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What is German media philosophy?

Subjectivity as medium of the media

Boris Groys

Contemporary, let us say ‘post-modern’, discourses on media, communication, information and so on are functioning in our society in at least two different – if interconnected – ways.* First, they describe scientifically the functioning of contemporary media and their growing role in our society. But the development of media theory during recent decades was, in a very obvious way, motivated not only by a pure scientific interest in the make-up of the new information age, but also by a desire to undermine the role and position of ‘the subject’ and to get rid of the philosophical tradition that had the subject as its main point of reference. We heard from Marshall McLuhan that the message of the medium undermines, subverts and shifts every individual message using this medium. We heard from Heidegger that *die Sprache spricht* (language speaks), and not so much an individual that is using the language. These formulations undermined the subjectivity of the speaker, of the sender of the message, but the hermeneutical subjectivity of the listener, reader, receiver of the information is left by them relatively intact. However, Derridian deconstruction and Deleuzian machines of desire got rid also of this last avatar of subjectivity. Here, an individual reading of a text or the interpretation of an image drowns in the infinite sea of interpretations and/or is carried away by the impersonal flows of desire.

These flows are understood by contemporary media theory as being material and driven by powerful material forces. The subject, on the contrary, is traditionally understood as being ‘spiritual’, immaterial – and as such completely powerless vis-à-vis the material universe that is no longer perceived as being subjected to any ‘ideal’ metaphysical order. Without the superimposed metaphysical order the interplay of material forces presents itself as pure chaos. The merely spiritual, immaterial subject has no power that would allow it to take control over this chaos and subject it to a certain order. Accordingly, the subject also cannot produce, stabilize and communicate its message using media of communication because these media are also material. The ultimate message of the media is the chaos of material forces that manifests itself as a zero message, as nonsense – beyond any subjective power of control or interpretation, beyond any individual attempt to give a meaning to this chaos. This incapacity of the subject to formulate, stabilize and communicate its message through the media is often characterized as the ‘death of the subject’. This is the standard mass-cultural formula covering the subtleties of all the different media theories – and it is this formula that I would like to discuss now.

This formula refers to the subject that can be called the master subject: the subject that is able to

* The texts in this Dossier derive from talks presented at a panel at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London on 26 May 2011, ‘Media, New Media, Post-Media: What is German Media Philosophy?’, organized by the Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy (CRMEP), Kingston University London. Unlike Anglo-American media theory, which has a background in sociology and communication studies, German media theory emerged out of literature and philosophy, and has developed a preoccupation with the concept of ‘medium’. The panel was intended to give a snapshot of some of the latest versions of this distinctive concern.

formulate and communicate its intentions, its thinking, its message. Mastery over communication is revealed by contemporary media theory as a subjective illusion. But one can still ask: Who is the subject of this subjective illusion? Who is the subject of the desire to master the communication in the name of one's own thinking? *Who is the subject of the desire to be a subject?* And, obviously, deconstruction, as well as other forms of contemporary critical theory, presupposes the existence of the subject of desire to be a subject. In fact, Derrida has often stressed the central importance of this desire to become a subject – because in the absence of this desire deconstruction itself loses its critical edge. Now, whatever can be said about the ontological nature of the subject of desire to be a subject, it is fair to say that this subject is meanwhile well aware of contemporary media theory, including the discourse of deconstruction. Earlier, I mentioned the mass-cultural status of the formula 'the death of the subject'. Today, the contemporary subject is fully prepared to give up its spirit (*seinen Geist aufzugeben*) by entering the material media and flows of communication. Alexander Kojève wrote before World War II that writing is a prolonged form of suicide. At that time only a few others knew that. In our time this knowledge has become a truly democratic one. The post-deconstructive subject has capitulated in its struggle for dominance over the media. It gave up its will to power, its desire of mastery, its hope to formulate and communicate its message. But the capitulated subject is not the dead subject. In fact, the contrary is true. The capitulation is the best guarantee of survival.

Servant subjects

Here I would like to remind you of the primary scene of the emergence of the self-conscious subject, as described by Hegel in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*. As you will recall, according to Hegel the subject becomes self-conscious when its life is put into extreme, mortal danger by a struggle between itself and another subject – a struggle with an unpredictable outcome. Thus, the subject emerges originally through awareness of its possible death – being seized by fear and trembling. The birth of a subject out of angst of death is a figure that was repeated later in different forms by Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger and many others. Now, Hegel famously describes the outcome of the fight between two self-consciousnesses in the following way: one wins, the other dies or capitulates. One becomes the master, the other becomes the servant (a better translation of Hegelian *Knecht* – not 'slave', as it is often translated). The servant gives up his or

her own desires and begins to serve the desires of the master. Thus, the servant subject becomes reduced to a thing, a tool, a material medium for the realization of the desires of the master subject. In this way the servant subject becomes a material force operating on the same level as other material forces. Therefore, ultimately, world history becomes the history of the servant subject, and not the master subject – world history being the history of work. Work as service is a way from pure spirituality and immateriality into the materiality of the real world. The servant subject transforms the world by his or her material work, and puts the material world under his or her control. However, the serving subject can survive and take control over the material world only by remaining a capitulated subject – by giving up its own desires, messages and dream of mastery. Also in a position of power, the capitulated subject remains a serving subject – serving technology, society, humanity, progress, nature, world, etc. The ultimate historical role of the capitulated subject is the role of the executive, the functionary, the manager, the bureaucrat.

To apply this Hegelian insight to our current topic, one can say that only the subject that becomes aware of the possibility and even certainty of its imminent death, through its use of the material media of communication, becomes truly self-conscious – that is, truly subjective. But let us consider the case in which this subject prefers capitulation and servitude to death. The Hegelian servant subject builds a state – as a prison for its master, who is reduced to the role of a citizen under the control of law. The contemporary post-deconstructive, capitulated subject builds the Internet – as a prison for the traditional master subject of thinking being reduced to the role of a network user and 'content provider'.

Here, the servant subject gives up its own message and begins to serve the messages of the others – it becomes a server. It becomes Google, Facebook, Wikipedia and innumerable other Internet agencies. By doing so the capitulated, servant subject captures and puts all the 'content providers' – all the alleged masters of their messages – into the prison of media networks. Not accidentally, the individual sites on Facebook all look like epitaphs; and the whole network looks like a huge cemetery and, at the same time, like a forum for post-mortal, post-deconstructive conversations.

The servant subject serves the sign flows – so that they can flow ever further. But at the same time it channels the flows of information by controlling not their meaning but precisely their material side – their direction, their quantity, and so on. And this

operational control – channelling, directing, delivering – is not innocent. The medium’s own message is, as was already said, a zero-message, pure noise, chaos. The ordering, channelling work of the operational servant subject (and it is the operational, servant subject without a message that operates our media – not the anonymous power described by Foucault) brings order to the media chaos. However, by channelling the information the operational subject produces meaning – even if it does it indirectly, in the mode of self-concealment. Therefore the servant subject can never put itself beyond suspicion of corruption, manipulation and having a hidden agenda – that is, of usurping the place of the master.

The only way to avoid this suspicion is to restage the original scene of the struggle between the subjective message and the chaos of the media. That is what the avant-garde art of the twentieth century did, and what a certain kind of contemporary art still does today.

eschige zunbada
wulubu ssubudu uluw ssubudu
tumba ba- umf

In his diary *Flight Out of Time*, Hugo Ball describes the ‘simultaneous poem’ that was presented by Huelsenbeck, Tzara and Janko on 29 March 1916 at the Cabaret Voltaire, in which score of the recital was constituted via parallel recitatives in different languages, including singing, whistling, rattling, and so on. As Ball remarks:

The human organ represents the soul, the individuality in its wanderings with its demonic companions. The noises represent the background – the inarticulate, the disastrous, the decisive... In a typically compressed way the poem shows the conflict of the *vox humana* with a world that threatens, ensnares, and destroys it, a world whose rhythm and noise are ineluctable.¹

Nevertheless, about three months later (23 June 1916), Ball writes in his diary that he has invented ‘a new genre of poems – namely, *Lautgedichte* [sound poetry]’. Sound poetry, as described by Ball, can be interpreted as the self-destruction of the traditional poem, as the exposure of the downfall and disappearance of the individual voice. Ball describes the effect of the public reading of his first sound poem at the Cabaret Voltaire in a following way: ‘Then the lights went out, as I had ordered, and bathed in sweat, I was carried out off the stage like a magical bishop.’² The reading of this sound poetry was experienced

and described by Ball as an exhausting exposure of the human voice to the demonic forces of noise. Ball wins this battle (becoming the magical bishop), but only by radical exposure to these demonic forces; by allowing them to reduce his own voice to pure noise, to nothingness. Here the subject stages its death in its struggle against the media – and in this way regains its sovereignty without pretending to become a winner, to become the master subject. This subject becomes the medium of the media – the messenger that transmits the message of the media instead of transmitting its own message. It becomes a medium that makes the workings of the media visible, observable, phenomenologically accessible.

This shows why media theory is not and cannot be simply a science and why it cannot get rid of the subject, after all. Media show themselves only if and in so far as they frustrate, shift and deconstruct the individual intentions of their users. If they would transmit these intentions absolutely adequately, their workings would remain non-observable, structurally concealed. Of course, an external observer would still be able to follow the use of such media utilities as books, canvases, television sets, computers, and so on. But his observations would not be sufficient to develop a media theory: such an immediate external observation would not even be able to bring the observer to a conclusion that it is the transmission of meanings or intentions that takes place here. Rather, it would look to him like every other industrial activity.

In other words: there is no unmediated access to the media. The media are not immediately observable. To become observable the workings of the media have to be mediated by a subjectivity that takes upon itself the role of mediator of the media. In fact, it is the advanced art of modernity and a certain kind of contemporary art that historically played the role of such a mediator of the media. Contemporary media theory is dependent, de facto, on this mediation. But there is a tendency to forget it. There is a tendency to forget that we can see only what is shown to us. Individual images and texts are shown to us by media (not by empirical subjects with their empirical intentions). But the media themselves – as far as they become the object of our contemplation, observation and analysis – have to be shown to us by a (mediating) subjectivity that is witnessing and presenting their functioning.

Notes

1. Hugo Ball *Flight Out of Time*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1996, p. 57.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 71.