

# Production and creation

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## I. Production & Creation: the Author as Producer

Long before the classical age invented the term *creation* and put it at the centre of artistic activity, the material aspect of fabrication, which necessarily constrains and even conditions it (as highlighted in the term *production*) already tended to be reduced or relegated to a subordinate level. Thus the term *techne*, which, originally, according to Homer, means 'to fabricate', 'to produce', 'to construct', has, on one hand, gradually emancipated itself from material fabrication (to emphasize the fact of causing, making, bringing into existence) and, on the other hand, focused on the result of this action – on 'efficient making' –, thus finally designating the faculty at the origin of this excellence, the productive expertise relating to an occupation.

If creating and producing both mean 'making something exist,' the term *production* invites us to reflect on the act of fabrication as the transformation of the previously existing [1]: matter, of course, – that one actually does not create but alters – but also the technical means used and the economic and social relationships that they underlie.

It is in this perspective that this term is used by Marxism and the materialist aesthetics which ensue, notably the philosophers of the Frankfurt School. For them, the concept of creation indeed remains too attached to a philosophy of the subject and does not address the issues of economic and social determinism that condition and dominate the act of fabrication, thus underestimating the issues relating to creative subjectivity or creative freedom.

This shift of fabrication towards production brings us to reconsider, following ancient tradition, art together with the concept of technique [2] – eclipsed by the romantic moment of exaltation and the sovereignty of the creative subject – and to place, in a modern perspective – the industrial revolution and the development of capitalism – technique back within the production system that it contains.

If any of these issues, in Marx's tradition, implies placing the unity of all human activities within the economic and social world, another issue (on which we will concentrate) is, from the point of view of art, to question (and clearly challenge) the autonomy, which the romantic creative act has suddenly bestowed on the work of the art. Through the term *production*, the objective here is indeed a double-sided critique: firstly that of art as an activity unrelated to material, productive and hence social conditions (in this perspective, art, considered as production, joins the ordinary activity of material fabrication); secondly and more generally, that of the modern system of the autonomy of art, suspected of supporting both a bourgeois and disengaged conception.

It is this last aspect that we would like to develop in this article, from the text of the address given by Walter Benjamin at the *Institut pour l'étude du fascisme* in Paris on April 27<sup>th</sup>, 1934, *The Author as Producer*. Appropriating in a quite unique and original way the term *production*, this text intended, through the *leitmotif* of the author as producer, to point at the exact position where the author, in his activity, is linked to the ordinary world (in the economic and social sense), and to thus define both the conditions of his independence and transformative action. Through the concept of the author as producer, Benjamin intended to address the issue of a critical and politically engaged art form and to redefine the function of the artist in society: in short,

to examine the relations between aesthetics and politics from the viewpoint of the author's activity; a way of raising the issue of the artist's responsibility in industrial capitalism that was emerging in Benjamin's time.

## 2. What is political work: The Author as Producer

*The Author as Producer* agrees with Brecht's approach (the text was published in *Essays on Brecht* [3]), while pursuing his reflections, whose conclusions, initiated in 1926 in *One-Way Street*, are aporetic in part.

The question asked here is that of the compatibility between aesthetics and politics; and that of temptation, following the elimination of the aura (whose decline began from the text of 1926), that of the work of art, to which Benjamin, in this text, seems to prefer the literary effectiveness of leaflets. How, indeed, in the words of Rainer Rochlitz commenting on *One-Way Street*, can one "maintain one's aesthetic requirements in a strategic context: how to define a work of art worthy of the name, since the main criterion of creation is the effectiveness of its action on the receiver"? [4] Or how, in the words of Benjamin in the 1934 text, can one make sure that "a correct political tendency also comprises of a literary tendency which is correct [5]". *Author as Producer* precisely responds to this question by subjecting it to a dialectical process, specifically via the use of the concept of production.

In *One-Way Street*, Benjamin had first begun to dismiss the position of engagement: conviction. Essentially moral in nature and therefore rooted in the subjectivity of the author, the latter denies all work of the artwork, making it a mere content, a message [6] without real impact on things. In addition, from the receiver's standpoint [7], "To convince is to conquer without conception [literally, *unfruitful*]. [8]"

What is then the political tendency of an artwork? At what level does it situate itself if one rejects the subjectivity of the author, and everything that, in one manner or another, would be the result of a personal intention? Not in terms of conviction – subjective compliance – but precisely in terms of *production* – objective intervention – as it requires one's understanding of the art work, not as an isolated object or as the product of singularity, but as belonging to a production apparatus and using the concept of technique. "By mentioning technique I have named the concept which makes literary products accessible to immediate social, and therefore materialist, analysis. [9]"

Any dialectical treatment excludes that one starts from the artwork as isolated object: it must be reintegrated into living social relations. And if social relations are relations of production, it must therefore be inserted into the production process. As any artwork uses a technique, it is, as a median concept, 'a dialectical starting-point [10]' that will make the connection between political tendency and aesthetic quality, thereby overcoming the 'sterile dichotomy of form and content. [11]'

Thus, each technique corresponds to a certain way of mobilizing the production apparatus and therefore creates aesthetics. Abandoning the novel for a newspaper format, as do the Russian literary avant-garde, introduces a new relation between author and reader: in the newspaper, writing gains in breadth what it loses in depth, the writer loses his status of expert and the author/reader distinction begins to fade.

That is why the author should dismiss intention and conception, expressions of pure subjectivity with uncertain effects and, more safely and effectively “find his position within the production process. [12]” Political art must define and determine itself as *techne*, i.e. at all levels of formal and technical decision making in the development; in order to affirm, against what *One-Way street* seems to suggest, that it is aesthetic rather than political.

Such a conception that establishes a functional dependence between political tendency and technique means, as Rainer Rochlitz pointed out [13], merging aesthetics into technique, to the extent that tendency (i.e. quality) is only reduced to technical choices. For example, Benjamin reduces editing to a technical act: he merges aesthetics in the tool. But this seems to be the condition to which the technique can be, without aporia, assimilated to the political tendency. Placing in it the political tendency of an artwork is also consistent with a materialist perspective.

In addition, if the author has to think of himself as a producer, it is because he must find his correct position in a production apparatus with prodigious integration capabilities: ‘The bourgeois apparatus of production and publication is capable of assimilating, indeed of propagating, an astonishing amount of revolutionary themes without ever seriously putting into question its own continued existence. [14]’ Without a considered position in the production process, the best intentions turn into counter-revolutionary propositions. The contemporary analyses of the development of capitalism, by Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, in *The New Spirit of Capitalism* published in 1999, continue the reflections initiated in the thirties by Benjamin: it is difficult, if not impossible, even if one is an artist, to extract and position oneself outside of the system: the ‘bourgeois apparatus of production and publication’ in Benjamin, the institutional and capitalist process in Boltanski/Chiapello; a system that is also capable to both integrate dissent productions and to emerge stronger.

The whole vocabulary of critical activity is then revoked and the presumed autonomy of the artist reconsidered: dissidence, rebellion, periphery, the alternative... reveal themselves under the prism of this mere declaration of intent or position, which runs the risk of only engaging itself. Anything but a critical position.

### 3. “Not to supplying a production apparatus but changing it .” [15]

How, then, once the hypothesis of subjective compliance is set aside (belief, intention, idea...) can one feel one feel solidarity as a producer? “He will never be concerned with products alone, but always, at the same time, with the means of production. In other words, his products must possess an organizing function besides and before their character as finished works. [16]” One of the most immediate and tangible modalities is for the author to remove himself from the principle of competence [17] and break down barriers between the two productive forces, so as to introduce a new division of labour [18].

This shift implies introducing new hierarchical relations between, on one hand, the artist and his collaborators and, on the other, between the artist and the public. This constitutive differentiation between author and public is already, like the aura, fundamentally undermined by cinema, in which the public is able to judge as an expert [19]. This also applies to the Communist press. In both media, the author/public relation becomes

reversible: in cinema, everyone can now be filmed, and the revolutionary press offers any reader the opportunity to take up the pen.

Brecht, to whom Benjamin's text is devoted in part, appears as the one who best managed to become 'Author as Producer' and, according to the motto, 'not to supply the production apparatus, but to transform it. [20]" It is the transition from tragedy to epic theatre that operates this transformation in that it disrupts the functional relation between stage and audience, but also between text and performance, director and actor. Benjamin also discusses the distancing effect in the theatre of Brecht from the viewpoint of this new functional relation to the stage, transformed into a podium: epic theatre "is more easily defined from the idea of the stage than the idea of new drama. [21]" And epic theatre is precisely an attempt to "get that presence on the stage. [22]"

This transformation of the functional relation is precisely what New Objectivity has failed to achieve. Photographs which aestheticize human misery, make it 'an object of consumption [23]' and perpetuate the world as it is. For Benjamin, New Objectivity is the type of school that supplies the production apparatus, which leads to 'converting revolutionary reflexes [24],' failing to consider his position as a producer and believing that the object or the 'content' was enough. For the leitmotif of 'Author as Producer' means managing to concentrate in technique only the political tendency of the artwork that gives it *de facto* its aesthetic quality (this equivalence is asserted at the beginning of the text). It is this pragmatic unity that finally ensures the efficiency of the artwork (both politically and aesthetically) and avoids any potential politically damaging distortion between 'content' and 'form,' between the heterogeneity of the subject targeted and the means implemented (both poetic and technical).

However, even if Benjamin's concept of technique seems to be understood in a broader sense – it indeed includes the idea of genre and style: newspaper versus novel, epic versus tragic... –, one may legitimately question its ability to solely support the political – and aesthetic – tendency of the artwork. This is one of the issues raised in the debate with Adorno about cinema: cinema as a technique – involving the decline of the aura, reception in distraction, rupture of the illusion through editing – does not, in itself, meet the demands of an art form capable of emancipating the masses. If Benjamin revised his commitment to cinema after reconsidering the concept of aura and of reception in distraction, one can just as well reconsider it from the viewpoint of the political meaning that Benjamin attributes to technique. Certainly, the technical choice carries a significance that gives the artwork its meaning, but that significance is not intrinsic to the medium. The example of editing proves it. This process does not inherently have meaning and Griffith, Godard or Vertov use it in very different ways. To Benjamin's concept of technique – although it includes the genre and somehow the style – one should add something that implies usage, appropriation: aesthetics in the strongest sense, which cannot be merged with technique. Therefore, one can consider that, in the end, Benjamin actually undertakes the dilution of aesthetics – and politics – in technique: "The aesthetic value is sacrificed to accommodate functions of adaptation and instrumentality (...). Hence the problematic character of the idea of the disappearance of art in favour of technique. Benjamin no longer has any concept of what constitutes the proper value of the artwork, of what makes their requirement for inherent validity, regardless of the ideological or utopian function they perform each time in a social context. [25]"

The 'problematic character of the idea of the disappearance of art' runs throughout modernity. It is at the heart of avant-garde aporias, whose underlying motivation is embodied by Benjamin's text: transitivity between technique and politics, transitivity between aesthetic progress (in the technical sense) and ethical emancipation: "technical progress is, for the author as producer, the basis of his political progress. [26]"

The double aesthetic and political requirement – the latter implying a strategic context and the efficiency of the action on the receiver as a criterion of creation –, most often leads to sacrifice the aesthetic value to functions of adaptation and instrumentality. The danger, in contrast, would be to dilute the concept of technique, to consider it as a power of opposites and make it a simple instrumental concept, which would only take its meaning in relation to the purpose for which it might be used. Extracting this instrumentality means for art to "leave behind the neutral horizon of the aesthetic [27]" to paraphrase Giorgio Agamben in *The Man without Content*, and to consider the technical choice, if not as decisive, but at least as carrying social, political and economic significance, in the future destiny of the artwork. Such a concept precisely denies the modernist notion of an art form which considers techniques according to their aesthetic qualities, i.e. formal (colours, appearances, textures...) and not their meanings in a global environment.

In this sense, Benjamin's definition of technique is demanding and highlights the responsibility of the author in the choice of his formal options. In itself, it also traces the boundaries of aesthetics in its dialectical relations with what is outside and constantly penetrates it and defines it. The artwork indeed receives a meaning as a technical object: its artistic character does not operate a transubstantiation sufficient for the process to disappear within the finished product. Materialist aesthetics are right to argue that art as *techne* participates in the production process of the work in other spheres of activity and that any revolutionary, political or critical purpose implies being anchored in the production apparatus that must not be left intact.

How does one then acknowledge the necessary consideration of technique – the author is a producer and not a hack [28] – without sacrificing the aesthetic requirement? Although Benjamin's reflections are pertinent, technique or medium carries in itself a meaning, a message – his mistake is to consider this meaning independently of the usage and context in which one uses a particular medium, even when the entire process precisely aims at denying any autonomy or instrumentality to the concept of technique.

But refusing such instrumentality also requires considering the context in which the technical choice takes place: it is precisely by putting it in its context that one gives it form and meaning.

Therefore, it might be appropriate to extend Benjamin's concept of technique and integrate in it the idea of positioning in the production process – beyond a mere technical perspective –: to open it to usage, to the context and modalities, which are by definition variable and circumstantial.

*The Author as Producer* has continued to nurture critical thinking in the post-war period and even today continues to be widely quoted and commented on [29], as it is a valuable tool for reflecting on art 'in situ' while taking the full measure of its institutional, economic, but also formal positioning. In comparison to Benjamin's foresight regarding the functioning of the capitalist system, some current thinking that still envisages the

idea of a critical function of art from the point of view of individual engagement or position, as if art was a socially independent activity, now appear to be well outmoded. Regarding this, the reflections of *The Author as Producer* remain unsurpassable and remind us that art implies *praxis*, and never just *poietic*; a fact that the promotion of the concept of production has undoubtedly helped assert.

#### 4. Footnotes:

[1] Here, the term creation, in the biblical sense, considers the appearance of material things as *Fiat* (*Fiat Lux*, Let there be light) an *ex nihilo* appearance, an action that implies, firstly, a break in the order of causality (transition from nothingness into being) and secondly, a will (divine or artistic) behind this appearance (since it does not belong to a causal chain from the viewpoint of things themselves); these two points implying contingency, freedom and purpose. On the metaphysical implications of such a distinction, see Spinoza, *Ethics*, Book I, propositions 30 to 34, London, Penguin Classics, 2005 (translated by Edwin Curley).

[2] The term *production*, as it focuses on the material conditions of fabrication, necessarily implies the concept of technique, as evidenced by its etymology and meaning in Homer, which we recall at the beginning of this text. This same alliance, used by Kant in the *Critique of Judgment*, continues today in the production/technology/industry equation (vocabulary used in design or the cultural industry) versus creation/art/Fine Arts.

[3] Under this title, Suhrkamp Publishing published, in 1966, a number of texts by Walter Benjamin, gathered together by Rolf Tiedemann. They notably address the theory of epic theatre, the conception of the *Threepenny Novel* and 'The Author as Producer.'

[4] Rainer Rochlitz, *The Disenchantment of Art: The Philosophy of Walter Benjamin*, The Guilford Press; 1st edition (1998), translated by Jane Marie Todd.

[5] Walter Benjamin, *The Author as Producer* (1934), *Essays on Brecht*, London, Verso, 1998, p. 88.

[6] On this subject, Benjamin is very critical regarding the New Objectivity, which, he said, "functions in a counter-revolutionary way so long as [it] experiences [...] solidarity with the proletariat only in the mind." Walter Benjamin, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

[7] A viewpoint that is necessarily integral therewith, the fundamental motivation of political art being, by definition, that of its effectiveness, its impact on the viewer.

[8] Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street and Other Writings* (1926), Penguin Classics, 2009, translated by J.A. Underwood.

[9] Walter Benjamin, *The Author as Producer*, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

[10] *Ibid.*

[11] *Ibid.*

[12] Walter Benjamin, *The Author as Producer*, *op. cit.*, p. 101.

[13] Rainer Rochlitz, *op. cit.*

[14] Walter Benjamin, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 95.

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 98.

[17] Indeed, as noted by Rainer Rochlitz, "among the barriers to overcome, the most important is that of exclusive competence," Rainer Rochlitz, *The Disenchantment of Art*, *op. cit.* Which means for the artist to lose its exceptional character.

[18] The Bauhaus also aimed at overcoming the capitalist division of labour, in particular by reuniting, once again, if possible in a single person, the artist who designs and the artist who carries out the task. Similarly, Marx considered the work of the artisan as the model of free activity, in that it is both design and material fabrication. These approaches are slightly different to that of Benjamin, but point out the same challenge,

namely the alienation caused by capitalist sharing, which they both tried to suppress in favour of new types of relations between author, producer and receiver.

[19] “The reader is always prepared to become a writer, in the sense of being one who describes or prescribes. As an expert – not in any particular trade, perhaps, but anyway an expert on the subject of the job he happens to be in – he gains access to authorship.” Walter Benjamin, *op. cit.*, p. 128.

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 132.

[21] Walter Benjamin, ‘What is epic theater? (2nd version)’ (1939) *Essays on Brecht*, *op. cit.*

[22] *Ibid.*

[23] Walter Benjamin, ‘The Author as Producer’, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

[24] *Ibid.*

[25] Rainer Rochlitz, *The Disenchantment Of Art*, *op. cit.*

[26] Walter Benjamin, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

[27] Giorgio Agamben, *The Man without Content*, translated by Georgia Albert, 1999.

[28] Concept of the hack or agent: someone who fundamentally refuses to prise the production apparatus away from the ruling class by improving it. See Walter Benjamin, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

[29] Notably the text of Hal Foster, ‘The artist as ethnographer,’ which reminds us that Benjamin’s text “offers a vital reflection on the relation between artistic authority and cultural politics.” See *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, The MIT Press, 1996.

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