The Second Media Age

Mark Poster
The Second Media Age
The Second Media Age

Mark Poster

Polity Press
Contents

Acknowledgements vii

PART I THEORETICAL RECONSIDERATIONS 1

1 Social Theory and the New Media 3
2 Postmodern Virtualities 23
3 Postmodernity and the Politics of Multiculturalism 43
4 The Mode of Information and Postmodernity 57
5 Databases as Discourse, or Electronic Interpellations 78
6 Critical Theory and TechnoCulture: Habermas and Baudrillard 95

PART II MEDIAS 117

7 Politics in the Mode of Information: Spike Lee’s Do the Right Thing 119
8 RoboBody 136
9 What Does Wotan Want? Ambivalent Feminism in Wagner’s Ring 141
10 War in the Mode of Information 156

Notes 161
Index 184
For Carol
Acknowledgements

Many people deserve my thanks for comments and suggestions with this book. Members of the Critical Theory Institute continue to serve me as a unique academic environment in which critique is forthright but constructive. Over the years relations of trust have grown there which nurture intellectual development and discussion. My friend and colleague Jon Wiener gave me excellent advice on several of the chapters. Rob Kling read several chapters, offering valuable suggestions, and made me aware of many new works on topics I treat. Versions of the chapters were presented at many campuses and conventions at which I received much valuable criticism which I accepted as gracefully as I was able and for which I am very grateful. Ideas for this volume were also formed in my classes. Graduate students in History and in UC Irvine’s Emphasis in Critical Theory were often more helpful than they can know in assisting me to clarify issues, discover new texts and revise old assumptions. Carol Starcevic provided assiduous, helpful readings of many chapters.

PART I

THEORETICAL RECONSIDERATIONS
Social Theory and the New Media

The twentieth century has witnessed the introduction of communications systems that allow a wide distribution of messages from one point to another, conquering space and time first through electrification of analogue information, then through digitalization. Among critical social theorists there has been a debate over the political effects of these technologies, with one side (Benjamin, Enzensberger, McLuhan) arguing for potential democratization and the other side (Adorno, Habermas, Jameson) seeing the dangers to liberty as predominant. This debate occurred at a time when the broadcast model of communications prevailed. In film, radio and television, a small number of producers sent information to a large number of consumers. With the incipient introduction of the information “superhighway” and the integration of satellite technology with television, computers and telephone, an alternative to the broadcast model, with its severe technical constraints, will very likely enable a system of multiple producers/distributors/consumers, an entirely new configuration of communication relations in which the boundaries between those terms collapse. A second age of mass media is on the horizon. At this critical junction, I shall review the debate over the relation between technology, culture and politics of the first media age, gauging the extent of the value of those positions for an analysis of an emerging new technocultural arrangement. Although one portion of this discussion, the Adorno–Benjamin debate on mass culture, has been analyzed many times, I shall focus on the issue of communications technology, a topic which has been largely overlooked. I shall concentrate my attention on the problem of the construction of the
subject in relation to these technologies, the issue of the body and the question of postmodernity. Throughout the chapter my chief concern shall be the development of a critical social theory that accounts for the impending massive cultural reorganizations of the second media age. My motivation is neither to celebrate nor to condemn these prospects but to indicate their importance for cultural change.

The general political question that haunts the discussion of the media for critical social theory is the stalled dialectic. The parties to the debate acknowledge the absence of an oppositional political force that might challenge the status quo. For some the working class, in whom much hope was placed by Marxist theory, has been politically nullified to no small extent by the media but in the widest sense was assimilated into modern society as part of a baleful mass. For others modern society achieved an integration of the working class largely without overt political repression, through the operations of what Antonio Gramsci termed "hegemony." While these positions have a great deal in common, their difference lies in how the popular groups are regarded: in the former the working class has become an inert mass, manipulated by the media and popular culture generally. For the latter the dominant forces have been able to establish a statis but resistance continues at the micro-level of everyday life. The first position is characteristic of most members of the Frankfurt School; the latter is typical of the cultural studies group and of Michel de Certeau in France. Feminists and postcolonial theorists align themselves on either side of the issue. The question I wish to raise is to what extent does the debate hinge on a certain understanding of technology, one characteristic of the broadcast phase of its development which is in the process of being supplanted by a much different configuration?

I Critical Social Theory Confronts the First Media Age

Representative of the general attitude of the majority of intellectuals toward the electronic media, writer and critic Georges Duhamel refers to the cinema as "a pastime for helots, a diversion for the uneducated, wretched, worn-out creatures who are consumed by their worries . . ., a spectacle which requires no concentration and presupposes no intelligence . . ., which kindles no light in the heart and awakens
Social Theory and the New Media

no hope other than the ridiculous one of someday becoming a ‘star’ in Los Angeles. With these harsh words Duhamel expresses his revulsion toward mass culture, finding in it no redeeming value, not even in some small corner. His judgment blankets the entire extent of the domain, disbursing an even intolerance without the slightest qualification. His stance emits a steadfast disgust, remarkable in its purity and consistency. Surely not all intellectuals who found fault with movies and other electronic communications systems were as absolute in their condemnation. But many have been just as negative, just as scornful, even those who have had politically motivated sympathy for the consumers of these media and interests in the quality of daily life; those, in other words, who located the hopes of mankind for emancipation from domination in the vicissitudes of common folk. For modernist intellectuals, cultural capital or distinction in Bourdieu’s sense varies inversely with one’s contact with the media.

Duhamel’s characterization of film bespeaks the viewpoint of the intellectual and artistic elite of modernity, consigning the masses to the unrelieved hell of popular culture. His bleak portrait enacts a division between his own tastes and those of everyman and everywoman; it installs a boundary around the art that he enjoys and relegates everything else (film, radio and television) to a valueless nether world that is little different from commerce, industry and other regions of modernity. Duhamel incorporates the media into the general contempt which many artists and intellectuals display toward modern society in general. One function of this contempt is to preserve high culture as separate and precious. For the Duhamels of the twentieth century, I contend, this contempt is more significantly motivated by the deep need to reject the media a priori, without careful investigation, because something about it threatens their identity as intellectuals. This attitude, I suggest, continues today among many, especially in the disciplines of the humanities, foreclosing a sustained inquiry into the media that is attentive to the enormous fascination they hold for so many people. I suggest further that something about what I call the first media epoch, the one dominated by the broadcast model of few producers and many consumers of messages, offends the intellectual’s sense of authorship and that this is so regardless of the qualities that pertain to the cultural objects in question. First epoch media unsettle the autonomous subject of modernity. Intellectuals of this period were and are largely incapable of receiving messages in the form of film, radio and television. And this
failure prevented the critical social theorists among this group from estimating the changes in the culture of the majority of the population, particularly in its relation to politics.

Even a cursory glance at the writings of the Frankfurt School confirms this judgment. Writers in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* probed the workings of the capitalist economy and liberal ideology with subtlety and sophistication. Whatever disgust they may have harbored for modern industrial organizations and institutions of the nation-state did not prevent them from looking closely and effectively at their workings, from extracting a nuanced account of what were, in their terms, the benefits and the costs of these activities, and their consequences for the project of enlightenment. Such was not the case when it came to examining the media. Here judgments lost their acuity and descended into polemic and vituperation. In perhaps the best and most influential example of Frankfurt School writing on the media, Adorno and Horkheimer, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, betray the insensitivity of the modernist intellectual for the cultural experiences of the population. They first note the chief technological character of the first media age: “The technical contrast between the few production centers and the large number of widely dispersed consumption . . .” (p. 121). Next they indicate their difficulty with the situation of the subject in the modern media: “The step from the telephone to the radio has clearly distinguished the roles. The former still allowed the subscriber to play the role of subject, and was liberal. The latter is democratic: it turns all participants into listeners and authoritatively subjects them to broadcast programs which are all exactly the same . . . (p. 122). The gigantic fact that speech penetrates everywhere replaces its content . . . The inherent tendency of radio is to make the speaker’s word, the false commandment, absolute. A recommendation becomes an order” (p. 159). For Adorno and Horkheimer the broadcast model of the first media age was the practical equivalent to fascism.

Ten years later Adorno wrote an essay on television with very much the same results. Reactions to television are not those of the “liberal” subject, independent and reflective, but are unconscious and massified: “The repetitiveness, the selfsameness, and the ubiquity of modern mass culture tend to make for automatized reactions and to weaken the forces of individual resistance.” Adorno attributes to the purely technological features of the broadcast system – the ability to disseminate widely and instantaneously an identical information signal – the effect of reversing the project of Enlightenment. On a slightly
more positive side the media, to Adorno, are a force of solidarity in an increasingly diffuse society: "The more inarticulate and diffuse the audience of modern mass media seems to be, the more mass media tend to achieve their 'integration'" (p. 220). But the "integration" is placed in quotes, suggesting its inauthenticity, and Adorno continues the argument with a strong whiff of Duhamel's revulsion: "...the majority of television shows today aim at producing...the very smugness, intellectual passivity, and gullibility that seem to fit in with totalitarian creeds, even if the explicit surface message of the shows may be antitotalitarian" (p. 222). In an unacknowledged behaviorist flurry and without any empirical basis but his own imperial authority, Adorno concludes his jeremiad with a statement that the consequence of the media on the population is a dumb stupefaction: "The more stereotypes become reified and rigid in the present setup of cultural industry, the less people are likely to change their preconceived ideas with the progress of their experience" (p. 229).

Perhaps the epitome of Adorno's position on the media came in "On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening," an essay from 1938, well before he developed the concept of the culture industry. If Adorno had any area of expertise outside of philosophy, it was music, and his conclusions about contemporary music are stark. At stake is nothing less than "the liquidation of the individual" (p. 276). In this essay Adorno extends Marx's analysis of the fetishism of commodities to the domain of music appreciation, as in the following example: "The consumer is really worshipping the money that he himself has paid for the ticket to the Toscanini concert" (p. 278). If the "fetish-character in music" is explained by classic Marxist concepts extended to the cultural domain, the "regression in listening" requires the innovation of technological determinism. Adorno's discussion of listening shifts genres from classical to popular music and relies primarily on the radio as causal agent: "Regressive listening is tied to production by the machinery of distribution..." (p. 287). The media of the radio producers "deconcentrated" listeners who use/abuse music as background noise or "mere" entertainment. The apotheosis of "fetishism" and "regression" occurs again through the influence of technology: "Of all fetishistic listeners, the radio ham is perhaps the most complete. It is irrelevant to him what he hears or even how he hears; he is only interested in the fact that he hears... With the same attitude, countless radio listeners play with the feedback or the sound dial..." (p. 293). For Adorno, then, radio destroys musical taste, lowers the
level of general culture and contributes to the possible demise of democracy.

In response John Mowitt contends that in Adorno’s critique of distracted listening the subject presupposed by him is the vision-dominated subject of the print era. Relying very much on McLuhan’s theory of the sensory transformation of the media, Mowitt argues that electronic media “reintegrate” the senses, effectively nullifying the basis of Adorno’s position. For my purposes the value of Mowitt’s essay is that it underscores the unreflected and limited figure of the subject in Adorno’s theory of the media, one that greatly detracts from its ability to develop a critical theory of that domain.

The very serious question for critical social theory at stake in Adorno and Horkheimer’s remarks on radio and television is the relation between technology and culture. Without raising this issue at the general level, they argue that technology, in this case radio, in itself determines its effect. Because it is a one-way transmission with no reply possible, radio produces a language of command. Surprisingly these advocates of total human liberation emerge as technological determinists. In their effort to understand how the culture of capitalism undermines the dialectic, how it transforms the working class from a potentially revolutionary subject into a passive consumer, a decidedly conservative political force, Adorno and Horkheimer bypass the cultural level in favor of technological determinism. In their analysis they configure the working class or the popular forces as passive and inert, mirroring the critique that they desire to provide. Their logic runs: (1) since World War I, the working class has not been a politically effective negation of capitalism; (2) the “culture industry” mediates between the relations of production and politics, defusing the dialectic; (3) a chief reason for its success are the electronic media which introduce authoritarian voices in everyday life. The radio monologue is their deus ex machina, a magical device that transforms free agents into passive victims. Behind this logic, I contend, lies the problematic binary of the subject as autonomous/heteronomous: if the subject as radio audience cannot enter the dialogue, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, it is unfree. If the process of subject constitution in media communications were comprehended without this binary, a more complex, nuanced and perhaps less bleak conclusion might emerge from the analysis, one that might account for the cultural level of reception and modulate the rigid determinism of radio technology. Bound to the logocentric subject of modern theory, Adorno and Horkheimer are unable to see...
the popular audience of radio as anything other than heteronomous and therefore attribute this enslavement to the technology.¹⁰

Technology itself, even the technology of cultural reproduction, did not necessarily evoke such animus from Adorno. His discussion of the phonograph, for example, is balanced and not blind to certain benefits of the device. In reference to the phonograph Adorno writes, "The ambiguity of the results of forward-moving technology . . . confirms the ambiguity of the process of forward-moving rationality as such."¹¹ Adorno admitted certain benefits of technological mediation, almost exclusively, it must be noted, in the domain of classical music. And these benefits, it must also be noted, hinge upon the ability of the phonograph to confirm and even enhance the consumer’s character as an autonomous, critical subject. The phonograph permits the permanent recording of music, saving it from oblivion and permitting the listener repeated auditions.¹² Adorno comprehended the technological basis of the phonograph record (inscriptions in vinyl analogous to sound waves). He also discovered that the long-playing record permitted the uninterrupted listening to a complete movement of Beethoven’s Third Symphony, concluding that on this basis alone it deserved praise.¹³ But his recognition of the virtues of long-playing records came in 1969, almost two decades after their inception. In a well-researched essay regarding Adorno’s position on the media, Thomas Levin calls attention to these anomalies, as well as others concerning film and radio, regarding them as a basis to “reconsider his position on mass media and technology in general.”¹⁴ While it is good to learn that Adorno’s hostility to the mass media was not hard-fast, the critical theorist might do better, I contend, in analyzing his deep limitations on the question of technology because they are more characteristic and have had infinitely wider impact. The purpose of doing so, however, is not to condemn the person or even belittle his extraordinary theoretical abilities but to develop further the interpretive powers of critical theory.

The type of intellectual which Adorno represents shies away from media culture and from technology in general in order to preserve the position of the autonomous subject. Adorno was quite aware of this defensive posture. In the introduction to Minima Moralia he wrote with remarkable reflexivity, “For since the overwhelming objectivity of historical movement in its present phase consists so far only in the dissolution of the subject, without yet giving rise to a new one, individual experience necessarily bases itself on the old subject, now historically condemned, which is still for-itself, but no longer in-
itself.” Trapped within the binary autonomy/heteronomy, Adorno saw no alternative to the modernist subject: either that subject existed or it was “dissolved” leaving no subject at all, just a mere thing, an inert mass. This degree zero of the subject, one who is only “for-itself” hovering above social space in a remote cloud of critique, was an outcome, Adorno thought, of the twin scourges of the twentieth century – both the culture industry and fascism: “In face of the totalitarian unison with which the eradication of difference is proclaimed as a purpose in itself, even part of the social force of liberation may have temporarily withdrawn to the individual sphere. If critical theory lingers there, it is not only with a bad conscience.”

In these passages, Adorno at once recognizes the subject as historically constructed and pulls back from that recognition. The “objectivity of the historical moment” liquidates the subject and no “new one” has appeared. These phrases suggest that subjects are constructed and destroyed in social conditions, although no specific mechanisms of the process are here indicated. In other places, as we have seen above, technologies such as the radio and film are endowed with the powers of subject dissolution. Adorno recognizes the phenomena of war as an accelerator of such practices. In the following example, he goes so far as to name “experience” itself as a casualty of new communications technologies under conditions of war:

The total obliteration of the war by information, propaganda, commentaries, with camera-men in the first tanks and war reporters dying heroic deaths, the mish-mash of enlightened manipulation of public opinion and oblivious activity: all this is another expression for the withering of experience, the vacuum between men and their fate, in which their real fate lies. It is as if the reified, hardened plaster-cast of events takes the place of events themselves. Men are reduced to walk-on parts in a monster documentary film which has no spectators, since the least of them has his bit to do on the screen.

In this perspective, war and communications technologies are a frightful duo. One recalls the film The Great Man (1957), in which America’s favorite media personality, now reporting on the war from the front lines, is revealed as a fraud who used advanced technology to dub in sounds from the battlefield while he remained in safety in the rear. Like Adorno, the film depicts war and communications technologies as “dehumanizing,” instead of understanding the process, as Paul Virilio does in War and Cinema, as a process of reconfiguration, not one of pure loss: “For men at war, the function