

Markku Koski

Proposition for AICA 2019 Congress in Berlin

Abstract

Walter Benjamin made a couple of interesting observations about criticism in his famous essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1935). In those days they were only tendencies or "weak signals", but nowadays in the age of digital reproduction they seem to be very prophetic.

"It is inherent in the technique of the film as well as that of sports that everybody who witnesses its accomplishments is somewhat of an expert", Benjamin wrote. He saw that for example in the way a group of newspaper boys leaning on their bicycles discuss the outcome of a bicycle race.

Benjamin then expands that observation to literature. For centuries a small number of writers were confronted by many thousands of readers. But with the extension of the press an increasing number of readers can become writers. It began with the daily press opening to its readers space for letters to the editor. "Thus the distinction between author and public is about to lose its basic character", Benjamin wrote.

Today those observations seem to be very poignant in the sphere of criticism. The professional criticism in the newspapers is clearly on the wane, but at the same time the internet is full of criticism. Nowadays everybody can be a critic. This is especially true in the area of film-criticism.

Benjamin clearly accepted that kind of development as a good thing, but as a dialectician he also saw how fascism in his time did not give "the proletarian masses their right, but instead a chance to express themselves". "Fascism seeks to give them an expression while preserving property."

Today that kind of freedom of expression is connected with the rising tide of digital populism, which often carries with itself resentment towards professional criticism, science and all kinds of experts.

Bio and the statement

I am Markku Koski, Ph.D of Media Studies and Sociology, independent scholar, critic and writer from Finland. I have written many essays and books about media, politics, celebrity and popular culture. I am a member of Finnish Critics Association. In 2016 I was given the Honorary Prize of The Sodankylä Film Festival. As an art journalist I am also receiving a special pension from the state of Finland.

I am interested in the concept and history of populism, particularly in the cultural field. My presentation is based on Walter Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction". In that essay Benjamin describes how the new media gave the audience new possibilities to express themselves. As a true dialectician Benjamin saw that in that development many promising things, but at the same time very grave tendencies which on those days were connected to rising fascism.

Today in the age of digital reproduction Benjamin's observations have again become very acute. Internet has given populist views especially on art and art criticism a very powerful platform and the mainstream press has often jumped on that bandwagon. But as Benjamin's friend Bertolt Brecht used to say, "Do not build on the good old days, but on the new bad one".