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Reproductive Media and the Crisis of Intersubjective Recognition

With the gradual acceleration of the growth of technology since the turn of the Twentieth Century, the very parameters of subjectivity and its sphere of right—understood as a sphere of free action—have come to be questioned. For instance, with the power of the reproductive technology of media—like video, photography, and television—, it has become an urgent ethical question as to whether one has rights to his or her own image.¹ Thus, if the sphere of right was first conceived analogically as an extension of the idea of bodily physical integrity, should we also understand one's image to stand as part of that sphere? Or still more important for the idea of intersubjective recognition, is it even possible to speak of any sort of reciprocal recognition of right when reproductive media stands as a mediator of that social relation? Although it is not generally recognized, I will argue that Walter Benjamin offers great insight into the issue of the decline of the intersubjective account of the social in the age of reproductive technology. Now although Walter Benjamin in his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" speaks of impact of reproductive technology upon the modern imagination, scholars have generally not recognized how Benjamin's analysis of the decline of the "aura" simultaneously stands as an analysis of the decline of the social theory of intersubjective recognition. I will begin to delimit how Benjamin's analysis of the decline of the aura impacts the social through a brief overview of what many understand to be the origin of the theory of intersubjective recognition in the work of J.G. Fichte.

I. J. G. FICHTE AND THE ISSUE OF INTERSUBJECTIVE RECOGNITION

J. G. Fichte is widely regarded as the first to articulate intersubjective recognition (*Anerkennung*) as a theory of right, and thus offer the notion of intersubjectivity as a significant social theory.² While Fichte's version is extremely complex, and many of its finer elements are points of great dispute among Fichte scholars, for our purposes of it is only necessary that we grasp Fichte's account of intersubjective recognition in its basic form. Now the core principles of such a theory are expressed in more common parlance in the notion that one's rights end where someone else's nose begins. While such a gross simplification does little justice to Fichte's thought, in schematic form this account of individual right nevertheless sketches the essential intent of any reciprocal theory of right: it demonstrates intersubjective recognition. It demands one individual recognize another individual as a free autonomous being. Here we have the essence of Fichte's conception (1971) of intersubjective right: "...each limits his freedom through the possibility of the

freedom of the other" (3:120–21).³

Fichte's intent in outlining a theory of right was to deduce the conditions of the possibility of freedom or free action. By means of a transcendental deduction, Fichte concludes that if freedom or free action is possible, one rational being must recognize and take into consideration the rights of another rational being as an autonomous subject.⁴ By making space for the other through the free limitation of one's own action, a recognition of right is constituted. Conversely, the other's recognition of me as a rational, free, autonomous being, stands as a condition of possibility of my own freedom, and self-consciousness. The other's recognition of my right to free action and self-determination is an acknowledgment that catalyzes my ascension to self-consciousness and affords me real freedom. Fichte is arguing, consequently, that one could not achieve freedom and self-consciousness alone. Rather, they arise exclusively through an intersubjective mediation, insofar as it is the other's claim upon me that makes freedom and self-consciousness possible.

What is unique about Fichte's account of right is that its deduction of the possibility of freedom is also a deduction of the possibility of self-consciousness. This making space in the recognition of right gives space to the self-active ego, and in the act of recognition makes self-consciousness possible. Thus, intersubjective right describes both the preservation of the self-active transcendental subject and its constitution in self-reflection. Consequently, one might say that it is the form of social interaction—in this instance, the reciprocal recognition of a community of free beings—which determines the form of consciousness. In the context of our broader discussion of the impact of the technology of reproductive media upon the social, one might imagine, as Benjamin himself will intimate, that reproductive media's mediation of the social will in turn generate unique forms of consciousness.

Although Fichte would describe the ego in terms of act (*ibid.*, 1: 463–64), in the age of the media image, it would appear subjectivity can no longer be bound exclusively to a concrete sphere of action, and to a system of rights that would secure it.⁵ In an era increasingly dominated by technologically reproduced images, a theory and definition of right anchored in the free, self-limiting and self-reflecting, action of the transcendental subject seems in danger of being out paced by the needs and demands of the actual forms of social interaction.⁶ Thus, several questions plague this transcendental deduction of intersubjective recognition. Namely, how does one come to recognize another rational being? How is recognition achieved and what are the limits of recognition? While Fichte himself was aware that such questions of recognition might begin to threaten his very transcendental method, the point we are concerned with here is the extent to which such questions are further complicated, aggravated, and radicalized by the technologies of reproductive media.⁷

As we suggested with the example of the photographic image, the source of the break-down of the intersubjective recognition of right stems from the technological power of reproduction. Now one must imagine that the technological power to produce images threatens, or at least complicates, antecedent powers of imaging.

Specifically, I am thinking of that distinctly Modern power of imaging called the imagination: *Einbildungskraft*. While certainly there has been a long history of representation in the Western art, or in the iconology of Western religious traditions, such images are mere products. And as products, they have remained subordinate to that productive/creative source called the faculty of the human imagination.⁸ It is the imagination of the author or artist which remains the original source of that work. The turning point comes, however, through a reversal; a reversal whereby the imagination is no longer the productive source of its world, but rather a subordinate and passive consumer of images external to it. Now, although I have argued elsewhere that such a transformation can be seen in the work of Fichte, an explanation of the Fichtean imagination and its relation to intersubjectivity is regrettably beyond the scope of this short essay.⁹ Nevertheless, as will be made clear in the case of Benjamin, the transformation of the imagination will indeed have a profound effect on the theory of intersubjective recognition and its account of right. For Benjamin, as we will see, in the age of reproductive media the problem of intersubjective recognition is at base a crisis of the imagination.

II. BENJAMIN, THE DECLINE OF THE AURA, AND THE DECLINE OF INTERSUBJECTIVE RECOGNITION

Although it is not generally recognized, in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" Benjamin (1972-89) will address the problem of intersubjective recognition in the context of his larger discussion of the decline of the aura in the age of the mass. Through a close reading of portions of this text I will explore Benjamin's insight into the impact of reproductive media upon the intersubjective recognition of right by arguing that Benjamin recognized that the decline of intersubjective recognition was coincident with the decline of the aura.

The aura, for Benjamin, designates that radiant sphere of meaning which the singularly unique art object carries with it as part of its essential being. This "meaning" implicitly references that unique socio-cultural horizon out of which a singular given "art" object is produced. The art object is the product of a determinate individual imagination—which is itself the product of a particular cultural horizon. The aura then, designates a complex, dynamic, living web of meaning, whose sense giving power stands in a reciprocal relation with this singular created object as part to whole. The aura describes the object's meaning in terms of its living affiliation with its origin or creative source. Talk of the decline of the aura suggests that the object's meaning will come to stand apart from its origin or creative source.

Now, I have been claiming that Benjamin (1972-89) is suggesting that there is an immediate link between the decline of the aura and the obsolescence of intersubjectivity as a social theory—but how? For him, the aura implies a recognition. Thus, in the same way a recognition of right confers a special status upon a particular being, as an autonomous being worthy of a space for free action, so too

does the notion of the aura offer or confer a unique field of meaning to the object in question. At least this seems to be what Benjamin is suggesting. As he explains in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," with technology, the power of imaging is unhinged from the structure of recognition in which "the glance" is returned. He writes:

the camera takes a person's picture without returning his glance. The glance, however, expects inherently to find a response wherever it gives itself. Wherever this expectation finds such a response, . . . it experiences aura to the fullest. (1/2: 646).

Here, Benjamin marks an essential link between the aura and the dynamic of recognition. He concludes, that with the decline of the aura in the age the mass, what is no longer returnable is precisely the look—the defining moment of intersubjective recognition. Conversely, only where there is recognition does one experience the aura. Thus, with the decline of the aura in the age of the mass, the experience of recognition is forever altered. With the camera the glance is not returned; our expectation of recognition is not fulfilled.¹⁰ Such a phenomena, however, is not limited to the inhuman 'seeing' of the camera, and other technical equipment. For Benjamin, the camera is but an extreme instance of his more general point: with the decline of the aura, even common cultural objects lose their horizon of meaning, and, as such, do not return the glance, and affirm one's own socio-cultural identity.¹¹

In part, Benjamin intends to show us that with the decline of the aura in the age of mechanical reproduction, the power of imaging is no longer simply the work of the imagination (understood as faculty); it is primarily the effect of technological reproduction.¹² With mechanical reproduction the object no longer exhibits an aura; it is displaced from that determinate cultural horizon that could align that singularly produced art object, with the creative, productive imagination of a unique author (or authors).

In brief, the object no longer exhibits an aura because the work of the imagination is externalized through material technique. What we are talking about is a form of alienation. With mechanical reproduction what is eroded is that reciprocal relation of intimate recognition between those cultural objects an individual uses and those objects she creates. The situation, however, is still more extreme. It is not simply that the creative imagination is no longer the source of the objects an individual uses; but rather, foreign "use objects" come to determine and give shape to the very the workings of a now dis-empowered faculty of imagination.

Such a claim is grounded in one's everyday experience of television or film. For instance, as a film spectator, one need not organize one's own narrative experience.¹³ The horizon, perspective, and even intentionality of that experience is already predetermined by the form and content of the technology of film.¹⁴ My central point for our discussion of the constitution of the intersubjective recognition of right in Fichte is that as a consequence of such reproductive technologies, the

transcendental subject and its imaginative faculty could now no longer always secure itself within a determinate horizon of meaning. And without the self-affirmation and meaning derived through intersubjective recognition, the very parameters of one's own sphere of right would come to be questioned. In other words, in the same way that the aura of the object depends upon a determinate, irreplaceable locus for its meaning, so too is recognition contingent upon the self's sense of place as determined by that power of imaging (*Ein-Bildungs-Kraft*) anchored in the transcendental subject: it designates that purportedly inalienable place which defines the sphere of right of both oneself and the other.

What threatens intersubjectivity, it seems, is an entirely new power and structure of representation, that could be described as a technology of the imagination. In this sense, the crisis of intersubjectively constituted right, brought on by technological reproduction, signals a deeper metaphysical crisis of the imagination and its power of representation. Benjamin, of course, is not arguing that today an intersubjective recognition of right is impossible. But rather, he is suggesting that such a theory or account of right becomes less and less adequate as our social relations become more and more mediated by reproductive media. Within this technological horizon of reproductive media, one's sense of self, self-consciousness, and freedom—determined by the sphere of right and free action through the recognition of the other—, is now less an intersubjective mediation, than a mediation of reproductive media. While a more complete exploration of the relation between the intersubjective recognition right and the metaphysical crisis of the imagination in the age of reproductive media must be left for another time, we can at least say that we have come to recognize such a relation by having established the manner in which Benjamin's account of the decline of the aura also stood as an analysis of the decline of the transcendental account of intersubjective recognition.

Notes

1. There has been increasing interest in an ethics of the media image. See for instance, Gross, Katz and Ruby 1988. Another volume from this same group is forthcoming.
2. While the notion of intersubjectivity is implicit in Kantian ethics, particularly in the notion of a kingdom ends, Fichte's transcendental deduction of the other will for the first time make explicit the idea of reciprocal recognition in the constitution of right.
3. The translations of Fichte are my own.
4. In my view, Fichte's central concern and understanding of right was determined by his larger interest in the socio-political question of freedom. "Right" then, for Fichte, is primarily a right to free action and freedom.
5. In Fichte's words (1971): "All relation of right is determined through the sentence: each limits his freedom through the possibility of the freedom of the other" (3:120–21). Consequently right, and by extension freedom, is determined through a self-conscious, reciprocal, self-limitation.
6. Fichte himself, I will argue, as attested to in the *Tagebuch uber den animalischen Magnetismus* (1813), encountered such a crisis in the early part of the Nineteenth Century. (See for instance, Scribner

2000a). What Fichte encountered was a critical disjunction between his own theoretical account of intersubjectively constituted right, and the actual lived form of subjectivity manifest in social experience. Here intersubjective recognition is put into question by a technically produced power of imaging. What this disjunction signals in Fichte is, I contend, a crisis of the transcendental imagination. What we have to consider in detail, however, is the link between intersubjectivity and the imagination.

7. I have discussed this 'threat' elsewhere. See Scribner 2001.

8. The essence of the Modern imagination is identified most readily in the notion of the creative and productive power of the individual. While the pre-Modern artistic imagination was understood through the metaphor of the mirror in which an essentially anonymous group (or perhaps individual) would function as a mimetic reflection of the divine. By contrast the modern artist is captured by the metaphor of the lamp. Here the artist is his or her own productive source of illumination. See for instance, Kearney 1988.

9. I have elaborated the relation between intersubjectivity and the imagination in Fichte in Scribner 1999. I have discussed this issue in still greater detail in my Ph.D. thesis (Scribner 2000b).

10. Although Sam Weber emphasizes this in his work, he does not seem to link the decline of the aura with the decline of the intersubjective recognition of right. See Weber 1996.

11. One might imagine, for instance, the intense identity affirming experience of receiving, and wearing, a hand-made sweater from one's grandmother, while living abroad in a foreign culture. What makes that initial experience abroad so alienating is that those foreign cultural objects stand outside one's own sphere of meaning and thus will not return the look. By contrast, the hand-made sweater, returns the look, a look of recognition, that affirms one's identity on the most intimate of levels.

12. While the work of Benjamin does not use the language of the crisis of spirit, his exploration of the crisis of the transcendental imagination, through the problem of intersubjectivity in the age of technology and technological reproduction, can be understood as a meditation on the crisis of spirit.

13. Of course, one could also make the same case for the narrative structure of books and the technology of print more generally.

14. Baudry 1986 emphasizes this point.

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