

Pixels, Decenteredness, Marketization, Totalism, and Ingmar Bergman's Cry For Help

Richard Brosio
Ball State University

In the first part of his paper Marshall explains how the educational reform he criticizes is weak in terms of epistemological grounding. He rightly condemns an instrumental and vulgar pragmatism that focuses on “how to” instead of a more profound and holistic attempt to relate wise goals and the means to achieve them. Marshall is courageous to insist we can know *that* as opposed to mere knowing *how*, in spite of the fact that the human condition does not feature a direct access to certainty. This rampant “how to-ism” is the bane of all too many teacher education programs; moreover, this uncritical instrumentalism prepares the ground for capitalism’s reproductive use of the schools instead of educating for responsible citizenship. Although leftists are correct to point out the dangers of foundationalism and essentialism, it must also be realized that if epistemology is an affair of radical subjectivism as well as of a destructive relativism, then there will be no cognitive place upon which to ground oppositional politics against the new world order of global capitalism. There will likely occur a continued reduction of cognitive powers to expertise utilized to serve one’s bosses and/or alleged betters.

It seems obvious that the concentration on information instead of knowledge is also useful to a consumer society wherein the putatively sovereign shopper decides upon the attractiveness of products, as if such a choice were an adequate substitute for bona fide democratic participation. The so-called democracy of the “free” market features the bastardized citizen who is equated with consumer “choice”; although what is offered in the market is seldom central to her/his authentic needs. It is clear that hidden persuasion is comparatively easy to achieve in a sound-bite, contextless parade of consuming images thrust before us on the electronic media.

Marshall is correct to problematize the rapidly developing computerization and information technologies that are becoming ubiquitous throughout the globe. He has a hunch that this technology may be more useful to the forces of capital, the bosses, and the class state than to the “‘Luddite cropper, the “obsolete” hand-loom weaver, the “utopian” artisan’ who E.P. Thompson sought to rescue ‘from the enormous condescension of posterity.’”¹ Marshall knows that the displaced worker of capitalism’s latest gale of Schumpeterian “creative” destruction is related to those who Thompson tried to rescue. David Noble has written that in the wake of the information revolution, many

people are now working harder and longer...under worsening...conditions...with...less benefits, and less pay. The technology has been developed and used to deskill and discipline the workforce in a global speed-up of unprecedented proportions. And those still working are the lucky ones. For the technology has been designed above all to displace.²

Marshall’s treatment of “Other Philosophical Issues” can be showcased with help from Marshall McLuhan, who has written: “Technological environments are

not merely passive containers of people but are active processes that reshape people and other technologies alike...the sudden shift from the mechanical...to the technology of electric circuitry represents one of the major shifts of all historical time.”³ This may be true; however, analyses of major technological changes of the type McLuhan seeks to provide are more helpful if conducted with one eye open to forms of power: economic, political, racial, and gender. McLuhan writes: “The mark of our time [1964] is its revulsion against imposed patterns. We are suddenly eager to have things and people declare their beings totally.”⁴ Perhaps. However, Jim Marshall is right to remind us that “knowledge should not be dissociated from power”; moreover, he sees that the declarations of one’s being, or “telling the truth one knows oneself” are often subsumed under the market logic of consumer capital where cries from the heart, letting one’s hair down, telling all, are sucked into the vortex of a postmodernist superstore where nearly all of one’s fears, anxieties, and hopes can be meretriciously satisfied through consumption. The alleged sovereign consumer (who has enough tickets to ride) extends her/his choice-making powers beyond the physicality of the modern market to the virtual reality of cyberspace. In this frenetic world of time-space compression, the *vox populi* becomes all too often the voice of individuals who have been miseducated to believe that their bona fide needs and desires are available in the multiplex, quasi-total spaces controlled by the agents of late capitalism. The choices are many, but remain within the one-dimensionality of the regime of capital, featuring the class-state as gendarme.

Marshall suggests that the kinds of communication technologies we use have consequences in terms of truth claims and authority. I wish that he had told us more about how electronic communication renders legitimate authority structures more tenuous; therefore, let us develop these “medium may be the message” assertions further. McLuhan argues that the linear logic of print technology serves authority better than the simultaneous logic of television; however, the logic of consumer capitalism may make problematic McLuhan’s claims/hopes for the anti-authoritarianism he favors. For example, Mark Crispin Miller argues that

the specific danger which television — within capitalist hegemony — poses for democracy is its ability to appear as the viewer’s ally....” TV co-opts the smirking disbelief which so annoyed the business titans of the thirties [when their billboards stood in stark juxtaposition to grimy Depression scenes]....TV protects its ads from mockery by doing all the mocking....The postmodern viewer is street-smart and ad-wise: s/he can decode everything while being protected by ironic detachment.⁵

In part three, Marshall’s periodization of symbolic exchange takes us to the present which is characterized by electronically mediated exchanges, simulation, and a decentered self featuring multiple identities. He deserves two cheers for asserting that the third period is not more progressive than oral and print exchange. However, because I am not convinced by Marshall’s arguments that the electronic texts’ alterability is central to his excellent point that we do suffer from a loss of referents in our use of language and other signs, I wish to present a friendly addendum to his analysis. Marshall’s desire to have thoughts, words, arguments, and symbols be interpretive of, and/or in some ascertainable reference to, what is more solid and historical than just feelings is central to our historical attempt to go beyond

subjectivity and on to the possibility for warranted assertibility. However, the reasons for our difficulties go beyond the present dominant methods of symbolic exchange.

The undoing of the Aquinian synthesis, the rise of scientific description, and the decline of organized religion's secular power were all imbricated in the materiality from which an unprecedented economic regime developed — one that increasingly influenced Western, and then global, social and cultural histories. Marshall Berman has argued that Marx located, within the quotidian functions of the market, most of the dynamic, measureless, and anarchic phenomena that many others attributed to God's death and the alleged ensuing nihilism.⁶ David Harvey has argued that the present period of capitalist development — one characterized in part by a hyper-round of time-space compression in pursuit of greater profitability — is not a radical break from historical capitalist development. The extension of capital's power over cultural production has been assisted greatly by the invention and use of electronic information technologies of which Marshall speaks. In Harvey's view, much of the postmodernist response to capitalist development is simply "the commercialization and domestication of modernism, and a reduction of the latter's...aspirations to a *laissez-faire*, 'anything goes' market eclecticism."⁷ He thinks such eclecticism integrates with a politics of subtle control over those who are not well-served by the victory of the market. As John McGowan has written (drawing on Fredric Jameson's analysis of late capitalism):

Postmodern culture with its endless projection of disconnected, decontextualized images, breaks down the systematic underpinnings of meaning....[In Jameson's words:] "If...the subject has lost its capacity ...to extend...across the temporal manifold, and to organize its past and future into coherent experience, it becomes difficult enough to see how the cultural productions of such a subject could result in anything but 'heaps of fragments.'"⁸

So, it is not just the alterability of electronic texts per se, but the use of technology within a certain regime which should be examined further.

I think that our educational-political challenge is to collectively construct a "big-picture" understanding of a very big series of pictures, but not necessarily a random series. We must continue to construct portrayals that help us understand the only totalizing phenomenon in the world — namely capitalism. Adorno has argued that we live in a time of nominalism; however, he and his colleagues were convinced that the historical task of philosophy (as contrasted to apologia) is to describe the most general and ultimate ground of being. In my view, "Critical Theory is [best] used to confront a given society in terms of how it became what it is and how it could have (or should have) developed differently. Such reflection is...judgment."⁹ During this acquiescent historical period it is of great importance to keep our commitment to understanding enough about the complex whole in order to move bona fide democratic projects forward — even without Archimedes' lever.

Marshall understands well the need to establish middle ground between the obvious lack of certainty that is central to the human condition and the tendency to submit to the most dangerous kinds of relativism and nihilism in the absence of such certainty. I hope that he appreciates the following story. When one of Ingmar

Bergman's characters disappears into the grainy dots of the film itself, one may wonder why the director chose this technique to represent decenteredness and even the destruction of the historical actor. My surmise is that his cinematic warning and/or cry for help did not indict the medium but instead the broader historical plight of human beings, including the use and/or misuse of information technologies by specific actors.

-
1. Harvey J. Kaye, *The British Marxist Historians* (Cambridge, U.K.: Polity Press, 1984), 173.
 2. David Noble, "The Truth About the Information Highway," *Monthly Review* 47, no. 2 (June 1995): 50.
 3. Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962), prologue.
 4. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (New York: Signet Books, 1964), 21.
 5. Richard Brosio, "Review of Mark Crispin Miller: *Boxed In: The Culture of TV*," *Educational Studies* 21, no. 1 (Spring 1990): 52.
 6. Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), passim.
 7. David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford and Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1980), 42.
 8. John McGowan, *Postmodernism and Its Critics* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991), 156.
 9. Richard A. Brosio, *A Radical Democratic Critique of Capitalist Education* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1994), 608.