

AN INQUIRY UPON THE TRANSITION FROM AUTONOMOUS MESSIANISTIC ART TO OTHER VIRAL ARTICULATIONS ON YOUTUBE, IN REFERENCE TO ADORNO'S COLONIZATION OF LEISURE TIME

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Abstract-In light of the thriving audience participation on YouTube, which has come across as a fundamental part of digital culture, it has eventually acted as a direct medium between the consumer and the media producer. In addition to it, the tumultuous generation of amateur media ranging from social commentaries, reaction videos to official content, has resulted in the shaping of a seemingly democratic participatory media. This widespread participation has resulted in the system of sharing social media, in a supposed proto-socialist economy.

In relation to it, Adorno's concept of free time has been completely overturned in view of the uploading of reaction videos by major production companies (Vevo, etc.), and the consequential formation of Reactor channels who merely post their reactions to it. Regular viewership of YouTube videos often indulges one to watch these reactions in turn, in an attempt to identify with the pseudo-celebrities. This can be seen as an instance of the ideology of personification (value of personalities is inflated to compensate for the social determination of normal life). Thus, the concept of 'Do everything by yourself' is presented in an inverted fashion, such that our leisure time is dictated by the schedules of relatively secondary sources of YouTube channels. Furthermore, the process of clickbaiting utilized as a part of marketing strategies of the YouTube site, seems to play a major hand in the social capital formation of the virtual world. Here, YouTube by the masses and its easy and variable access in the recent years has brought forth such an array of informational hub, that the viewer is not just watching the video uploads that s/he needs to at the moment, but is compelled to watch more and more in kind, through the auto play option. Furthermore, the inclusion of 30 sec advertisements (e.g. ad sense) to each YouTube video presents itself as one of the most effective source of incomes for professional You Tubers, excepting donations, thus, serving as an addition to the already present social capital in the digital realm. Therefore, the supposed concept of democratic viewership and sharing is undercut by the rules and regulations of YouTube, which often borders on slight censorship, thus, further problematizing the notion of 'digital utopianism'.

Index Terms-Audience participation, digital culture, reaction videos, democratic participatory media, clickbaiting, digital utopianism.

1. INTRODUCTION

In accordance to Theodor W Adorno,

The darkening of the world makes the irrationality of art rational: radically darkened art.

(Aesthetic Theory, pg. 54)

The emergence of "marketplace of culture" (Papastephanou 75) towards the end of the 20th century, has witnessed a tremendous influx of standardization, fetishization and reification in the contemporary post-structuralist world; wherein in reference to the subject-society-power equation of the Critical Theory of The Frankfurt School, one may cautiously gauge upon the fact that "Marxist determinist subjugation of art need not necessarily reduce aesthetics to a form of proletarian messianism." (Papastephanou 77) In such times, Theodor W Adorno, in his attempt to stray away from orthodox Marxism, conceived autonomous art in association with the thoughts of Hegel, Lukacs and Heidegger, that it ought to present a conspicuous representation of itself, devoid of any representation of class interests or obligations. In his attempt to elude didactic art in itself, it can be observed that "his conception of form mediates content, and in its interactions with it, thus, referring to the whole internal organization of art in relation to the capacity of art, so as to restructure conventional patterns of meaning" (Papastephanou 77). While he mandates a microcosmic examination of the episteme¹-valuated art, so as to scrutinize the current social conditions of the capitalist system, it certainly entails into the accounting of an individual's private life and his day-to-day activities. In relation to this, Adorno's concept of free time and what does the individual do with it certainly seems to detach

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itself from the imperatives of labor. Subsequently, from a subjective standpoint, one may accord YouTube as one of the various facets of leisurely activities inducted into the cosmopolitan lifestyle. Herein, YouTube as an autonomous viral phenomenon and a free-for-all video-sharing website directed towards a sense of collective proprietorship, had emerged in December 2005. Its establishment as an “ever-changing cluster of information from the overlooked and forgotten amidst new material” (Hilderbrand 50), had seemingly made possible the “conjoining of both personal and cultural memories” (Hilderbrand 50), which would significantly factor into the distinction between the public and the personal aspects of the social individuality. In this essay, I intend to show in reference to Adorno’s ‘Free Time’ (1991), the binary brought forth by YouTube’s ambiguous licensing policies of the user’s intellectual rights and Lukacs’ commodification of labor power, alludes to Adorno’s quantification of free time, within which occurred a transference of leisure from the YouTube stars to the associative non-identity of the subscribers. Furthermore, YouTube’s induction of click-baiting policy is in dire conflict with the authenticity of its supposed freely accessible, democratic space, which leads one to speculate as to for how long it would maintain the guise of social democratization, and if so, whether it would actually intensify class stratification in the long run.

2. RESEARCH ELABORATION

The loss of YouTube’s indie status with Google’s acquisition of its domain for US\$ 1.6 Billion had begun to raise several speculations in regard to copyright protected videos. What had made it especially distinctive from other similar websites were its elusive policies for copyright infringement that seemed to resonate with a ‘laissez-faire’ arrangement. Moreover, Google’s revenue-sharing transactions with other media conglomerates initially seemed to be protecting the site from the liability of illegal uploads, as it was only required to remove specific clips at the request of aggrieved copyright holders. However, being one of the largest repositories for digital material, there has been quite an ambiguity in relation to its stance on the “intellectual property rights of the user”. It should be noted that under the YouTube TOS² contract, regardless of all User Submissions, therein is “a worldwide, royalty-free, transferable license to use, reproduce and distribute private content” (YouTube 2009) Furthermore, the undefined criteria of a “commercially reasonable time” in retaining the videos, long after the deletion of the user account, is exacerbated by the fact that the site may retain server copies along with other cloud data³, for an indefinite period of time. (Bianco 307) Here, this seems to invoke Lukacs’ notion of reification which was quite distinctive from the Western Marxists’ approach. Even though it depicts the supposed proletariat’s personal activities (e.g. posting private pictures, video clips) as being governed by a medium of free consciousness, which is completely opposed to the subordination of the proletariat subjectivity to the capital (Starosta 41), it is eventually undercut by a looming oppression of the externalized servers of the website. This seems to induce an exploitative relationship between the user and the website, akin to the hierarchical relationship between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, bordering on the infringement of private property. With the interjection of free consciousness of the users, it seems that the reified consciousness of the proletariat (site user), is already pre-determined by nature, such that the mere exercising of any kind of measured control by the bourgeoisie upon the means of production is bound to affect the democratic virtual space, which is in dire opposition to its initial free-for-all policy. While this may entail a transcendent, yet subdued form of capitalism, as dictated by the market forces, it seems to further complicate the emancipation for freedom (atleast in the virtual space). Moreover, this can be paralleled to “Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism, which indicates the commodification of labor in the modern society” (Starosta 42). In relation to this, there has been a constitutive second nature of the products of the labor (personal user videos), and its relative unwarranted movement towards a profit-generating scenario, yet protected by the law (e.g. YouTube TOS). The subsequent injustice and the estrangement of the laborer from his own commodity can be solely adjudged to be a part of the larger social objective sphere, rather than “a Hegelian subjective misconception of appearance” (Starosta 42). In response to this, Lukacs might argue that the individual’s labor power as a commodity must be granted its own capital manifestation, rather than being accrued to the former. Furthermore, Lukacs’ abstraction of labor is explicated upon the basis that the YouTube user is merely one amongst the multitudes engaged in a specific set of activities, which seems to resonate with Marx’s theory of division of labor. So, to term the YouTube website as a mere “characteristic of capitalistic manufacture, which outsources the immediate processes of production (user videos, subscriptions and comments) to the masses, in response to the sub-systems of politics, culture and private matters” (Starosta 43) wouldn’t be an outstretch; rather the fundamental tendency to quantify and compartmentalize each and every aspect of the individual’s social life, seems to parallel Adorno’s conception of lack of genuine autonomy in the individual’s private life, in respect to the construct of social totality.

3. FINDINGS

The central conflict between ‘the amateur participatory economy’ as one of the former facets of the ‘second economy’⁴ and the digitized capitalist economy, can be carried over to the fact that collective intelligence functions

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upon the sole aspects of distribution and collectivism, rather than individual intelligence, such that it is directed towards an equalized non-alienated mode of labor. Here, YouTube's systematized collective ownership seemingly relies upon the binary between unregistered users who can watch videos whilst maintaining anonymity, and the registered users who can upload videos to their own channels, along with the aforementioned privilege. In this regard, YouTubing as a profession at the grassroots' level can be accrued to the latter, wherein the uploaders would have to rely on spontaneous, efficient and regular communicability with their respective subscribers, rather than catering to a fixed nine-to-five job. But this seems to mark the paradox of free time, within which their leisure time is reified, such that the perpetrated demarcation between labor and free time exists no more. Furthermore, the mere reactions to official media content, posted by these supposed 'independent content creators' on their respective channels have in the recent years, seen a tremendous outgrowth of subscribers in kind. Consequentially, some of the highest earning YouTubers can assuredly be included in the millionaire margin. For example, Tobuscus with a \$2.18 million yearly income, PewDiePie with a whopping \$8.47 million margin and TheFineBros with an estimated \$2.41 million income (Harrison 1,7,10), are some channels which merely post parodied trailers, foul-mouthed apt conversation with subscribers, and reactions of their subjects to viral videos. In this aspect, one can't simply deny that art in the context of deconstructing slapstick humor and unconventional and non-elitist critiques has become the up-and-running in this post-modern world. Furthermore, this reflects upon the fact that there has been a total transference of the concept of leisure from one's own accord to that of the YouTube star's subjective preferences, such that the regular viewers have even gone to the extent of identifying themselves with these pseudo-celebrities, indicating the ideology of personification (value of personalities is inflated to compensate for the social determination of normal life). In light of Adorno's perception of free time, we can notice that the concept of "Do it yourself" is presented in an inverted fashion, such that what we usually prefer to do in our free time, is seemingly dictated by the timely schedules of their respective uploads, thus, acting as secondary sources in order to reaffirm the emotive normativity of how one ought to 'appropriately respond' towards a specific video clip. This can be evidenced by the reactions posted on TheFineBros channel, wherein they employ several demographic and multi-lingual groups, ranging from kids, to teens and adults, in order to react to specific viral and social commentary clips. It can be observed that the viewers unconsciously tend to align their opinions in respect to their favored group, indicating an established sense of non-identity amongst the subscribers. So, even though it manages to bridge the generational gap aspect, as well as the racial differences within the reactor groups, it undermines Heidegger's truer sense of universalism that ought to have overcome all local, ethnic, national and gendered identities. Subsequently, one might suspect the tentative formation of the First-World normative discourse, highlighting the apparent stereotypes in the Western demographic, and thereby, attributing to the notion that unlearning knowledge as unrelated to action, with the sole purpose to induce progressive social change, is merely presumptuous at its best. YouTube's facilitation of "spectatorial consumption" (Hilderbrand 49) has resulted in the popularization of the culture of the clip, wherein the user can view specific snippets out of live broadcasts and recordings, which foreground "a new temporality of immediate gratification for the contemporary audience".(Hilderbrand 49) However, the induction of click-baiting policy along with it is utilized as a part of the viral marketing strategies by YouTube, which seemingly enables the viewer to gain access to loads of media content, along with hoards of other irrelevant data. Here, the user is mostly compelled to marathon through multitudes of videos, facilitated via the 'autoplay option'. This seems to indicate some deliberated policy of viewing at work, which further problematizes the notion of a liberal social website. Ironically, this directly correlates to the practice of "cool hunting and gathering" (Mc Luhan 2005) amidst YouTube's inexhaustible pedagogical network, thereby equivocating its immediacy and availability aspects respectively even though it establishes itself as a recurrent, self-updating hub. In a general aspect, this phenomenon, being rightfully termed as liberal communism by Slavoj Zizek, stipulates a transparent schema of free flowing information, so as to give away everything for free (free access, no copyright), while subtly charging for additional services. Such a formulation can be contradicted on several bases, including the ruthless revenue generating strategies implied by the site such as the 30-second advertising placements with each video clip, including its mandating an ad-free subscription service, wherein its YouTube partners would have to include their own clips into the service, along with a 55% extra subscription revenue grant (Kafka 9); failing to do so would result in exclusive private hosting of the videos, amounting to little or no revenue at all, which further complicates the notion of social capital formation, i.e., of what it truly entails, diversification of income for the proletariats, or a deliberate infringement of the user rights by the website.

CONCLUSION

The universality of "post-auratic art" (Papastephanou 81) not only is based upon the continuous transitioning of the consumerist longing for what is new and trendy, that may be accentuated by boredom and the escapist culture, but also alludes to the fact that its autonomy is secured with the subversive engulfing of non-identity amongst the public.

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In other words, such an estrangement from reality does not imply a Romantic conception anymore; neither does it acknowledge a formalistic independence from the capitalist construct. Nevertheless, there seems to be a redundancy within the conformist populace in their day-to-day lives, signifying some sort of mass indoctrination (mainstream opinions) induced to the users, such that it may inhibit the independent individual growth in the long run. This can be paralleled to Adorno's pessimism in relation to postmodern art, which further enunciates a harrowing implication that maybe foreign culture (especially third-world) and the emergent democratic virtual spaces, being brought forth from oblivion, whilst initially assuming a free-for-all policy, is thereby exclusively subjected to an elitist commoditized space (cosmopolitan status). Even though it would eventually be justified on the basis of low revenue margins and other market rationale, one might observe that the notion of technological determinism and its implicit alienation has finally taken over the reins of the class distinctions amongst the masses. Thus, the conception of YouTube as a democratic pedagogical medium which would have transitioned from being a possible threat to a promising possibility is an idealistic notion in itself. In reference to Heidegger's cautionary stance on 'enframing', wherein he points out the impeccable transference between information technology and technological rationality in the near future, (Suoranta and Vaden 144) one might speculate as to whom it would actually benefit; whether it would intensify the class fragmentation even more with its underlying revenue pre-requisites, mainly on the basis of web access, and if so, for how long it would maintain the guise of social democratization in view of its transference of anonymity to the masses.

APPENDIX

Episteme- Truth.

TOS- Terms of Contract.

Cloud Data- Data sources processed on real-time software networks, via remote servers.

Second Economy- A loose description that applies to all non-officially sanctioned forms of economic exchange.

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