

Power and Social Control – Walter Benjamin

Imperialistic war is a rebellion of technology which collects, in the form of “human material,” the claims to which society has denied its natural material. Instead of draining rivers, society directs a human stream into a bed of trenches; instead of dropping seeds from airplanes, it drops incendiary bombs over cities; and through gas warfare the aura is abolished in a new way (Benjamin, 1936).

Walter Benjamin's essay *The Work of Art in the age of Mechanical Reproduction* was written in 1936, in the lead up to World War two, a time troubled by an extreme sense of political urgency (Sinah, 2007). His concerns that mass media reproduction alienated the aura from the original artwork led to his ideas that; capitalist societies smothered the artist within the person as well as the art itself,

Each person in the line worked on only a very small piece of the item. In this way, no single person had any real ownership of the item produced at the end. This is because each of them only made a small piece of the whole. This left people with a feeling of emptiness. They no longer made whole things for themselves that they could take pride in.’ (*The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction. P2, 2009*)

He also believed that war associated propaganda was a powerful desensitizing method; the violence, horror and death associated with war could be over shadowed through mass media depictions of national unity and triumph. War lost its aura as propaganda convinced people that they must go to war in order to protect themselves and to be ‘mighty’ as a nation.

The danger is that we have so separated these senses from our immediate bodily integrated experience that they are alienated and they allow us, he says in the artwork essay, to contemplate human destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the highest order. This is the kind of aestheticism of politics which fascism then builds on. (*Susan Buck-Morss, One Way Street: Fragments for Walter Benjamin by John Hughes, 2013*).

In many ways, *Benjamin's* concerns about capitalist structures and propaganda systems destroying authenticity, and being used as a means of mass control, are still relevant today. In capitalist societies, political ideals of freedom, independence and opportunity are promoted, through various streams of media, as privileges everyone is entitled to. (*Capitalism: A love Story, 2014*). Media companies aesthetically appeal to natural human desires, displaying images of healthy bodies, nature, sex, luxury and freedom, in order to sell a product.

‘...be smart about how to catch people’s attention—and that means taking advantage of what matters most to people: their five senses’ (*Maguire, 2008*)

These representations have become so deeply ingrained in people, that if they don’t achieve the level of success seemingly available to them, within a system that claims to support them, ‘they’ are considered failures by themselves and by others (*Psywar, 2013*). Their own values, talents and beliefs, (their auras), are diminished within a system that tells them they can have it all, but is ultimately designed to fail them, because - ‘...*freedom for some turns into repression for others*’ (*Why Marx Was Right, 2012*).

Benjamin's ideas that war-time propaganda diminishes the aura of war are also relevant in current times. With expansive worldwide news coverage, it is unlikely that the blatant Nazi Germany type of propaganda that Benjamin witnessed would ever happen again –

‘The third Reich is a train that does not leave until everyone is on board.’ (Benjamin, 1932)

However, media coverage is certainly effective in stirring up fear, insecurity and hatred within communities on the subject of war, at the same time as convincing them that aggressive actions are justified and in their best interest.

In Australia, recent headline news has been focused on ‘potential’ terrorist attacks on homeland, after authorities successfully immobilised an *ISIS* terror plot that involved the beheading of random civilians on Australian territory.

'The horror of Islamic State Jihadism has been brought home by an alleged plot to kidnap a random Australian off a Sydney street and behead them.' (Kerin, 2014)

Dramatic images of terrorists being captured, have impassioned Australians, whose experience of the War on Terror, thus far, had been from a distance – which had perhaps desensitized them. Headline word usage such as; horror, Islamic State Jihadism, terror attacks, random beheadings, conspiracy and gruesome, serve to create fear amongst the nation. While details of swift government and police action, like; officers raiding homes before dawn, fourteen people arrested, 800 police involved in the raids - make people feel safe and protected. (Kerin, 2014)

With an abundance of emotionally charged national coverage, coupled with longstanding political agendas, Walter Benjamin's arguments would affirm the need to question the 'aura' of the information being presented in Australian media and the influence it has over its people.

All efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war.
(Benjamin, 1936)

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