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Technologised Consumer Culture: The Adorno-Benjamin Debate and the Reverse Side of Politicisation

Abstract

This paper reanimates the Adorno-Benjamin debate to investigate the potential of contemporary technologised consumer culture to become a space for bottom-up political agency and resistance. For both Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin, the technological advancement of the twentieth century had an inherently irrational character, as evidenced by the self-destructive tendencies of humanity during the Second World War. Nonetheless, the thinkers famously disagreed when it came to the implications of the marriage between technology and mass culture. Discerning its potential for the mobilisation of the masses, Benjamin believed that technology would politicise mass culture, allowing society to employ it for its political ends – an idea which Adorno debunked. Technologised consumer culture has noticeably evolved since the time of the debate. Nevertheless, revisiting the debate is necessary to understand a sharp contradiction between the expanded possibilities for political participation and the return of the ‘auratic’ or cultic function of technologised consumer culture. At the same time, the paper shows that technology does politicise consumer culture. However, the pitfall lies in that the politicisation is done through technology as a tool, which is vulnerable to appropriation, granting those who are in the position to control it a substantial political resource. Consequently, the paper argues that the politicisation of consumer culture risks having a reverse effect of facilitating the aestheticising of politics – turning politics into a spectacle.

Keywords

Technology, consumer culture, the Adorno-Benjamin debate, politicisation, resistance

The Adorno-Benjamin dispute of the 1930s, which debated the emancipatory potential of mass art, is one of the most remarkable aesthetic controversies of the last century. Its magnitude was such that Walter Benjamin’s analysis of technological reproducibility of art – particularly his claim that it is ‘completely useless for the purposes of fascism’ – prompted Theodor Adorno to continue to reply to Benjamin in his numerous works until his death in 1969 (Benjamin, 2003 [1939]: 252; Krakauer, 1998: 50). For both Adorno and Benjamin, technological advances bear the danger of enabling large-scale manipulation and coercion. From this perspective, the fact that technological innovations have become an inseparable part of contemporary consumer culture is an issue that calls for urgent attention. At the same time, Benjamin’s account gives hope that the entry of technology into mass consumer culture could offer unique possibilities for its politicisation. Technology could transform consumer culture into a progressive force, building social resilience to any oppressive regime by virtue of the possibilities for political communication that modern technologies open. It is this idea that Adorno fiercely debunked.

The noticeably evolved character of technologised culture that is widely consumed today seems to change the dynamics of the debate. The turn towards participatory web cultures and prosumption, whereby individuals stand simultaneously as consumers and producers, calls for a reconsideration of the debate. Revisiting the Adorno-Benjamin dispute, this paper aims to analyse the potential of

contemporary technologised consumer culture to become a space for bottom-up political agency and resistance. Indeed, if consumerism is so deeply entrenched into the fabric of modern society, one way to deal with it could be to employ technologised consumer culture for the political empowerment of the masses. In so doing, the paper examines the possibility of, using Benjamin's term, politicisation of consumer culture through its interaction with technology.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, it reconstructs the two sides of the debate. Benjamin's insights into the decline of 'the aura' and the transformation of art into a vehicle of political communication are counterpoised with an exegesis of Adorno's critique. In dealing with the debate, the most important is to avoid approaching it from the position of who is right or wrong. As the following section illustrates, the debate reflects the ambiguity of contemporary technologised consumer culture, with its simultaneously progressive and regressive potentiality. On the one hand, in addition to endowing consumers with an agency, the new developments have provided unprecedented possibilities for social communication. On the other, their consumption is an investment into the structures, which, on a wider scale, disempower society. The contradictory nature of technologised consumer culture accounts for the combination of a 'progressive' prosumer agency and the return of the 'auratic' function of technologised consumer culture with all the power hierarchies it maintains. The final section problematises the idea of politicisation of consumer culture through technology. It questions the extent to which such politicisation is able to transform the way society is governed, given the tendency of technology to grant those who have control over it a substantial political resource. Since its recruitment for specific political goals, contemporary consumer culture is *de facto* politicised, but differently to the bottom-up way that Benjamin envisaged. What can be observed today is the juxtaposition of the new possibilities for political mobilisation and the emergence of new mechanisms through which it can be manipulated. In this case, politicisation is no antidote to the aestheticising of politics. In fact, the former has already created favourable conditions for the latter, as exemplified by the growing use of social media by populist leaders for the dissemination of their political performances.

The Adorno-Benjamin Debate

Writing against the backdrop of Nazism, both Adorno and Benjamin saw its roots to be in the very fabric of modernity and the latter's abuse of technology. According to Adorno, the efficiency of the Holocaust and its technological sophistication were expressions of the progressive domination over nature by humans. The mastery achieved over nature and the thoughtless fetishisation of technology, whereby technology becomes the end in itself, ushered in the self-enslavement of humanity. For Benjamin (in Simons, 2016: 48), such 'miscarried' reception of technology is symptomatic of a fundamental perversion in the relationship between the accelerated technological growth and the relations of production. The horrors of war are the result of the 'discrepancy between the enormous means of production and their inadequate use in the process of production'; between 'the gigantic power of technology and the minuscule moral illumination it affords' (Benjamin, 2003 [1939]: 270, 1979: 120). When the only use of nature is 'to dominate it and other men', means and ends become conflated (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 4). Power, progress and technological advancement are now goals of their own deployment – a mode of reasoning known as 'technological rationality' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 121). It is the rationality of domination *per se*, which has lost the very reason it claims to embody.

In their analysis of the phenomenon of authoritarian irrationalism witnessed in the twentieth century, Adorno and Benjamin emphasise that the cultural life of society played an important role in enabling mass manipulation and control. According to Adorno (1975a: 12), the 'culture industry', which includes all the products 'tailored for consumption by masses', is a compelling mechanism of the

homogenisation and totalisation of society. Crucially for Benjamin, aesthetics played a substantial role in bringing the Nazi regime into power. The organisation and mobilisation of the masses were actualised through the 'aestheticising of political life' (Benjamin 2003 [1939]: 269). Hence, mass cultural events organised by the Nazi party always stood out with their essentially political undertone. The self-alienation of humanity reached the point when it started 'experience[ing] its own annihilation as a supreme aesthetic pleasure. *Such is the aestheticising of politics, as practised by fascism*' (Benjamin 2003 [1939]: 269). Indeed, its regalia and spectacles made Nazism perhaps the most aesthetically obsessed regime in history. As Wolin (1994: 184) puts it, fascism turned the self-destruction of humanity 'into a grandiose and grotesque aesthetic pageant', turning death into an object of aesthetic contemplation.

If there were an early conclusion to be made at this point, it would be that consumer culture – its way of thinking, arts and institutions – is a powerful apparatus of mass mediation. Now, given the terrifying outcomes accompanying the technological advancement of humanity, what might be the implications of the entry of technology into consumer culture? In the wake of the omnipresence of the influence of technology in almost every sphere of contemporary consumer culture, it is vital to understand what Benjamin and Adorno have to say about this issue. Unexpectedly, here, their positions remarkably diverge.

Benjamin and the Transformed Character of Art

Warning against the juxtaposition of capitalism and technology, Benjamin, nonetheless, believes that the alignment of art and technology could bring the innervation and reinvigoration of the masses. Contrary to considering technology to be an enemy of humanity, Benjamin declares communism to be a harmonisation of the two (Simons, 2016). Bringing humanity and technology together is an essential goal because technology can liberate 'human being from drudgery' (Benjamin, 2008 [1936]: 45). In the wake of its historical transformation, art would play a prominent role in the empowerment of society.

In his famous 'The Work of Art' piece, written and revised between 1935 and 1939, Benjamin develops his analysis of the impact of technological reproducibility of art on society. Accordingly, the advent of photography and the increased intervention of technological means in the production of artworks have led to a crisis of art, changing both its mode of reception. Mechanical reproduction of artworks has resulted in the devaluation of their authenticity and uniqueness and, more importantly, the disintegration of the 'aura' of art that they sustained (Benjamin, 2003 [1939]). The aura is the source of authority of the work of art in its cultic form. It signifies the embeddedness of the artwork in the sphere of tradition, its unique distinctiveness and spatiotemporal specificity. According to Benjamin (1969 [1935]: 222), 'the "sense of the universal equality of things" has increased to such a degree that it extracts it even from a unique object by means of reproduction'. The 'exhibition value' has overtaken the 'cult value'; quality has lost to quantity.

Contrary to lamenting the disappearance of the aura, Benjamin arguably welcomes it (Demiryol, 2012). Its withering emancipates the work of art from the dependence on tradition, within which art was meaningful only in relation to the ritual. Ceasing to be an element of magic, the withering of the aura emancipates art 'from its parasitic subservience to ritual', including the hierarchies and social distinctions that it maintained (2003 [1939]: 256). Benjamin believes that technological reproducibility gives rise to 'new aesthetic techniques of representation and expression, which in turn produce new modalities of perception and articulation' (Schweppenhauser, 2009: 120). In this historical transformation, Benjamin 'delegates revolutionary Messianism to the technology of film' as a form of art that is nothing but a result of compiling a series of separate images and scenes (Koch, 2000: 206).

Entering its realm, people experience a malleable world where any constraints can be superseded with the help of technology. Film also challenges the previously dominant private and solitary settings in which the reception of art took place, 'collectivising' the experience of art by making it more accessible (Demiryol, 2012: 945). Simultaneous collective reception positions it particularly suitable for the dissemination of political message. Finally, the audience now takes an active role of a 'critic', implying its critical relation to film (Benjamin, 2008 [1936]: 260). Thus, film can '*train human beings in apperception and reactions needed to deal with a vast apparatus whose role in their lives is expanding almost daily*' (107-8).

In the years preceding his death in 1940, everything pointed to the demise of art and its full utilisation by the Nazi regime. Given this context, Benjamin sees that the only choice is to politicise art – to employ it for the political ends of society that stand in stark opposite to those of fascism or capitalism. Indeed, the shattering of the aura opens up enormous possibilities for the political mobilisation of mass culture and emergence of social consciousness. The crisis of art means that '*the whole social function of art is revolutionised*', and the relation of the masses to culture changes (Benjamin, 2003 [1939]: 257). Art has become mass art. The revolutionary potential of the technological reproducibility lies in the fact that it coincides with the earning of the masses for cultural and political self-determination. The politicisation of art encourages direct participation of the masses in the production of art, who are now critical of their conditions as a subject and endowed with power over cultural production. As a result, the social function of culture shifts its status as an object of aesthetic satisfaction to a tool of political communication.

Adorno's Critique

Technologies of aesthetic reproduction, Benjamin believed, will transform not only culture, but the whole of society. The confluence of art and technology will end bourgeois, authoritarian privilege and prepare the conditions for the emancipation of society. For Adorno, this same confluence has had a reverse effect. Adorno agrees with Benjamin that technological reproducibility has stripped the work of art of its unique artistic quality. However, whereas Benjamin is open to the new immersive qualities of film, Adorno is much more sceptical about the marriage between technology and culture. In fact, as D'Olimpio (2015: 623) said, 'Adorno feared the advent of the Hollywood Studio film as akin to Nazi propaganda'. This section examines Adorno's critique, which is vital for the critical engagement with contemporary transformations of technologised consumer culture in the sections thereafter.

For Adorno, Benjamin's fatal oversight lies in not being attentive enough to the manipulative and administrative employment of technologised culture that made Auschwitz possible. According to Adorno (in Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 120), 'films, radio and magazines make up a system which is uniform as a whole and in every part'. Mass media is 'democratic' merely in the sense that 'it turns all participants into listeners and authoritatively subjects them to broadcast programmes which are all exactly the same' (122). It is also successful in responding to popular demand, however simulated it might be. Otherwise, mechanical reproduction has totalised society *from above*, ensuring that every detail is 'stamped with sameness' (128). Mass media, whose coming Benjamin celebrates, cannot be revolutionary because it inevitably originates from the same technological production process, in the same economic conditions, as that which incubated fascism. The origin of mass media stems from neither a 'primary concern for the masses, nor of techniques of communication, but of the spirit which sufflates them, their master's voice' (Adorno, 1975a: 12). In short, contemporary technological

capabilities have simply facilitated the feeding of pre-digested cultural products to the masses, forcing their conformity and obedience.

Both Benjamin and Adorno can appreciate the magnitude of the ability of film to alter the human understanding of the world. However, contrary to being revolutionary, for Adorno, this ability merely restricts thinking to the limits dictated by film-makers and, by extension, the current system of relations. The audience is too afraid to lose the thread of the story to be able to think beyond it (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997). Thus, the problem is not so much in the passive consumption of visual narrative, as in that spectators are too active, yet in a superficial way. Meanwhile, film presents a distorted version of society consisting of a set of isolated moments. Adorno (in Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 132) sees 'the montage character of the culture industry, the synthetic, controlled mode of production of its cultural objects' as being key to controlling social perception. For Adorno, such representation eludes society in its totality, with all its contradictions and irrationality. It is the purpose of the culture industry to distort reality by fragmenting it into storylines in such a way as to simulate the resolution of contradictions and give a sense of rationality to the world.

Challenging Benjamin's belief in the intrinsic revolutionary spirit of the masses, Adorno (1977: 125) stresses that their interest in political empowerment does not change the fact that the masses 'bear all the marks of mutilation of the typical bourgeois character'. Like Benjamin, Adorno agrees that the cinema creates a perfect environment for the masses to influence each other's opinions. However, for Adorno (in Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 154), this is a prime testament of the illusion of individuality given by culture industry, for the individual opinion 'is tolerated only so long as [its] complete identification with the generality is unquestioned'. The proximity of art only facilitates the alienation and 'the progress of barbaric meaninglessness', making them even more inescapable (160). The result of the technological reproducibility of culture is 'the reduction of people to silence, the dying out of speech as expression, the inability to communicate at all' (Adorno, 1985: 271). If the Enlightenment is 'the progressive technical domination of nature', then the culture industry is the result of the Enlightenment turning against itself into 'mass deception' (Adorno, 1975a: 18). It eradicates, Adorno (19) concludes, 'autonomous, independent individuals who judge and decide consciously for themselves'.

Adorno, Benjamin or Both?

The simplicity of the question is disarming. It seems that the Adorno-Benjamin dispute has no imminent potential for resolution, thus, acquiring a form of antinomy, whereby neither of the positions can be sacrificed to one another (Wolin 1994: 197). Both perspectives have their shortcomings when taken individually. If implemented prematurely, Benjamin's solution risks heralding the false politicisation of aesthetics that could result in furthering the integration of mass culture into the exploitative social relations. At the same time, since the emergence of revisionist scholarship of audience reception in the 1980s (Fiske, 1986, Hall, 1980), Adorno has repeatedly come under scrutiny for not accounting for the presence of consumer resistance in the marketplace (Schor, 2007). Cultural and media studies scholars have debunked the assumption that consumers respond to the meanings promoted by culture industries in fixed, pre-determined ways (Rodríguez-Ferrándiz, 2014, Zajc, 2015). Hall (1980) notably argued for the necessity of breaking with the passive conceptions of the 'audience', reconceptualising it as an active and creative producer of meaning. According to Hall (130), in order to 'have an effect', entertain or persuade, the message promoted by the culture industry 'must first be appropriated as a meaningful discourse and meaningfully decoded'. Adorno's refusal to recognise it

meant that he relinquished seeking for political communication at the level that would be accessible to the masses, rather than exclusively ‘to a coterie of specialists’ (Wolin, 1994: 208).

It is also important to avoid overstating the divergence between Benjamin’ and Adorno’ accounts. Adorno (in Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 121) admits that the manipulative function is not inherent to technology itself: it is ‘the result not of a law of movement in technology as such but of its function in today’s economy’. Meanwhile, Benjamin acknowledges that culture is going right in the opposite direction to the one he anticipated – commodification. Contrary to the dominant perception, Benjamin is aware that the new media is not intrinsically liberating and can be used both for emancipation, as well as manipulation. According to Benjamin (1969 [1935]: 231), insofar ‘as the movie-makers’ capital sets the fashion, as a rule no other revolutionary merit can be accredited to today’s film than the promotion of a revolutionary criticism of traditional concepts of art’.

The next section shows the way in which the contradictory nature of the debate captures the simultaneously progressive and regressive potentiality of contemporary technologised culture.

Technologised Culture Today

Technologised culture has significantly evolved since the time Adorno and Benjamin undertook their writing in the 1930-40s. Creating new patterns of consumer-to-consumer and consumer-to-production networks, digital media has blurred the distinction between production and consumption. The turn towards prosumption, whereby the user is simultaneously a consumer and a producer, has been one of the revolutionary changes taking place in the history of consumer culture. It has led to an ongoing shift in the power relations between culture industries and consumers (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010). Consumers now appear as an active subject, consuming and producing culture. As a start, the masses find a way to express their agency in the production of online content. The audience can actively participate in the creation and distribution of online content. User expertise is increasingly integrated into producer models of development activities, which was unimaginable during the prevalence of press and electronic media as mass media (Roberts and Cremin, 2017). Perhaps, just like Benjamin envisaged, consumers are starting to realise that they can be emancipated from oppressive social relations by taking advantage of new technological developments, which are far more accessible than ever before. Technologised consumer culture can have a specific educative role because consumers learn to deconstruct the established patterns of production and reception.

In addition to endowing consumers with an agency, the ‘new’ participatory web cultures have provided unprecedented possibilities for social interaction. Millions of individuals interact daily through social network sites, such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and Snapchat, which encourage and facilitate social communication. A stupefying range of interfaces delivering media to people has provided infinite resources for collaborative social production and massively expanded online choice (in quantitative terms). The abundance of websites, digital compression technology and decentralised media production have replaced the monopoly of handful broadcast channels and print titles (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Taking YouTube as an example, it is a vast, affordable and unregulated social platform. YouTube enables various actors, regardless of gender, race, age and body, to discuss and post audio-visual material. The same applies to other user-generated content sites, including Flickr and Wikipedia, where amateurs and professionals can exchange their content. Another distinctive type of social media consists of game streaming sites, such as Twitch and YouTube Gaming, where users can interact with streamers through comments or tips.

Far from being redundant in the context of prosumption, the Adorno-Benjamin debate is central in interrogating the implications of continually evolving technologised consumer culture. In particular,

the soundness of Adorno's critique becomes clear once one recognises that there is a different side of prosumption. First, prosumption does not automatically translate into a diversity of ideas, voices and perspectives. Most of the user-generated content either adopts the templates and standards established by the professional entertainment industry or overtly reuses professionally created content (Zajc, 2015). These standards are, of course, not without their gender, class, age and racial biases, often promoting majoritarian logic (Jenkins, 2009). Furthermore, although there is little or no charge to use online services, this time it is corporations that pay for the ability to reach users (Roberts and Cremin, 2017). According to Fuchs (2015: 163), 'constant online activity is necessary for running and targeting algorithms for generating viewing possibilities and attention for ads'. The audience itself, its consumption habits and search history, has long been the principal commodity on sale while receiving no pay in return (Curran et al., 2016). Such data can be used to generate profit in various ways, namely advertising, as in the case of Google's advertising suite. The very act of communication through social media between users generates value for corporations. At the same time, while the agency of prosumers brings unprecedented profits to corporations, an overarching majority of prosumers are paid next to nothing in return.

The rise of prosumption also means that the focus of profit-making is now on the creators of user-generated content, who provide instant access to a tailored audience, with whom they already have a strong bond of trust. 'Social influencers' enable advertisers not only to identify and target desirable audiences, but also to actively influence and manipulate consumers by abusing their trust of the creator. Popular streamers on Twitch and YouTube, such as Felix Kjellberg (PewDiePie) or Casey Neistat, as well as social influencers on Instagram, such as Kim Kardashian, have come under continued criticism for their failure to disclose sponsorships. On balance, as Schor (2007) explains, consumer society works through prosumer agency rather than against it. The success of companies depends on their skill to sell agency to consumers. Notwithstanding its affordability, interactivity and visibility, prosumer agency is no obstacle to the logic of commodification. Uber, a ride-sharing service, is often portrayed as a revolutionary company poised to disrupt long-established monopolies of taxis and car-hiring services. However, the fact that its drivers are recognised not as full-time employees in most countries, but as 'registered partners' deprives them of the entitlement to the payment of benefits and job security, as they can be fired anytime without severance (Dudley et al., 2017: 493).

On a fundamental level, technologised consumer culture remains highly integrated into existing economic interests. In this light, Miles (1998a: 1006) rightly introduces what can be characterised as the 'consuming paradox'. As such, consumerism enables self-expression through material and symbolic means, while sustaining a dominant system that, on a grander scale, constrains personal freedom. This shows that consumer culture is at once enabling and constraining (Miles, 1998a, Zajc, 2015). In fact, the key to the success of consumerism lies in that, despite having at least a partial awareness of its harm, consumers are willing to explore its effects (Miles, 1998b). Contemporary technologised culture is equally paradoxical. It is, by no means, a straightforward extension of the power of the producer that is obediently consumed by docile individuals. Technologised culture has provided individuals with unprecedented opportunities for constructing their own meanings and communicating them to wide audiences. Yet, the potential that it opens for communication, individuality and self-fulfilment also paves the way for a more omnipotent control over them. The creative, 'agentic' prosumer culture is still an investment into the system of market exchange (Schor, 2007). Therefore, seeing technologised culture either as a source of empowerment or a path towards mass obedience would be one-sided, for its impact is much more intricate. Indeed, consumers appear in a constant battle with themselves, trying to come to terms with the tensions that the consuming experience entails (Marsh, 1982).

The question then is why, despite being at least partially aware of their role in sustaining the ultimately disempowering social structures, do people continue to consume technologised cultural products? At this juncture, Adorno speaks of consumption as being injected with irrationality, for the gratifications that it provides alleviate no real problems. Nor do they bring any long-term emancipation. There is merely a momentary feeling that contradictions are resolved, ‘the release of one’s own feeling of unhappiness’ (Adorno in Cook 1994: 23). It is important to note, however, that, in recent years, research has been done to show that consumption is not limited to the search for enjoyment or momentary pleasures (Brock 2017; Illouz, 2009). Adorno’s overly simplistic assessment of the motivations behind consumption can benefit from incorporating the concept of emotion (Illouz 2009). Illouz (2009: 383) demonstrates that emotion is the ‘energy-laden’ side of human action, which ‘implicate[s] cognitions, affect, evaluation, motivation and the body’, propelling the act of consumption. Instead of simply being a means of gratifying desires, commodities provide emotional meanings and experiences. The emotions arising from consumption ‘are experienced on the *imaginary* mode’ and do not pertain to ‘real’ social relations or ‘actual’ experiences (Illouz 2009: 397). In doing so, the effectiveness of consumption lies in its power to propel individuals ‘into a realm of possibilities entertained through the exercise of imagination’ (Illouz 2009: 398). Consumption simulates the sensations that the ‘authentic’ experience of individuals would entail.

The writings of Jean Baudrillard (1983, 1988) are particularly helpful in understanding the power of the non-simulated experience. Baudrillard (1983) observes the replacement of reality with a simulated reality – a ‘hyperreality’. With the advent of hyperreality, the nostalgia for non-simulated experiences and the craving for authenticity assume their full meaning. The result of living in a technologically reproduced world of signs is the emergence of the cult of the lived experience in its fundamental banality. This is exemplified by social networking sites and the overwhelming amounts of information about people’s mundane lives they contain (Beer and Burrows, 2010). The consumption, or rather prosumption, of the mundane involves anything from daily checking of friends’ pictures on Instagram to watching YouTube videos of mundane activities, such as driving a car or brushing teeth. The interest in the everyday experience is also evident in a constant stream of news stories about celebrities’ daily life and an increasing popularity of social media accounts managed by celebrities. The ability to reach celebrities through ‘unmediated’ channels, such as Twitter or Instagram, has a special charm since it fosters the illusion of intimacy (Gerds, 2011). Therefore, technologised consumer culture is predominantly concerned with the production, and overproduction, of ‘authentic’ experiences. This is increasingly amplified by prosumers, many of whom have capitalised on the desire of their followers to hear honest opinion while acting as corporate agents.

Technologised consumer culture appears to be full of contradiction since the agency it grants its consumers can take many ‘not-so-progressive’ forms. What the striving for even the banalest authenticity shows is that, contrary to Benjamin’s predictions, the marriage of technology and mass culture does not lead to the disappearance of the irrational, cultic function of cultural consumption. According to Adorno (1975a: 15), mass culture ‘does not strictly counterpose another principle to that of aura, but rather [...] conserves the decaying aura as a foggy mist’. The aura now has ceased to be tied to distance and autonomy and is now based on immersion into authentic experiences (Simkins and Steinkuehler, 2008; Vassiliou, 2010). With the recent technological developments, particularly those associated with virtual and augmented reality, there is a growing quest for more intense sensations from the world of the spectacular. The pursuit of authenticity simultaneously through and in spite of technological reproducibility is a response to the discrepancy between the new possibilities for

consumer agency and the strengthening of wider structures that subvert it. Although there is no return to passive forms of consumption or old aesthetical values, the auratic quality of contemporary immersive technologies can be counterproductive to social consciousness. As Buck-Morss (1992: 23) elucidates, '[s]ensory addiction to a compensatory reality [is] a means of social control'. Consequently, consumption can divert social energies into the search for the authentic and away from challenging the broader, profoundly unequal structures.

The Intertwinement of Politicisation and Aestheticisation

The emergence of new technologies has not destroyed the auratic function of consumer culture. However, does it necessarily render the idea of politicising consumer culture impossible? Does the argument that, for example, social media seems to encourage citizens' political expression and participation not prove the reverse (Loader et al., 2014)? Finally, is the preservation of unequal structures behind technologised consumer culture a reason for scepticism about the effects of its politicisation?

There is enough evidence that digital culture has the potential to improve political participation. Studies have shown that social media has politically engaged previously inactive participants who now enjoy greater knowledge about current affairs (Curran et al., 2016; Koc-Michalska et al., 2015). Being a member of a political Facebook group is linked to a stronger likelihood of engaging in online, but also traditional political participation – from signing online petitions to voting (Loader et al., 2014; Vissers and Stolle, 2014). Social media makes nearly every topic a political issue (abortion, homosexuality, cultural appropriation, vegetarianism), uniting separate publics around specific causes. The sheer number of 'Twitter Revolutions' – including the 2010-11 Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia, the 2011 Egyptian Revolution and the 2013-14 *Euromaidan* Revolution in Ukraine – suggests that technologised culture can be a training ground for collective innervation of society. Beyond social media, Simkins and Steinkuehler (2008) have shown the potential of video games to foster critical ethical reasoning skills by providing simulated social spaces in which players can practice making significant decisions within their games. The belief that making democracy fun can make it work guided the creators of *Democracy*, a political strategy video game, which puts players in the position of key government decision-makers. Overall, both social media and video games can contribute to making democratic participation more appealing.

From frivolous entertainment, technologised consumer culture is starting to be perceived as a unique platform for social critique and political resistance. It is premature, however, to prescribe social media and video gaming as activities for enhancing political participation due to the lack of any conclusive evidence. Caution is also needed because social mobilisation does not mean the ability to affect hierarchies of power. Likewise, the ease of access and participation does not cancel out the monopoly of control of the Internet by large service providers. The assumption of a causal relation between digital culture and democratic change also omits the use of the Internet for non-democratic purposes, including state surveillance, manipulation or deliberate disinformation, as in the case of Russia (Christensen, 2011). The cardinal task is to understand what prevents the new forms of engagement from becoming a force that transforms the way society is governed and empowers citizenry rather than political elites. This is where the Adorno-Benjamin debate is important.

The fundamental problem that revisiting the debate uncovers is that the heavy impact of the hegemonic social structures on technology exceeds the impact that the latter is capable of exerting on them. Recalling Benjamin's (1969 [1935]) analysis, whereas technological innovations progressively subvert the hierarchical foundations of art, the power-holders in society immobilise this development

by regaining control over technology. The result is a cyclical process, whereby technology reproduces the social structures that, in turn, invest in technology and sustain a flourishing environment for its development. As technology becomes an economic/corporate enterprise, its incorporation into culture deprives the revolutionary potential of mass culture. More importantly, it makes the cultural life of society a site of manipulation. Technological consumption masks the power it represents, giving those who have control over it a substantial political resource. As Miles (1998b: 83) puts it, when technology appears in the wrong hands, it can ‘be used actively to accentuate counterproductive power relationships’. It is in the interests of the established elites to maintain the aura around the consumption of cultural goods. The preservation of inequality of power behind technologised consumer culture produces an illusion of the latter being a progressive force, at the time when its auratic function appears in a disguised form.

However, from this, it should also be deduced that technologised consumer culture does appear to be politicised. Yet, this politicisation is done through technology as a tool, which has ceased to be neutral and started serving particular interests. Without being liberated from its subservience to social/economic/ideological hierarchies, technologised consumer culture organises and directs social energies in the way that is most suitable to maintain those hierarchies. Since its recruitment for specific political goals, consumer culture is *de facto* politicised, but contrary to the bottom-up way that Benjamin envisaged. Furthermore, according to Benjamin, the existing power-holders do not simply rely on the preservation of the auratic function of consumer culture to maintain their power. They also turn politics into a cult by aestheticising it as a means of manipulating people (Benjamin 1969 [1935]). For example, Benjamin observes that fascism aestheticised politics through its uses of art in ceremonies, political speeches, on the staging and communication of political events through mass media channels – all with the aim to mesmerise the public. Jay (1992: 45) describes aestheticised politics as ‘the victory of the spectacle over the public sphere’. Consequently, the distinction between an aestheticised politics and a politicised culture is blurred in reality, as both can supplement each other. It is a troubling conclusion of the Adorno-Benjamin debate, but also the one that often escapes inquiry, that an aestheticised politics and a politicised culture can be two sides of the same coin.

To quickly recuperate, the paper has shown that the persistence of the auratic function of consumer culture is no obstacle to its politicisation. Hence, the progressive merit of technologised consumer culture is limited mainly to the changes within the realm of technology itself. In simple terms, for the ordinary citizen, its progressiveness is observable in need to stay up-to-date with new developments, for example, by buying the latest version of iPhone or trying out new games. This contrasts with a comparatively smaller degree of actual revolutionary merit of technologised consumer culture in relation to the ability of citizens to make any difference in politics beyond elections in contemporary democracies or challenge the hegemony of neoliberalism. The expanded opportunities for activism and dissent do not guarantee the collapse of existing structures. Furthermore, it is also not the case that the politicisation of consumer culture necessarily supplants the aestheticisation of politics. A significant insight that one can elicit from revisiting the Adorno-Benjamin debate concerns the ability of the politicisation of consumer culture to lay the ground for the successful execution of the aestheticisation of political life. Essentially political issues become part of everyday aesthetic consumption to an extent that the latter overturns their political content. Likewise, nowadays, there is a strong parallel between the way technology endows consumer culture with a stronger auratic value and the way technologised consumer culture is subsequently recruited for political purposes.

Above all, it is populism that embodies at once an aestheticisation of politics and a politicisation of mass culture. The recent resurgence of populism, particularly in its right-wing form, has brought to light its performative dimension. More precisely, rhetorical (argumentation and tone) and aesthetic (fashion and design of surrounding environment) techniques employed by populists to attract supporters have been noted to be a defining characteristic of contemporary populist movements (Moffitt, 2016; Taggart, 2000). First that comes to mind is the simplicity and directness of populist rhetoric, which employs a ‘tabloid style’ – with its coarse language and slang – to portray affinity with ‘the people’ (Canovan, 1999: 5). According to Moffitt (2016: 56-57), populists take advantage of the fact that ‘a particular aura is granted to those leaders who can perform successfully for “the people” by combining strong leadership with interesting, “accessible” and entertaining personas’. Thus, populist leaders give prior importance to making themselves visible through televisual performances, ways of dressing and political incorrectness. In addition to incorporating performative or ‘theatrical’ elements into politics, populists, including Donald Trump, Marine Le Pen and Geert Wilders, became one of the forerunners amongst political elites to recruit social networks for political communication and mobilisation. This allowed populists to distribute their political performances to a steadily growing mass audience and build strong follower bases (Dittrich, 2017). Their strategy proved successful because of the ability of social media to create a sense of ‘unmediated’ communication with the leader, given the culture’s striving for authenticity. By granting populists a platform to distribute their performances, social media reinforced the politicisation of consumer culture, thereby facilitating the populist aestheticisation of politics.

The Adorno-Benjamin debate illuminates the dangerous convergence of the unprecedented technological transformations in consumer culture, the preservation of unequal power structures and (populist) politics. Reflecting on that danger is especially necessary in times of crises. Crises cause a rupture in the existing system and open space for new coercive regimes, which can capitalise on social media to gain mass support. The fact that technologised consumer culture is not under collective social control by extension conveys citizens’ alienation from political decision-making. In such circumstances, social energies stimulated by new technologies may be diverted into mass irrationality and destruction. As the Holocaust testifies, the annihilation of the Other, preceded by mass representations of its threatening and almost ‘inhuman’ guise, can become an upmost source of perverse aesthetic pleasure. The ability of politicised social media to mobilise enormous numbers of people could turn in into the opposite of a progressive force. It is at this point that the singling out of the ‘other’ can provide a sense of meaning and political action. Symptomatic of this is the scapegoating of particular Others – such as asylum seekers or minority groups – as enemies of ‘the people’. Hence, it is unsurprising that the online popularity of the German populist far-right party, *Alternative für Deutschland*, soared following the influx of Syrian refugees to Germany in the autumn of 2016 (Dittrich, 2017: 6). While further analysis of populist spectacularisation of politics as well as populists’ interaction with technologised consumer culture is beyond the scope of this paper, a circumspection of these developments should be the next point of inquiry.

Conclusion

From the cinema to social media, consumer culture today is primarily a technologised culture, a site of virtual reality that knows no constraint other than the human imagination. Against the backdrop of the continuously changing digital environment, a sociology of technologised consumer culture demands circumspection as a vital tool. The paper has uncovered a number of issues that currently prevent technologised consumer culture from becoming a site of social empowerment and political resistance. On the one hand, digital media has provided new opportunities for consumer agency, blurring the gap

between consumption and production. On the other, as the article has argued, it is not yet a sign that technologised culture today is entirely in the position to be a driving force of social emancipation. In the long run, the consumption of technologised culture is still an investment into a ruthless economic engine and political power it sustains. It is through the conversation with Adorno that the ‘foggy mist’ of the auratic or cultic function of technologised culture unravels. Consumption is more often a source of immersion into ‘authentic’ experiences than political knowledge or resistance. Therefore, the entry of technology into consumer culture has provided means of political communication, but also reinforced the auratic function of consumption.

Contrary to Benjamin’s predictions, not only do technological developments not destroy the hierarchies behind consumer culture, but the resurrected aura around the consumption of ‘authentic’ experiences also does not prevent the politicisation of consumer culture. This time, however, it is a top-down politicisation that countervails a bottom-up innervation of society. Technology, indeed, politicises consumer culture, but in the sense of turning it into a political tool primarily in the hands of those who currently have a stronghold over technology. It is not to say that the outcome of technologised consumer culture is completely pre-determined, in which case this discussion would have no point. It is the existence of at least some progressive potentiality that technologised consumer culture that brings the need for a critical discussion of the obstacles that it faces. Importantly, at the point of the intersection between the cultic function of consumer culture and its politicisation in the interests of the dominant powers, politicised consumer culture is no antidote to the aestheticising of politics. In fact, technologised consumer culture provides a considerable platform on which political spectacles can play out, as exemplified by populist performances. Although at first sight an innocent development, its potential for manipulation requires urgent scrutiny. After all, Adorno’s (1973: 265) ‘new categorical imperative’ – ‘to arrange [humanity’s] thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself’ – has not lost its relevance today (Adorno, 1973: 265).

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