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Burying the Death of the Author

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"The unity of a text does not lie in its origin, but rather in its final destination. (…) The birth of the reader is to be paid with the death of the author."
Roland Barthes 1967

When Roland Barthes proclaimed the death of the author[1] a year before the caesura of May 1968, it could hardly be foreseen, in light of the hegemony of producer-oriented views, how inexorable the ascent of the recipient, the consumer and the audience - whether understood as an aggregate of atomized individuals or as a social community - would be in the fields of art as well. This ascent did not take place automatically. It was constructed, prepared and accompanied by theoretical work. Roland Barthes' essay is only one example of this.

As far as the social sciences are concerned, the corresponding theory effects, "reality effects", that have had an impact at the level of cultural policies are relatively obvious. In the standard works of art economics, the attempt to valorize the consumers with respect to the producers has been carried out as transparently as possible. Whereas philosophers have labored over essentialist definitions of

art in long treatises for centuries, coming to the most diverse conclusions (such as mimesis, expression, form, aesthetic experience, and others), the economists schooled by Occam's razor arrived at a remarkably simple definition. As it says in a widely read standard work of art economics from the 90s: "Normally artists and other insiders define what is to be considered art, while laypeople are expected to recognize this definition. (...) In contrast, economists are of the opinion that the individuals themselves should decide what they want to consider 'art'. (...) The question 'What is art?' can be answered by appealing to the wishes of the audience."[2] This is perhaps the most explicit version of giving the people what they want. Only a few years before Roland Barthes raised the estimation of the recipient, Adorno rejected ideas of this kind in a no less famous essay, in which he referred to the manipulation of these kinds of preferences by the cultural industries, to the "spirit" that they "infuse" people with.[3]

Similar to the term avant-garde, autonomy is one of the terms that is regarded as having been discredited under the influence of postmodernism in the art discourse. However, if autonomy is not related to the idea of a socially indeterminate cultural production, then it still has facets that are certainly worthy of being defended. Sociologically, the autonomy of cultural fields in the tradition of Pierre Bourdieu can also be ascertained through the extent to which producers have other producers as an audience.[4] The relevant evaluations come from peers or are oriented to standards determined by producers. If autonomy is understood in this way, then the "economic definition of art" can be regarded as an exemplary case of a heteronomous definition of art. It ultimately aims to subject producers to comprehensive compulsions of a general demand.

The theoretical background for this kind of an understanding of art can be found in the idea of "consumer sovereignty" embedded in the model notion of perfectly competitive markets. According to the conventional understanding, this secures two things: a) determining the allocation of resources according to the demand of the consumers, and b) products that are sold to consumers as cheaply as possible and made as abundantly available as possible. The popular economic version of this idea is: "The public calls the tune to which the businessman dances."[5]

"Really-existing" capitalism deviates so far from the model ideas of the free market that some critical theorists make a strict distinction between market and capitalism.[6] Capitalism is marked by power differences, the formation of monopolies, intransparency of supply, and strategies of systematically influencing preferences. None of these can be reconciled with the idea of the pure market. There are various explanations for the structuring or manipulation of preferences in individual cases, for example in reference to the cultural industries (Adorno), to advertising and promotion in particular (Marcuse), to invocations on the part of ideological state apparatuses (Althusser) or the incorporation of existing structures (Bourdieu). The sovereignty of consumers, "rational" actors according to neo-classical theory, is therefore severely limited in many respects.[7] As economic actors, the proponents of the free market usually strive for monopolies themselves and attempt to systematically influence consumers' preferences.

Nevertheless, the call for "customer orientation" based on the idea of consumer sovereignty has become extremely widespread in recent times. This is also evident in the results of the historical comparison of management discourses that Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello attempted in the course of their study on the "new spirit of capitalism". In the accentuation of customer orientation and in

the concomitant attempts to substitute hierarchical internal controls in institutions with an external control by customers, clients or an audience, Boltanski and Chiapello see one of the most striking recent developments in the economic field[8]: if control tasks are transferred from the management level to the customers, this results in flatter hierarchies and cost reductions. In the most daring notions, the entire hierarchical structure of organizations is turned around: the customers are placed at the tip of an inverted pyramid. Proving oneself against the measures of control by customers creates vertical differentiations between institutions in competition and leads to the elimination of those who are not willing or able to stand up to this test.

In the cultural fields, in which the state assumes a stronger position than in the economic field, this control mechanism is deployed today within the framework of neoliberal strategies of governmentality, which seek to make the "collective body (...) 'lean' and 'fit', 'flexible' and 'autonomous'."[9] This becomes a substitute for state controls when the state withdraws from these fields, or it is used as a basis for restructuring institutions under state auspices by implementing elements of market logic. The reinforcement of the idea of customer orientation or its transfer from the entrepreneurial sphere to public cultural policies in the form of an "orientation to the audience" as a control mechanism, can be illustrated with numerous examples. Two examples may suffice here, one from the museum context, the other from the context of major exhibitions.

Hamburg serves as the first example, because it seems to exemplify contemporary cultural policies in many respects. The "Hamburg model" was introduced under the auspices of the Social-Democrats. In terms of the orientation of cultural institutions to models from the economic field, it is therefore not one of the

radical examples familiar from the Thatcher era in Great Britain. [10]

In early 1999 all the museums in Hamburg, including two museums devoted to art, were made "independent", namely in the form of a transformation into public law foundations. "Independence" in this case means release from strong state integration. It implies sovereignty in personnel decisions, self-management of the budget, the introduction of commercial accounting, free hand in the commercial exploitation of gastronomy and the museum shop, decision-making competency and responsibility for all business operations issues. In addition, the artistic director is complemented with an executive director on an equal level and the reduction of state control is balanced by additional control through the foundation council. The state or community ensures the financial basis, whereas the individual institutions conduct their "operative business" according to their own ideas and within the framework of their financial resources.

"The objective of the structural reform of the museums that has been introduced," as stated in conjunction with the "independence" of the seven Hamburg museums, "is to create conditions (...), under which the museums will be better able to fulfill their task by being more open to the public and more efficient than before."[11] In terms of legitimate principles of justification - "cités" in Boltanski and Thevenot's sense - efficiency arguments of the industrial cité are linked here with those of the market economy cité, which comes down to the supply of desired commodities in the competitive markets.[12] Here the possibility of achieving profits creates "incentives for a more conscious visitor orientation." An art institution that has to survive on its revenues, according to the principle idea, will seek out new ways to attract visitors.[13]

In the course of the transformation into state supported quasi enterprises, the two Hamburg art museums followed the line of the market economy cité and its emphasis on orientation to the customer even more explicitly than the other five cultural institutions. In the specification of the "leading objectives" for the individual institutions, it says for instance that the Hamburg Kunsthalle seeks "to the fullest extent possible" to "place itself at the service of art and at the service of the visitors", whereas the Museum of Arts and Crafts seeks "to the fullest extent possible (...) to place itself at the service of the audience."[14] Already in 2003 the media reported a "dramatic" development among the Hamburg museums. According to the reports, although the museums had become "more interesting, closer to the public, more modern", their economic situation was "worse than ever before".[15] However, I would like to draw attention not so much to the consequences of the structural transformation and the subsequent call for the state and an increase in support, the rise of blockbuster exhibitions, or the difficulties of recruiting a large audience for art on a long-term basis in a city like Hamburg. Certain aspects of the genesis of the structural transformation are no less interesting. In fact, the heads of the institutions themselves were substantially involved in this transformation. They presented the first drafts for structural changes in this direction in 1995 with a view to the apparent autonomy gains. And these endeavors were in turn well supported in the art field. This is evident in the results of specific research. During the year prior to the initiative of the museum directors roughly 670 artists, critics, curators and non-specialist visitors to the Hamburg Kunstverein and the Hamburg Deichtorhalle for exhibitions with works that are to classed as belonging to the "field of limited production" in Bourdieu's sense were questioned on the issue of the economization of the art field,

among other issues. In particular, two conclusions are remarkable in this context:

a) The broadest possible acceptance for the economization of art institutions was evident, regardless of whether it was a question of corporate sponsoring or the question of whether the management of art museums should be oriented to commercial rationality. Over 80% of those questioned expressed agreement.

b) There were only marginal differences between the responses from groups specializing in the field, in which - as the interviews showed - Adorno, but also post-structuralist authors such as Foucault, Deleuze, Derrida, etc. are highly regarded, and the responses from the general art public, mostly comprised of occasional visitors to art exhibitions. There was little trace of an antagonism between "art and business" or a "break with the economic order".[16]

Economization was thus accepted even in the center of the field, not by all the participants, but certainly by wide majorities. A climate predominated that supported the structural change directly and indirectly, actively and passively.

The second example that is to be mentioned here briefly reveals the implications of promoting audience orientation for the autonomy of producers and curators. The choice of the motto of the Venice art biennial in 2003, "The Viewer's Dictatorship", may have been based on ironic intentions on the part of the curators. However, the management of this venerable major exhibition interpreted it literally: "The audience was undoubtedly regarded as a mere side effect in modern art ten years ago. Now, though, there is certainly a point in focusing on the 'viewer's dictatorship' in one of the mottos of the Biennale, rather than the artist's dictatorship.

(...) The only criterion for success is the number of visitors, as it is everywhere else in the business world."[17] Thinking about the motives for "buying the product exhibition" led the Biennale management to the principle of "limiting the number of video installations" and showing "at the most, very short videos", out of consideration for the "perspective of the audience".[18]

II.

The transformation in cultural policies is only a mosaic stone in a more comprehensive process of continuously shifting boundaries - the expansion of commodification and market-appropriate relationships. The side effects have been extensively documented, at the level of difference - a constantly increasing vertical differentiation of living conditions on a global scale - as well as at the level of indicators of anomie.

More recently an awareness of both the disarmament and the appropriation of criticism and dissidence has risen.[19] In search of explanations for why the process of economization has progressed largely unhindered, the most diverse factors are mentioned. There are structural mechanisms that are overpowering, as well as subjective conditions; discrepancies between a critical awareness and the willingness or ability to react at the level of action; the heterogeneity of critical currents that are too incidental or one-dimensional and which therefore overlook developments in other areas; there is the effectiveness of the associative strategies of the elites that are designed to coopt criticism and resistance. Nor should those theories be forgotten that formulate the generalized suspicion that dissidence and resistance have a relationship of secret complicity with power. A new facet of these kinds of insights is

found in the study of the "new spirit of capitalism" presented by Luc Boltanski, brother of the artist Christian Boltanski, and Eve Chiapello.[20] The system attacked by criticism does not merely appropriate. Because of its normative indeterminacy, in Boltanski and Chiapello's view capitalism is instead actually dependent on its opponents or on the interplay with anti-capitalist criticism. This serves to de-legitimate obsolete structures, to develop more convincing justifications for existing structures and also the self-control that it is not capable of by itself. Historically, capitalism has initially regenerated itself in the 20th century through the influence of "social criticism", the primary themes of which are inequality, exploitation and discrimination, specifically in the form of the welfare state, which emerged in reaction to socialist, communist, but also fascist criticism. According to the two French sociologists, beginning in the 1960s "artistic criticism", which was originally rooted in the philosophy of Romanticism, opposing standardization, bureaucraticization and massification and demanding autonomy, emancipation and transgressing boundaries, has been more important for the regeneration of capitalism than social criticism.

This study, which is not based on the presumption of the ineffectivity of art or cultural production, but indeed presumes the opposite, especially in conjunction with certain critical approaches, has hardly been received in the art field so far. The tendencies of its implications include that it is less a matter of motifs or programs, but rather of effects. Programs are not simply progressive because they make use of a radical or anti-capitalist rhetoric. What is progressive and what stabilizes or renews the system should accordingly be judged by its effects, especially the delayed effects. The position distinguished between different forms of criticism and thus does not lead into cynicism, escapism or resignation, which

could easily be the case with an orientation to the relatively empty formulas from the philosophy of suspicion, such as "we are all part of power". Instead it draws attention to the question of which forms of criticism and practice are functional for the next stage or the stage after that of economicization and commodification, and which forms of practice could at least decelerate or disrupt, if not actually prevent these tendencies. Of course it is difficult to assess potential effects in open social systems, but it would already be an improvement to think more in this kind of frame of reference. Following the logic of paradox effects, it is not unusual for criticism to reinforce the same ills that it seeks to fight or prevent. The classic example of non-intentional perverse effects is Max Weber's Puritan Protestants, who did not intend to create modern capitalism, but nevertheless contributed substantially to its formation in the west.[21]

The changes in cultural policies are undoubtedly partially the result of conscious neoliberal strategies. By themselves, however, these cannot explain the transformation. In its pure form the neoliberal ideology is radical, and for this reason, it is hardly popular. As the neo-Gramscian theory of cultural hegemony emphasizes, it requires a connection with popular ideologies[22], but also support through paradox effects. These create acceptance and agreement, but also abstention and reserve in terms of opposition.

Boltanski and Chiapello call their approach "sociology of criticism". Unlike Boltanski's earlier works, in which he investigates the conditions for the media publicity of social criticism[23], the analyses in the study of new capitalism are more reminiscent of the criticism of ideology in the philosophical or humanities tradition. In comparison with the analysis of homologies and parallels between an "artistic criticism" represented at a high level of abstraction and sophisticated management discourses, the social

mechanisms through which criticism is made functional for that which is criticized, ultimately remain fragmentary and indeterminate. One of the crucial links in the chain is popularization. Through the popularization of decontexualized fragments from emancipation and authenticity theories (e.g. Adorno, Freudo-Marxism), but also from fragments derived from the tradition of authenticity criticism (e.g. Deleuze, Derrida), structures of desire and patterns of action emerge, which are taken up in economic and political fields of action and subjected to contrary goals. In this way, criticism unwittingly contributes to new forms of suppression, exploitation and economicization. The social and cultural mechanisms through which this happens in individual cases is not decided.

A research program that deals with the disarmament, endogenization and reversal of social and artistic criticism certainly seems to be worth refining and developing further. Even though its current realization can only be convincing to a certain extent due to a number of reasons, it should still provide an impulse to take a closer look at the critical approaches that have contributed to de-legitimizing the producer and revaluing the consumer. From today's perspective it seems that it was more than a kind of theoretical background music for the preparation and establishment of new cultural policies oriented to the customer and the audience. At the same time, attention should be given not only to philosophical criticism, but also to the popularizing and popular forms of theory with a widespread impact, which are received by current and future actors in cultural policies and cultural management. A number of social and cultural theories would be suitable in this context, sociological theories devoted to the decentralization of the author[24], such as the theory of art as collective action, as well as theories of culture or of the aesthetics of reception. One example must suffice here.

For years one of the most popular variations of critical theory has been cultural studies, which has meanwhile spread far beyond the Anglo-Saxon world. Due to its magnitude, this field has been differentiated into numerous sub-fields with heterogeneous paradigms that are partly mutually antagonistic. "We want," writes Paul Willis, for instance, who represents the ethnographic paradigm of cultural studies, "to rehabilitate consumption, creative consumption. (...) The interpretation, symbolic action and symbolic creativity are components of consumption. This work is ultimately just as important as everything that may have been coded into the commodities originally."[25]

In light of these and similar revaluations of the consumer in certain sub-fields of cultural studies, in which consumption is redefined as a form of production, Jim McGuigan[26] pointed out parallels to the variant of cultural populism that is based on the fiction of the sovereign consumer. What the different variations of cultural populism have in common is that they attempt to shift the customer, the consumer, or the audience, as in the case of John Fiske[27], one of the main proponents of the semiotic paradigm of cultural studies, into the center. In light of the differences in intellectual style and in the political connotations, these populisms undoubtedly appeal to groups in different regions of the social space. These kinds of theories and others, such as certain variations of cultural sociology, are implemented, alongside purely economistic theories, in the training programs for cultural agents, cultural managers.

It would seem apparent that particularly the interplay of apologetic and critical approaches could explain the tremendous cultural-political success of consumer and audience orientation. About forty years ago now, Adorno wrote under conditions, in which the cultural industry was still underdeveloped and the customer and audience orientation of cultural institutions was still relatively

discreet: "The customer is not king, as the cultural industry would have us believe, not their subject but their object."[28] Now that a huge measure of energy has been invested over the course of years and decades in deconstructing the author or producer and in revaluing the customer, the consumer and the audience, it seems appropriate today to devote at least a portion of this energy to the deconstruction of the recipient, certainly in conjunction with a strategic revaluation of the cultural producer, formally borrowing from the idea of "strategic essentialism".

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[1] Barthes, Roland, Der Tod des Autors. In: Texte zur Theorie der Autorenschaft, Stuttgart 2000 (1967), p. 185-193.

[2] Pommerehne, Werner / Frey, Bruno, S., Musen und Märkte. Ansätze einer Ökonomik der Kunst. München 1993, p. 7-9.

[3] Adorno, Theodor W., Resumé über Kulturindustrie. In: Pias, Claus et al. (Ed.), Kursbuch Medienkultur. Die maßgeblichen Theorien von Brecht bis Baudrillard. Stuttgart 2000 (1963), p. 202 – 208.

[4] Cf. Bourdieu, Pierre, Über das Fernsehen. Frankfurt / Main 1998, p. 88f.

[5] Heilbroner, Robert / Thurow, Lester, Economics Explained. New York et al. 1994, p. 196.

[6] Cf. e.g. Braudel, Fernand, Sozialgeschichte des 15. bis 18. Jahrhunderts. Aufbruch zur Weltwirtschaft. Munich 1986.

[7] Cf. Etzioni, Amitai, Die faire Gesellschaft. Frankfurt / Main, 1996, p. 338ff.

[8] "The most characteristic features of the development of management in the last thirty years can be seen in the transition from control to self-control and in the transfer of control costs formerly borne by the organization to the employees and the customers." Boltanski, Luc / Chiapello, Eve, Der neue Geist des Kapitalismus. Konstanz 2003, p. 122.

[9] Bröckling, Ulrich, Krasmann, Susanne, Lemke, Thomas (Ed.), Gouvernementalität der Gegenwart. Studien zur Ökonomisierung des Sozialen. Frankfurt / Main 2000, p. 32.

[10] Cf. Chiapello, Eve, L'influence des facteurs ideologiques sur la gestion des organisations culturelles – une comparaison France-Angleterre à la lumière des années Thatcher. Jouy-en- Josas 1993, p. 45ff..

[11] Bürgerschaft der Freien und Hansestadt Hamburg, 16. Wahlperiode, Drucksache/1537, 13. 10. 1998, p. 2.

[12] Cf. Boltanksi, Luc / Thevenot, Laurent, De la justification. Economies de grandeur. Paris 1991, p. 32ff. On the application of this model to cultural policy issues, cf. Chiapello, Eve, L'influence des facteurs ideologiques sur la gestion des organisations culturelles – une comparaison France-Angleterre à la lumière des années Thatcher. Jouy-en- Josas 1993.

[13] For an elaborated neoliberal position on audience orientation, see Banfield, Edward, The Democratic Muse. New York 1984, p. 92ff.

[14] Bürgerschaft, 1998, op.cit., footnote 11, p. 43.

[15] Cf. Gretzschel, Matthias, Schieflage bei den Museen dramatisch. Hamburger Abendblatt, 15. 4. 2003.

[16] The historical antagonism between art and economy is especially emphasized by Bourdieu, Pierre, Die Regeln der Kunst. Frankfurt / Main, p. 198. Findings similar to those in Hamburg were also the result of prior interviews in Vienna (1993) and subsequently in Paris (1995). The results converge with findings such as those from the study, for example, by Chiapello, Eve, Artistes vs. Managers. Paris 1998, which is not based on survey data.

[17] "Kunst für Kunden". Interview by Tobias Müller with Franco Barnabé, the "manager at the top of the Biennale", Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung, 8. 6. 2003, p. 37.

[18] ibid.

[19] Cf. von Osten, Marion (Ed.), Norm der Abweichung. Vienna / New York 2003.

[20] On the theoretical and political placement and assessment of this study, cf. Bidet, Jacques, L'esprit du capitalisme. Questions à Luc Boltanski et Eve Chiapello. In: Lojkine, Jean (Ed.), Les sociologies critiques du capitalisme. Paris 2002, p. 215 - 233. Potthast, Jörg, Der Kapitalismus ist kritisierbar. Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme und das Forschungsprogramm der "Soziologie der Kritik". Berliner Zeitschrift für Soziologie, Nr. 4 2001, p. 551-556.

[21] Cf. Weber, Max, Soziologie, Weltgeschichtliche Analysen, Politik. Stuttgart 1968, p. 314ff. Collins, Randall, Max Weber. The Prostestantic Ethic. Beverly Hills - London- New Delhi, 1986, p. 48ff.

[22] Cf. Stuart Hall, Der Thatcherismus und die Theoretiker. In: Stuart Hall, Ausgewählte Schriften. Ideologie, Kultur, Medien, Neue Rechte, Rassismus. Hamburg 1989, p. 108-153.

[23] Cf. Boltanski, Luc, Bezichtigung und Selbstdarstellung: Die Kunst, ein normales Opfer zu sein. In: Hahn, Alois / Kapp, Volker (Ed.), Selbstthematisierung und Selbstzeugnis: Bekenntnis und Geständnis. Frankfurt / Main 1987, p. 149-169; Boltanski, Luc, L'amour et la justice comme competénces. Paris 1990.

[24] Cf. Becker, Howard, Art Worlds. London 1981.

[25] Willis, Paul, Jugend-Stile. Zur Ästhetik der gemeinsamen Kultur. Hamburg 1991, p. 36f.

[26] McGuigan, Jim, Cultural Populism Revisited. In: M. Ferguson / P. Golding (Ed.), Cultural Studies in Question. London et al. 1997, p. 138ff.

[27] Cf. Fiske, John, Understanding Popular Culture. London / New York, 1990, p. 26ff.

[28] Adorno, Theodor W., 2000 (1963), op. cit., p. 202.