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The Possibility of Critique in an Era ruled by the Media

Abstract

Taking the philosophy of media as a starting point, this text examines the possibilities, forms and status of critique in our times which are dominated, at least in the West, by what is known as media culture. On the one hand, the text avoids reducing systemic and strategic critique of capitalism to merely a critical point of view, while on the other it problematizes and examines the critique of modern media practices. The authors implicitly conclude that merely asking these questions paves the road to comprehensive critical action, within the existing systems of this media universe, as well as beyond it, i.e. in the particular socio-economic system of thought and action. This text also examines the possibility of achieving critical practices through art, and in the context of emerging new technologies. Possibilities for critique within the framework of new media art are explored in particular, as this might revolutionize not only media practices, but also the social, historical and economical practices of capitalism as such.

Key words: *criticism, media, capitalism, new media art .*

Critique is in our times most often defined as critical thinking. We however see this as an erroneous approach: defining critique as critical thinking on the one hand means to trivialize and simplify the concept, as well as to severely narrow down its meaning, since such a general definition omits the possibility to use critique in art and other phenomena such as the media. On the other hand, equating critique with critical thinking is an interpretation advanced mainly by modern psychology, which often reduces it to formal types of analysis, structured in a particular way. Our task here is to examine the possibility of critique in this age of media, primarily from a philosophical point of view[1], i.e. within the framework of the philosophy of media. To put it more precisely – we examine the possibility of media practice as critical practice, and the position new media art holds within it.

In the most general sense, critique for us does not represent only a way of thinking, it incorporates critical theory as well as effective critical practice. In other words, it is impossible to reduce critique to critical thinking because it sometimes goes beyond concepts and logical thinking/judgment. We therefore see critical practice as a practice of abstract thought and practical action, in line with Fichte's *Tathandlung*, for example. Unlike Kant and Fichte however, for whom self-awareness is the foundation of consciousness, it is our view that consciousness and critical thinking are founded on class divisions and conflicts. The effectiveness of critique as such is therefore the force necessary for destroying the self-sufficiency of self-awareness as well as speculation on pure concepts – a self-sufficiency that may be defined as the fuel validating the spirit of capitalism which encourages its development.

Critique is used here in its broader sense. We interpret it not only as critical thinking, but as a position taken on thinking itself and on its openness towards further processes of concept dialectics. This includes developments in thinking which instead speculative syntheses and conclusions, lead to criticism that penetrates (social) practice and is realized within it (a position parallel to Adorno's critique through negative dialectics and resolution of class conflict in reality). In our opinion this needs a mimetic impulse taken from reality as well as an aesthetic impulse from the media and the arts. The text therefore insists on critique as interpreted by the media and contemporary art, realized in a technologically mediated space.

Certainly, the shift from negative developments of the concept to its practical resolution is not to be carried out partially or uncritically. This then implies a revolution – both in thought and in reality (including the existing cultural, artistic and media reality). The interpretation context itself however is generally marked by unreflected speculation (in finance for example) and the so-called "crisis

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1   A Facebook page celebrating the so-called Philosophy Week (Serbia, 2020) defined critical thinking in somewhat popular terms, but adequate to our research. Critical thinking means cognition and evaluation, and is linked within a systematic whole: "Critical thinking entails the ability to express one's own views; to plan communication and express one's opinion in a manner enabling it to be understood completely; the ability to link all significant elements of the topic under discussion; to establish a logical structure of opinion within which the stated facts make sense; to represent ideas in such a way that they are interlinked – so that conclusions which logically follow might be naturally drawn from them." Posted on Facebook: 3rd February 2020, accessed: 4th February 2020.

of representation"[2] which on the one hand pushes the concept as well as conceptual critique into theoretical positions which in their production generally support the capitalist world[3], and on the other hand in terms of non-conceptual elements of art, leads to a process of "dematerialization", which is at the same time another form of speculation.[4] We believe modern media are at the centre of this dematerialization process (in culture as a whole). This is why the primary issue to focus on in this era of media reign is the possibility of criticism within philosophy and aesthetics.

Moving away from speculation and keeping within systemic critique, we examine how problem thinking can operate inside the media environment, with particular emphasis on artistic practice within media which takes a negative view of reality thus losing the strength of its foundation (in a tangible reality), but retaining the position of negative movement (as defined by Adorno in the field of modern art). In other words, we analyse critique as a concept but expand its dialectic to the domain of assessment and value. Evaluation does not always mean conceptualization; it can also contain an element of aesthetics which is why we take media and art as our subject matter. The critical position we primarily wish to examine and establish here does not always coincide – as per accepted opinion – with certain media content or objects of artistic representation. Following Adorno's unfinished theory of aesthetics, we essentially deal with forms/genres of media and art which take a critical stance on reality, simultaneously aiming to change it in a radical way.

It appears that the media of today are not particularly suited to critical review in general. Although in analysing their own function TV networks mostly keep to the traditional triad (information, education and entertainment), and a critical approach should include information as well as education and even entertainment, modern TV networks mainly operate uncritically. Almost all types of media content are treated as goods even when they are distributed through so-called public services. Since commercial content almost always lacks a critical approach, it generally seems that in the domain of television and modern media a critical stance is some exotic property that is sometimes desirable and most often not.

One possible objection from the point of view of any commercial media operating on the market, is that critical processes should once again be incorporated in the education system, as well as in science and politics. Meanwhile, media industries exchange information and sensory experiences on the free market and should therefore be free from the pressure exerted by the state and conservative intellectuals, as the competitive relationship between products on the market can replace "traditional" critique in the media. Contrary to this, the horizon of expectation regarding modern

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2   This crisis may be interpreted as a general crisis and a crisis in terms of value and evaluation: "Goux describes the tendency of capitalist exchange towards abstraction and the tendency of 'dematerialisation' in art as two sides of the same general crisis in representation, punctuated by historically traceable crises in the value form." Marina Vishmidt, "Notes on Speculation as a Mode of Production in Art and Capital", in: Micha Kozowski, Agnieszka Kurant, Jan Sowa, Krystian Szadkowski and Jakub Szreder (eds.), *Joy Forever: The Political Economy of Social Creativity*, Free/ SlowUniversty of Warsaw, MayFlyBooks, London, 2014, p. 48.

3   Ibid, pp. 47-62.

4   Ibid.

media appears to have remained unchanged in the general public – just as any other goods which are produced, distributed and consumed on the media market, information must include elements of independence and/or neutrality and sometimes criticism, unless it is exempted from this due to its specific type (such as the tabloid press or pornography). In this process the surviving critique in modern media is most often seen in terms of genre: there is social criticism, moral criticism, etc., or in terms of specialized fields – literary, art, music criticism etc. In addition to this, criticism is seen as a mediating form in the culture industry between artists, managers and the audience with the apparent function of ensuring larger profits.[5]

As authors of this text however, we are not interested in how partial critique gains ground in the media sphere, or its status, although such a critique is also marginalized, defensive and in practice often exposed to be pseudo-critique. We believe the fundamental problem of criticism in the media is ingrained in the system and relates to technology and the general ideology of media processes. If we assume technology is "neutral in terms of value", it can serve both the ruling regime of thinking as well as systematic criticism. This issue essentially relates to freedom of the media and more specifically – to phenomena of censorship, auto-censorship and "political correctness" (as well as the limits of these). Contrary to this, all commercial media and most public services can be seen as supporting the current regime in place (regardless of daily politics), since they provide services to one and the same regime of "being and thought", i.e. capitalism. This regime, as is well-known, aims to control the media through market mechanisms; systemic criticism is of course aimed precisely against such a set of views which joins together capitalism and the media acting within it, seeing it as a unified industry. This industry today is technologically advanced to a high degree and is increasingly digitized, on all fronts.

Possibilities for critique in these times defined by digital media and the theory and practice of *Big Data*[6], especially in the information age of late stage capitalism – have lately been offered by Assange, Snowden, Manning and their followers. In commenting on their activities, some called these subversive actions carried out online and on social networks – "an art of rebellion".[7] This "art of rebellion" appearing in the "age of terror" (fear) is actually a transcendental and immanent critique of the media environment: transcendental as it operates outside the system, and immanent because it criticizes the world of information and media through using its own language and resources. Such a critique characteristically adopts one of the following approaches – one includes publishing information that had been safeguarded and controlled by certain regimes and secret services, and the other means fighting to make such activities a norm for media and social practice. Alongside these broad strokes of active critique in the field of global information, possibilities for democratic action through critique (in a technologized form of democracy) are also available in the sphere of so-called social media (Twitter, Facebook) which are in essence impossible to control, despite

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5   See: Introduction... available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/41064885.pdf?seq=1.
6   Comp., e.g., Shui Yu, Song Guo (eds.), *Data Concepts, Theories, and Applications,* eBook, Springer International Publishing, Switzerland, 2016.
7   See: Geoffroy de Lagasnerie, *The Art of Revolt*: *Snowden, Assange, Manning*, Stanford University Press, USA, 2017.

numerous attempts to do so. The problem with critical views stated in such environments is that actually these media have not been developed for critique but for other purposes.

Although *prima facie* this new media space appears to be open to the exchange of different opinions (views) and to critical action – both for individuals and for groups – it is actually a *topos* of "prosumption" (an instance of simultaneously consuming and producing content), and therefore represents an exploitation of the users' work. Criticism produced here is therefore less efficient in practice or it reverses its critical facet into its opposite, as evidenced by "revolutions" initiated on social networks (social media). The most famous examples include the Arab Spring and the global Occupy movement – a failed attempt at reviving 1968 student protests, supported by new media. In an article on critical theory and digital media, Jonathan Gray[8] claims all these revolutions have actually been colonized by megacorporations and that internet media systems serve other purposes – these are in short, new ways of accumulating capital. The ways in which profit is gained on the networks, through marketing or "mechanized exploitation of users", regardless of whether they use critique or other media forms and content, are always the same – companies operating in digital media exploit participants through the ideology of "Playbour", obscuring labour within something that apparently constitutes play.[9]

External to these online and social network environments of work and play, but actually within the same domain, new forms of artistic expression emerge, characterized by critical engagement. This nonconceptual critical practice is not only a matter of the technology that shapes it, but also of those aesthetic moments which within shaping it may introduce impulses necessary for social change. It is our belief that just as the avant-garde in art questioned not only previous theories (of art) but social practice itself, expectations regarding new media art are not merely a matter of technical solutions in terms of innovative artistic expression, but also a potential starting point for radical change.

Similar to Assange, Snowden and other activists in terms of their engagement within the framework of media-political action, alternative and guerrilla action in modern art also uses the media as a message. This "message", in addition to being, in McLuhan's sense, the choice to use media for critical action, is simultaneously an artistic "message" that operates owing to its particular aesthetic/media form. In this sense, one further issue related to the previous ones is the possible critical engagement of (new) media through art. This problem is today analysed not only in philosophy, aesthetics, media and art theory, but also by modern artists creating in the media environment, as well as media (h)ac(k)tivists, ecologists and others.[10]

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8   See: Review of David M. Berry, *Critical Theory and the Digital*, in: Jonathan Gray, "On Critical Theories and Digital Media", *Krisis*, Journal for contemporary philosophy, available at: https://www.academia.edu/11823682/On_Critical_Theories_and_Digital_Media, accessed: 9th February 2020.

9   Ibid.

10 Comp. e.g. with the topic of the ínterdisciplinary symposium at the University of Birmingham (2018) titled "Critical Media in the Arts: Time, Materiality, Ecology", available at: https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/lcahm/departments/music/events/2018/critical-media-in-the-arts.aspxm, accessed: 11th February 2020.

Generally speaking, and based on historical occurrence, any discussion on new media art necessarily presupposes examination, analysis and theoretical explication of its critical dimension. Here however we must stress that understanding the concept of new media in accordance with its definition in the theory of art does not completely match the interpretation of the term in media studies, although as a wider concept it includes the meanings it has in the fields that primarily focus on understanding media practices. It is only on the basis of a differentially established perspective that we can see the existence of new media art as an expression of surpassing the conventionally established framework of artistic action, instead of viewing it as an adjustment of creative work to modern technological possibilities.

Development of new media art has always followed attitudes advancing wider social critique. The search for a radically new art encompasses early avant-garde artistic movements, concept art, land art, happenings, performance and experiments with possibilities of expression in new technologies within the development of multimedia art. In this way new media art manifests resistance and opposition to the existing social, economic and political framework of events. Its radical position does not remain at the level of formal analysis, but is primarily aimed at transforming the role of art in society. Development of art in general is marked by a search for new possibilities of expression, development of styles, i.e. artistic movements, as well as implementation of contemporary technological knowledge resulting in innovative new techniques and implementing new practices at the level of artistic methods. In this sense new forms of expression are not separate from the emergence of new media art. However, its foundation and direction cannot be equated with the stated (general) interests of art and research.

Failed attempts at understanding it and marginalizing radical social intervention as the central focus and basic principle in art of the new media is to a certain point the result of identifying it as *new media* art which highlights the interpretation of its radical position only at the formal level, that is, at the level of analysing *new* media of artistic expression. The consequences of such a view which might completely overturn the basic position on the development of new media, can also be found at the level of theoretical approaches to its interpretation (in the history and theory of art, aesthetics and art criticism), as well as within modern art practices. The most explicit critique of such an approach is offered perhaps by John Cage who has said that radicalism in art is not defined by its form but by its destructive action within the existing social and historical context. However, despite not being generally accepted, the strength of conservative action in the theoretical and artistic developments mentioned, are not to be underestimated since their increase has the power to completely alter the direction and approach to a historical interpretation of the development of new media art.

It is precisely such circumstances that bring this question into focus – what is the possibility for critique in this era of media rule? Does the increasingly strong commitment in society to developing new media technologies reveal the problem of form as the central principle for establishing new

aesthetic value systems? If an era identifies itself through the methods/technologies/processes of transferring information and the possibilities for accessing them, instead of identifying with the quality/foundation/historical perspective of artistic and any other creative expression, is there any space left for other forms of radical action that do not relate to the development of technology?

The current narrowing and simplification of the paradigm for understanding new media art, prompted by the already mentioned change in the interpretation focus, introduces into modern art those art practices which identify with new media art according to the criterion of being based on so-called *new* (artistic) *media*, but without the main criterion of being defined as the art of new media. Despite the fact this focus in art and research may be considered as perfectly legitimate, the criterion for classifying these works should be thoroughly examined.

One should ask to what extent are *new media* actually new, a question posed already in the 1990s by Lev Manovich. Focusing on understanding the essence of media, Manovich first questioned the supposed level of newness at the formal level, suggesting, in accordance with this view, the introduction of the term meta-media or post-media, which in his later works initiates the development of a so-called post-media aesthetic.[11] Further following this line of interpretation, the issue to be highlighted is – whether results of innovation/improvement manifested at the formal level, can be considered essentially new in an era of media, i.e. of prevailing media and communication industries.

In circumstances when innovating/surpassing/developing media which in some segment differ from existing ones represents an expression of greater consolidation and stronger development of dominant industries, such changes remain within the framework of activities supporting the *status quo*, and they cannot be considered entirely new at the level of their social influence. The fact is that the revolutionary effect in emerging new media technologies does not exist in the age of powerful media and media-technological industries, whose development is based on a relatively fast exchange of products available on the market. The process of declining revolutionary effect exerted by the media is also highlighted by Manovich in his analyses, as he notes that new media normalize the revolutionary effect of avant-garde art movements.[12] In this sense, viewed from a wider historical perspective, the *new media era* can be considered to be a *post-media* era, in the context of extinguishing revolutionary possibilities traditionally highlighted by the emergence of new media technologies. This however is still not reason enough to accept the position that any implementation of new media in art lacks fighting power. This is primarily true in instances when new media in artistic expression are not part of the dissemination and absorption of media industries. Only if it develops and acts outside the context of dominant powers of social guidance, can the medium in the so-called era of media rule as we understand it, keep the revolutionary power to subvert existing social-historical relations.

11   Lev Manovich, "Avant-garde as Software: From 'New Vision' to New Media", in: Sretenović, Dejan (ed.), *Metamedia*, Centre for contemporary art, Belgrade, 2001.

12   Ibid.

A significantly wider scope of critical action in new media art as well as a theoretical approach to its fighting potential can be identified in the different ways the media are used today, as well as in the open possibilities of meaning a particular work carries. The theory behind this view is primarily in John Fiske encouraging the subversive potential in popular culture, and in postmodernist views of texts resisting any imposed meanings (comp. Derrida), or even in the traditional view that art represents a space free of thought. Even a cursory glance at some new media artworks with a strong critical dimension, such as *BirderXing Guide* (Heath Bunting and Kayle Brandon, 2002), *Zapatista Tactical FloodNet* (Electronic Disturbance Theater, 1998), *[domestic]* (Mary Flanagan, 2003), *Second Life Dumpster* (Hajoe Moderegger and Franziska Lamprecht, 2007), *The Mad Dog Performance* (Oleg Kulik, 1994), etc., link this position with modern art practice.

Modern art therefore, and this is true for understanding new media art as well, has not lost its critical potential. Its revolutionary strength might be obscured by actions, approaches and uncritical interpretations through which the perspective of understanding new media art is equated with examining the expressive possibilities of new media technologies and tools. The consequences of such a position becoming authoritative due to the social influence of media industries are however not be found only in the domain of expressing social criticism through art, but in art criticism itself which, seduced by the fetishization of formal principles in creative expression, can often exclude from the art world precisely those works expressing the strongest social criticism, precisely because they cannot be included in the generally accepted classification systems at the formal level.

Through new media art and in modern social, economic and historical circumstances, critical engagement which is socially marginalized but still quite productive, faces the challenge of possibilities for its expression and activity being partially eliminated, which leads to a total failure to be recognized as artistic expression. This development in prevailing theories and practices of modern art is primarily the effect of the analysed discursive and artistic-poetic repositioning of (artistic) critical engagement in the media and overall sphere of human activities. Certainly, maintaining critical and revolutionary practices in modern times must include the existence of problem-based theories such as the philosophy of media, which can encourage and support a fundamental change in reality.

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Kako je moguća kritika u
eri vladavine medija?

Sažetak

U članku se, sa stanovišta filozofije medija, otvara pitanje o potencijalima, načinima i položaju kritike u našem dobu koje karakteriše, bar kada je reč o zapadnim kulturnim krugovima, dominacija tzv. medijske kulture. S jedne strane, izbegava se redukcija sistemske i strateške kritike sveta kapitala na puko kritičko mišljenje, dok se, s druge strane, problemski preispituje kritika delujuća unutar savremenih medijskih praksi. Autori implicitno zaključuju da je već samo otvaranje ovakvih pitanja utiranje puta za sveobuhvatno kritičko delovanje, kako unutar zatečenih sistema medijskog univerzuma, tako i izvan njega, odnosno u konkretnom društveno-ekonomskom sistemu mišljenja i delovanja. Takođe, u tekstu se razmatra mogućnost kritičkih praksi posredstvom umetnosti, odnosno unutar konteksta dejstva novih tehnologija. U tom smislu, posebno se istražuju potencijali za kritiku u okvirima novomedijske umetnosti, što bi trebalo da predstavlja uvod u revolucionisanje ne samo medijske, već i društveno-povesno-ekonomske prakse u eri kapitalizma.

Ključne riječi: *kritika, mediji, kapitalizam, novomedijska umetnost.*