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ON CULTURAL MATERIALISM, COMICS AND DIGITAL MEDIA

By Ernesto Priego

In 1936,[i] Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) accounted for the paradigm shift that mechanical reproduction meant for art and politics. For Benjamin, technological change was not merely a sign of uncomplicated, forward-thinking progress; it meant a profound transformation of the realm of human experience.[ii] In this account of the era Benjamin witnessed, the German philosopher and collector was also unknowingly predicting a time he personally would not experience: four decades later, these descriptions of his time are illuminating the reality of the present. Benjamin wrote that 'the cathedral leaves its locale to be received in the studio of a lover of art; the choral production, performed in an auditorium or in the open air, resounds in the drawing room', but he was not describing digital 3D imaging, Wikipedia, YouTube or Google; he was writing about film photography and the phonograph, forms of technology many now consider 'obsolete'. The fact we can identify that sense of wonder at technology's ability to make the absent present and vice versa proves Benjamin's point: that there is a 'logic of form'[iii] in art and technology, or, in other words, that the future and the present are also contained in the past, as new technologies and art forms do not simply supersede present and anterior ones, but depend on them. Benjamin's work has proven so influential because, unlike the digital media 'pundits' of today, he did not predict the future, but analysed the present.

Benjamin was writing within the scope of Marxist criticism, which comprised of so-called dialectic materialism, historical materialism, and/or cultural materialism. Within Marxism in general and critical theory in particular, these terms are unambiguous, and their use brings 'inevitable problems' (Williams 1977, 103). Simply put, materialism' opposes idealism and dualism, or the theory that 'mind', 'consciousness' or 'spirit' on the one hand and 'matter' on the other are independent from each other. Though Marx and Engels never used the term 'dialectic materialism' to define their system of thought, their system was dialectical[iv] and sought to detect contradictions and the effects in the shaping (or deformation) of a whole (Marx and Engels 1968, 619). This method would later become standard in sociological and cultural study, beyond any given political ideology. In spite of the detailed theoretical differences that make dialectical and cultural materialism distinct (Althusser 1969, 158-162), this method of inquiry deals with 'models of historical knowledge and questions of causality and agency' (Brooker 2003, 157).

Nevertheless, the meaning of 'materialism' in contemporary usage has often been reduced to either banal consumerism or deterministic 'economism'.[v] Cultural materialism, as theorised by Raymond Williams (1977), seeks to readdress the question by arguing for a 'rematerialisation' of art and culture, for the recognition that culture expresses itself as materiality. The materiality of culture is conceived as a complex and fluid series of interconnected dialectic relationships between people, ideas and physical objects in sets of specific spatiotemporal conditions of geographical, political, economic, technological and ideological order. For Williams, there is an 'inescapable materiality' in the works of art, which is, in turn, 'the materialisation of kinds of experience' (Williams 1977, 162). Though this can be inferred to include the commoditisation of art, it also refers to the direct and indirect tangible and symbolic expressions and consequences of the existence of art in specific societies.

In the current context of digital content, in which atoms are often derided as unnecessary or easily replaceable by bits and bytes, the very concept of 'matter' is being interrogated, as are terms like 'media' and 'medium'; 'form' and 'content'. The anxieties of the present day are again being expressed through dualistic or bipolar sets, where the so-called 'new' is to seamlessly replace the 'old', and where some want the general public to believe that the 'spirit' or content of cultural products is independent from their current physical incarnations.[vi]

My research is inspired by the conceptual heritage and critical strategy of cultural materialism. It is not its intention to provide a definitive vision of 'the future' of comics; it is concerned with their past and present and how both interact to illuminate what comics are or are capable of being. By studying the still-transitional stage in which comics co-exist in different platforms and how new ways of creating, publishing and therefore reading are being put to test, my research seeks to challenge a series of assumptions about books and digital technology. The claim made in my thesis is that comics as a communicative language has expressed itself as a kind of materiality that is specific to itself and only itself. This materiality is different to that of any other media, e.g. most traditional books; it produces and is simultaneously the consequence of particular textual topologies that have made comics partially untranslatable to digital and other media, or at least interrogated the idea that such 'translation' can be done without significant loss or without becoming something else.

Photo: Gisèle Freund, Walter Benjamin in the Bibliothèque National, Paris, 1939.

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[i] Benjamin composed three slightly different versions of *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen* Reproduzierbarkeit, which can be compared in the *Selected Writings* compiled by Harvard University Press (2004-2007). The third version is dated 1939. The essay is known in English as 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', though other translations also exist, including 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility' (2008). In the most recently published English translation of the essay, J.A. Underwood (2009) uses the same title as Harry Zohn did in his seminal 1969 translation, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'.

[ii] The German philosopher, sociologist and cultural critic Walter Benjamin was associated with the Frankfurt School of critical theory, mainly through his correspondence with Theodor Adorno (1903-1969). The influence of Karl Marx's historical materialism was definitive in the

development of Benjamin's ideas on language, art and technology. Historical materialism is of course grounded on Hegel's philosophy. For Hegel, 'the phenomenology of spirit' was 'the science of the experience of consciousness'. This is the critical heritage in which contemporary uses of the terms 'materiality' and 'phenomenology' rest. Technology in its broadest sense – from a humble pencil to a 3D scanner – comprises of the material conditions of human existence, and therefore modifies the way humans understand themselves and the world around them.

[iii] Technology and art were part of the same phenomenon for Benjamin. He was interested in surrealism because it 'fused science and art' (Buck-Horss 1977). The space where technology and art met was the field in which aesthetics and politics came together. The term 'logic of form' refers to the common features and functions of different art forms throughout time, which questioned any untroubled conception of history, as Michel Foucault would later do with his *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969).

[iv] Engels defined dialectics as 'the science of the general laws of motion, both of the external world and of human thought–two sets of laws which are identical in their substance but differ in their expression... the dialectic of concepts itself became merely the conscious reflex of the dialectical motion of the real world' (1970, 619).

[v] 'Economism' is the belief that the economic level of a society determines its destiny.

[vi] For a clear visualisation of contemporary dualism, see the online video advertisement 'The Future of Publishing', <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Weq_sHxghcg> (DK Publishing 2010), where the debate about the migration of books from print to digital media is reduced to two opposing methods of reading (scrolling down/scrolling up), where one is 'negative' and the other 'optimistic'. The video, prepared by the UK branch of Dorling Kindersley Books and produced by Khaki Films, strongly references 'Truth', a 2006 promotional video by the Argentinean agency SAVAGLIO\TBWA <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lFz5jbUfJbk>, and 'Lost Generation' by Jonathan Ross (2008) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eKkfYH2l_hc>. In a time in which digital piracy is considered one of the biggest threats to creative content industries, the lack of originality in the DK Publishing video seems counterintuitive.