owners are often the determinant force in the synaesthetic system. As Miriam Hansen puts it:

“The unprecedented acceleration of technological innovation and circulation have created conditions in which consciousness is more than ever inadequate to the state of technological development, its power to destroy and enslave human bodies, hearts and minds.” (Hansen 394)

In line with Bratton and Groys, Hansen also notes technologically mediated fundamentalisms as one of the challenges resulting from this alienation. On a more positive note, Hansen admits that “imaginative practices and have opened up new modes of publicness that already enact a different, and potentially alternative, engagement with technology” (394). To explore these perhaps more “sensible” forms of engagement, Hansen calls for a renewed attention in critical thinking on the aesthetics and digital mediation (394-395). The challenge is therefore in re-interpretating and reconsidering Benjamin’s thought in order to contemporise this relation, not only to lay bare the cruxes, but also to look for sensible relations between aesthetics and digital technologies.

CONCLUSION

The negative impact of technological mediation on the senses, diminishing emancipating political agency was already conceptualised by Benjamin in the 1930s. Since then, numerous attempts to contemporise Benjamin's thought have been undertaken, e.g. by Buck-Morss. Her concept of the anaestheticised subject, blocking out the overloading stimuli in modern society, can be related to Groys' notion of ritualised opinionlessness on the Internet. For Groys, the endless digital stimuli are highly ambiguous in their messaging, which requires the digital user to be both emotionally indifferent to the excess of messages as well as dependant on the "faith" their sincerity, stimulating a numbing of the senses and reliance on ambiguity instead of critical thinking. As the often corporate owners of these digital interfaces in controlling the technologies nudge the synaesthetic system to particular ends, digital reproduction might not have brought about a democratic rise in political participation Benjamin hoped for. However, it should be noted that this text has predominantly offered a techno-sceptic perspective. Both Groys and Bratton offer a pessimistic account, while Buck-Morss consideration of technology as the determinant force in the synaesthetic system might border technological deterministic notions. Benjamin's faith in a greater opportunity for emancipating politics through technological reproduction can be taken up as a positive way forward, and further deliberation on digital reproduction and the senses might provide more sensible accounts on how to best appropriate this relation.

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