Transformations

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From Flâneur to Web Surfer: Videoblogging, Photo Sharing and Walter Benjamin @ the Web 2.0

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I. Introduction: Benjamin @ the Web 2.0

One of Walter Benjamin's main points in the introductory parts of *The Arcades Project* was that technology and techniques contribute to a restructuring of the human sensory system (Leslie 42). He wanted to put forth that the forms of mediated reproduction which were emerging in the era of modern industrialism had an impact on the ways in which people organise their perception of the world around them. Benjamin illustrated his point by discussing how cars, trains and aeroplanes transform relations to physical space, as well as how new media such as photography and cinema reformulate previous conceptions of time and space. This latter area of focus makes it particularly tempting to try to apply his analytical concepts on today's intensified developments within the sphere of digital media.

This paper explores and illustrates how Benjamin's analysis of the nineteenth century culture of consumption might contribute to an understanding of the new communal formations and self-reflexive subjectivities of the internet in the twenty-first century. Theoretically, this will be done with a specific focus on the concept of the *flâneur* as discussed in *The Arcades Project* (416-455), and on some lines of reasoning that are central to his essay on "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction". The empirical emphasis will be on two examples of so called Web 2.0 technologies: the photo sharing service of *flickr* and the videoblogging functionality of *YouTube*.

Firstly, I discuss how the notion of the *flâneur* needs to be updated and modified to work in an analysis of Web 2.0 technologies. Secondly, I bring the contemporary examples of online photo sharing and videoblogging into the discussion. Thirdly, I will revisit some key passages of Benjamin's writing and apply them on these examples before returning to the overarching question concerning the continued usefulness of Benjamin's theory.

As a concept, the "Web 2.0" was coined by the American media company *O'Reilly Media* in 2004. It refers to a second generation of internet based services that enable people to share information online in ways that were previously unavailable. Web 2.0 applications and services are characterised by elevated degrees of interactivity, cooperation, file sharing and social networking, as compared to the more unidirectional and less dynamic Web 1.0. In brief we can say that we have gone from mere websites to a large number of creative communities.

II. Updating the flâneur

The concept of the *flâneur* as developed by the likes of Baudelaire, Simmel and Benjamin is often understood as referring to a leisurely city stroller with no intention to buy anything. An aloof wanderer parasiting on the superficial stimuli of streets and shopping arcades. But such

understandings may obscure the fact that the originators of the concept might rather have seen the *flâneur* as a critical and active subject. Even though Benjamin developed an extensive critique of the *flâneur* throughout his writings, he is still not clear on whether the *flâneur* is critical of the way in which he interacts with the world around him or not. Regardless of this discussion I will argue in the following that the basic reading of the *flâneur* as absent minded needs to be revised if the concept is to be used as a vehicle to discuss and understand new media and new modes of communication. There are also, after all, some major differences between the arcades of Paris and the global meeting places and communication channels of the web. There is really no denying that computer technology in general, and specifically the internet, has had a massive impact on contemporary culture and society. Already today it feels a bit antiquated to say things such as: "Information technology has changed the ways in which people interact" or "The internet is re-shaping the ways in which time, space and identities are constructed and understood". In the introduction to the second edition of the book *Web.Studies* British media researcher David Gauntlett states:

> The first edition of *Web.Studies* began with a story about how I didn't get into the internet at first, in the mid-1990s, because it seemed too nerdy. Bloody internet, I said: full of computer geeks swapping episode guides for *Babylon Five*. This was, of course, intended to reassure 'cool' readers that they weren't reading a book aimed at an audience of computer scientists and boys who go to sci-fi conventions. Today, such apologies are not necessary: the Web is so much a part of everyday life - and, in particular, so often at the heart of popular culture, or used to *communicate* pop culture - that there is no need to justify it, or be embarrassed. ("Web.Studies" 3).

Gauntlett's personal, and humorous account, illustrates an experience that probably many of us have made. The last ten years has seen the incorporation of the web into the everyday. But this does not automatically mean that the web has completely altered our everyday patterns of appropriating space, being social and forming identities. In some respects it may actually be the case that the web has rather been adapted to already existing socio-cultural patterns.

This issue of balancing notions of continuity and of change has a parallel on a more abstract theoretical level, namely in the theoretical discussion concerning the so called postmodern condition: if we would agree that we have actually entered a postmodern era, while leaving modernity behind, we will consequently understand expressions and phenomena in the present from certain perspectives; from that of fragmentation and the death of grand narratives (as described by Lyotard), and from that of hyperreality, simulation and the victory of image over substance (as discussed by Baudrillard in *Simulacra and Simulations*). The same rings true when it comes to grasping the cultural and social effects of informationalism. If we would agree that information technology is a bearer of such revolutionary change, that it brings about the "genesis of a new world" (Castells "Vol. 3" 367) we will consequently understand its effects from a similar perspective: "Under the informational paradigm, a new culture has emerged from the superseding of places and the annihilation of time by the space of flows and by timeless time: *the culture of real virtuality* (Castells "Vol. 3" 381).

But even though there sometimes is a tendency within cultural and social theory to represent history in terms of a dichotomisation or a clean-cut shift from the modern to the postmodern era, it seems more reasonable to look at this transition in terms of a continuing process. The rapid and progressive changes that we witness today within the spheres of information technology and new media are no doubt both important and exciting. But that does not mean that a transition from traditional CRT television screens to LCDs suddenly revolutionise basic patterns of social and cultural life. Maybe not the gradual changeover from old school to mobile telephones either, or the change from books to e-books, or from mail to e-mail. What is important is that we communicate and create culture.

But this argument is not only about the so called new media technologies not necessarily being

completely "new". It is also about the characteristics generally connected to postmodernity not necessarily being all that "post" modern. Dutch literary theorist Hans Bertens contends that the way in which postmodernity is often described "suggests an interesting pedigree" (205). Benjamin's analysis of the style of allegory in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* focuses on non-coherent 'kaleidoscopic' cultural fragments with floating meanings, and thus foreshadows the floating and aestheticised postmodern sensibility. *The Arcades Project* also points to a rather "postmodern" commodity world that celebrates dreams, illusions, fragments and surface. This argument illustrates my point: that the coming of postmodernism, and hence the cultural patterns of the computerised society, has been a continuing process that has its roots somewhere in the middle of the nineteenth century (Bertens). However there is no doubt that this development has not been going on at an even pace. Rather, it has been increasingly intensified over time as more and more places and spaces of aesthetic consumption and expression have emerged. The Web 2.0 services discussed in this paper are examples of such sites.

In sum it can be said that in view of the fact that Benjamin in a sense discussed "new media," we can apply his concepts to an analysis of contemporary new media. However, this does of course not mean that the media landscape has not changed at all during the last 150 years. The internet certainly plays an important part in the intensive media development currently taking place. As described by Henry Jenkins it surely has the power to play a substantial part in cultivating interactivity, re-negotiating cultural boundaries and promoting participation and democracy. Certainly, it can also work as a powerful tool for self help (Orgad 146-157), identity construction (Chan 271-285; Cheung 53-68), and social movements (Melucci; Harcourt). But, in spite of all this, we must not forget the important contribution that can be made by theories that were mainly developed to understand "modernity". Their potential usefulness becomes all the more obvious if we realise that we are probably making a mistake if we look at modernity/postmodernity in terms of a clean-cut dichotomy. It could be argued that a more defensible way of conceiving the present day is in terms of an accentuated form of modernity. This has actually been done by a number of theorists: Anthony Giddens prefers the concept of "late modernity." Zygmunt Bauman writes of "liquid modernity," Ulrich Beck of a "second age of modernity," and Scott Lash about "another modernity." Together, Beck, Giddens and Lash have written about "reflexive modernity."

Even though there is a need to revise the concept of the *flâneur* to make it entirely applicable to the web context, some writers on present day digital cultures have still managed to use it in a relatively direct sense. Manovich, for example, actually contends that "Recent writings on visual culture, film theory, cultural history, and cyberculture have invoked the figure of the *flâneur* much too often" (268) but still calls upon it in a rather interesting analysis of navigable virtual space. Manovich, however, still emphasises that the *flâneur* wants to "lose himself" in the masses (270), and that he is "immediately erasing the faces and figures of passersby" (268). While probably giving a reasonably correct image of some of the more aimless web surfing strategies, this non-updated notion of *flânerie* has been put to use by a number scholars of postmodernity and the internet: Clayton writes of "a style of distracted attention characteristic of the *flâneur*" (34) and Cullenberg argues that the "voyeuristic pleasures" of the *flâneur* are the antithesis to an "active life of production and reproduction" (185). The point is that this way of using the *flâneur* in analyses of the internet, however thought provoking, and not necessarily completely misleading, risks obscuring an important dimension. This is because one of the defining characteristics of the internet – and particularly of Web 2.0 applications – is its conduciveness to "participatory culture." Jenkins writes:

> The term, participatory culture, contrasts with older notions of passive media spectatorship. Rather than talking about media producers and consumers occupying separate roles, we might now see them as participants who interact with each other according to a new set of rules that none of us fully understands. (3)

The dimension we risk missing, if the concept is not revised, is that active audiences produce

meaning. It is reasonable to think of the web 2.0 surfer as more conscious and reflective than indicated by the readings referred to above. A crucial element in the theories of "late modernity," as formulated by Giddens among others, is that the present day individual – much like Jenkins's "participants" – is constantly working on forming his own subjectivity by processing and interacting with masses of symbols and information. In fact, Benjamin's original notion allows for such readings. This is, for example, recognised by Longhurst, who shows that even though the *flâneur* moves around "in an uncoordinated, fleeting way" due to "the fragmentation of modern life", he can still "redeem it through his ability to aesthetically link otherwise disparate phenomena" (117). Looked upon in this way, the *flâneur* is not wandering aimlessly, but rather assembles "raw materials" (118) for the production of culture and identity. So, if early users of the initial incarnations of the web were more "alienated" and passive, the active users of the Web 2.0 might reflect a desire to take control of the "alienating space" by "aestheticising" and "colonising" it (cf. Erlmann 8).

Benjamin himself – within the development of modernity – identified a tendency towards an increased mediated interactivity as well as an entanglement of media technologies and everyday life. He wrote that the *flâneur* moving around in the city "not only feeds on sensory data taking shape before his eyes," but is also taking part in "something experienced and lived through" (*Arcades* M1,5). This could in fact be interpreted as a description, on the abstract formal level, of a process which is quite similar to what we today discuss in terms of "new media studies", "the Web 2.0" or "convergence culture": A move from simple media consumption towards increased participation and interactivity.

The more interactive, user oriented and decentred the web gets, the more similarities between the virtual cultures of the day and the social forms of early and high modernity come into sight. The same patterns of simultaneous proximity and distance discussed by Georg Simmel in his writings on *The Stranger* and on *The Metropolis and Mental Life* are, for example, easily identifiable in relation to phenomena such as web communities and internet dating. Henri Lefebvre's theory on *The Production of Space* is – to take another example – fitting in many respects when it comes to the ways in which web interactants, as well as commercial actors, employ a number of social strategies to render the rooms of cyberspace as physical realities. Pierre Bourdieu's theories of habitus, capital and social space can likewise be put to work in describing processes of dominance and symbolic violence within internet chat rooms (Bowker & Liu 631-644; Blashki & Nichol 77-86). Similarly, Erving Goffman's mid-twentieth century theories of self-presentation and impression management is commonly referred to by internet researchers (Chan 271-285; Ellison et al .; boyd). Against the background of this insight – and with the updated reading of the *flâneur* in mind – this paper revisits the writings of Walter Benjamin in search of ways of applying them to virtual cultures. This will be done in relation to two examples of Web 2.0 services: *flickr* and *YouTube*. The first case, *flickr*, is a photo sharing website as well as an online community platform which is widely regarded as one of the early examples of Web 2.0 applications (launched in 2004). Even though the site can be used as an online repository for private photos, one of its more conspicuous uses is within so called photoblogging or moblogging. This is a practice where users publish their own private images of everyday situations with the help of a digital camera and a computer or, in the case of moblogging, using a mobile phone with a built-in camera.

Much like *flickr*, *YouTube* (launched in 2005) is also oriented towards file sharing and social networking while at the same time functioning as a web community. *YouTube* is centred on video files, and thus enables the practice of videoblogging – that is the documentation and online sharing of everyday experience in the form of moving pictures. Already we can make a connection to Benjamin: In the files on "Panoramas" and "Mirrors" in the *Arcades Project* he describes a popular fascination with looking glasses, lenses and image stimulation (527-542). He talks about an ocular passion marking the late nineteenth century when mirrors were incorporated into strangely named machineries of image production: dioramas, cosmoramas, fantoscopes, cycloramas etc. In his impressionistic notes we read this excerpt from a letter included in his empirical material:

Egoistic – "that is what one becomes in Paris, where you can hardly take a step without catching sight of your dearly beloved self. Mirror after mirror! In cafés and restaurants, in shops and stores, in haircutting salons and literary salons, in baths and everywhere, 'every inch a mirror!'". (*Arcades Project* 539)

These patterns of narcissistic identities and of ocular passion, so characteristic of Benjamin's account of modernity are also distinguishing features of the Web 2.0. Benjamin discusses mirrors as expanders of space into infinity, as defiers of boundaries, as destabilisers and creators of chains of endless duplication.

Sites such as *YouTube* and *flickr* are in fact good examples of the temporal and spatial dissolution discussed by a number of postmodern writers from Lyotard to Turkle. Benjamin addressed similar themes and issues when he analysed nineteenth century Paris as a composite of a thousand eyes and a thousand lenses, all of which acted as screens, reflecting subjects back to themselves as objects. The informational and virtual cultures of the twenty first century can be understood in a similar fashion. This context is also composed of an immaculate number of eyes, lenses and reflective (computer) screens. Logging on to the Web 2.0, throwing ourselves into its ocean of the visual biographies of both ourselves and others, there is a lot in common with Benjamin's spectators of cultural change (the *flâneurs*: the window-shopping consumers simultaneously selling themselves).

III. Shifting metaphors

Much of Benjamin's writing can be read in a metaphorical sense. While the *Arcades Project* is specifically about the city of Paris and the lifestyles, predispositions and patterns of movement of its *flâneurs*, it can also be interpreted as an analysis of modernity in general. In that case we take "Paris" to symbolise modern western society and modern culture as a whole. "The *flâneur*" consequently becomes an aggregated abstract social character – an ideal type – for describing predominant traits of the mind and behaviour of modern man as such.

In order to use Benjamin's writing for an analysis of information society and virtuality, we therefore need to shift metaphors. The following sections of this paper relate some of Benjamin's thought to contemporary cyberspace examples, with the assumption that "Paris" – for this analysis – is a metaphor for *cyberspace*, "the *flâneur*" a metaphor for *the web surfer*, and "works of art" a metaphor for *the forms of visual expression communicated through the internet.*

(a) Dissolution of time and space

One of the most conspicuous features of internet communication in general, and of photo sharing and videoblogging in particular, is the ways in which rigid concepts of time and space become dissolved. The screen dumps in Figure 1 illustrate this.
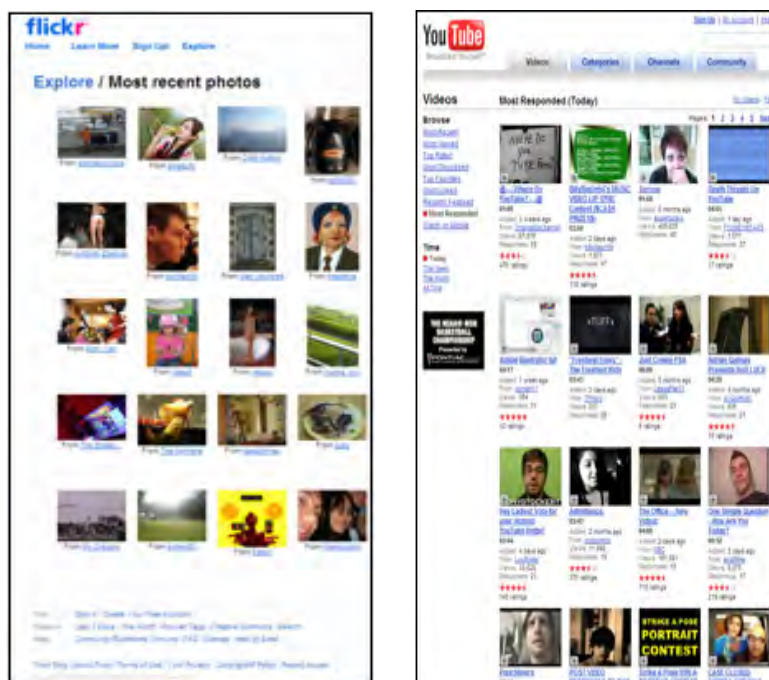
Figure 1. Screen dumps from *flickr* and *YouTube*, 2007

Both of these sites were visited on March 26 at a computer in Umeå, Sweden. What confronts the onlooker is a number of images and videos from a variety of other physical places around the world, taken on a number of different dates (according to the traditional western calendar) and at different points in time, in different time zones. They come all at once to the spectator situated at one particular place in space and time. Castells refers to this when writing about "the culture of real virtuality" in which "timeless time" and "the space of flows" have annihilated traditional time and place. But the question is what we should take "traditional time and place" to be. The "ecstasy of communication" we find in these visual communities could be interpreted in Baudrillard's postmodernist terms of "hyperreality": Images referring to other images in an endless chain that may ultimately extinguish "real" reality. Postmodern culture is said to be a culture of quotations and intertextuality (Storey 185). But the multitude of images shown before the web surfer on *flickr* and *YouTube* could in fact also be interpreted as a very tangible, and maybe radicalised, expression of the same cultural qualities discussed by Benjamin.

Benjamin did indeed address these themes. His formulation on how "the sight of immediate reality has become an orchid in the land of technology" ("Work of Art" XI) surely rings similar to the idea of hyperreality. Further, he wrote that "(e)ven the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space" ("Work of Art" II). Reading Benjamin in the light of informationalism and the prophecies about – and celebrations of – the Web 2.0, the similarities between his temporal and spatial analysis of modernity and Castells's and Baudrillard's descriptions of informationalism and postmodernity become rather striking. Benjamin says that "(t)he street conducts the *flâneur* into a vanished time" (*Arcades* M1,2), much like cyberspace leads it surfers into timelessness. He goes on to say that "everything potentially taking place . . . is perceived simultaneously;" "far-off times and places interpenetrate the landscape and the present moment;" "(t)he most heterogeneous temporal elements . . . coexist" (*Arcades* M1a,3; M2,4; M9,4). Benjamin further describes modernity in terms of a relativisation of space: "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" ("Work of Art" II).

Much like Baudrillard's web surfer is on "a passage through an indefinable space" ("New Technologies"), Benjamin's *flâneur* finds himself in places "(w)here doors and walls are made of

mirrors" and "there is no telling outside from in" (*Arcades* R1,3). Similar to cyberspace, "the city can appear to someone walking through it to be without thresholds: a landscape in the round" (*Arcades* M3,2). The images in Figure 1 – condensing many "physical" places and "actual" times into others – can be interpreted as "multiple fragments which are assembled under a new law" ("Work of Art" XI).

(b) From *flâneur* to web surfer

The tendency towards images dominating narrative, style taking over at the expense of substance (Strinati 225), the rise of irony, and the celebration of all that is irrelevant, which is generally regarded as characteristic of the present day (cf. Harvey; Lang) could also be read in Benjamin's terms. The web surfer who is given the opportunity to take a look at what 353,111 individuals – unknown to him – around the globe had for lunch (Figure 2), is perhaps driven by an intoxicated curiosity similar to that of the *flâneur*. They both represent a social type that is in constant search of ever new sensations: An "intoxication" comes over him; he feels "the magnetism of the next streetcorner" and he wants to satisfy "the deep human need for daydreaming" (*Arcades* M1,3; M3,10).
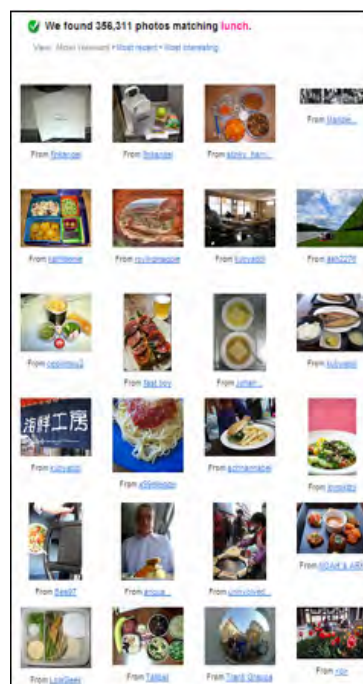

Figure 2. Screen dump from *flickr*, 2007

The idea of Simmel's formal sociology was that the social researcher must focus on the forms, rather than the content, that make up society. This means that we can find similar patterns of action, interaction, roles, relations and identities in contexts that – at first glance – differ quite a lot from each other. This is basically an idea of abstraction: that we need to look to overarching patterns instead of the surface level details of singular cases – at least if we want to formulate theory. And if we look at the type of the *flâneur* and the type of the web surfer, they seem to express similar predispositions and strategies.

Benjamin's *flâneur* would surely be interested in logging on to *flickr* or *YouTube* to gain an insight in the everyday lives of random people – to look at what is on their lunch plates – since he is an "observer" who feels an "intoxication of empathy;" to him "(c)uriosity has become a fatal irresistible passion" (*Arcades* M13a,2; M17a,5; M14,1). The *flâneur* has an obsessive interest in other people's lives. All of this is "spellbinding because it is not his own, not private" (*Arcades* M1,2). The *flâneur* would surely be a fan of reality-TV, an expression that hallmarks contemporary

culture (cf. Bignell; Jermyn & Holmes): "(T)he *flâneur* . . . was never really a friend of the great outdoors. What mattered to him was . . . communication with, observations about, the simple sight of human beings" (Benjamin *Arcades* M4a,2). To both the *flâneur* and the web surfer the interest in other people has become an end in itself. They are both have voyeuristic tendencies: "The phantasmagoria of the *flâneur*: to read from faces the profession, the ancestry, the character. . . . The masses . . . stretch before the *flâneur* as a veil: they are the newest drug for the solitary" (*Arcades* M6,6; M16,3).

(c) Online self presentations and exhibitionistic culture

These social types do not – as stated earlier – only express passive observation. They are also highly inclined to interact. This means that the *flâneur* does not only capture the receiving side of online interaction, but also its self presentational aspects – or, if we will, its exhibitionistic dimensions. Figure 3 illustrates the communicative features of *YouTube*. One individual has posted a movie of himself asking the question "How are you today?" to the collective of *YouTube* members. The video has been viewed 8.675 times, commented upon 438 times, marked as a favourite 5 times, and 85 users have produced answers to the question in the form of video files of their own.
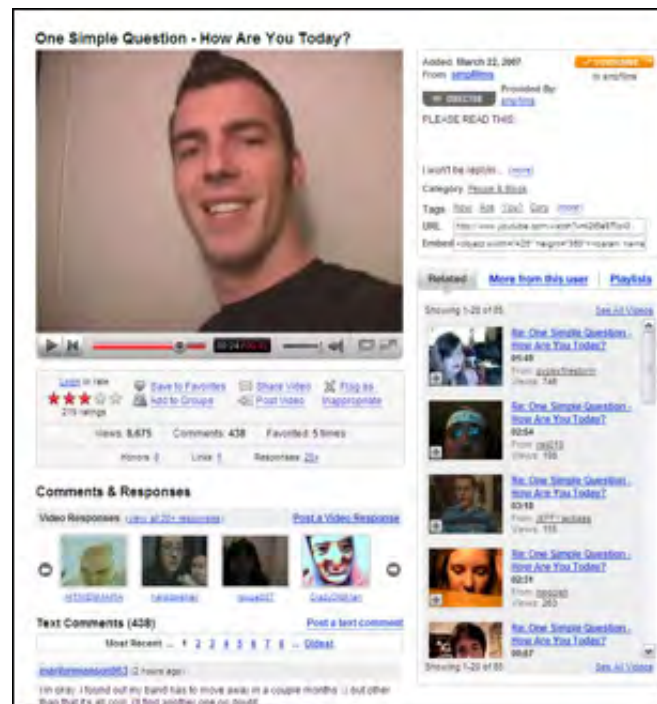

Figure 3. Screen dump from *YouTube*, 2007

This form of interaction, social networking and visual self presentation is of course – in the technological sense – something new. But while Castells and Jenkins surely have identified further intensified developments within the fields of social movements and participation, Benjamin had already written that "(t)he greatly increased mass of participants has produced a change in the mode of participation" ("Work of Art" XV). An "increasing number of readers" are becoming "writers" as "the distinction between author and public is about to lose its basic character" ("Work of Art" X). Already some fifty years earlier than theorists of late modern identities such as Bauman and Vecchi, and long before reality-TV, Benjamin recognised the beginnings of a changeover where actors "are not actors in our sense but people who portray themselves" ("Work of Art" X). The reflexive identity project, which is said by Giddens and others to be characteristic of late modern life strategies, is present in Benjamin's descriptions of high modernity's *flâneur*. He is fascinated by "the possibilities of entering into appearance," and

"is always in full possession of his individuality" (*Arcades* M1a,1; M6,5). This is partly connected to his will to interact, but mainly to a narcissistic and exhibitionistic culture. In Benjamin's day he was, by some, called a "dandy" (cf. Garelick). The corresponding social type of the present day could be the "metrosexual" (cf. Flocker). Benjamin writes of the *flâneur* wanting "to sell himself," "display himself" and exhibit his "use value" – a value which, when it comes to society's visual aspects, is moving from "the cult value" to "the exhibition value" ("Work of Art" IV; V; *Arcades* M16,4). This process is accentuated as communication technologies develop:

> It is easier to exhibit a portrait bust that can be sent here and there than to exhibit the statue of a divinity that has its fixed place in the interior of a temple ("Work of Art" V).
>
> . . .
>
> But now the reflected image has become separable, transportable. And where is it transported? Before the public ("Work of Art" X).

(d) The proximity/distance paradox

Patterns of simultaneous proximity and distance – such as those addressed by Simmel – are of course also notable in online communities. This raises the interesting question of how trust and intimacy is established in communication over the internet, since this is a medium which still provides its users with rather limited social clues as compared to face-to-face meetings. Some internet researchers – such as Henderson and Gilding – have concluded that the specific characteristics of the web (non-simultaneousness and lack of social clues) seem to promote rather than undermine intimacy. Howard Rheingold in fact stated in *The Virtual Community* that neither the potential anonymity of the web nor the possibilities of fraud seems to prevent strong relations of friendship from being founded in this context:

> You can be fooled about people in cyberspace, behind the cloak of words. But that can be said about telephones or face-to-face communication as well; computer-mediated communications provide new ways to fool people, and the most obvious identity swindles will die out only when enough people learn to use the medium critically. In some ways, the medium will, by its nature, be forever biased toward certain kinds of obfuscation. It will also be a place that people often end up revealing themselves far more intimately than they would be inclined to do without the intermediation of screens and pseudonyms. (27).

This is highly reminiscent of Simmel's writing on *The Stranger* – the wandering "other" who is near and far at the same time and who therefore "often receives the most surprising revelations and confidences" (145). This also rings in unison with Giddens's concept of the pure relationship (cf. *Intimacy*), which to him is the late modern man's way of handling the ontologic security risk typical of the present day (cf. *Consequences*). The proximity/distance paradox is also addressed by Benjamin, who was obviously influenced by Simmel ("Arcades" M17,2). Quoting Adolf Schmidt, he writes on how it is "almost impossible to summon and maintain good moral character in a thickly massed population where each individual, unbeknownst to all the others, hides in the crowd, so to speak, and blushes before the eyes of no one" (*Arcades* M1,6), and citing Baudelaire: "The spectator is a *prince* who everywhere rejoices in his incognito [and] enters into the crowd as though it were an immense reservoir of electric energy" (*Arcades* M14a,1). Benjamin's *flâneur* is clearly in a contradictory position, similar to that of the web surfer described by Rheingold above: on the one hand hiding behind "screens" and "pseudonyms,", while on the other, revealing and exposing himself: "Dialectic of flânerie: on one side, the man who feels himself viewed by all and sundry as a true suspect and, on the other side, the man who is utterly undiscoverable, the hidden man" (*Arcades* M2,8). Much like Giddens, Benjamin identifies the need of man to handle the ecstasy of communication, the information overload, by building what Giddens calls "pure

relationships". That is, relationships based on extreme openness, nearness and intimacy. Benjamin writes of this in terms of "the desire of contemporary masses to bring things 'closer' spatially and humanly" ("Work of Art" III).

IV. Coming full circle

This paper has promoted a sceptical view of the idea that the advent and constant sophistication of information technology is connected by necessity to a major historical break, a "revolution" or the "genesis of a new world." I have referred to theorists of the information society, and of both high- and late- as well as post modernity, in order to show that their analyses are in fact – in spite of the differences in terminology and framing – similar on many points. They all describe how ongoing processes of social and cultural change demand that the individual come to terms with new modes of communication and new patterns of interaction by developing and resorting to various strategies. It can be concluded that Benjamin's concept of the *flâneur* – if updated in some respects – is highly useful for describing and understanding the particular forms of communication and subjectivity that characterise the virtual communities and contexts of today.

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