

undisciplined thinking_

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Claus Pias_ Presentism. Digital Cultures and the Legacy of Media Critique

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I. The Media Are to Blame¹

Social critique has been taking place in the form of media critique since long before so-called “digitalization.” The classic model of such critique consists of four elements. First, the *urgency* of the matter at hand is declared: something is always at stake (values, community, education, for example), and an immediate and rhetorically powerful intervention is needed in order to avoid something even worse to come. Second, there is a fear of lost *self-evidence*: an apparently still existing immediacy, unity, or truth is suddenly experienced as something damaged, obfuscated, or corrupted. Third, there needs to be a flexible *attribution of responsibility*: individual media bear the guilt for every fundamental upheaval that has taken place and are convicted of such crimes in the critical trial. It is through this power attributed to media that a given critique gains its validity. Fourth and finally, there is a historical *narrative of loss*: the new and untrusted media in question are measured against the old and familiar media of the time and can only lose in this comparison until they themselves have become old and familiar media.

This strategic quartet of arguments can be traced back throughout the history of media philosophy in the twentieth century (and beyond) – whether, for example, in Karl Krauss’s critique that the press is making the news “impressionistic,” in Günther Anders’s critique that television is reducing experience and obscuring reality, or in Vilém Flusser’s critique that images have brought about the end of arguments and historicity. For a number of years, this tradition has been perpetuated by a media critique of digital cultures, and the guiding keyword of this critique has been “presentism.”

The different varieties of the presentism thesis state that, by means of digital media, today’s culture (in the singular, of course) is defined by an overwhelming excess of presence. In sum, the accelerating effects of computerization have pushed nearly everything into the present, so that, ultimately, nothing else remains but a breathless and simultaneously stagnant present without any past or future horizon through which it can be “experienced.”

Examples of this can be found in books such as Douglas Rushkoff’s *Present Shock: When Everything Happens Now*. In all aspects of life, according to Rushkoff, what prevails is a “present shock” – a fixation on the “now” and an excess of simultaneity that no longer allows any time for reflection. The cause of this, he thinks, is digital media, which he opposes with a mixture of arrogance and admiration (as is fitting of any alarmed cultural critic in tune with the times). In Rushkoff’s view, digital media are so powerful that they create a “narrative collapse” and that they lead to a state of “digiphrenia” between a faux present of ongoing “digital bombardment” and the true now of “coherently living humans.”

Of course, he offers an obvious solution that does not call into question the power of media (as stated by media critics) but rather (futilely) instructs his readers to compensate for such losses. In the sense of the old virtue of *temperantia*, this is a matter of finding the “optimal balance between storage and stream, content and flow.” This calls to mind a rather considerable market segment that such media critiques often evoke: the digital detox or healing from “oversharing” or “WhatsAppitis,” the inner experience of “down time,” the temporary avoidance of media (“digital sabbath”), the act of decelerating by means of “slow

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media,” or the act of “unplugging” via shield ware or unplugged classrooms – all of which have been the topic of innumerable confessional and self-help books.

Just how forgetful (and thus “presentistic”) such media critiques of “digitalization” can be is clear from the fact the same arguments were made three decades ago about television. In his 1985 best-seller *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, for instance, Neil Postman wrote the following about what he called the “now ... this” culture: “The phrase [on radio and television newscasts] is a means of acknowledging the fact that the world as mapped by the speeded-up electronic media has no order or meaning and is not to be taken seriously.” Through a never-ending stream of fragmentary and context-free trivialities, Postman goes on, we lose all time for reflection. In a development that spreads to old media as well, “logic, reason, sequence, and rules of contradiction” and even “truth” are relinquished for “primitive” emotions, shifting attitudes, and short-term affects. And at stake in all of this, in Postman’s estimation, is nothing less than the “survival of culture,” which is no longer able to make any coherent judgements about the world.

II. Under the Stress of Digitalization

If one compares this situation with the recent and no less heated and breathless discussions about the advantages and disadvantages of “digitalization” in politics and the economy, what is surprising is not the expectable difference but rather the radical *similarity* between affirmation and critique. The countless debates about the digital future of culture, administration, industry, education, or research – which reliably revolve around empty analytical terms such as “good or evil,” “a blessing or a curse,” or “What can we do about it?” – are distinguished above all by the fact that the two sides of the argument are blind to their common assumptions. This can be demonstrated quite easily:

Obvious, first of all, is the element of *urgency*: those who jump into discussions of “digitalization” almost invariably add to the suspicion that Germany is losing its much-cited “place” in the world, that jobs are at stake, and that the educational opportunities of “our” children are at risk. “Digitalization” thus always seems to be a time-critical matter; ongoing pressure to act and make decisions is supposedly being created by something that might happen at one point or another but nevertheless warrants immediate reactions. The element of *loss of self-evidence* is no less apparent: the fear of new and emerging cultural techniques (and this applies to something as banal as learning about the existence of YouTube or Twitter) does not culminate in curiosity, for instance, but rather splits, under the perceived pressure of time, into cultural-critical condemnation or awkward adoption. Third, both sides will share the element of *responsibility* – the sense that “the media” are responsible for all fundamental upheavals. This accusation will be made without any regard for the specifics of digital media and their different cultures. The fact that a protocol, a smartphone, a high-performance computer, a “social” platform, administrative software, or the work station of someone in a cubicle can each be viewed as a “medium” (despite vastly different materialities, social situations, or applications) only makes matters unattractively complicated and is simply ignored in favor of the grand assertion that “digital technologies” in themselves are the engine of epoch-making changes. Any claim about a new epoch needs its “leading medium,” to which so much power can be attributed that it might seem that the entire future depends on it. For this reason, it is easy to see why the last element – the historical *narrative of loss* – also comes

into play, even if it might seem to be told as a narrative of progress. In this regard, judgments about the value of old or new media are the most uninteresting of all. For, regardless of whether “digitalization” makes something “better” or “worse,” as soon as it is identified as a reason for historical change and thought to be responsible for making the world fundamentally *different*, it has already qualified as competitive, so that the investment in its “innovations” can turn out to be a value in itself.

All things considered, it would be hard to deny that the discussion about “digitalization” has itself been profoundly presentistic. This is all the more so if one takes into account the fact that, though the terminology may change, this very discussion has been taking place for more than half a century – beginning perhaps with the question of so-called “automatization” in the 1950s. Since then it has regularly recurred in surging waves of demands, measures, and promises, only to ebb and be quickly forgotten in order for a new buzzword to swell up again. “Digitalization” knows no past, because the success of its “nowness” (in David Gelernter’s terms) depends on never-ending tipping points of constantly pending “revolutions” – and it knows no future, because it can only understand the latter as a permanently urgent update to its constantly recurring present.

This statement alone, however, does not explain anything. For, without a doubt, computerization has already emphatically altered the world of which we and our observations are a part. In this sense, digital media have long interfered in our notions of presentness, and they have formed altered schematisms that always already influence our thinking about their own present. To this extent, the more challenging task lies in reaching a better understanding of the presentism of “digitalization” in politics and the economy. Rather than unquestioningly adopting the argumentation schemes that it shares with its humanistic critique, this will involve shedding light on its historical conditions. Such an attempt could begin with the recollection that, for more than fifty years, the announced or proclaimed “digital age” has never had any eyewitnesses. This is because concepts of epochs are always simultaneously constructive epistemological concepts as well as an expression of epochal consciousness that is instigated and formed by the historical situations at hand. In order to understand the presentism of the discussion surrounding “digitalization,” one would therefore, on the one hand, have to direct one’s gaze toward the historical changes in the way that time has been understood and, on the other hand, reconstruct the body of narratives that have led to the fact that, today, the narrative of “digitalization” can only be told presentistically and not otherwise.

III. The Cybernetic Semantics of Time

In order to come to a better understanding of the concept of time that is relevant to “digitalization,” one should first call to mind the strand of cybernetics that was reformulated during the Second World War and was on everyone’s lips during the subsequent two decades. The success of cybernetic figures of thought was so resounding that the latter were able to infiltrate and permeate all areas of knowledge and science without cybernetics itself ever having to become an institutionalized scientific discipline of its own.

Especially instructive are the countless popular representations of cybernetics during the 1950s and 1960s. Again and again, everyday examples were used to represent and explain

how feedback loops function. The most notorious example is probably that of the thermostat: a desired room temperature is set at the thermostat's control as a goal; a sensor communicates an actual value as information to the comparator, which compares it to the desired value and intervenes at specific intervals by means of an activator (the heater of air conditioner) so that the goal of a consistent temperature can be achieved. Usually, such feedback loops were illustrated as circular flow charts, with the goal hovering above. And suddenly, as soon as such a diagram was drawn, it seemed possible to regulate everything: be it primary education or blood sugar, cooking spaghetti, the trajectories of satellites, or entire national economies – the controllability of that which was entered in the systematic place of the goal became immediately evident. This is all the more amazing because such diagrams in fact represent dynamic, material, and above all disrupted (that is, fragile) processes. What the popular diagrams of cybernetics radiate, however, is a remarkable sense of imperturbability, quiet, and timelessness. Whatever the goal may be (or so they seem to ensure) will be taken care of by a mechanical ensemble whose details are of no further interest and yet will guarantee that the future will reliably arrive and will always be as wished.

The meaning and purpose of such mechanisms were even more obvious before their demilitarization. Norbert Wiener, the “Wunderkind” of cybernetics, encapsulated the specific form of this regulatory knowledge with the concept of “prediction.” And, as is well known, its most prominent area of application was the automation of air defense systems. In this case, prediction means foreseeing the trajectory of the target and the trajectory of the missile as functions of one another. The missile does not fly toward the place where the target currently is but rather where it will soon be – that is, it flies toward the future of the target, which, in the ideal case (a direct hit), will also be its own future. To this end, on the one hand, the zig-zag course of the evasive enemy pilot is recorded and evaluated. The more the latter tries to behave surprisingly, unpredictably, or “originally,” the more detailed his profile will become, the more predictable his behavior will become, and the more predictable his future will be (namely, to be shot down). On the other hand, the flight trajectory of the missile is constantly corrected in light of its own past and future, so that a direct hit will come to pass. The “presentism” of this regulatory process consists in consolidating uninterrupted traces of the past and the goals of a predetermined future into a present that correlates both under the pressure of time and decision-making, so that only this present counts.

With the development of digital cultures, this sort of prediction has become a significant social model. Whenever the connection between past data traces and future subjectivations informs us about our own preferences and desires, about our future purchases, close friends, or advisable opinions, it always only seems to ensure that the future was never open at all. Whereas the Enlightenment encouraged people to think that, at least in principle, the future is independent of the past and can thus be shaped by individuals, prediction is based on the idea that individualization means no more than that we cannot escape ourselves and that our future is always already dependent on our inexorable self-similarity, which machines are simply better at figuring out than we are. Such forms of “similarity compulsion,” which is essential to the very algorithms of pattern recognition, have repeatedly been criticized as “homophile,” “racist,” or “discriminating,” and the Canadian media theorist Wendy Chun has gone so far as to classify them as belonging to the tradition of eugenics.

The cybernetics of the 1950s saw things differently. Wiener himself characterized the time semantics of prediction as a “non-deterministic teleology”: as a paradoxical yet reliable

constellation within which desired futures can simply be put in place and then appear with a high probability, precisely *because* the pathways into these futures can be delegated to machines and therefore be ignored. Politically, this was a highly attractive model, not only because it could be interpreted in technocratic terms but also because it was seen as an opportunity to create a new sort of “humanism.” The latter was expected to consist in agreeing upon “human” goals, setting these goals, and then leaving their realization to the new machines, which would actualize them (unerringly, it was thought) and hopefully make things better. That the paths leading to these goals happened to be hidden in black boxes was seen less as a problematic matter of opacity than as a relief from burdens that promised “humans” greater sovereignty when it came to negotiating and establishing their futures.

It would certainly be worthwhile to examine such hopes in the context of contemporary historical-philosophical considerations such as those of Reinhart Koselleck, who began (between a bygone world war and an incipient cold war) by reconstructing the modern semantics of time and particularly the semantics of an open future caught between “critique” and “crisis,” prognostics and terror. Whereas Koselleck interpreted the future as the unbetrayable secret of modernity ever since the transitional period around the year 1800 – as the secret that occupied the systematic position of sovereignty – Wiener believed that the future is always set in advance and that, in the present, it is cybernetic feedback loops that occupy the systematic position of the secret.

IV. The Epoch of the Digital

Historically, the relevant narratives through which “digitalization” can still be understood to the present day originated a little later, namely over the course of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Ironically enough, it was the humanities of all things that then played a prominent role in discovering the very historical-philosophical self-perception of “digitalization” that now, some fifty years later, they can certainly be said to have lost. For, beyond feebly struggling to identify matters of “urgency” and fighting for political attention, grant money, and a place of prominence in the area of “innovation,” the humanities have been left with little else but holdouts such as “ethics,” “cultural critique,” “reflective knowledge,” “transfer projects,” or their own start-ups (such as “digital humanities”).

In any case, for this narrative it was necessary, on the one hand, for “media” (specifically “digital media” or, as it was then called, “electronic media”) to be identified as the subject of the historical process whereby a visible object could be traced back in the form of “new technologies.” On the other hand, it was necessary to identify the present as one that, after an immediate intervention in response to this process, claims that these new technologies have already and inconspicuously begun to reconstruct the world in a comprehensive and fundamental way that affects all aspects of life.

In the early 1960s, both arguments were advanced by the media theorist Marshall McLuhan, and his ideas won him the prominence of a pop star. According to McLuhan, different media provide historical conditions of possibility; they form the media *a priori* of our thinking, feeling, action, and knowledge; and, as “leading media,” they guarantee the coherence of an epoch’s forms of expression. This coupling of “epochality” to media regimes has historiographic consequences. Because media themselves can only be observed by means of media, they can

always only be described in the “now” of the media upheaval underway. In a sense, what is always needed is a final observer from the foundering world (here McLuhan himself) who can still observe this moment of upheaval with brilliant erudition and provide information about the epochal shift that is taking place. The legitimacy of the media critic and the power of the media interpreter depend on this “upheaval” never ceasing but rather always unfolding “now” – in the moment of expression. The simple reason for this is the media themselves and their own mentality-forming power: for, just as it is difficult to imagine a future “new” media epoch when one is still thinking and living in the “old” one, it only really becomes possible to understand a bygone media epoch once its successor has come into being. Outside of the “now,” understanding media (as McLuhan’s book from 1964 was titled) is an impossibility.

Such daring theories fell on fertile soil around the year 1970, when so much effort was being exerted on formulating new master narratives about a “post-industrial,” “postmodern,” “technetronic,” or “electronic” age under American hegemony. On the one hand, the promise of new media (the end of nationalism and industrial exploitation, the pluralization of word views, lifelong learning, individualization, etc.) was well-suited to the Western assertion of its own freedom from ideology. On the other hand, the argument for an epochal shift initiated by media (and thus controllable) was enormously attractive. It promised to win the struggle in the “competition between systems” by simply changing the playing field from the industrial to the electronic age. As anti-communist strategies, computerization, digitalization, and electronic networking promised to be a “Western” systemic victory, because there – one could now assert thanks to McLuhan – a new world-historical epoch had already begun.

As of 1964, the task of working out this agenda was taken up by the “Commission on the Year 2000” at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Proceeding from scenarios of how, in the year 2000, the West would dominate this new epoch, the prophets of post-industrialism translated McLuhan’s media-theoretical and historical-philosophical theses into the language of quantitative sociology, political consulting, and finally into specific initiatives concerning innovation and the economy. They understood their role to be no less than that of the Enlightenment *philosophes* – that is, they saw themselves as the shapers of sociality, politics, philosophy, and economics for a fundamentally different world. The thesis of the *a priori* of media was central to this because, according to it, all that was needed was to invest in technological innovation and the rest would take care of itself. Even if the details of such an epochal change happened to be foggy, it was at least known how this shift would be brought about: namely by what would later be called “digitalization.” This generated pressure for political action, because the upheaval (and thus the future) had already begun. The goal and the regulatory authority (or “activator”) thus resembled those of a cybernetic air defense system: the post-industrial future would be achieved by means of digital technologies whose development and dissemination would require constant evaluation and regulation in the present. McLuhan’s urgent call to understand media in the “now” was replaced by the urgency of promoting media-technological development in the “now,” and the (dispensable) critics of this program henceforth found themselves demoted – sadly on account of their own arguments – to the humanities.

V. Aporias of Media Critique

Because they were endlessly repeated and politically implemented, these narratives of the Cold War were able, more than a half century later, to develop into a self-fulfilling prophecy. Digital cultures and the fundamental revolutions associated with them unexpectedly congealed into reality without the presentistic talk about the inexorable conditions for an entirely different future ever stopping. Nowhere, then, is there more talk about the future than where it has disappeared through its own inexorability. "Silicon Valley," which was invented in the early 1970s and has never since been absent from any so-called political "vision," is the big winner of this presentism. It is still able to recommend itself and its products as outfitters of a new era because, from the beginning, software, data networks, and PCs have been material forms of media theory and the philosophy of history – incarnated, one could say, in silicon. Its economic engine is formed, precisely, by the paradox of an "entirely different" and yet already inexorable future, about which decisions always have to be made "now" regarding the acquisition and application of technologies.

In an ironic way, the American assertion of the digital epoch was then inscribed into the foundational scene of German-language media theory, which would in turn be reimported to North America as "German media theory." After the dominant "critical theory" of the 1970s could find little use for an ideologically unreliable, Catholic essayist like McLuhan, Friedrich Kittler took it upon himself to initiate a delayed, German-language reception of the media *a priori*. The latter not only provocatively announced the imminent end of the humanities; it also transformed the "synthetic" epochal change endorsed by the political and economic advisers of the Cold War into an "analytical" research agenda called "media science" (*Medienwissenschaft*). The figure of the "final observer" (now in Hegelian garb) was thereby reclaimed yet again. For, what would follow the historically erudite description of the present situation after the moment of its own expression would merely be, according to Kittler, "black holes and boxes that, as artificial intelligences, are bidding us farewell on their way to nameless high commands." Thus closes a circle within which the historical-philosophical scenarios of the Cold War became a basic (and no longer questioned) assumption in the analysis of its own actualization. "Critique" would therefore likely mean making the historical conditions of possibility (and limits) of media theory visible yet again to the media critique of so-called "digitalization."

In this sense, there would at least be two reasons to undermine the (historical-) philosophical foundations shared by the apologists and critics of "digitalization." First, the assertion that epochal change is caused by technologies is deeply contradictory: although "digitalization" is expected to engender surprising and unpredictable qualities, it is simultaneously and secretly presupposed (in the cybernetic tradition) that these will ultimately turn out to be the very qualities desired from the beginning. To this extent, "digitalization" is also a matter of narcissism and its wounds. And second, "digitalization" has been around for more than fifty years, and thus the terms, concepts, and narratives with which it is hoped to be understood or even controlled have in fact become anachronistic. To this extent, discussions about "reasonable" use, advice about "ethical guidelines," and negotiations over "future scenarios" are not only inapplicable to the *future* of "digitalization." They are inapplicable to its *present* as well. The innumerable phenomena related to this changed reality therefore require, as the basis of critique, fewer pronouncements about epochs and more attention, curiosity, and precision – just as they need terms, concepts, and narratives that differ from those of the Cold War or even modernity. This would also involve the challenge of being *modest*, of trying to come to a better understanding of digital cultures instead of always simply stating that the

latter – whether for better or for worse, whether in an affirmative or “critical” gesture – are “now” what is at stake.

Translated by Valentine A. Pakis

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