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The Decay of Aura and the Media Integrator

(About the transition from consciousness as a medium of ideas to consciousness as a medium of communication)

Abstract

This study is an attempt to conceptualize the media decay of the aura around things, the sublation of the imagination and stunted development of the modes of thinking typical of the Enlightenment - a more or less global process since the mid-20th century. As a side effect, it could offer an insight into our critical reaction against and among the media, a reaction based on hierarchical dispositions vis-a-vis the truth, on the privileged treatment of the means, on the identification of truth with illusion which is renounced in traditional society and moral instruction, etc. The purpose of this study is to outline certain aspects of the integration into a media-globalized world - an integration evolving beyond, past and against all deliberate holistic projects, and whose objective is all-round openness or universal networking within a possible, to some extent imaginary, reality. This reality has been recently called virtual.

Key Terms

Benjamin, Aura, Media, Enlightenment, Information, Hyperthesis.

Auranın Çöküşü ve Medya Odağı

(İdelerin aracı olarak bilinçten, iletişim aracı olarak bilince geçiş hakkında)

Özet

Bu çalışma, şeylerin çevresindeki auranın medya çöküşünü, imgelemin bitişini ve 20. Yüzyılın ortalarından beri daha az veya çok globalleşen bir süreç olan Aydınlanma'nın gelişimi engellenmiş tipik düşünme tarzlarını kavramsallaştırma girişimidir. Bu bir yan etki olarak bizim hakikatle karşılaştırılan hiyerarşik yapılarla, aracın ayrıcalıklı muamelesine ve geleneksel toplumda ve ahlaki eğitimde vazgeçilen yanılamayla hakikatin tanımlanmasına dayanan eleştirel tepkimize yönelik bir kavrayış sunabilir. Bu çalışmanın amacı, globalleşen medya dünyasına doğru gerçekleşen bütün kasti holistik tasarımların ötesinde, uzağında ve aleyhinde evrimleşen ve nesnelliği çok yönlü bir tarafsızlık ya da imkan dahilinde

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bir evrensel şebekeleşme olan entegrasyonun, hayali bir tür gerçekliğin ana hatlarını çizmektedir. Bu gerçekliğe ise sanal gerçeklik denilmektedir.

Anahtar Terimler

Benjamin, Aura, Medya, Aydınlanma, Enformasyon, Hipertez.

I. Terminological-methodological, theoretical-cognitive and socio-historical considerations

I.1. The terminological-methodological premises of this study are based on Walter Benjamin's¹ conceptual-terminological complex of the *decay of the aura*, which combines explanation and disposition to understand and perceive the effects of the mechanical reproducibility of works of art since the first half of the 20th century. The universality of this process is easy to understand even without the archetype of most nebular hypotheses on the origin of all sorts of universes - deterministic or Kantian-Laplacian in terms of essence, Gutenbergian or media-related in technical terms, and originating from "globality" in the world as "village". For Benjamin, this is a symptomatic process whose significance points beyond the realm of art. It is thus relevant not only to works of art, but also to any technically reproducible product.

Since in essence the media are the fruit precisely of mechanical reproducibility and, besides, reproduce the respective perceptive disposition on a daily basis, the methodological application of this concept seems entirely relevant to them. In this case there is a shift in focus; the shift is towards the imagination, which is totally blocked by free and indiscriminate information - one of the mass effects of media reproducibility.

If "aura" as a concept referring to natural objects means "the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be," in its social manifestation through mechanical reproduction it has the following objective: "the desire of contemporary masses to *bring things 'closer'* spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction."² In the direct sense, things are brought closer by their multiplication to the point where there is no empty space *between* them and the recipient. Consequently, we have a densification of space through its constant population with identical things, in the course of which "the desire of the masses" meets "the mechanical reproduction of works of art." Cinematography is the distinctive type of visual succession; it is also at the core of the

¹ Cf. BENJAMIN, W.1936, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter Seiner Technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*; Interpreting Benjamin's concept itself is beyond the scope of this study; here it is applied only. It is obviously rooted both in the opposition between "nature" and "society" typical of German philosophical-methodological literature in the period, and in Benjamin's specific application of the historical-materialistic methodology. The oxymoron "decaying aura" is another form of presenting the demystification of social relations, where "the decay" has no dramatic negative implications or nostalgic roots.

² Ibid., p. 344 (Benjamin's italics).

notion of an "information flow"³ proceeding along the channels of visibility. The immediacy of perception limits the space in which an aura may emerge around an object, and this brings us to a situation in which we have a fullness of objects but a paucity of auras.

This may be described in the terms of the macro-physical world that are essential to European thought and vocabulary which, notwithstanding their concern with "spirituality," use spatial metaphors. The aura loses its ephemerality, becoming increasingly heavy and immobile, ever more uniformly accelerating, and this magnifies the density of the images blocking the free perspective that is essential for the sudden appearance of a distance. If anything appears suddenly, it is proximity only - a truism based on the disposition to limit the sudden and proximate to the rapid filling in of inter-junctions, i.e. in-between spaces: between recipient and event, between media and communications, between ideas and realities. The aura no longer withers - this happens in the course of the multiplication of ever closer objects and of the escalation of ever more distinct objective-thematic desires of "the masses"; the aura is compressed to the point where it can only be imagined.

I.2. This brings us to the second, *theoretical-cognitive consideration*. It concerns the imagination, the most unrestrained and personal manifestation of consciousness. The imagination is directly associated with the aura in its natural manifestation: the unique phenomenon of "bringing things closer." At the same time, the imagination - in order to be such - is my own unique vision of something, it is my own visualization which, if communicated to anybody, would promptly become classifiable in a particular regime and which, if imposed - on myself or somebody else - will become a notion. Imagination is unique *per se* - just like the individual image; and incommunicable - just as the true memory. People know about it, insofar as they situate beyond the domain of reality; here they are *competent and knowledgeable*. This does not mean that there is no knowledge of imaginary things, fantasized ideas or phantom anxieties in reality either, but only that the imagination is non-substantial in the classical sense of the idea of cognition: it is not a sub-junction but an inter-junction. That is why it can fit into any space or junction in the first place. Insofar as it is an environment and medium of conceptualizing images. It can be limited only if there is a density of images or a pre-given order of conceptualizing images.

In most cases, images are densified by some kind of order. Yet what happens with the imagination when images have filled all voids but there is no established order or pattern of their arrangement? Does this leave a place for the imagination, which has been expelled by the surplus of indiscriminate imagery and the absence of an "orderly" basis for assessing things in terms of their imaginarity?

If we adhere to the classical dispositions, we ought to say the following: if there is a density of images, the imagination indeed disappears because there is no space and time for non-topical, "empty" thought; the environment has become so unidimensional

³ We could undoubtedly cite the notorious "stream of consciousness" as an icon too, yet the problems of its visualization call for caution.

that it has left no gaps. This is precisely what may be defined as "information environment." It has a hyperthetical content and a hypertextual form.⁴

I may imagine that I am informed but I can not inform about my imaginings - their very articulation involves their classification by the order of the immediate external reality. Vis-a-vis the latter they are "voids" or, in other words, emergence of gaps in a dense reality. The imagination subjectively causes a sense of fullness, since it is a symptom of absence, but the comparison with reality deprives it of meaning, leaving nothing but its distance. Keeping this distance is a condition for the appearance of an aura around the imagined object, i.e. of the possibility to upset the particular order or place of objects.

That is why imagination is on the borderline of crime and innocence. It is hidden and not communicated. Perhaps at some point it might be worthwhile to go even as far as the Aristotelian interpretation of truth as the offence of the *topoi* in order to relate the dispositions for the apologetic-negative perception of the imagination and its possibility, on the one hand, to the present perception of virtuality, on the other. In this case, however, that would be a pointless extravagance. That is why the relation of the shriveling aura to imagination as an irregularity, a form of no-sense-of-place, would be more relevant to the subject of this study.

In fact we are dealing with a specific unawareness of situational order, but full awareness of the sense that it is possible to find external means of coping with the situation provided that there is sufficiently verified typical information. Given the domination of information technologies, non-compliance with the structural elements of a particular situation or the principles that constitute it is no longer guided by the notion of direct violence but, rather, by the introduction of extra and reliable elements which "work" in all cases. (That is why information is "applicable" and "innocuous.") Their multiplication distances the real situation, and this makes the latter - mediated by information atoms - totally non-transparent; reality is thus replaced by its "virtualization." Since this "virtualization" is mechanically reproducible and direct, it does not have the characteristics of the aura.

What was once called nature or naturalness yields to the pressure of the imaginations, which have been densified to the point where they have become more real than reality "itself," the quest for which is phantasmagorical. And there is no longer any crossing of borders, but only employment of ever more real than reality itself means of coping with "the state of affairs" from the blocked perspective of their conceptualization *per se* or from another perspective.

⁴ In 1985, when I coined (at a University of Sofia seminar on "The Logic of Kant" and in my paper for the Wittgenstein symposium in Kirchberg, "*Was ist Hyperthese?*") the word "hyperthesis" almost playfully as a possible and useful term in describing and understanding the function of philosophical theses that differed from the "hypotheses" of, for instance, the natural sciences, the term "hypertext" had not been invented yet. The term "hyperthesis" was used also by Willy Helpach in his Hegel's interpretations; cf. *Beiträge zur Individual – und Sozialpsychologie der historischen Dialektik*, Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, Heidelberg, 1955, S.S. 27-28.

In general, this is a process of galloping modernization, in which those blockages of the perspective multiply to the point where they allow a broad objective-thematic choice and, hence, the illusion of real involvement in events. In classical Enlightenment terms, things boil down to an objective illusion which cannot be perceived as such at the time of experiencing, but is revealed at every successive point of the probably even more illusory involvement. In the course of this narcotic growth of illusion, a peculiar notion of truth that may be called "nymphomaniac" is asserted - every successive possession intensifies and multiplies the claims to the number of objects of desire and the length of time in which they are possessed. The ideal of complete fusion of object and event may be temporarily unattainable, but it is the reference point of many media efforts.

1.3. In socio-historical terms we thus have another form of the traditional post-Marxian notion of "humanization of the world": the world is filled with more and more unnatural objects. The theories gravitating around this notion range from Plato to Heidegger and from Herodotus to Toynbee. Yet since we are discussing methodological restrictions, I will briefly dwell on a single aspect that seems to be relevant to the subject and thesis of this study.

This aspect concerns the change in historical consciousness or in the consciousness of historical change. The traditional version usually explains things in terms of cause and effect. In principle, it proceeds from the temporal duration, in which some events predetermine others or generate follow-ups. The questioning of this causal view during the Enlightenment (e.g. by David Hume) is combined with the birth of the notion of the decisive role of publicity, of public opinion, of accidental factors in regard to the established hierarchies. Notably, the rights of "nature" - *per se* (e.g. in the case of Jean-Jacques Rousseau), the natural right (e.g. John Locke, Christian Thomasius and the whole school of *jus naturalis*), the inviolable human rights, especially the right to life, freedom and happiness (e.g. the French encyclopaedists, Thomas Jefferson) - are increasingly among those "accidents" in history. Initially "the accidents" were simply included in the traditional explanatory patterns of cause and effect, renewing the latter thematically. Their growing number⁵ resolutely shook the belief in directly deterministic explanations, each one of which is complemented by another not only in theory but also in practice, and is thus reduced to a "complement" that may be omitted. In an information environment, however, such omissions open gaps which are sufficient for an influx of ideas that are entirely different from causal explanations.

Based on the fundamentalist concept of knowledge cultivated by the whole European tradition of learning, those ideas combine the cult of factual precision and the understanding of the real, actual and possible views of the historical process no longer in the available biased histories and social theories only, but also in the literal concept of "contemporary modern history *per se*." In other words, this is the availability of comprehensive information about all past, current and future events, which is a condition for the direct explanation of each one of them.

⁵ The history of the single-factor explanations of history must doubtless include the appearance and limiting towards increasingly dense "determinants" of a purely economic, technological, scientific, disciplinary, military-technical, financial, psychological, psychopathological and any other origins.

Infantile as it might be in its literality, this concept can help us understand the change in historical consciousness: from deterministic, it evolves into a functional-situational one and, in addition to the relation between events in time, starts seeking the relation between events in space as limited by its terrestrial dimensions. This history is continuously created by the media; hyperbolically, if we imagine someone who can read all papers, listen to every single radio show, see every single TV programme and cover the Net, we will have precisely the infantile, but real image of the media person proper. I think that all true media today subconsciously long for such a monster.

Such a history and such a person are, of course, impossible beyond their parodic manifestations, fictional models or forced morphological schemes.⁶ Common sense rules out the possible materialization of such horrifying plurality, yet common sense is definitely not the best counsel if we want to understand contemporary media even in their finite number. Still, it might be useful to try and see what would happen if we recounted our recent history from the perspective of those methodological, cognitive and historical constraints. This history incorporates the decay of the aura, the incommunicability of individual imagination and the illusion of historical change against the background of a public life traditionally developing within the natural cycle.

II. The Media Intergrator

Since this process of medialisation is conditional on human experiences, perceptions, plans or behaviour even at the level of pure mediation of information, all sorts of value-related - hence traumatic or traumatizing - associations are inevitable. It would be wrong to assume that those associations have been deliberately sought for the purpose of hurting I, you, he, she, it, we, you, they or THE VALUE they represent. I will not discuss personal pronouns but impersonal inter-junctions, which may serve as an ambience precisely because they are impersonal. The ambience in question may cause surprise and even prompt interjections. Stylistically, interjections would be quite an adequate expression of the media image of novelties that is imposed, with strange appearances or seemingly irrational activities "rationalized" on a massive and primitive scale.

Even though this study is devoted to the media representation of images, models and notions, restricted imaginations and verisimilar illusions, it is not driven by iconoclastic passion or sentimental hopes for a way out of the state of media feudalization of consciousness. Yet there *have* been attempts to find a way out, and there might well be one: be it through legislative intervention, "guerilla warfare" (Herbert Marcuse, but also Umberto Eco⁷) or "critical public communication, which is regenerated spontaneously by the sources of the life-world" (Juergen

⁶ The following may serve as examples: a) any "comparative history of the world"; b) some stories by Jorge Luis Borges such as "Funes, the Memorious" and "The Library of Babel"; c) Oswald Spengler, *Decline of the West*.

⁷ Cf. Marcuse, H. 1966, in "Political Preface" 1966.- In: *Eros and Civilization, A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*. Beacon Press, Boston, 1966, p. xvii; Eco, U. 1967. "On a Semiological Guerilla Warfare", in: *Philosophia*, book 2 of 1991, p. 57 and passim.

Habermas⁸), or even extreme suggestions that "we analyze ourselves as creatures that are to some extent historically defined by *Aufklaerung*" in order to preserve our philosophical ethos and human identity (Michel Foucault⁹).

This does not mean that there is no pathetic vanity in this attempt: it hopes to explain the evolution of the above-mentioned process in view of a distinctly strong but seldom employed generational pressure on the part of those, whose behaviour, conceptualization and projects are integrally bound up with media free of all tendencies - apart from the informational - and convenient for any use - apart from the situational. Those tendencies stem from, on the one hand, the global information flow, and on the other, from the new attitudes of readers, viewers and listeners, whom the media are eager to keep. Last but not least, this is a matter of choice based on the addiction to information in a particular situation that is already catered for by some media.

Hence I will not deal with the otherwise typical media functions, which are usually situated between politics, entertainment and advertising, and which attract popular attention. There are many reasons for that, but I believe one particular reason is of paramount importance.

The above-mentioned addiction to information in a particular situation is a distinctive feature of a specific media type - be s/he a source, disseminator or user of information. I will arbitrarily call them "*media integrator type*." This means a person who is both the source and the user of information reported and received by *all available media*. Even though s/he is reminiscent of the reborn by the communist regime ideologue of the "all-round personality" of Renaissance; in fact they have little if anything in common with the latter: first, because they are directly dependent on a particular availability, and second, because their possible development boils down to quantitative acquisition of the skills of providing and using information without any tendencies that go beyond the sphere of pure information. Several things ensue from that.

The "media integrator" is not the conspiratorial figure of the media manipulator that uses means for ends whose achievement gratifies needs inherent to the means themselves or their use. Thus s/he has an unbiased attitude and expresses a disposition of pure functionality. If there are any consciously pursued objectives, they are in the incessant information flow and removal of obstacles to the latter by discovering ever more information. The over-valuing of this information which, incidentally, is asserted by the growing potential for its rapid mechanical reproduction and improvement, makes it possible to ignore traditional value bans of another - auric - type.

Far-fetched and arbitrary as this analogy might be, it is revealing: this media type bears the archetype of human behaviour even in the primeval times of hunters and gatherers, and is the subjective ambience of all mass information processes. It applies to those people (by tendency this could be all of us), who have no "sense of place" and

⁸ Cf. Habermas, J. 1990, *Strukturwandel der Oeffentlichkeit*. Suhrkamp Verlag, Fr/M. [*The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*]. Preface to the new edition of 1990.

⁹ Cf. Foucault, M. 1984. "What Is Enlightenment?": - In: Rabinow, P., Ed. *The Foucault Reader*. New York, Pantheon Books.

whose infiltration of the fiefs of the separate media and public structures leads to a general change towards a media integrity that ignores the visible differences in the media. Let us note once again that the people in question are not only those employed in the so-called media, even though it is they who are inclined to ideologize their aspiration to openness; they are all of us, insofar as we live in a world that is largely validated by communications.¹⁰

Apart from J. Meyrowitz, whose study *No Sense of Place* notes the parallel between primeval times and the information age,¹¹ it is tempting to consider the analogical reflections of Ortega y Gasset. They were first formulated around the time of *The Revolt of the Masses* (after 1926), and culminate in the ninth essay of Part One, "Primitivism and Technology."¹² They are guided by an anti-Cartesian notion, according to which the archetypal bonding between humans and the outside world acquires "clarity and distinction" when humans identify with the reactions of animals, analogize their intuition and mimic their behaviour for "hunting purposes." Hence - needless to say, the transition is not so direct - the atavistic tendencies in most "new regimes," whose justification is in the mass desire to eliminate the mediating institutions of the "old" ones through "immediate action." The media facilitate the development of those tendencies. In societies such as the Bulgarian one they are up against just as primitive attitudes, and sometimes betray their main mission of information media, making concessions to their commercial self-perception.

Of course, the type of media persons discussed in this study is not Ortega y Gasset's "vertical invaders". Today they zap channels, do not have favourite papers and "surf the Net" and, when chatting online about Madonna, would never think that this name immediately evoked a significant image from "her life-world" if not for their mothers, then at least for their grandmothers.¹³ At the same time, they are overplaying

¹⁰ It is "dialectic" to privilege the present state and treat it as a relative completion of distant tendencies. In this sense, one might argue that the quantity of media is always relative and that even the first spoken word is a beginning of a media process; respectively, that having a single thing "specified" as a medium is sufficient to generate the process under consideration. That is why it is irrelevant whether in this case by "media" we mean street proclamation, press, radio, television, the Internet or any other mediation. Still, common sense calls for a distinction between at least two media that differ by their means.

¹¹ Cf. MEYROWITZ, J. 1985. *No Sense of Place*. Oxford. Cit Habermas, op. cit. 45-46.

¹² Cf. Ortega y Gasset, J. 1930. "La Rebelion de las Masas".- *Obras Completas*. T.IV, Revista de Occidente, Madrid.

¹³ To those who might object that some grandmothers traditionally talk of the Mother of Jesus and hardly care about Madonna, I will reply that, after all, I have in mind grandmothers with secular education, who have been familiar with the concept of Madonna as imagine of painting. It would be interesting to study the way of conceptual educational unification through the replication of figures from Renaissance painting, one of which is precisely the Madonna. The subletting of confessional differences through it is much stronger than it appears, because it further embellishes the effect of two mass traditional authorities: the educational institution with its "object lessons," and faith brought down to the level of everyday life and its "maternal" relay. For educated grandchildren, cf. google.com: just type in the word "Madonna" and you'll get Madonna Louise Ciccone. This Madonnas can be used as a trivial example according to the logic that has long been concerned with the objective

another archaic model of behaviour too - immediate escape from a particular situation by the means available in their own nature. This might well be a "second" nature that is manifested primarily. The media facilitate this manifestation.

Needless to say, this sounds pretentious and rhetorically contrived and, as regards adventure or education, simulative: adventure or education are simply absent from the process and sphere with which we are concerned, i.e. indiscriminate information and the concrete situation. In brief, the process in question is the shriveling of the aura by means of information, and the sphere, a possible media landscape in the past ten years or so, associated with the provision of information of a secondary interpretative type. The landscape is unintentionally constituted by all media, therefore this study will not be concerned with their specificity by means, zones of influence, keynote declarations and political tendencies or source of funding - all of which are important and definitive aspects of their existence. The focus is on their aggregate impact on the consciousness that perceives and the behaviour that ignores them, whose concreteness may be a condition for their existence, but whose ideal typicalness is a precondition for their functioning not just as a realized product of commercial transaction that depends on mass demand.

Since we are dealing with a tendentious relation similar to that between background and outstanding objects, we should proceed precisely from the broader context in order to break the vicious circle of background and objects, environment and things. In fact the objects and things are not necessarily a pure manifestation of the background and environment, but in that case their discrepancy is even more conspicuous.

Of course, you may deliberately choose not to read the particular newspaper, you may change the channel, turn off the television or radio, deny you access to the Internet, and yet: in a media-globalized world you are the medium and ambience of communication. In a sense, this is safer than being a medium and ambience of ideas. Hence if there is any thesis in this study, it is the following:

Under the general impact of media we have a transition from consciousness as a medium of ideas to consciousness as a medium of communication. This transition is experienced as a conspicuous absence of an aura and presence of imaginary information.

This conspicuity stems foremost from the absence of models of information use, and is caused by the speedy withdrawal of the state-and-political halo which traditionally integrates communications.

There are probably more powerful explanatory schemes and methods, as well as approaches to and theses on this issue which are far more relevant to the media - yet how could one possibly ignore precisely consciousness in its inconsolableness? In that sense this attempt is also objectively well-intended in the quest for a possible essence that might explain real phenomena. As regards the answer to the question "Which or

unidimensionality of different names as Evening Star and Morning Star, but is useful in objectifying the media-related objective differences in the case of one and the same name. Risking to hurt somebody's feelings irreparably, I would say that both Madonnas are a product of a global tendency to impose auric images without any imagination.

whose consciousness are we talking about?" suffice it to cite the self-definition of those who have "no sense of place": by tendency, virtually all of us.

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