

Walter Benjamin and the Political Practices of the Alt-right

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The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction

Walter Benjamin was one of the great analysts of liberal capitalism during a time when its days seemed numbered and fascism was ascendant across Europe. Much of his work is taken up with looking at how the cultural products and processes characteristic of a civilization are reflective of the inner psychic and spiritual tensions roiling beneath the surface of hegemonic ideologies.

In his seminal 1936 essay “The Work Of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” Walter Benjamin discusses how works of art are created and reproduced in different era. He traces how works of art were once meticulously reproduced by craftsmen working under a master, and compares that to the modern world where art can be reproduced and disseminated with incredible rapidity. Benjamin also discusses the impact that this has on society. Because art can now be reproduced and spread across the body politic with incredible speed, it has become a powerful tool for the maintenance of power structures. Those who have power in society can quickly and cheaply produce ideologically loaded aesthetic works, which can quickly be deployed as tools of distraction and propaganda.

But notably, Benjamin made another and far deeper point at the conclusion of his essay. Noting how the rise of reactionary fascism was in part dependent on the paradoxical use of the most powerfully modern technologies to deploy propaganda, he pondered what this said about the subjects of fascist regimes. His conclusion was quite striking. The capacity of modern societies to reproduce artistic materials had become so pronounced that in fascist countries it had produced a very new type of social organization. Fascism was essentially a society that had transformed itself into entertainment. The alienated masses of people were turned to self-distraction to prevent them from recognizing the insidious forces of exploitation that continued to efface their individuality. As he puts it in the Epilogue:

“The growing proletarianization of modern man and the increasing formation of masses are two aspects of the same process. Fascism attempts to organize the newly created proletarian masses without affecting the property structure which the masses strive to eliminate. Fascism sees its salvation in giving these masses not their right, but instead a chance to express themselves. The masses have a right to change property relations; Fascism seeks to give them an expression while preserving property. The logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life. The violation of the masses, whom Fascism, with its Führer cult, forces to their knees, has its counterpart in the violation of an apparatus which is pressed into the production of ritual values.”

Benjamin’s essay was published in 1936 as the cinema was just cresting in its cultural influence.

Films such as *Triumph of the Will* overtly deployed technology to produce a new aesthetics of distraction, most of which reached a pitch in the call for war and violence. Anticipating Stanley Kubrick's black comedy *Dr. Strangelove* many years in the future, Benjamin suggests that we would so plunge into the distraction of our darkest impulses that even acts of wanton destruction and annihilation would increasingly be regarded as acceptable because they drew people out of themselves for a brief period of time. The connection between such an aesthetics and support for an increasingly authoritarian and paranoid political culture isn't hard to discern. Moreover, as we shall see, it also plays an integral role in the formation of broader historical narratives which must also be analyzed and challenged.

The Modern Aesthetics of Distraction and the Alt-Right

Benjamin's endlessly provocative essay is a useful starting point for thinking about the modern aesthetics of distraction deployed by the alt-right and its various affiliates. But while Benjamin is a useful place to start, we need to go beyond his analysis. We must examine how what is effectively post-modern conservatism uses the now exponentially more powerful technological tools of digital media and communications to disseminate its paranoid messages.

The alt-right emerged as the product of complex conditions in society, but its first instantiations were online. Individuals felt increasingly alienated in a society which no longer conformed to their expectations, often dealing with disappointment at their inability to live up to the American Dream in a climate of economic decline. Moreover, they came to feel that the triumphalist historical narratives about American supremacy, often affiliated the ascendancy of white protestant norms to the status of universal ideology, were increasingly being challenged. The psychic protection these alienated individuals felt by affiliating with this triumphalist historical narrative about American greatness was undercut by counter narratives about the persistence of past wrongs towards groups like women, African Americans, and the developing world more broadly. These counter narratives were promulgated by seemingly alien groups within society who were simultaneously both all-pervasive and hegemonic, while also not embodying the traits of "real" Americans.

As the historical narratives about American greatness were undercut, and the psychic defense it provided against alienation faded, many in the future alt-right turned to distraction to express their resentment. This took the form of a dizzying and growing array of right wing aesthetics whose primary purpose was no longer to present a clear and consistent political ideology. Classical conservatism, while certainly preceding the alt-right, was at least concerned for present itself as an intellectually consistent system of thought. William F. Buckley's snide pretensions shouldn't distract from the fact that many took his unique blend of moralistic Protestantism, support for unbridled individualistic capitalism, and robust international interventionism, to be a genuinely plausible worldview. But the alt-right was never concerned with that. This is why, despite its apparent hatred of post-modernity, the alt-right is very much a post-modern movement. Its relativism and distrust of any "truth" but that which flows from the communications bubble is indicative of the conditions of its birth.

Digital technologies, with their capacity to simultaneously open up new spaces for thought while enabling individuals to increasingly live within a communications bubble, meant that most alt-righters never needed to concern themselves with the intellectual salience of their ideology. They could concern themselves increasingly with distraction; the most satisfying of which was often to undermine and stereotype all those they felt were responsible for their sense of alienation. Intellectuals, Women, LGBTQ individuals, Muslims, Democrats, Hollywood celebrities. Each was targeted in turn by memes, pod-casts, videos, fake news. This was all designed to present a minimum of intellectual content in the most affective manner possible. In other words it was designed as ideological entertainment which played to the psychic desires of alt-righters to have

their resentments stokes.

Of course many the alt-right could not give plausible reasons why these groups were dangerous. The most offered was that these groups were taken as representative of everything that was holding back “real” Americans; an idealization drawn from stereotypes and clichés that never had much basis in reality. But that is what Benjamin taught us long ago, and what is more clearly important than ever before. The aesthetics of distraction is designed for affect on the masses; it distracts feelings of resentment and anger towards reactionary actions rather than the critical evaluation of power. In the immediacy of resentment one can temporarily efface the loneliness of alienation. But once one steps beyond immediacy, the greater historical problems of an aesthetics of distraction become clear.

The aesthetic tools of distraction do more than just provide an outlet for the resentments of the alienated. Though this is their day to day function, they serve another purpose. They allow the alt-right the opportunity to reconstruct an account of history which superficially redeems and resurrects the formerly triumphalist narrative. “Make America Great Again” is a call to return to a triumphalist narrative by ridding the state of those whose mere presence increasingly challenges it by serving as a reminder of American sins past and present. This also demonstrates the fundamental impotence of the alt-right, what Hannah Arendt might have called its “impotent bigness.” It wishes to redeem a triumphalist historical narrative by removing those who threaten its credibility. But removing and attacking those same people one serves to reinforce their point about American shame. Few things demonstrate this better than the very election of Donald Trump; sending a trust fund sex-offender to the White House to stick it to those progressives who say rich white men tend to get ahead.

Conclusion

I will conclude by looking at another dimension of Benjamin’s work; that concerned with history as a whole and its potential redemption. In his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, Benjamin innovatively pushed against the idea of historical progress. Unlike liberal narratives which parroted the inevitable triumph of world-wide capitalism, and even their Marxist counterparts who remained firmly committed to the utopian belief in the communist society to come, Benjamin presents us with a far more pessimistic image of the past as a chaos yet to be redeemed.

“There is a painting by Klee called *Angelus Novus*. An angel is depicted there who looks as though he were about to distance himself from something which he is staring at. His eyes are opened wide, his mouth stands open and his wings are outstretched. The Angel of History must look just so. His face is turned towards the past. Where *we* see the appearance of a chain of events, *he* sees one single catastrophe, which unceasingly piles rubble on top of rubble and hurls it before his feet. He would like to pause for a moment so, to awaken the dead and to piece together what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise, it has caught itself up in his wings and is so strong that the Angel can no longer close them. The storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the rubble-heap before him grows sky-high. That which we call progress, is *this* storm.”

Benjamin’s solution to the problem of historical progress as chaos is messianic; we can only redeem the broken history of the past by effacing its alienation in the present. In doing so, we establish a present in which “splinters of messianic time” are shot through. Accomplishing this means turning people from the aesthetics of distraction and to confrontation with the real sources of their alienation and the complex histories underpinning them. We can start by demonstrating that as long as the alt-right attempts to redeem a false narrative of American greatness through embodying the must ugly characteristics found in America’s history, it is doomed to impotent failure.

