

Economics of New Music

Tim Benjamin

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III. The Age of Mass Connection

Walter Benjamin wrote his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” in 1936 (Benjamin, 1999 [1936], 211–244). It is a foundational (or at least very influential) work in the fields of cultural studies and media theory. This chapter is not about Walter Benjamin’s essay, but that essay is my starting point, and I consider Benjamin’s arguments in the light of the 70 years that have since passed. Specifically, I identify a new “Age”, which I call the “Age of Mass Connection”. I argue that this new Age will have great implications for the way in which art – specifically in my field, so-called “new music” – will be both created and received in the coming years.

The Key Ideas in Walter Benjamin’s Essay

Art, which used to be merely imitated by hand, is now capable of being perfectly (or nearly perfectly) reproduced by machines. At the same time, new art-forms have arisen, some that are designed for reproduction, and others that cannot even exist without the basis of mechanical reproduction; Benjamin refers specifically to the photographic print and to film. In cases such as these, Benjamin asks, what is the value of the original? What, indeed, *is* the original? These questions define art in the new Age that Benjamin describes. Processes involving the mechanical reproduction of art have existed since the invention of the printing press, but Benjamin is mainly concerned with the newer forms of reproduction, and their impact in his time upon the creation of new art.

In the past, authenticity – a key component of the idea of the original work of art – was defined in terms of space and time. Mechanically reproduced art, however, is free to go where an authentic original cannot. The authentic original was located in space and time; but we now have the “close-up”: an expansion of space; and we have slow motion: an expansion of time and movement.

Another aspect of “the original” is tradition: reference – or deference – to an original. In Benjamin’s new Age, art is made to be reproduced, and he describes this aspect of art as “exhibition value”, or art for art’s sake, as opposed to art as a social function, which he terms its “ritual” or “cult” value. Therefore, he argues, art is now emancipated (from the ritual) by mechanical reproduction.

One consequence of this emancipation is the loss of what Benjamin calls the “aura” of an original work of art, “aura” being mediated by a sense of authenticity and ritual. The loss of art’s aura began with Dadaism – the placement of ridiculous, taboo, ordinary, (and mechanically

produced) objects in places highly suggestive of aura, ritual, and authenticity: the art gallery or museum of art. This loss of aura has been countered by the fetishisation of art, that is, the creation of personality outside the original; consider for example the cult of the Hollywood celebrity in relation to the aura of film.

The withering of aura was for Benjamin an historical force, and art – instead of being based on ritual – would now be based on politics. Indeed, Benjamin believed that the politicisation of art was a goal of Marxist revolution, like his contemporary Adorno insisting that art must be political. The traditional Marxist view sees production as the foundation for everything else, “everything else” being a resultant superstructure built upon the foundation. Historical changes in the superstructure, according to Marx, arose out of changes in the means of production, and the only way to radically change the superstructure would be through revolution³⁴. For Benjamin, relating this concept to art, a revolution driven by mechanically reproduced art would result in a change everywhere else: in reception, presentation, commerce, even scholarship.

The loss of “aura” and the consequent “emancipation of art from the ritual” is an echo of proto-Marxist ideology, of the Young Hegelians and Feuerbach: if the goal of history is the liberation of humanity, then the goal of the history of art is the liberation of art, from aura, ritual, and the cult of the authentic. Hegelian dialectics in Marx explain the condition of human beings, and in Benjamin they explain the condition of art. I will return later in this chapter to a political discussion of art, in the light of a new Age that I will now seek to propose.

The Age of Mass Connection

It could be labelled the “networked age”, the “wired age”, or even the “Internet age”, but I have chosen as a more precisely descriptive term, the “Age of Mass Connection”, “*mas*” connection signifying a multidirectional network of relationships in which everyone is at once producer and consumer, as opposed to a one-way relationship in which the roles of “producer” and “consumer” are clearly defined. The way art is delivered to the recipient, especially in the case of music, is changing. The wax cylinder begat the shellac 78, which begat the LP, which begat the portable cassette, which begat the CD. This brief genealogy describes media that share the aim of the reproduction (through increasingly sophisticated inscription) prior to the amplification of sound. These media also share an existence in physical reality; one can hold them all in one’s hand. The present child of this dynasty is the compressed digital sound or video file, commonly referred to as the MP3 (although strictly, this is one of many similar formats), a medium that,

³⁴ As set out, for example, in the Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859).

crucially, you cannot touch. The medium lives in digital bits only; it can be streamed from one place to another, or it can be copied as a whole from one computer to another, but it never exists in physical reality in the sense that previous media did. In a further difference from previous media, once in existence, the MP3 file requires no extra human labour for additional copies to exist; it is not commoditised in the usual sense.

The new media of Walter Benjamin's Age – film and photography – are changing, video, recorded music, photography, and journalism, in particular: think of YouTube, MySpace, Flickr, and blogs. These are all “user-generated” channels, and strongly shape the content they offer. The networks through which artists' creations are delivered – primarily the Internet, but increasingly mobile networks too – allow art to be instantly and easily delivered to anywhere, to exist in all places and yet (in the form of an authentic original) none. Importantly, despite the huge amount of data that has been generated, it is now easy to locate any particular piece of it, via increasingly sophisticated search filters – indeed we now have a new verb, “to google”.

The trend is for art to become a personal, one-to-one experience at the point of reception. There are shared personal experiences, but these are not the mutually shared public experiences of the concert hall or art gallery. The key idea of this new Age is the difference between, say, the 1970s or 1980s: the high point of the “mass culture” that Walter Benjamin was describing and predicting, and the present time. Then, we shared our experience of a few hit TV shows, a few major orchestras, and a few blockbuster films. Now, we have access to thousands of shows on hundreds of TV channels, millions of tracks of music, and billions of web pages, all through a personal handset. What was a shared public cultural experience is now the personal private experience; endless choice creating innumerable groupings of transient individuals with briefly shared cultural experiences, but with different backgrounds and little common cultural vocabulary.

The Long Tail

The cultural critic, economist, and editor of *The Wire*, Chris Anderson, has described a phenomenon that he calls the “Long Tail” to describe this new Age³⁵. The Long Tail describes how “endless choice is creating unlimited demand”, and describes the changes in economics that are heralded by the new Age.

³⁵ Anderson (2006)

The previous Age – Walter Benjamin’s Age of Mechanical Reproduction – was characterised by “hits”. The reason for this is limited space, for example shelf space in the record store. The store can only hold, say, a hundred or a thousand titles, and so they need to be the most popular hundred or thousand titles. Likewise, cinemas will each year show only a few hundred films; this is not because only a few hundred films are made, but because there is limited capacity in cinemas, films cost a certain amount to distribute, and so only the most likely to make a profit for the cinemas will be shown.

The new Age is characterised by, perhaps, the “anti-hit”, or the endless choice already described. We are no longer forced to choose from the most popular films, books, or music; we can choose from a huge selection, and we can easily retrieve and access our choice. One case that highlights this difference is that of the company Ecast, which operates digital jukeboxes in bars and clubs in the United States. These units are the same as standard jukeboxes, but each has a broadband connection and a hard drive, to which audio files are downloaded from a central server. Instead of the usual 100-or-so discs on offer in a standard jukebox, Ecast initially made 10,000 discs available on their jukeboxes. Contrary to the patterns of the previous Age, 98% of these discs sold at least one track per quarter³⁶. When Ecast added thousands more discs, the pattern was the same. As there is effectively zero cost of packaging, delivery, and storage, Ecast are able to add and to hold more and more “stock” at no cost. They found that the more discs they added, the more they sold, with all those discs selling a track once or twice per quarter adding up.

This is one example of the general phenomenon of Anderson’s “Long Tail” economics. A few hit products in any given market (music, films, books, and so on) sell many, but now, the obscure products can collectively sell many more.

³⁶ Ecast CEO Robbie Vann-Adibé in conversation with Chris Anderson (Anderson, 2006, 7–8)

Figure 11: A typical "Long Tail" graph, as described by Anderson (2006)

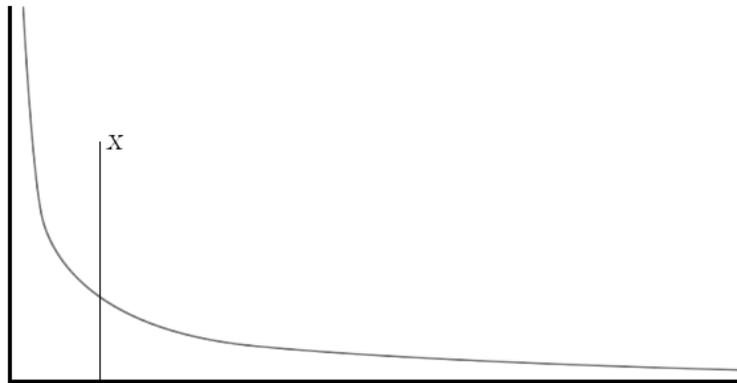


Figure 11 illustrates the typical shape of a graph of “Long Tail” distribution, plotting (for example) sales on the vertical axis against individual items, ranked by total sales, on the horizontal axis. In the case of Ecast, tracks would be ranked by popularity on the horizontal axis, with the number of times the track was selected on the vertical axis. At the “head” – to the left of the line marked at x – we have the hits of the previous Age, and to the right we have the “Long Tail” of the new Age.

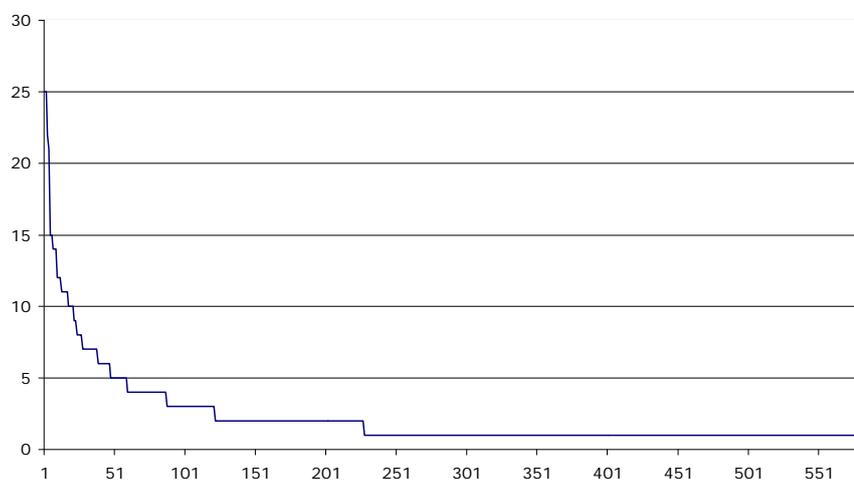
This phenomenon is not unique to the marketplace; it seems that there is a “Long Tail” to be found almost anywhere. Anderson has cited examples in such diverse fields as astronomy, encyclopaedias, human populations, even flavours of jam. One can expect to find a “Long Tail” in any circumstances in which there are “hits” on one hand, and “anti-hits” on the other for which the marginal cost of supply is low or non-existent. Consider, for example, the performance of new music in the United Kingdom. There are certainly a small number of “hits” each year: in 2008, for example, the London Sinfonietta’s performances of Nono’s *Prometeo* filled the Royal Festival Hall for two nights; the Royal Opera House’s 2008 production of Birtwistle’s *The Minotaur* received almost-full houses for the entire run. These hits are, no doubt, expensive to produce, and depend on public subsidy to break even despite their substantial audiences. There are, conversely, a large number of “anti-hits”: small concerts, frequently in obscure venues, with often tiny audiences. These may be very cheap to produce, and are quite capable of meeting their expenses without the need for subsidy, for the performers and promoters are often amateurs or enthusiastic professionals supplementing their main income³⁷.

³⁷ It should be noted that the sense of the word “amateur” has changed over time; it is now often intended pejoratively, implying someone that is not quite skilled enough at an activity to (deserve to) earn money doing it, whereas in the past the opposite meaning prevailed: the independent (perhaps gentleman) amateur led his field, and the subordinate professional was someone unfortunate enough to have to earn money in it.

These are the “Long Tail” of new music, and tend to feature more adventurous programming of not-so-established composers by similarly less-known performers than the “hits”. For illustration, consider Figure 12 below, showing the number of performances advertised in the Society for the Promotion of New Music’s *New Notes* magazine (selected because of its consistent and specialist concert listings for the UK) of works by composers living after 1945 in the first six months of 2006 on the vertical axis, with their rank by number of performances on the horizontal axis. The “hit” composers received up to 25 performances each in the period, while a very large number received just one.³⁸

Figure 12: Performances of works by living composers, ranked (horizontal axis) by number of performances (vertical axis), 1 January to 30 June 2006

Source: *New Notes* (Society for the Promotion of New Music), issues 01/06 to 06/06



It has always been the case that in any population or market some things will appear or sell more than others, but given unlimited choice and equal access to alternatives, the Long Tail appears, grows, and becomes vitally important. It is possible to demonstrate the difference between the older case, in which some things simply sell more than others, and a genuine Long Tail.

³⁸ This methodology (counting performances) was used partly because of the difficulty in gathering accurate audience figures in the “tail” of the graph. The number of performances of works by a given composer serves to some extent as a proxy for the audience numbers generated by performances of that composer. These statistics tell more than the popularity of single and perhaps one-off events, but show the consistency with which some composers are performed, illustrating their comparative “hit” status in the “head” of the graph.

The shape of a Long Tail graph is technically described by a Pareto distribution demand curve, in the form $y = n/x$.³⁹ A demand curve from a previous Age would appear as a similar graph, but with a chopped-off tail, as in Figure 13:

Figure 13: Preference ordered by rank, showing truncation



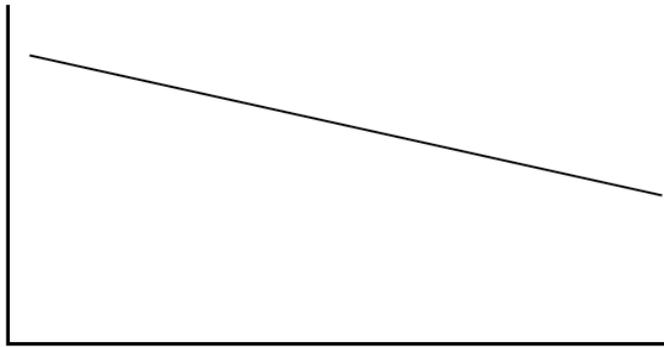
This is simply caused by a lack of shelf-space in a store, for example, or capacity in cinemas, rather than a lack of supply after a certain point of demand; only the most popular, most viable, “hit” products are sold.

It is possible to examine more closely the difference between a Long Tail graph and the chopped-off version if the graphs are plotted on a different scale, the logarithmic scale⁴⁰. When applying a logarithmic scale to both axes (known as a log-log graph) of a complete Long Tail (or Pareto distribution curve), the result is a straight line:

³⁹ This is algebraic notation rather than a formula, and describes a function in which the dependent variable (y) grows in inverse proportion to the independent variable (x) multiplied by a constant (n).

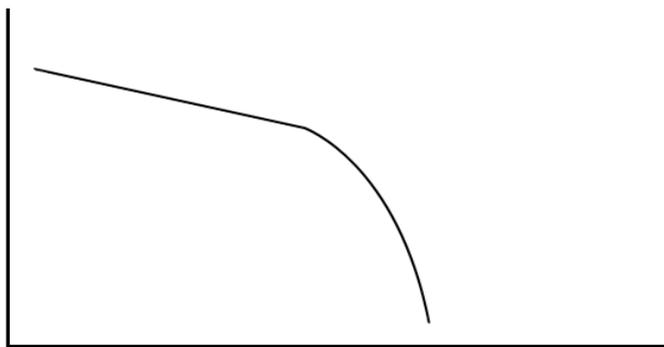
⁴⁰ That is, instead of equal divisions on an axis (1, 2, 3 ...), a scale in which each division is a factor of 10 bigger than the last (1, 10, 100, ...). In this case, logarithmic axes for the Pareto curve should result in a straight line, as illustrated. The purpose of this exercise is to examine deviations from a straight line, and the implications of this for the argument; linear relationships are generally easier to examine, which is why logarithmic scales are used in many commonplace situations, for example the decibel scale for sound volume, or the Richter scale for earthquake severity.

Figure 14: A Pareto distribution curve on log-log axes



If, however, we apply the logarithmic scales to the “chopped-off tail”, there is a tailing off of the straight line:

Figure 15: Preference ordered by rank, with truncation, on log-log axes



Combining both the Long Tail and the “chopped-off tail” on log-log axes, it is possible to see clearly the latent demand to which the new Age of Mass Connection allows access. What appeared in the past as a steep drop in demand after a certain point was simply a result of the costs of supply.

Figure 16: Pareto distribution curve, combined with truncated ranked preference graph, on log-log axes

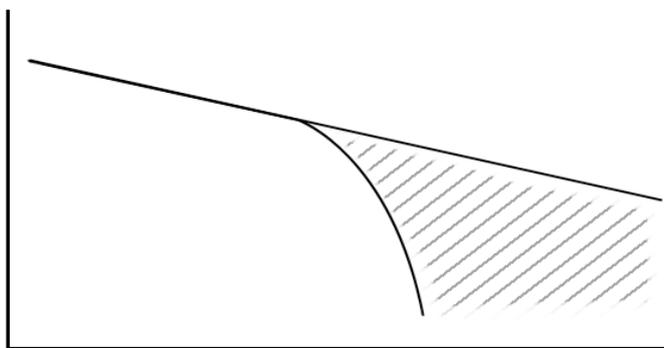


Figure 16 shows in the shaded area the latent demand that can be fulfilled now that the costs of supply are, essentially, zero in many markets. In the case of Ecast described above, all those

discs which sold one or two tracks per quarter are in this latent demand area, and would not otherwise have been sold, but now result in – collectively – a high proportion of overall sales.

The implications of the Long Tail for art are readily apparent in the digital products that I have already described. Whereas previously consumers only had ready access to a few hits, they now have easy access to virtually everything, and conversely, the artist (obscure or otherwise) has an easy means of access to the public.

Before considering the political consequences for art in reference to a new Age, I will examine a primary catalyst for change in music: iTunes, and more specifically, the iPod⁴¹. Apple's iTunes, naturally, being a retailer with essentially unlimited stock, advanced search filters, and no cost of delivery or storage, has a typical Long Tail business model. It is precisely this model that has brought about the real and very substantial profits of iTunes, Amazon⁴², and other online retailers. This model is also particularly attractive for classical music; record companies with large back catalogues of out-of-release records, with individually marginal popularity, can capitalise on the model, taking advantage of the low costs and easy access to hard-to-find customers.

The iPod

The iPod, driven by iTunes, is a ubiquitous mode of access to music in this new Age⁴³. Referring to Marshall McLuhan, writing in the 1960s (McLuhan, 2001), “the medium is the message”: the iPod is simply a medium for music in the form of digital files, but is more significant than the

⁴¹ By “iPod” I refer generally to portable MP3 storage and playback devices, including certain models of mobile telephone, and by “iTunes” I refer to the general case of a large, searchable, online, downloadable digital catalogue of music recordings – eMusic and Amazon are other examples – and not solely to Apple's products. The iPod and iTunes have to date dominated the market, and “iPod” is beginning to enter the vernacular, in much the same way as Hoover's vacuum cleaner was adopted into (British) English in the early 20th century and now refers generally to vacuum cleaners as well as The Hoover Company's products.

⁴² Although Amazon are known as a retailer of physical goods, they also directly compete with iTunes in digital music downloads. Moreover, they are innovative in book publishing. Many infrequently requested titles are kept as digital files and printed to order. Many of Amazon's suppliers (including mainstream publishers such as Cambridge University Press) have likewise invested in such “print on demand” technology. Additionally, many items sold by Amazon are in fact supplied by a large number of small third-party retailers, and are therefore (from Amazon's point of view, at least) virtual goods, and stock is not a limiting factor.

⁴³ See Chapman (2006); 86% of UK consumers aged 13 to 55 claimed in 2006 to own an “iPod/other digital music player”, compared to 96% owning a mobile phone and 52% with a satellite TV subscription.

content it might carry. For McLuhan, the medium (and not the content) effects structural change and affects society, and therefore the medium (regardless of the content) influences understanding and should be the object of cultural study. The medium, therefore, is the message. The very fact it is an iPod serving Mozart to our ears, and not (for example) an orchestra, is the salient point. From the point of view of the content, this represents a modal change of varying significance depending on the nature of the content (i.e., music). Historically, the music of Mozart would have been “served” by an orchestra in a concert hall (and later, through the medium of recorded sound), whereas the traditional medium of modern popular music is, foremost, a recording, and secondly, the live context. Therefore the culturally important modal change represented by the iPod is greater for some music (Mozart, for example) than for other music (the pop group Girls Aloud, for example). Both iTunes and the iPod are important media in the new Age and they affect modern society, and our relationship with music, more by their very nature as media, than due to the specific music they might carry. Moreover, they are (to continue with McLuhan) extensions of the self and interfere with – or disrupt – sensory perception.

Jean Baudrillard’s concept of the sign as the currency of the consumer society is closely related to McLuhan’s idea of the medium; Baudrillard interprets man’s relationship with the world as a chain of signifiers, McLuhan as a chain of media. McLuhan claims that the medium is of far greater significance than the content (to the extent that the content diminishes to insignificance), and this is mirrored in Baudrillard: “the content of the messages, the signifieds of the signs are largely immaterial” (Baudrillard 1998, 34).

Baudrillard constructed a modern fable, known as the *Cargo Myth* (1998, 32–33), to represent his concept of the sign in consumer society: Melanesian natives saw aeroplanes (but had no idea what these objects were) descending and bringing goods and equipment to nearby colonists, who had similar aeroplane-objects on the ground. Aeroplanes never descended to the natives, and so they constructed a copy – a simulacrum – of an aeroplane out of vines and leaves in the hope of attracting them and the “plenty” they brought to the colonists. Likewise the consumer constructs simulacra, an array of signs of happiness, in the hope of attracting happiness to himself. When happiness does not arrive, or does not bring the anticipated euphoria and ecstasy, the consumer interprets this as a fault with his previous acquisitions, and not with his general strategy: “if only I had the next model of mobile phone, the newer sports car”, and so on. He constructs further signs – he buys the new model – and the process of consumption through the characteristic signs of happiness begins again.

The iPod is a highly fetishised consumer object. More and more tracks are added; each gives a certain amount of satisfaction but each is marginally less satisfying than the last. Each dollar track – and money is just another medium, according to McLuhan – is flushed into the sanitary white iPod like so much filthy lucre. Psychoanalytically, the “money complex” as identified by Ferenczi⁴⁴ describes the relationship of the consumer with money as related to the infantile or simian urge to fling faeces; the hygienic, clinical overtones of our consumer “white goods” reassures us, the medical cure our modern-day religious indulgence. I offer these vivid images in illustration of Baudrillard’s idea of the sign in relation to the iPod.

The economist Galbraith, in his important work *The Affluent Society* (Galbraith 1999, 129ff), describes how the wants of today’s consumers are increasingly hard to satisfy. Note that Galbraith refers specifically to wants, for he argues that people as individuals no longer have needs; he claims poverty as a Malthusian hell has ceased to exist, in Western society at least (*ibid.*). Whereas needs are innate and essential for survival, wants are created by those who satisfy them: we need only think of the clever marketing of the iPod. The consumer is encouraged to personalise his iPod, in the famous advert featuring a black silhouette with a white iPod extending from its ears. The consumer has no identity; his personality can only be reflected through his iPod, and he can only differentiate himself from his peers – presumably, other black silhouettes – by the music stored in his iPod, for the devices, as mechanically reproduced artefacts, are otherwise identical. In an echo of Edwin Abbott’s satire on Victorian society, *Flatland*⁴⁵, the consumer can only escape from the two dimensions of his black silhouette through his three-dimensional iPod. Baudrillard claims that man’s relationship with consumer goods is “rigged, manipulated”; his relationship is with signs and not the object. Advertising, and then consumer, seek to “conjure away the real with signs of the real”.

This is the darker side to the Long Tail. Each iPod, no doubt, hides a characteristic Long Tail in its playlist: comparatively few favourite songs with the majority of tracks heard only a few times. The iPod’s Long Tail is a tail of signs, signs reflecting personalisation rather than personality or identity, of progressively smaller satisfactions in our fetish relationship with one-dollar tracks.

McLuhan’s essay *The Gadget Lover* (in McLuhan, 2001, 45–52), although written in the 1960s, has great resonance as a critique of the iPod. He begins with a reminder of the Narcissus myth, the hero’s name drawn from the Greek narcissis, or numbness. Although Narcissus does not

⁴⁴ As discussed, for example, in Freud and Ferenczi (1994 [1908-1914], 357–360).

⁴⁵ Abbott (1992 [1884])

immediately recognise his own reflection, he falls in love and becomes fascinated with this extension of himself, so much so that he fails to notice the overtures of the nymph Echo. He is in a state of narcosis, numbness; in McLuhan's words, he represents a "closed system".

Hans Selye, an endocrinologist, hypothesised that all illness was due to some stress or irritation, and that the body will always attempt to maintain equilibrium through the elimination of stresses and irritations⁴⁶. Taking this idea further, he held that extensions of our bodies are an effort to maintain equilibrium. The body, when faced with an extreme irritation that cannot be located or avoided, will resort to auto-amputation, which typically begins with a state of numbness. This auto-amputation can be an unwilling act – think of frozen extremities in cases of frostbite as the body tries to maintain core warmth in the face of extreme cold – or a willing act: with his arm trapped in rock and facing a slow death by starvation, climber Aron Ralston in 2003 famously cut off his own arm, below the elbow, to survive⁴⁷. There are also many documented cases of Body Integrity Identity Disorder, in which victims suffer from the overwhelming desire to amputate one or more of their own perfectly healthy limbs, and undergo often illegal surgery, unable to cope with the irritation. To a lesser degree, we all undergo the removal of hair, fat, skin and cartilage for cosmetic reasons: to counter the irritations of unsightliness.

McLuhan considers any extension of our body – for example, a gadget such as the iPod – as a form of voluntary or involuntary auto-amputation. The extension represents the body's effort to maintain equilibrium. McLuhan suggests that the creation of electronic networks, as a replica of our body's nervous system, is the ultimate extension, a "desperate and suicidal auto-amputation".

The iPod is a clear extension of the body, attached by thin white veins to our ears, nestling in marsupial fashion in our pockets, and frequently serves as a counter-irritant: drowning out the sounds of fellow human beings (and, indeed, fellow iPods) on the train, for example. In forming a "soundtrack to your life" – as we are encouraged to do⁴⁸ – we crowd out the irritating sounds of others and enter into our own reality of signs, distinct from the real world. We auto-amputate our hearing faculties. Indeed, the advent of the video-iPod and the iPhone allow for an auto-amputation of eyes as well as ears. Loved ones are reduced to a two-inch-square array of pixels

⁴⁶ Selye (1978 [1956]), 4ff

⁴⁷ As reported by, among others, *The Times*, "Trapped climber cuts off arm with penknife", London, 3 May 2008

⁴⁸ This common turn of phrase has been used in various forms as the title for TV programmes, records, books, and numerous newspaper articles.

and tinny digital sound. While objects as bodily extensions are not an especially new phenomenon – the radio, the book, even primitive tools are kinds of bodily extensions – what is different about the auto-amputative extension of the iPod is that it closes off our perceptive faculties. Consider Blake, in his epic poem *Jerusalem*⁴⁹:

If Perceptive Organs vary, Objects of Perception seem to vary;
If Perceptive Organs close, their Objects seem to close also.

As the things that we perceive vary over time due to differences in the use of our eyes and ears, a complete picture is assembled, in an ever closer approximation to an objective truth. However, Blake is saying, if we close off our perceptive organs – in the case of the iPod, by auto-amputating our ears – the things that we would, over time, have otherwise perceived become closed off to us. The possibility of an objective truth is therefore precluded; our subjective truth becomes immutable, and can no longer change as we perceive differently.

We create our iPods, perhaps subconsciously but often deliberately and very consciously, in our own image, by means of the signs – the tracks, photos, and videos – that we download and store. Like Narcissus, we become fascinated with this two-dimensional reflection of ourselves; we become numb, reduced to a state of narcosis in the pursuit of signs.

This fascination with the iPod as chief medium of the new Age is reminiscent of Old Testament idol worship. As we decorate the graven image of the iPod – cover it with “bling”, gold-plate it and encrust it with faux gemstones – we recall the Hebrews of the 115th Psalm:

Their idols are silver and gold,
The work of human hands.
They have mouths, but do not speak;
Eyes, but do not see.
They have ears, but do not hear;
Noses, but do not smell.
They have hands, but do not feel;
Feet, but do not walk;
And they do not make a sound in their throat.
Those who make them become like them;
So do all who trust in them.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Not to be confused with the well-known hymn of the same name; this quotation is from Blake’s “prophetic book” *Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Giant Albion*, of 1804–1820. The lines quoted are 1361–1362.

⁵⁰ *The Bible*, English Standard Version, Psalm 115. This passage is repeated in Psalm 135.

For McLuhan, the Old Testament idol is analogous to the reflection of Narcissus, and the beholding of idols conforms the beholder to them: “those who make them [shall] become like them”, in the same way that auto-amputation of the senses takes place by means of technological extensions of the body.

Stravinsky was deeply suspicious of the effect of recorded or mechanical sound, at least before he was paid large sums by Columbia to record his work. In his *Autobiography* – coincidentally first published in the same year as Benjamin’s essay – he describes the dangers as he perceived them:⁵¹

For the majority of listeners there is every reason to fear that, far from developing a love and understanding of music, the modern methods of dissemination will ... produce indifference, inability to understand, to appreciate, or to undergo any worthy reaction. In addition, there is the musical deception arising from the substitution for the actual playing of a reproduction, whether on record or film or by wireless transmission. It is the same difference as that between the synthetic and the authentic. The danger lies in the fact that there is always a far greater consumption of the synthetic which, it must always be remembered, is far from being identical with its mode. The continuous habit of listening to changed and sometimes distorted timbres dulls and degrades the ear, so that it gradually loses all capacity for enjoying natural musical sounds.

Stravinsky too, then, identifies a kind of numbness as a danger inherent in listening to recorded music: “indifference, inability to understand, ...”. He is clear that there is a division between “synthetic” and “authentic”, and that substituting the synthetic for the authentic degrades (amputates) the ear, until the “capacity for enjoying natural musical sounds” is lost: this is the same conclusion on the possibility for objective truth reached by Blake.

Some Conclusions on “The Age of Mass Connection”

This discussion of the nature of the iPod as a definitional medium of the Age of Mass Connection might lead one to the conclusion that the arrival of this new Age is in general a negative phenomenon, and that one might have reason to be pessimistic about the future of art. Indeed, Walter Benjamin concludes his essay with a bleak vision of mass warfare brought about by “fascism” giving the “growing mass of the proletariat” the “chance to express themselves”. In an attack on futurism, he describes war as the ultimate abolition of aura and the natural

⁵¹ Stravinsky (1962 [1936]), 153. It should be noted that the *Autobiography* was ghost-written by Walter Nouvel, and that the extent to which Stravinsky himself intended these remarks is not certain.

expression of man's subjugation of machinery. He is describing "imperial warfare" – the First World War – but also predicts that warfare will be the inevitable consequence of the aestheticisation of politics (by fascism), and the only means by which the masses can be moved within the "traditional property system" (that is, without communism); he wrote the essay in 1936. For Benjamin, communism represented the necessary politicisation of art in response to the aestheticisation of politics by fascism. In recent times, however, the "mass of the proletariat" have, through technology, gained new and greater chances to "express themselves", not through the medium of warfare but through electronic media. These media have served as extensions of humanity in the sense that the futurist Marinetti (quoted by Benjamin, 234) claimed man would extend himself through the machinery of "beautiful war".

The electronic revolution that has already taken place has undoubtedly made the world feel a smaller place, a "global village". This is popularly and vaguely thought of as a generally positive concept, carrying connotations of world peace and neighbourliness. However, for McLuhan, who coined the term⁵², the suggestions were rather more negative. The change from the mechanical era into the electric age was felt as a compressional force, forged in Harold Wilson's famous "white heat of technology"⁵³. This compression reduces the available time between action and reaction, to the point at which it is eliminated altogether, and man (Western man, at least) cannot take an action without thought of immediate reaction. When the time between action and reaction is eliminated, man, and society in general, cannot act with detachment and non-involvement, and we all participate in the consequences of our actions. For McLuhan, this describes a new "Age of Anxiety", which "compels participation regardless of any point of view". Furthermore: "every age has a favourite model of perception" (McLuhan 2001); ours is one of empathy, of faith in ultimate harmony. Therefore, everyone exists in a state of anxiety about the consequences of his actions. We numb this anxiety through auto-amputation of the senses, and we struggle to personalise and even identify ourselves through conspicuous consumption, through signs.

There are, however, causes for optimism and hope for progress in this new Age. Certainly the artist can take advantage of technological improvements, perhaps making a good living without resorting to the bland and banal or the solely commercial, and the phenomenon of the Long Tail will certainly allow ideas and art to be spread where they could not be before. If art is now politicised, electronic media, rather than politics, have become aestheticised. Notions of

⁵² McLuhan (2001), 5

⁵³ Harold Wilson's speech to the Labour Party conference, 1963.

“highbrow” versus “lowbrow”, “pop” versus “classical” will cease to exist as the need for broad categorisation dwindles; instead, there is a new perception of depth and individuation. If we only ever listened to the world through an iPod, then the conclusions of Blake might be correct, but each new Age builds upon previous Ages, and the private, personal experience will complement, not replace, the public, shared experience. Abstractly, the development of X out of Y does not remove Y from history; inventions may become technologically obsolete, but that is due to cumulative changes and improvement over time. Beethoven’s music did not disappear because Brahms or Mahler built upon his work, but (to recycle a previously-used metaphor) Bach would not, today, have to walk to hear Buxtehude. The essence of the new Age is not therefore one of technological change, in which the new replaces the old. It is a social change or paradigm shift, a political change, and an economic change.

In returning to my post-Marxist political theme, I would raise the question of the possibility for revolution. For Baudrillard, in the long tradition of reinterpreting Hegel, consumption replaced production as the foundation upon which the superstructure rests and through which change could happen. I would suggest the replacement of consumption with “connection”.

The key difference between Walter Benjamin’s Age of Mechanical Reproduction and this new Age is the speed of transmission of ideas. For McLuhan, the compressional force induced by increased speed eliminated the possibility of separating action and reaction, as previously discussed. But the chain of actions and reactions is reliant on connective mechanisms, and the paradigm shift in the way we transmit ideas by making connections defines my proposed Age of Mass Connection.

The history of social change could be read as the history of changes in such connective mechanisms. That is, in post-Marxist terms, changes in the superstructure could be interpreted as driven but not directly caused by small and numerous changes in the mechanisms of connection, the development of the network of ideas, rather than technological change; hence, the Enlightenment, inventions driven by trade networks, in maths the discovery of the exponent from financial transactions. If there is a teleological reading of this history of progress, it is one of acceleration – that is, increasing speed: the change in the distance between geographical points over the time between action and reaction – the goal of history being the liberation of ideas and thought from the oppression of distance.

In Walter Benjamin’s essay, the withering of aura (or rather, the liberation of art from aura) is related to a process of demystification. The magician becomes the surgeon, he claims, and the painter becomes the cameraman. However, the roles of surgeon and cameraman presuppose an object, an Other: the patient in the case of the surgeon, and the actor in the case of the

cameraman. The surgeon and cameraman act from a stance of non-involvement, of detachment from reaction to their actions. In the new Age, in which detachment is no longer possible, the patient is also the surgeon, and the actor is also the cameraman. More accurately, one might say that everyone is now a cameraman, and everyone is on camera, and everyone knows they are on camera: the camera as an agent of art has no aura.

How, then, can the artist – who can no longer be isolated from reaction, the Bohemian apart from the world in his garret – turn to his advantage the new Age? The digital commodity does not represent the oppressive exploitation of human labour that Marx identified in commodities; as no capital is used up in the construction of additional digital copies, capital is not transferred, and capital cannot accumulate in the usual way⁵⁴. If a digital commodity does not operate in the same way as the physical commodities of the past, the property relations and property structure are also changed. Such a fundamental change to the nature of a commodity would have resulted in fascism and war, by Walter Benjamin's logic, unless property relations also changed, by which he meant the introduction of communism. However, the digital commodity now shows a way in which property relations (the systems of human labour and capital) have been able to change, without (thus far) fascism and war, and without communism, but within and as a result of the free market.

Regardless of owning the means of production, regardless of capital, the artist now has unlimited and immediate connection in his power: immediate reaction to his ideas both in time and space. Some would interpret this as an end to specialism, the advent of an era in which “anything goes”; consider for example (the composer) John Adams:

I'm inclined to think that stylistic evolution has reached a point where it's going to relax for a while, like it did in Bach's or Brahms' day, and that composers are just going to feed like cattle in a great big pasture [...]⁵⁵

As a composer I instinctively recoil from this idea. Leaving aside the questionable idea that nothing much happened to music (to say nothing of musical instruments) in the 18th and 19th centuries, it is surely the job of the progressive artist to act, react and develop ideas. If action and reaction are now intertwined, and the artist can no longer act from the vantage point of

⁵⁴ Note that I am referring to the exploitation of human labour in the production of extra “commodities”, i.e. further digital copies, and not to the production of the original, which continues to be dependent on human labour.

⁵⁵ In interview; quoted in Mellers (1997), 283.