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Real Subsumption of Art to Capitalist Technical Reproducibility. Walter Benjamin and Bolívar Echeverría on Technology, Politics and Utopia under Capital

Abstract. The objective of the present article is to analyse the examination carried out by Walter Benjamin on the transformation of art and the aesthetic experience in his work The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproducibility. The analysis will be conducted departing from Bolívar Echeverría's reception of Benjamin's essay -that is informed by Karl Marx's Theory of Subsumption- with the aim of precisising and potentiating Benjamin's critique to capitalist technology and stimulating the discussion on the post-capitalist technological alternatives. In addition to presenting the essential ideas of Benjamin's argument on the modern technique of artistic production and the modern technique of production of goods in general, alternating them with Echeverría's interpretations in which he remarks the critical utopian potential within them, the critical conceptual convergence between Walter Benjamin and Karl Marx around the analysis of the essence of modern technique and its historicity, is presented.

It is evident though, that technique is never a purely scientific fact, but rather, at the same time, a historical fact. And as such, technique obliges us to reassess the positivist separation – completely lacking of dialectic – that has been tried to be established between sciences of nature and sciences of the spirit. The questions that humankind formulates to nature, are conditioned, amongst many other things, by the state of

its production. It is at this point where positivism completely fails. And this is such because in the development of technique it could only see the progress of natural sciences but not the regression of society. Otherwise, it overlooked that capitalism, as such, is one of the decisive forces of the aforementioned development.

W. Benjamin. "Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian"

Introduction

Bolívar Echeverría was an Ecuadorian philosopher, naturalised as a Mexican citizen, who arrived in Mexico in 1968 after having lived in Berlin between 1961 and 1968 where he studied Philosophy at the *Freie Universität*. His friend, Rudi Dutschke, the charismatic leader of the German student movement liked to call him "Die Rote Front Bolívar", expressing in that *motto* the love and friendly admiration for the multiple qualities that Bolívar Echeverría would display at the moment of articulating his thoughts and establishing commitments (Barreda, 2011). During his time in Berlin, Echeverría participated in the processes that the student movement had set into motion. One of them, and a very essential one, was the process of theoretical elucidation of the determinations of existence of contemporary capitalism, that was carried out in the self-managed seminars at the University and in the study circles that were organised by the radicalised youth groups outside of University. The intellectual itinerary of the processes of "Aufklärung als Aktion" [elucidation as action]— like Hans-Jürgen Krahl, the other important leader of the students movement, liked to call them— was constituted around three essential critical devices: the critical

and systematic reading of Karl Marx's *Capital* and the Critique of Political Economy; the rediscovery of the most original contributions to critical Marxism and critical thinking in general, realised during the first half of the 20th Century; the discussion *in vivo* with the crafters of Critical Theory of the first and second generations. It would be on these foundations that those that were the most theoretically enthused, would build the diagnosis of the epoch and establish a very rich and critical dialogue with philosophy, humanities and the many particular sciences that evolved over the course of the century.

With his rich theoretical background, Echeverría landed in Mexico and began his original reading of Karl Marx's *Capital* and of all his critiques of political economy, contrasting them with the theories of the most eminent authors of the 20th century. Echeverría participated in the famous seminar «Reading *Capital* by Karl Marx» at the Faculty of Economics at the National Autonomous University of Mexico. He taught the text contents with outstanding originality (Barreda, 2011). Despite the subject's complexity, he managed to subtly unravel the central concepts, the essential problematics, the argumentative sequences, and their different levels of abstraction. Echeverría did this to illuminate and simplify the logical structure of Marx's main work¹. In this pedagogical process, he not only did not skimp on references to the most outstanding critical Marxists of the 20th century in the treatment of each topic (Barreda, 2011)², but he also enthusiastically

¹ The best demonstration of this work of reading and creative development can be found in *El discurso crítico de Marx* (2017) [*The critical discourse of Marx*], first published in 1986.

² To name a few: Rosa Luxemburg, Georg Lukács, Karl Korsch, Isaak Illich Rubin, Henryk Grossman, Paul Mattick, Herbert Marcuse, Henri Lefebvre, Jean-Paul Sartre, Lucien Goldman, Alfred Sohn-Rethel, Wilhelm Reich, Ernst Bloch, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Walter Benjamin, Karl August Wittfogel, Roman Rosdolsky, Jindrich Zeleny, Karel Kosik, Maximilien Rubel, Helmut Reichelt, Hans-Georg Backhaus, Hans-Jürgen Krahel, Jürgen Habermas, Hans

considered the observations made by other critical authors who were not necessarily Marxists³ (Barreda, 2011).

Within his theoretical work, Echeverría's comprehension of the first chapter of *Capital* stood out in its authenticity⁴. This extensive study let him, among other things, elucidate the concept of *use-value*, a central piece of Marx's theoretical discourse. Echeverría uncovered it as a concept of contrast: an elemental fact to the study of critique and practice of political economy and for the critique of modern life's *totality*⁵.

From the dialectic reconstruction of the concepts *use-value* and *natural form of social reproduction*, Echeverría began to develop a

Heinz Holz, Leo Kofler, Agnes Heller, Valentín Voloshinov, Ferruccio Rossi-Landi (Barreda, 2011: 60)

³ Authors such as: Marcel Mauss, Georges Bataille, Claude Levi-Strauss, Henri Hubert, Karl Kerenyi, Sigmund Freud, Otto Fenichel, Géza Róheim, Fernand Braudel, Norbert Elias, Roman Jakobson, Louis Hjelmslev, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, *Tel quel* group, Abraham Moles, Jean Baudrillard, Johan Huizinga. (Barreda, 2011: 60)

⁴ The German and English texts on the thought and work of Bolívar Echeverría are: S. Gandler (1999) *Peripherer Marxismus. Kritische Theorie in Mexiko*. Hamburg/Berlin: Argument-Verlag; S. Gandler (2015) *Critical Marxism in México. Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez and Bolívar Echeverría*. Leiden: Brill; A. Saenz y S. Brito (2014). "Introduction to Bolívar Echeverría", en: *Radical Philosophy* núm 188, nov/dec; A. Saenz (2018). "Bolívar Echeverría: Critical Discourse and Capitalist Modernity", en Best, B., Bonefeld, W. (eds.) (2018) *The SAGE Handbook of Frankfurt School Critical Theory*. London: SAGE.

⁵ In the chapter "Use-value, ontology and semiotics" of his book *Use-value and Utopia* (1998), Echeverría captures his development of the concept of *use-value* in a complete and detailed manner. It is a rewriting of his classic essay "The 'natural form' of social reproduction", initially published in the Mexican journal *Cuadernos Políticos* n. 41, in 1984. The reconstruction of *use-value* made Echeverría reflect on it from a linguistics, semiotics, anthropology, psychoanalysis, sociology, and philosophy view to strengthen its critical function.

materialist theory of culture (2009). This theory, in turn, evolved into his original theory of the «quadruple *ethe* of capitalist modernity» (Echeverría, 2018). In this theory, he proposes a critical methodology to reconstruct humanity's history as a non-linear history that continues in four successive and simultaneous *ethos*.

The 'quadruple *ethe* of capitalist modernity' theory offers a fresh perspective on modernity (Barreda, 2011). It delineates four distinct ways in which modernity can configure itself⁶. Each configuration presents a proposed solution to the daily struggles of capitalist life, torn between the opposing principles of *use-value* and *value*. According to Echeverría, in the face of this fundamental contradiction of modern capitalist life one can adopt either an affirmative attitude (*realist ethos*), an aversion attitude (*romantic ethos*), a respectful attitude (*classical ethos*), or a participative attitude (*baroque ethos*) (Echeverría, 1998).

With this theory—as he expressed it in the prologue to his *Modernidad de lo barroco* (1998) [*Modernity of the Baroque*]—Echeverría looked to "expand the 'critique of political economy' developed by Karl Marx towards a critical theory of modern life as a whole [...]" (1998: 12), in total accordance with the comprehensive project of the global critique of modern society outlined by Marx in the prologue of his *Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844.

In conclusion, with the *critique of political economy* as a fundament and with the perspective of the *integral critique of modern life*, Echeverría recovers the principal authors of *Critical Theory* to advance in his bold reconstruction of Marxism while placing it at

⁶ In his reflection on the four versions of capitalist modernity, Echeverría engaged with thinkers he considered profound and original in order to problematize the issues of modernity and of the 20th century, such as Max Weber, Georg Simmel, Martin Heidegger, Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Leo Kofler.

the same level as the problems produced by capitalist development and the aggravation of the civil crisis. Walter Benjamin was an essential author who, among other things, led Echeverría to problematize the essence of modern technology and its emancipatory possibilities towards a post-capitalist concrete-utopian horizon.

Bolívar Echeverría carries out an original reception of Walter Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility*. Specifically, Echeverría draws on the concepts of Formal and Real Subsumption of Labour Under Capital and thus, departing from the Marxian Theory of Subsumption, potentiates the critical scope of Benjamin's work, oriented to account for *the reconstitution of the aesthetic experience in the transition to a post-capitalist modernity*.

Echeverría presents this peculiar reception of Benjamin's work in his essay, *Arte y utopía (Art and utopia)* which figures as the Introduction to Editorial Itaca's 2003 Edition of *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility*. The peculiarity of this critical edition lies in the fact that the translation from German into Spanish, carried out by Andrés Echeverría Weikert —son of the Ecuadorian philosopher— considers and contrasts all the versions of the text written by Benjamin⁷.

In the article, Echeverría contextualises and highlights the great sensitivity that allowed Benjamin to perceive the ongoing social

⁷ This edition uses the second edition of the essay and the first definitive, written in 1935-1936 (Benjamin, 1989). The main passages where there were variations in the other versions, are referred in footnotes. The versions considered are: the first version of 1935; the French version of 1936, the only one published in life of the author in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, and the third version written in 1937-1938.

transformation. A sensitivity potentiated for having found himself in an exceptional historical turning point in modern history: Germany at the crossroads of socialism or barbarism in which it was either possible for Nazism to fail and give way to the proletarian rebellion and the anti-capitalist revolution, or for it to consolidate and become irreversible thus plunging the world into counterrevolution and catastrophe.

A marked disposition to interiorise this borderline situation, unparalleled amongst his contemporary left wing intellectuals, is what would take Benjamin to perceive so sensitively the great ongoing transformation. A transformation that will naturally comprise alterations of the aesthetic experience and that imply artistic creation, its perception, its joy, the place of art in society, its change of function and even more, the meaning of art itself. These radical changes in the art world, which are the outcome of the “conquests of technique” and of the profound reconfiguration of the social world, are, according to Echeverría, the purpose for Benjamin’s essay.

And so, if in Benjamin’s essay the approach to the problem of art and of the reconfiguration of the aesthetic experience in connection with economical, social, political and technological events of the epoch is to be found, such connection is realised, like Echeverría points out, at two substantive points that are developed primarily all along the exposition. The first connection point, and the most evident throughout the essay, is the *real subsumption of art to its technical reproducibility*, or like Echeverría calls it: *real subsumption of art to value for exhibition* (Echeverría, 2003:18). The second point is the *massification of the reception of the work of art technically reproduced*. These two points converge in a fact not thematised by Benjamin in its entirety, a fact that Echeverría himself takes up without delving into it, opening up a hermeneutical task to be carried out and that in this work I would only like to state explicitly: the problem of formal and real subsumption of technique to a Post-Capitalist Social Form and the new subject that can playfully operate it.

This article focuses on examining the first connection point, the real subsumption of art to its technical reproducibility. In order to do so, I will first present the essential features of the Marxian Theory of Subsumption according to the way in which it was received by Bolívar Echeverría. Secondly, I will present the essential ideas of Benjamin's argument about the modern technique of artistic production and the modern technique of goods production in general, contained in the first seven theses of his text, alternating them with Bolívar Echeverría's interpretation in which the critical-utopical potential in Benjamin's proposals is remarked. Finally, drawing upon Echeverría's indications, I expose the critical conceptual convergence between Walter Benjamin and Karl Marx around their assessment of the essence of modern technique and its historicity. I also point out the avenues for future research in continuity with the problems that have been elucidated in this article.

Structure and Historicity of Modern Technique in Karl Marx's Theory of Subsumption

The affirmation that Echeverría read Benjamin's essay informed by Marx's Subsumption Theory is neither arbitrary nor exterior. In the year 1983 he translated passages of Karl Marx's "Manuscript of 1861-1863"⁸ that were published in the journal *Cuadernos Políticos* No.37 and were later reprinted in 2005 by Editorial Itaca with the title *La tecnología del capital (The Technology of The Capital)*. For Editorial

⁸ Echeverría informs that "most of them [the extracted passages] can be found in 'Results of the immediate process of production' (Chapter VI of the "1865 Manuscript") and are an almost exact transcription of the parts corresponding to the 1861-1863 Manuscript" (Marx, 2005:10). On the legal page he says that he took the extracts from K. Marx, F. Engels, *Gesamtausgabe*, II, 3, Dietz Verlag, Berlín, 1981.

Itaca's publication, the Ecuadorian philosopher wrote a brief introduction⁹ in which he indicated the relevance of the Theory of Subsumption for the new left in order to face the problems that had arisen with capitalist historical development. Bolívar Echeverría recognises the radical reflexivity of Marx's critical discourse in the concepts of Formal and Real Subsumption of Labour Under Capital and considers these to be the most central in the critical description of the Capitalist Mode of Social Reproduction, and so, he points out two possibilities for its theoretical use "almost unexplored by Marxist authors" (Echeverría, 2005:10). The basic aspects of this theory are summarised below.

The first possibility of use of the Theory of Subsumption can be found in the debate upon the *essence* of modern technique and on the possibilities of a postcapitalist technological alternative (Echeverría, 2005:10). In the literature on the subject, two direct effects of technological development are usually recognised; on the one hand, its essential effect that would be the potentiation of the productivity of labour, and, on the other, its "accessory" or collateral effect, that would be the destruction of the producing subject and of nature. Subsumption Theory explains these effects, criticising its appearance of naturality, as processes that do not emanate from the mere progressist need of applying science to

⁹ Besides the significant labour of edition and translation that Echeverría undertook to introduce the Theory of Subsumption in the Spanish speaking debate, Andrés Barreda, one of his first students, explains that in his classes and reading seminars on *Capital*, he considered essential the recuperation of the Theory of formal and real subsumption of the labour process under capital, since he recognised that in it, the most finished way in which Marx formulates his Theory of Capitalist Development is to be found (Barreda, 2011). On the same token, Jorge Veraza, another very notable disciple of Echeverría, in a recent publication on Echeverría's thought, besides affirming that "Bolívar's interpretation of *Capital* is...the best Marxist interpretation in Latin America and the world" (Veraza, 2022:189), explains that Echeverría's understanding *Capital* was completely different and this was patent in his very original way of introducing the concepts of formal and real subsumption of the labour process under capital.

production, but rather from a “regressive social need that consists in perfecting exploitation of labour force” (Marx, 2005: 11). In this sense, modern technology should not be seen as an incident that has spontaneously arisen and that imposes its stamp to the productive cooperation of the social subject. On the contrary, says Echeverría following Marx,

it is the *result* of the imposition of a peculiar form of productive cooperation -the one that consists in the conjunct belonging of multiple working subjects to a single capital- to the means of production, to its technical potentialities and to its reaction capacity over the subject that uses them. (2005: 11).

The second amongst the possibilities of use of the Theory of Subsumption is the one concerned with the historiographical discussion on the articulation of distinct modes of production in the capitalist era. The Theory conceives the capitalist mode of being as a mode that necessarily has got two basic figures, in some cases successive in time, but that can also appear complementary at the same time: the *formal mode* and the *real mode* of subsumption of the social reproduction process (production/consumption) in the process of Capitalist Accumulation (Echeverría, 2005: 12). In this sense, Echeverría, following Marx, will assert that,

at the base of the social conflicts of our time we are met with three elementary types, specifically capitalist, of contradictory articulation between modes of production: the articulation of a capitalist form with a precapitalist technical reality, the articulation of the capitalist form with the technical reality set up by capitalist form itself, and the articulation of new postcapitalist forms of society and technology with the socio-technical totality built by capitalism. (2005: 12-13).

Besides this, Echeverría points out that the concept of Subsumption has a special relevance for what he considers to be the core of the specific content of Marx's critical discourse: the theory of the contradiction between the Social-Natural Process of Production/Consumption and the Social-Capitalist Process of Valorisation of Value. This concept captures Marx's most advanced effort to demonstrate the way in which these processes articulate; it also expresses the evolution of his thought as it transcends the perspective that sees the process of labour as an untouched reality in itself that is only incorporated as "matter" to the "form" capital. As opposed to this, in the concept of Subsumption we would find, expressed with precision, the way in which those contradictory processes articulate; with this concept, the labour process is already conceived "as a 'substance' essentially affected by the capitalist 'form' which is mediating its existence or making it possible— even if it is only from the exterior or already within itself" (Echeverría, 2005:13).

Effectively, developing Marx's conception, the capitalist social form can affect production in a formal or real manner. In a purely formal manner, capitalism affects production when the technical procedures inherited from previous periods begin to function according to the logic of capital. Here, a *formal subsumption of labour under capital* would be occurring: the same process—the labour process— would be forced to carry out different tasks from those for which it was originally created, that is, it would be carrying out properly capitalist tasks. This would imply a *formal subsumption of labour under capital*.

Marx's following affirmation in the "Manuscript 1861-1863" expresses the notion of subsumption rather precisely and allows to observe the aforementioned connection of the two possibilities of use of this concept,

Historically, in fact, at the start of its formation, we see capital take under its control (subsume under itself) not only the labour process in general but the specific actual labour processes as it

finds them available in the existing technology, and in the form in which they have developed on the basis of non-capitalist relations of production... (Marx, 2010: 92-93)

When the labour process is put under capital's control in this fashion, it is only occurring in an external mode or formally, not in its contents nor in its qualitative material depth, and subsuming the labour process in its form, implies subsuming it in its sense. Thus, the form or sense of the labour process inherited from precapitalist circumstances is now subsumed under the capital, meaning its form or sense is commanded or oriented by the capital but "only formally, without changing anything of its technological concretion." (Echeverría, 2005:18).

Having said that, beyond formal subsumption there can be a *real subsumption of labour process* that takes place when capital, non-satisfied with using in a capitalist form the inherited technical productive forces, transforms them into their image and likeness. That is to say, when it turns the technical structure of the world into a capitalist technical structure one; when capitalist social form is carved in technology, thus, making of it a *capitalist technology*. If things are being produced with a capitalist sense; if the capitalist imprint is already in the production process itself, in the technical instruments with which goods are produced, then a *real subsumption of labour under capital* would be taking place.

If earlier, the capital had externally subsumed the labour process, in its form, now it does it in its internal and integral reality. As Marx asserts:

"We have seen how the capitalist mode of production does not only formally modify the labour process, but revolutionises all its social and technological conditions, and how the capital no longer appears here only as material conditions of labour—raw

material and means of labour— that no longer pertain to the worker, but as the synthesis of the powers and social forms of its communitary labour as powers and forms that confront the individual worker" (Marx, 2005: 56-57)

Politics and Utopia in the Work of Art Subsumed to Capitalist Technical Reproducibility

Having presented some fundamental ideas about Marx's Theory of Subsumption, it is now possible to assess, under its light, the first connection point between the reconfiguration of the aesthetic experience and the economical, social and technological transformations that were taking place at the historical turning point that Benjamin witnessed: the *real subsumption of art to its technical reproducibility*.

For Benjamin, having entered into an epoch in which the traditional work of art can be technically reproduced —thus, disappearing its uniqueness and its aura— is only one aspect of the problem. Art has only been *formally* subsumed to capitalist technical reproducibility. One is the work of art undergoing the process of its technical reproducibility as an *external factor* to itself—positive or negative— and a very different one is that which assumes it as an *essential moment* of its own constitution (Echeverría, 2003).

For instance, in the work of art of the avant-garde, its technique of production and consumption would be only formally subsumed to the value for exhibition; in it the technical reproducibility of the artistic product is a condition made present from the outside and therefore it can be affirmed that art has only been *formally* subsumed to capitalist technical reproducibility.

The other aspect, of greater relevance for the aesthetic experience and for the political function that it will acquire, is the fact that the technically reproduced work of art affects *the material constitution* of the work of art itself. In it, the subsumption has become "real" and has altered its own technique of production and consumption, already appearing in its *most essential design* as a work of art made *for* the technical reproduction of itself (Benjamin, 2003:18).

For instance, in cinema works, the technical reproducibility of the product has its base directly in the *technique of its production* which enables its massive propagation and even more, it openly imposes it (Echeverría, 2003:100 ss.)

Bolívar Echeverría affirms that in this *real* way in which technical reproducibility intervenes the work of art, is where Benjamin observes what for him is the most promising possibility in the radical metamorphosis process that art is going through in his epoch: for the *new technique of production of goods in general* to be discovered as a *new technique of artistic production in particular* by an artistic practice mainly oriented to satisfy the purely mundane need of an aesthetic experience, whose first sketch can be studied in revolutionary cinema (Echeverría, 2003).

This is why for Benjamin the essential question is: What happens with the work of art when it is not only that it can be reproduced, but rather that it is *made to be technically reproduced*? When it is conceived and realised for its technical reproducibility, when the work of art has been *really subsumed to technical reproducibility* and it has not been conceived, like in the auratic epoch, to be eternal.

Benjamin will answer this question oriented by a materialistic method that leads him to understand that the “decadence of the aura” of the traditional work of art, is a sign of a transformation of the sensory perception that is interconnected with the material and social conditions of the epoch. Next to the *unprecedented fact* that for the first time in world history, technical reproducibility of the work of art *liberates* it from its parasitic existence within the ritual (Echeverría, 2003), the transformation of the social function of art also takes place, having now its foundation in *politics*.

Thereby, this *emancipation* of the artistic procedures that increases the opportunities of exhibition for the work of art and the opportunities of aesthetic experience for human beings, reveals that

a transformation has occurred, a transformation that inverts the qualitative contents of the work of art and invests it with completely new functions. In this sense, Echeverría distinguishes that for Benjamin “the status of the emancipated work of art would be a *transitory status*; it would be between the archaic status, subdued to the work of cult, and the future status, in which it would be integrated in the work of everyday enjoyment ” (Echeverría, 2003:14) and as such, it is a vehicle of what art could be in an emancipated society.

Having before him the presence of the new art with a considerable historical scope that has shown in cinema its tendency to universalisation, will take Benjamin to carry out a *material* comparison with art’s primal epoch. In this material confrontation, he takes into account the goods production technique in general, and led by a dialectic perspective, will elucidate the *tendential difference* that exists between the first technique —proper to a primal society— and the second technique — proper to modern society.

In this specification, Benjamin finds that the tendency of the first technique is *to involve human beings as much as possible*; that its culminating act is human sacrifice and that its token is “once and for all” (and that in it there is at play either an irremediable mistake or a substitutive sacrifice, eternally valid). On the second technique, he finds that its specific tendency is *to involve human beings the least possible*; its culminating act would be in the line of unmanned remote control planes. Its token: “one is as good as none”, which has to do with experiment and its tireless capacity to vary the data of its attempts; its origin is to be found in the act of playing, there where “human beings, with unconscious cleverness start to distance themselves from nature” its real objective is “*concerted action* between nature and humanity” (Benjamin, 2003: 56).

Introducing a decisive turn to the usual treatment of modern technique, Benjamin will specify that the objective of “ruling over nature” is the objective of the first technique, proper to primal society. Actual society, as opposed to the primal society, has got a more *liberated* technique, despite the fact that it confronts human

beings as a *second nature*. It is a nature no less elementary than the one the original society had before itself. That is why “in front of this second nature, man—that invented it and that stopped being able to rule it a long time ago, or *that does not rule yet*—needs to carry out a *learning process* like the one he carries out before the first nature”. (Benjamin, 2003: 55).

As pointed out by Echeverría remarking Walter Benjamin’s critical and utopian streak, the latter culminates his reflection on the work of art in the time of the *new technique* with a differentiation (Echeverría, 2003). The *actual* technical base of the capitalist social labour process that is the successor of the technical strategies of archaic societies, strategies that were directed to respond to nature’s hostility aiming at its conquest and submission, is distinguished by Benjamin from the new technical base that has arisen with that process. It is a technical base “repressed, misused and deformed by capitalism”; its principle is no longer that of appropriative aggression of nature but rather “the ‘playful telos’ of form creation, in and with nature, which implies a new form of opening to it” (Echeverría: 2003: 22-23).

In this way, the historical task of cinema is to contribute to the immense actual system of apparatus, which appears as a second nature for the *individual*, to become a first nature for the *collective*. Benjamin finds that the political function of cinema is for human beings to train their perceptions and reactions now conditioned by the interaction with a system of apparatus which has a growing relevance in human life. In this interaction, human beings learn that their emancipation will occur when the constitution of the

humane¹⁰ has adapted to the new productive forces inaugurated by the second technique (Benjamin, 2003).

The political function of the new art will get in contact with the revolutionary moment of society, even though in a peculiar way. Benjamin, Echeverría and Herbert Marcuse, coincide in recognising that the *political character* of the new art “is not due to the fact that it contributes to the pro-revolutionary cognitive process but rather to the fact —like Marcuse affirms— that it proposes an exemplary revolutionary behaviour” (Marcuse as cited in Echeverría, 2003: 22)

And Echeverría goes on,

The new art creates a demand that is ahead of the time of its possible satisfaction; it exercises the masses in the democratic use of the “apparatus system”—the new means of production—and thus, prepares them for their recovered function as subjects of their own social life and their own history. (Echeverría, 2003: 22).

The new art —says Echeverría— moves ahead to put this subject into action, “showing him to give its first steps” (Echeverría, 2003: 23), and the goal of revolutions is to accelerate them, concludes Benjamin, since in revolutions the attempts of reactivation of a new and unprecedented collective whose organs are to be found in the second technique, are actualised.

In conclusion, the political function of art in the age of its technical reproducibility points towards a state of affairs in which “esoteric experiences of happiness have become public and

¹⁰ In the french version, published in 1936, during Benjamin’s lifetime in the *Zeitschrift forschung*, instead of “constitution of the humane” the text says “economical structure of humanity”. In that version, Benjamin is using the marxian concept of “economical structure” that incorporates the totality of social relations of production that keep a relationship with human productive forces. See: *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859).

universal” (Habermas, as cited in Echeverría, 2003), giving solution to vital questions that had been buried by the first technique.

Assesment and research paths in the perspective of the real subsumption of the sensitivity of the social subject under capital

There are no indications that Walter Benjamin read the preparatory manuscript of *Capital*, written between 1863 and 1866, entitled by Marx as *Das Kapital. Erstes Buch. De Produktionsprozeß des Kapitals. Einzelne Seiten. Sechstes Kapitel. Resultate des unmittelbaren Produktionsprozesses*. In this manuscript that was published by the Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute of Moscow in a bilingual edition in 1933, the concepts of formal and real subsumption of labour under capital are already developed.

It is known, on the other hand, that in 1935, he started reading *Capital*¹¹. The understanding that he achieved of Chapter 13, *Machinery and Large-Scale Industry*¹² is patent in *technological work*¹³ and *On some motifs on Baudelaire*. In Chapter 13, Marx culminates the analysis of the process of real subsumption of labour under capital

¹¹ In a letter to Adorno, dated on the 10th of June 1935, Benjamin informs him: “I have started to have a glance at the first book of ‘Capital’ and to have a walk around the little dwarf garden, next to the dread of the Alps, I have added the cultural history of Friedell, a bit untidy” (Adorno, 2021: 136)

¹² In this text, the original german edition is used: Karl Marx *Das Kapital Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie Erster Band Hamburg 1972* in: K.Marx, F.Engels, Gesamtausgabe (MEGA) Zweite Abteilung. Das Kapital und Vorarbeiten. Band 6, Dietz Verlag Berlin, 1987.

¹³ This is how Theodor Adorno used to refer to the essay *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility*, in a letter to Benjamin from the 29 of January of 1936. (Adorno, 2021:165).

that he had initiated in Chapter 10, whilst the analysis of the process of formal subsumption of labour under capital is carried out between chapters 5 and 9. Even though the terminology «formal and real subsumption of labour under capital» is only explained in Chapter XIV “Absolute and Relative Surplus-Value” the conceptual reasoning is displayed in the above mentioned chapters.

Even though Benjamin does not know the 1863-1866 Manuscript and even though he does not use the terminology of subsumption, Bolívar Echeverría demonstrates that Benjamin grasped the *structural-genetic* reasoning on the capitalist technique of production displayed by Marx in the referred texts.

Following Echeverría, it is possible to affirm that in the understanding of the technical reproducibility of the work of art, the two possibilities of use of the Theory of Subsumption mentioned above¹⁴, intertwine. On the one hand, its usefulness to unravel the essence of modern technique, manifests itself in the dialectic specification of the second technique that contrasts with the first technique, pointing out aspects that provide it with singular quality (tendency, token, origin, end).

On the other hand, in the possibility of using the Theory in what concerns the historiographic discussion, Echeverría explains how in Benjamin’s essay, two elementary types of contradictory articulation between modes of production are considered. Firstly, the articulation of the capitalist social form with the technical reality that this social form has erected, is present in the description of the fact that the constitution of the humane, here and now, is not *yet* adapted to the new productive forces inaugurated by the second technique.

Secondly, the articulation of new, postcapitalist forms of society and technology with the socio-technical totality built by capitalism, can be found in the description that the human being that invented the *new technique*, which does not yet dominate and that has become

¹⁴ See above: Structure and Historicity of Modern Technique in Karl Marx’s Theory of Subsumption

a second nature, with the aid of the new art will be able to interact with the apparatus system, that is the new means of production, and thus learn that “the serfdom to the service of such apparatus system will only be substituted by the liberation through the apparatus itself” (Benjamin, 2003: 57). And this will happen when the social relations of production have adapted to the new productive forces whose playful telos will allow for a concerted interaction with nature.

Two research paths are outlined in this article regarding the essential sense—technological and political—of Walter Benjamin’s essay. The first one is about massification in the reception of the work of art in the conditions of its technical reproducibility and, like mentioned at the beginning, it is the second point of connection between the transformation of the aesthetic experience and the social, economical and technological changes that had place during the time of the writing of the essay; Transformations that prefigure alterations in sociality and in the whole of human subjectivity and that can be analysed as processes of *real subsumption of the social subject under capital*¹⁵ following the Marxian concepts that Echeverría has recuperated to potentiate Benjamin’s theses critical scope.

The second path leads to investigate with more particularity the way in which a new perception or aesthetic sensitivity is configured. Like Benjamin has pointed out, it implies the modification of the experimentation of time and space and, thereupon, of all human sensory (Benjamin, 1972: 147). It is an investigation that leads to elucidating the processes of *real subsumption of the sensitivity of the social subject under the capital*.

¹⁵ The concept is proposed by Jorge Veraza in *Subsunción real del consumo al capital. Dominación fisiológica y psicológica en la sociedad contemporánea*. México: Editorial Itaca, 2008

The following section briefly points towards a possible investigation based on the intersection of the aforementioned paths. Benjamin's considerations regarding the transformation in mass perception are taken into account and they are articulated with critical indications formulated by Bolívar Echeverría and by Theodor Adorno.

As Benjamin recalls, cinema accomplishes art's essential social function. That is, to establish equilibrium between human beings and the apparatus. Cinema meets this undertaking by making a representation of the surrounding world relying on the technical devices and fully achieves it by enhancing the elements that constitute it; it accentuates hidden details in familiar objects and explores ordinary environments through the lens. In this manner, cinema furthers the appreciation of the inevitabilities that govern our existence and uncovers an immense, unsuspected field of action (Benjamin, 2003).

Hence, if the variety of spaces in everyday life —those of enjoyment, transportation, work, intimacy— are experienced as hopeless prisons, then cinema makes them spring into the air with its split-second dynamite and, consequently, enables human beings to venture into its vast ruins (Benjamin, 2003). In this way, through the extension of space and movement achieved by the apparatus, “entirely new structures of matter are revealed” (Benjamin, 2003: 86).

Effectively, With the intervention of the camera and its constellation of devices in the succession of life, cinema interrupts and isolates it, it expands and captures it, it magnifies and minimises it. Through the camera the human being obtains the experience of the “optical unconscious” (Benjamin, 2003: 87) in a parallel direction to the discovery of the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis.

The pictures in motion of the social nature, now expanded and revealed by cinema, are missiles launched towards the audience, whose transformed perception is bound to the tactile quality present

in the visual matter. Within cinema, where the public seeks entertainment, the tactile quality is in the shock-effect of the sequence of pictures, it is in the changes of scenery and in the multiple perspectives introduced to the viewer, blow after blow. As the poet, George Duhamel, said: “I can no longer think what I want to think. My thoughts have been replaced by moving images”. Duhamel hated cinema, but as Benjamin (2003) states, he certainly comprehended its structure.

Overall, the tactile quality that is launched at the viewer—images that are barely caught by the eye, are immediately transformed and interrupted by new ones—calls for the presence of an *enhanced conscience* (Benjamin, 2003). Contrary to former artwork, which demands an *asocial* behaviour of recollection, attention, and reflection, cinema develops a *social* behaviour: a distracted one, previously unveiled by dadaism.

Thus, the masses appear as a matrix from which a transformed way of participation in art emerges. Signs of this renewed participation in the aesthetic experience are in the enjoyment and entertainment; in the use and perception, in the ways of grasping art, in both the tactile and the visual quality, as well as in the ways of feeling it (Benjamin, 2003).

All of the above addresses changes that correspond to the profound transformation of the human system of perception and appreciation, specific to a time of historic inflection that is experienced as a crisis of civilization; “as a moment where a pronounced threat to life is latent for humankind” (Benjamin, 2003: 111-112).

That being said, what would result of the integration of the investigation of these transformations and the theory of subsumption, which highlights the fact that the ‘apparatus system’ is subcoded in its material structure by the capitalist telos, or in

Benjamin's words, that "rational technique has engendered within the depths of a capitalist economy that has long been irrational" (2003:87)?

The fact that the apparatus system's material structure of the new art is not neutral and that the relation of capitalist production overdetermines it, leads to the understanding that the representation of the surrounding world through *precisely that* system of devices is a representation interfered with by the capitalist social form. This interference is achieved through a subtle, unexpressed *proto-message*, implicit and incorporated in the very *functioning*, of the means of production in general (Echeverría, 2018). Thereby, particularly in the artistic means of production; the interference happens with the help of a

"diffuse proto-message, permanently apologetic for what is established, that incessantly sings praises to the capital; and that permeates or infects all the objects and all the words that come out of those means of production and discourse with its pro-capitalist sense," (Echeverría, 2018: XVI).

Consequently, the missile-pictures launched at the eyes and body, which the subject gradually dominates following the guidance of the tactile reception through the habituation [Gewöhnung], contain the subtle proto-message that hails the established order.

Hence, its consequences go beyond what Benjamin referred to when he spoke of the configuration of cinema as a "vaccine for the psyche". According to him, that is a product of the very technification that immunises the masses from mass psychosis and from dangerous tensions that technification has favoured in all spheres of life, through cinema, in which the unfolding of of sadic fantasies or masochist hallucinations is able to prevent its natural maturing among the masses.

The consequences extend to greater lengths, towards the field of problems that Adorno was faced with in his epistolary exchanges, that can be found in his essay, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, written in

1945. I am referring to the field in which the aestheticization of the world is not carried out in the form of an artistic production based on the fine arts or on traditional art (Echeverría, 2003), but rather the cultivation of the aesthetic forms realised within a frame of action, directly manipulated by the system of cultural industry. An “early customer service” (Adorno, 1998: 169) is provided that acts at the radical level of Kantian schematism; that secret mechanism of the soul that, according to Kant, processes the sensory data in such a way that allows it to adapt to pure reason.

In conclusion, synthesising Echeverría (2018) and Adorno’s (1998) approaches, there is no meaningful content left in the objects to be classified or processed by the receiver of pictures and messages, and of any kind of artistic and cultural products that are launched towards him,—that has been previously done within the schematism of the capitalist cultural industry—. Said system organises the functioning of mass media to adapt culture as a whole to the concrete needs of capital reproduction and to align the subject’s sensible perception with the needs of the capital.

It is worth questioning how this problem grows in today’s techno-digital climate. The critical analysis must acknowledge the tactile-material aspects and the consequences derived from touching, in *stricto sensu*, the sense organs under the interactive use it enables.

What happens to the subject’s thinking process when it alternates, mediates, and articulates itself with digital technology’s computational and algorithmic operations should be analysed. A working hypothesis that arises from the central argument of this article is that the digital tech device penetrates the subject’s consciousness by operating as a material premise of thought in each new act. It influences its *rhythm* and *form* and, as an essential consequence, alters the very *substance* of thought. A substantial

alteration of the experience means a redefinition of the *orientations* and *senses* that guide the subject's actions.

The digital technology system is fundamental in reconfiguring the subject's projective activity. Any human activity that includes the mobilisation of vital and sensory organs and the will of the subject, oriented towards an end (*telos*), is shaped in a machine-digital way.

Within the new individual-technology-society metabolism, the praxiological moment acquires a machine character due to the qualitative nature of the technological device, which enables the subject to use it actively, fulfilling an authentically metabolic mediating function. On every occasion, the *interaction* between the device and the individual restarts the reproductive cycle that creates reality, and, so it becomes a material premise of the form and rhythm of each new thought and the whole of human activity.

In conclusion, once the practical and conscious mediations of the new metabolism occur techno-digitally, the social subject transforms their world experience by altering their perception of temporality, spatiality, and their reciprocal relationships with society and nature.

In this manner, a developed process of the subsumption of the social subject under the capital is achieved. With it, the subject's sensitivity and perception in its material contents is subsumed as well, that is, their categories for understanding, with which they orient themselves in the world¹⁶.

¹⁶ Examples of the concrete forms in which the processes of real subsumption of sensitivity under the capital are expressed will be addressed in a future analysis. As for what concerns this work, only the essential dimension of consciousness that is subsumed in its material reality by capital has been shown. This becomes a condition of possibility for effecting the subsumption of other areas of sensitivity and perception of the social subject.

In the productive/consumptive interactions with the apparatus system, the technological and societal imprint becomes inscribed in the projective unit of the subject, thereby altering their subjective disposition, their sociability and, altogether, the entirety of their experience in the sense of capitalist praxis.

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