

Author as Producer, Walter Benjamin

Abdullah Khan.

Walter Benjamin, born to a Jewish family in Berlin in 1892, was one of the most influential Marxist thinkers, who died by committing suicide escaping from the Nazis in 1940. *Author as Producer* is a lecture he gave in Paris in April of 1934, for the study of fascism. His essays are normally difficult to deconstruct, as they are heavy in intellectual content. The essay primarily refers to the newspaper as a new media at the time, and the writer-reader relationship. It aims to bring reconciliation between aesthetic quality and political correctness in the work of art. This essay aims to clarify Benjamin's key points making his work accessible using references and examples he presented as well as a few others.

Though today much progress has been made on the topics Benjamin deals with- in terms of '*Author as (digital) Producer*', and '*Blogger as Producer*', I present an understanding based on Benjamin's time; before 1960.

Benjamin talks about the writer, his freedom to write what he pleases, the political correctness, and the quality of his work. Benjamin implies that the proletariat is the 'correct' audience for a 'progressive' writer. His intention here is to merge the line between

the author and the reader, to indicate that readers are able to perhaps contribute and collaborate as well. In his eyes, if the work was directed towards the progress of the proletariat then the work was aiming at some kind of progressive future, whereas if it was merely being written by the bourgeoisie for the bourgeoisie then nothing was being achieved, apart from entertainment literature.

He gives the words 'tendency' or 'commitment' weight; by suggesting that the tendency is the implicit or explicit direction the writer aims his work in. An example would be, Benjamin's tendency is in the solidarity of the proletariat, for the advancement of the study of fascism.

He wants to prove the assertion that if the right tendency is exhibited, it must then follow through to exhibit every other quality as well- as opposed to not needing to exhibit anything but the initial correct tendency.

The political correctness of a tendency or commitment is dependent on the correctness of its literary tendency. And this literary tendency, alone, makes up the quality of the work. This argument is an alternative or a parallel to that of 'form versus content'. He states that commitment is an adequate instrument of political literary criticism. However, he

goes on to suggest that commitment alone is not enough, and that literary correctness is necessary.

The idea of 'technique' is important in the way that technological advancements alter the means of production. Instead of asking the question: how does the art relate to the production techniques of its time; how does it respond to them- or revolutionize them? He asks: 'How does the work of art stand 'in' the production techniques of its time? This question relates directly to the literary technique.

Technique informs us of the way to correctly determine the earlier mentioned relationship between tendency and quality; "the correct political tendency of a work includes its literary quality because it includes its literary tendency...[which]...can be found in progress or regression of literary technique."

An example that Benjamin gives is that of a soviet Russian constructivist writer and playwright, Sergei Tretyakov. Born in 1892, and died in 1937, Tretyakov was also linked to futurism with his poems. Benjamin saw Tretyakov as a functioning, active literary, who instead of merely reporting from an outsider perspective, intervenes in the struggles he reports. He is Benjamin's model of the 'operative' writer, as opposed to the informing writer. An example Benjamin gives is:

*"At the time of the total collectivization of agriculture, in 1928... Tretyakov left for the 'Communist*

*Lighthouse' commune and during two lengthy stays there... call[ed] mass meetings, collect[ed] money to pay for tractors, persuad[ed] individual peasants who worked alone to enter the kolkhoz, inspect[ed] reading rooms, creat[ed] wall-newspapers and edit[ed] the kolkhoz newspaper, being a reporter for Moscow papers, introducing radio and travelling movies." Tretyakov "had a substantial influence on the ... formation of agricultural collectives."*

The idea of re-functioning or functional transformation as a historical effect (Brecht, and Benjamin's *Little History of Photography*, 1931) is caused by "technical advances that lead to a change in function of artistic forms, and hence the intellectual means of production. ("Notes from Svendborg," *SW* 2, 783). These technical advances now identified as the historical tendency of the modern age, open the door to a political art."

In this transformation works are not aimed at a final product but at contextualizing already existing institutional ideas using technical innovation. In many ways throughout history revolutionary artists have created work with similar intentions. Since art influences mainly future artists, it can even be argued that an artist works primarily for the purpose of the future artist. Dali's opening the realm of dream related art based on Freud's psychoanalysis is an example of this. Brecht's *Epic Theatre*, with its breaks in narrative, to keep the viewer distinctly separate from the action, is another example of this new functioning.

The advent of photography, and within it the montage and new objectivity are also good examples of this re-functioning. Today it is a common technique in the arts, to change the function of an object, since Duchamp's urinal; this is artistic innovation.

Photography in itself was an art form that altered our perception dramatically; it slowed down and deepened our observation by creating an illusion of the past to its most precise detail, which, in reality could easily be overlooked. This illusion verged on 'lie' for in reality we moved too fast to see things this way. And eventually the montage came and completely morphed this lie into an abstract manipulative effect. No doubt the montage can be used to meet positive ends- but photography as 'reality' started to become tainted.

New Objectivity is another example that Benjamin talks of. He claims it to turn the struggle against misery into an object of consumption, moving it from a compelling motive of decision to an object of comfortable contemplation; from a means of production to an object of consumption. A prime example Benjamin offers is Albert Renger-Patzsch (1897-1966), who in his 1928 book 'The World is Beautiful' successfully portrayed images of nature and industry, ignoring the misery of the subject, "by treating it stylishly and with technical perfection". Susan Sontag in her 'Regarding the Pain of Others' deals

with mainly war photography, but in general, tackles the issues with objectifying people's distress. 'The Family of Man, 1955, probably the largest photographic exhibition ever, organized by Edward Steichen, travelled 37 countries and exhibited 69 times. It received plenty of negative feedback:

"The very concept of The Family of Man is rather trite. What is worse it is based on ignorance if not a lie."

New Objectivity, the ideas of the observer and the observed, the ethical gray areas in photographing and exhibiting other peoples 'truth' as an outsider can be a sensitive area. A solution is for captions to be thought out and providing an appropriate feeling instead of glamorizing the aesthetic 'beauty' of an image full of suffering and passively let it pass; the importance of words.

In mentioning Dadism, Benjamin highlights how "the smallest authentic fragment of everyday life says more than painting. Just as murderers bloody fingerprint on a page says more than the words on it." He argues that for the author as producer, technical progress is the basis of political progress. The author is concerned never with just the object but also with the means of production; the product must possess an organizational function (not propagandistic use) aside from the finished work.

He quotes Lichtenberg: "it is not what a man is convinced of that matters, but what his convictions make of him." 'the best tendency is wrong if it does not prescribe the attitude with which it ought to be pursued.'

The writer must be active- in his writing, and must have 'a teacher's attitude' for 'a writer who does not teach other writers, teaches nobody'; the writers' product must have the characteristic of a model of instruction for other writers to give them a new and improved functional method. The demand of writers is 'to think' of their position in the production process. Benjamin believes and implies that the best of writers after thinking about their position in the production process are bound to commit their solidarity to the proletariat (implying that it is the most 'correct' thing to do). He urges writers to unify the means of intellectual production, organize intellectual workers within their actual production process and change the function of the novel, drama and poetry to heighten the technical quality of the writer's work.

## Bibliography

- "Albert Tenger-Patzsch (German photographer)." Britannica Online Encyclopedia.  
<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/498113/Albert-Renger-Patzsch> (accessed December 11, 2012).
- Bellis, Mary. "Timeline and Inventions of the 50s: 20th Century timeline 1900-1999 ." About.com: Inventors.  
<http://inventors.about.com/od/timelines/a/modern.htm> (accessed December 11, 2012).
- Benjamin, Walter. "New Left Review I/62, July-August 1970." The Author As Producer.  
[http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/theatre\\_s/postgraduate/maipr/currentstudents/teaching\\_1112/warwick/st2/kobialka\\_reading\\_-\\_benjamin\\_w\\_-\\_the\\_author\\_as\\_producer.pdf](http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/theatre_s/postgraduate/maipr/currentstudents/teaching_1112/warwick/st2/kobialka_reading_-_benjamin_w_-_the_author_as_producer.pdf) (accessed December 11, 2012).
- Cox, Geoff, & Krysa, Joasia. "Introduction to 'Author as (Digital) Producer'." Kurator.ORG.  
<http://www.kurator.org/media/uploads/publications/DB02/Intro02.pdf> (accessed December 11, 2012).
- Edwards, Robert. "Find A Grave Memorial." Sergei Tretyakov (1892-1937).  
<http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=35533078> (accessed December 11, 2012).
- "Edward Steichen at The Family of Man, 1955." MoMA| Archives Highlights.  
[http://www.moma.org/learn/resources/archives/archives\\_highlights\\_06\\_1955](http://www.moma.org/learn/resources/archives/archives_highlights_06_1955) (accessed December 11, 2012).
- "The Free Dictionary by Farlex." The Free Online Encyclopedia: The Great Soviet Encyclopedia (1979).  
<http://encyclopedia2.thefreedictionary.com/Sergei-TretIakov> (accessed December 11, 2012).
- Ferris, David. "The Cambridge Introduction to Walter Benjamin: Little History of Photography (1931): "The Author as Producer" (1934, unpublished)."  
Colorado.EDU: .  
<http://www.colorado.edu/humanities/ferris/Content/Te>

xts/Excerpt-Ferris\_WB-CUP-Intro.pdf (accessed December 11, 2012).

- Jay, Bill. "The Family of Man." A Reappraisal of 'The Greatest Exhibition of All Time'. [http://www.billjayonphotography.com/Family of Man Exhibition.pdf](http://www.billjayonphotography.com/Family_of_Man_Exhibition.pdf) (accessed December 11, 2012).
- KayOS. "AK on 'The Author as Producer', Walter Benjamin. Week 8." Thinking Practices. <http://thinkingpractices.wordpress.com/2010/02/03/ak-on-the-author-as-producer-walter-benjamin-week-8/> (accessed December 11, 2012).
- Navas, Eduardo. "Feature: The Blogger as Producer." Art Review. <http://www.netartreview.net/monthly/0305.3.html> (accessed December 11, 2012).
- Sontag, Susan. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. New York: Picador, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003. [http://www.imagearts.ryerson.ca/michalak/html/CD8320/Sontag, Susan \(2003\) Regarding the Pain of Others.pdf](http://www.imagearts.ryerson.ca/michalak/html/CD8320/Sontag,Susan(2003)RegardingthePainofOthers.pdf) (accessed December 11, 2012).