

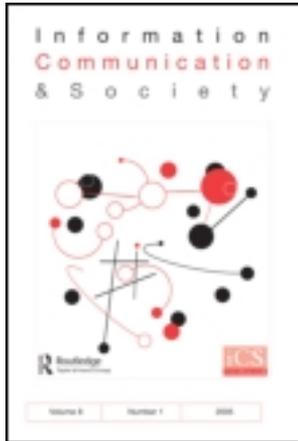
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READING WALTER BENJAMIN AND DONNA HARAWAY IN THE AGE OF DIGITAL REPRODUCTION

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Abstract

Walter Benjamin's 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' has much to offer contemporary analyses of the 'Information Age'. This article re-reads this famous essay in light of a later intervention by Donna Haraway, 'A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s'. There are strong parallels and overlaps between these two groundbreaking pieces, despite their many differences. Both deal with how their respective generations of 'new' information and communication technologies (ICTs) are intertwined with broader sociocultural and political economic change. Both apply controversial, Marxian, theoretical insights to changes in the mode of (re)production in their analyses of techno-economic change that herald both negative and positive political possibilities. This article takes Benjamin and Haraway in turn, their lives and their work in general and these two essays in particular. It concludes with a brief discussion on how Benjamin's and Haraway's optimistic takes on technological change – as political opportunity, despite less than optimal tendencies in the political economic and technical apparatus of their respective ages – can contribute to fleshing out theory and research on ICTs. And to do so without lurching between the positions of extreme pessimism or optimism that characterize the debates to date.

Keywords

art, mechanical reproduction, aura, tradition, cyborg, feminist theory, Frankfurt School, information and communication technologies

1. INTRODUCTION

During long periods of history, the mode of human sense perception changes with humanity's entire mode of existence. The manner in which human sense perception is organised, the medium in which it is accomplished, is determined not only by nature but by historical circumstances as well.

(Benjamin 1973: 216)

Late twentieth-century machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed, and many other

distinctions that used to apply to organisms and machines. Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves are frighteningly inert. . . . Modern machines are quintessentially microelectronic devices: they are everywhere and they are invisible. . . . Writing, power and technology are old partners in Western stories of the origin of civilization, but miniaturization has changed our experience of the mechanism.

(Haraway 1990: 194, 195)

Information and communication technologies (ICTs), the current rubric for the microelectronic – digital – composition of many consumer goods, media and telecommunications, (personal) computing, and information exchange, are now firmly embedded in hi-tech industrialized societies (Castells 1996: 31, n. 11; Jordan 1999; Spiller 2002: 6–21). The Internet/World Wide Web arguably encapsulate these infrastructural, technical, and political economic processes to date (Maresch and Rötzer 2002: 7 *passim*). ICTs have also become increasingly prevalent in cultural life, the arts, and all but indispensable to the (mass) entertainment industries (Mansell and Silverstone 1996; Cubitt 1998; McChesney *et al.* 1998; Freyermuth 2002). Museums, art galleries, the media, and educational institutions, all recognize how digital (re)production impacts upon the cultural and intellectual realms. The jury is still out, however, as to what the qualitative – aesthetic – properties of latter-day digital technologies and the art forms they facilitate exactly entail, let alone their impact on ongoing debates over ‘what is art?’ And the complex relationship between profit-making, the circulation and (re)production of works of art, the public and/or private persona of the artist-as-creator and ICTs *tout court* simply underscores the political and economic dimensions to these debates in what could be called the ‘age of digital reproduction’.

Similar sorts of questions were being raised at the turn of the twentieth century as large-scale industrialization and new forms of mechanical (re)production – photography and film especially – were making inroads into the cultural, political and economic realms of Western societies. Their own more recent digitalization notwithstanding, photography and film are now recognized art genres in their own right. They are also intertwined in ‘popular culture’ and the media.¹ But this was not the case a century ago. When compared with painting and sculpture, the new photographic techniques could create uncannily ‘real’ images all but instantaneously, with techniques that were much more accessible. Moreover, these (re)productions could be distributed at a much higher rate than hitherto. Film took these properties even further to a wider audience. The early twentieth century was also marked by mass left-wing and right-wing political movements, the rise of powerful industrial–military complexes, economic precariousness and political unrest. Little wonder perhaps that photography and film were not

greeted with open arms by the cultural and intellectual gatekeepers of the age. Aesthetic criteria aside, their social and political implications were hotly debated. For whilst this interaction between technological, sociocultural and political economic change was apparent, it was also extremely difficult to untangle. Then, as has been the case with arguments about television, video 'nasties', 'virtual reality' computer games and now the Internet, commentaries were split along political ideological lines, socio-economic divisions, cultural and aesthetic sensibilities.

Even more reason, then, to revisit two landmark essays that tackle head-on the way technological change, politics, economics and culture interact: 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1935–9) by Walter Benjamin² and 'A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s' (1985/1990) by Donna Haraway.³ Written 50 years apart, both have become cult classics. Benjamin's famous reflection on art and mechanical reproducibility in the face of Fascism on the one hand and the emergent consumerist ethos on the other, was – and still is – a source for subsequent debates on the political import of techno-cultural change (see Roberts 1982; Best and Kellner 1991). His essentially up-beat analysis of popular film as a challenge to aesthetic and political traditions is also a permanent fixture on philosophy, cultural studies, art history and technology studies literature lists. In the 1980s, with the rise of 'post-industrial' hi-tech 'knowledge economies' and neoliberal economic orthodoxy, Donna Haraway's equally idiosyncratic analysis of the human body–machine relationship as a 'cybernetic' crossover explicitly challenges prevailing Cartesian dualisms, and psychological investment in the dream of organic unity (Haraway 1990: 198–202), in both Marxist and Feminist circles. The Cyborg Manifesto sets out a radical – cyborg – response to exploitative gender–power relations emerging under neoliberal global restructuring (Pettman 1996; Runyan 1996: 238; McMichael 2000). It has ensured her a place as a key theorist of cyber(netic) cultural politics. The Benjamin and Haraway essays now appear regularly together in burgeoning literature lists that deal with the interaction between technology, culture and politics.⁴

There are several other reasons for examining these two essays together. First is their authors' shared affiliation to Marxian critiques of the capitalist mode of production (seen as an exploitative social relationship and a contestable political economic system); Frankfurt School Critical Theory in the first instance and Marxist/Socialist Feminism in the second (Jaggar 1983; Devetak 1999). Both Haraway and Benjamin are interested in the emancipatory attributes of their respective generation of ICTs for marginalized groups. Both acknowledge the flip-side though; that mechanical/digital reproducibility also become enmeshed

in new (exploitative) productive forces, new and old forms of social and political economic alienation. The second reason is their interdisciplinary method and conscious subversion of ingrained scholarly boundaries. Both take an approach that looks at the material – technical, sociocultural-symbolic and political economic power dimensions to the respective technologies as problematically co-constituted (see Harding 1998); as sites of cultural contestation; of complex gender–power relations. In this respect both essays draw on an eclectic range of literary, cultural and theoretical frameworks in making their argument against reified political and cultural analyses (see Callon and Latour 1981: 286). In other words, Benjamin and Haraway share ‘an awareness of both the factuality of the objective world and its contents and the actuality of subjective human interaction with that objective world’ (Leslie 2000: xii).

A third reason is the respective timing of these two reflections, which points to both important overlaps and differences between them (see below). Both appeared at political economic cusps and accompanying moments of intense techno-political shifts. In Benjamin’s case, the burgeoning struggle between Fascism, Communism and Capitalism in the 1930s vis-à-vis photography and film as ‘mass’ media and Fordist manufacturing (Bernard 1999). And the predominance of neoliberal thought, decline of the Welfare State, immanent demise of the Eastern Bloc and the popular uptake of the Internet/World Wide Web in Haraway’s case. Both were writing for their times, address key issues of the day yet manage to speak well beyond their apparent use-by dates. In that respect, both essays were written as think-pieces on behalf of groups who stand to gain, even as they look to be losing out, under these new conditions. Each takes their distance from the official position on the technology-versus-culture debate of their respective political and intellectual milieus; Frankfurt School critiques of popular culture and concomitant Marxist/Feminist ontological investment in organic holisms, respectively. Both are addressing an audience that is found wanting in its ability to think ‘outside the box’ on the one hand and intellectual and cultural elites that seek to maintain the status quo on the other. Neither have any truck with reified concepts or intellectual–ideological posturing vis-à-vis the new or in defence of the old.

Along with these substantive overlaps there are stylistic and formal features in common; the looser, more episodic essay form; an eclectic and compact style that alternates between precise analysis and passionate language; a mixing of complex philosophical analysis and unabashed pleasure at the way the other more visceral – tactile – dimensions of mechanical/digital reproduction work at the conscious and unconscious levels of changes in ‘human perception’ (Benjamin 1973: 216) or images/fictions of ‘both imagination and material reality’ (Haraway

1990: 191). Finally, such a juxtaposition acknowledges both Benjamin's use of this device as part of his critical method (Arendt 1973: 51–3; Best and Kellner 1991: 227) and Haraway's search for 'fruitful couplings' (Haraway 1990: 191) that can counter a 'hardening of the categories' (Haraway 1997b) in a time increasingly characterized by 'theorised and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism' (Haraway 1990: 191).

This article proceeds as follows: Section 2 consists of basic biographical details on Benjamin and Haraway and the key historical and intellectual issues surrounding the writing and production of these essays. Section 3 juxtaposes the two works. This 'conversations' section takes Walter Benjamin as the historical and intellectual reference point mainly because Donna Haraway, like many of the successive Marxist/Feminist generations, is beholden to Benjamin's theoretical legacy, in his own right and as a founding member of Frankfurt School Critical Theory (Franklin 2003). The article concludes with a brief discussion on how reading Benjamin and Haraway in tandem can contribute to theory and research into (re-)thinking the 'Information Age'. Following their cue, I argue for (re)definitions of technology, art and politics that can recognize the fraught relationship between them – as spheres of action, material and myth-making practices and (re)productions of 'real life' – without recourse to essentialist explanatory frameworks, aesthetic conventions and hierarchies of good taste (Benjamin 1973: 217–18; Haraway 1990: 223).

2. BENJAMIN AND HARAWAY IN CONTEXT

2.1. Walter Benjamin

Biographical Note

Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) was born in Berlin, Germany, into a 'wealthy run-of-the-mill assimilated Jewish family' (Arendt 1973: 33; Jay 1973: 199; Roberts 1982; Wolin 1994). He came of age during the Weimar Republic before settling in Paris in the 1930s as a political refugee from the Nazi regime. The historical record is patchy but apparently he earned his living, supported a wife and family until his divorce in 1930 and a passion for book collecting, from a combination of journal and newspaper publications, a stipend from the Frankfurt School, and by other 'private means', most likely his father who was an art dealer and antiquarian.

The longevity and extent of Walter Benjamin's posthumous fame and influence

is in inverse proportion to the relative brevity of his life and the even shorter time-span of his academic and publishing output (Roberts 1982: 1–3). His writing career in Weimar – and then Nazi – Germany and France spanned but a decade (Arendt 1973: 7). His early academic record was chequered, to say the least, in that a mixture of ‘bungling and bad luck’ (op. cit.: 14) dogged the reception of his scholarly research, effectively preventing him from establishing a university career (Jay 1973: 203–4); his two research monographs were famously misunderstood at the time.⁵ It was not until 15 years after his death, with the publication of his collected works and correspondence that his influence began to spread (Ferris 1996; Weigel 1997; Benjamin and Osborne 2000; Leslie 2000); an influence that is reflected in a vast amount of secondary literature on Benjamin-related themes.

Perhaps the best-known biographical detail of Benjamin’s life is how it ended; on the Franco-Spanish border in September 1940. He was uneasily awaiting a US visa having fled Germany and then France from Nazi persecution (Arendt 1973: 23–4; see Jay 1973: 197–8). Apparently, Benjamin mistakenly believed that he would be quite unable to obtain the necessary papers and expecting to be sent back to Nazi Germany after being stopped at the Spanish border, he chose to kill himself. The historical and intellectual repercussions of this personal choice have not gone unacknowledged by later commentators (Arendt 1973: 7; see Jay 1973: 198).

A crucial aspect to Walter Benjamin’s intellectual legacy is his role as co-founder of Critical Theory, the body of Marxist and Freudian-influenced theory and research based at the University of Frankfurt – the Frankfurt School as it is now known. His contribution to Critical Theory, and his close, albeit stormy, intellectual relationship with the doyens of the early Frankfurt School, Adorno and Horkheimer, is still the subject of much debate (Arendt 1973: 16; Jay 1973: 198–9; Best and Kellner 1991: 219, 223). Even within this group of maverick Marxist intellectuals, Benjamin was ‘probably the most peculiar Marxist ever produced by this movement, which God knows had its full share of oddities’ (Arendt 1973: 16–17; Leslie 2000: viii). He was involved in the Communist movement – he visited the Soviet Union – and Zionist activism at the same time (op. cit.: 39; Jay 1973: 200–1); dreamt of publishing a work made up entirely of quotations in a pre-Postmodern age (see Huysen 1990; Nicholson 1994), wrote (famously) about Goethe, Proust, Baudelaire, and Kafka; art and aesthetics, architecture and cities; translation; philosophy of history; book collecting, wandering about the city, and technological change.

Historical and Intellectual Issues

To recall; the historical period in which Benjamin was writing was the lead-up to the Second World War; a period of 'mass movements' (Benjamin 1973: 215) in which Fascism gained a firm foothold in Western Europe. On the other side of the Atlantic, mechanized manufacturing assembly lines, now known as the Fordist mode of production, were hustling in the consumer society. Along with the arrival of popular film came other forms of 'mass media' such as glossy magazines, newsreels (an important vehicle for wartime propaganda), and the 'great historical films' of the Soviet Union (Benjamin 1973: 215). Benjamin, taking his cue from the Frankfurt School's suspicion of the belief that 'a technologically advanced society automatically embodied freedom and progress' (Best and Kellner 1991: 219), combined this with a Brechtian understanding of art – and theatre – as a politicized and empowering form of expression for the common person (Benjamin 1973: 239, n. 9).

When it comes to putting the Artwork Essay into its intellectual context, a lot boils down to Benjamin's aforementioned fraught relationship with Adorno and Horkheimer who not only financially supported him from the mid-1930s but also edited and published his work (Jay 1973: 210–11; Roberts 1982: 70; Wolin 1994: 163 *passim*; Leslie 2000: 130–1). The Artwork Essay's progression through various drafts and editing exigencies for its publication in German, French and then English illustrates these tensions – philosophical, political and, no doubt, personal – between Adorno, and to a lesser extent Horkheimer. They were to criticize Benjamin for not being 'dialectical' enough, amongst other things (Jay 1973: 197 *passim*; Roberts 1982: 66 *passim*; Best and Kellner 1991: 217 *passim*). With respect to this essay's use of 'crude' historical materialist terminology and the political exigencies of publishing in the USA (Jay 1973: 205; Roberts 1982: 153 *passim*), the sticking point for his two colleagues (who were at once his fans, mentors and editors) was that Benjamin was being way too optimistic about the revolutionary potential of mechanical reproduction to change the power relations of capitalism (at any level) and too enamoured with popular culture. He was seen to be too 'uncritical' about the political savvy of the 'masses' either under the sway of Fascist propaganda and political mobilization or as 'absent-minded' (Benjamin 1973: 234) consumers of the capitalist 'culture industries'. This difference was deeply felt for what Adorno and Horkheimer feared was that

mass art had a new political function diametrically opposed to its traditionally 'negative' one; art in the age of mechanical reproduction served to reconcile the mass audience to the status quo. Here, Benjamin disagreed . . . he paradoxically [*sic*] held out hope for the progressive potential of politicised, collectivised art.

(Jay 1973: 211)

This difference of opinion, approach, and taste, is still echoed today in many analyses of politics, culture and technology from successors of the Frankfurt School and beyond. In this respect, several aspects of Benjamin's take on this issue need to be delineated.

Right from the outset, Benjamin does not treat 'art' and 'technology' as mutually exclusive domains; of creative endeavour on the one hand and 'nuts 'n' bolts' on the other. Both have material characteristics, aesthetic properties, and 'social significance' (see Leslie 2000: xii). Nonetheless, the material properties of new techniques of (mechanical) reproduction do have an impact on creative processes. In doing so, they have the potential to challenge the political and cultural status quo.

The second thing to notice in Benjamin's approach is his double treatment of the political economic–power relationship: these new technical attributes have the potential to enable empowering change in societies marked by economic and social divisions. They can also dis-empower, which is why examining the relationship between the arts and technological change means raising political as well as cultural questions. For he was also well aware of the new forms of socio-economic exclusion developing with the rise of the consumer society, manufacturing assembly lines and increasing commodity fetishism in non-Fascist societies.

Another element is Benjamin's admiration for the early political and technological successes of the Soviet Union. The (assumed) benefit of hindsight after the Stalinist era and the demise of the Communist Bloc in the late 1980s notwithstanding, this political stance does not diminish the power of his radical questioning of assumptions about 'authentic' art and political practice. He argues that new reproductive techniques can – indeed they should – emancipate art from the stifling reign of the style police, on the one hand, and that their creative potential be used to alleviate the alienated labour relations underpinning capitalist economies on the other (Benjamin 1973: 218). Relative to his contemporaries' dismissive attitude to the aesthetic and/or social value of the new 'culture industries' (see above), this is an optimistic approach.

A final point to note is the relationship between Benjamin's work as a whole and the enormous amount of Benjamin-related literature. The *Artwork Essay* can be read in its own right in that one need not be a Benjamin buff to be able to engage with what he has to say.⁶ But it is also a complex argument with many layers and recapitulations, and much more than a quaint example of early technological determinism and/or naive political idealism (Benjamin 1973: 215). As Benjamin acerbically notes, changes in the arts and technology are not impervious to capitalist Research and Development agendas or totalitarian political

ideologies. But neither are they untouched by their appropriation by – and for – ordinary people.

2.2. Donna Haraway

Biographical Note

Alive and well, and living in California, USA, Donna Haraway has been making an important contribution to theorizing ‘people’s love/hate relationship with machines’ (Kunzru 1997: 1/7) from a feminist/marxian/postmodernist perspective since the 1980s at least.⁷ Like Benjamin, Haraway’s interests and references are eclectic and her work difficult to classify. What is clear is her continual movement between the ‘hard’ sciences, the social sciences and humanities. She excels in crossing and blurring historically and economically constructed boundaries between science and technology, culture and politics by her ‘interweaving of the academic, the popular and the commercial in illuminating how we come to think our place in the economy of nature’ (Young 1992: 9 WWW).

Born in Denver in 1944 and educated in Catholic schools, she majored in zoology and philosophy with a large dose of English. Her PhD in Biology was an historical study of metaphors in twentieth-century developmental biology; a mix of culture, politics and ‘hard’ science from the outset. Unlike Benjamin, she has pursued an academic career, which has taken her from Yale to Johns Hopkins University, the University of Hawaii, and then to the University of California at Santa Cruz where she has been Professor of the History of Consciousness since 1980. This Ivy-League pedigree does not go unacknowledged as she is more than

conscious of the odd perspective provided by my historical position – a PhD in biology for an Irish Catholic girl was made possible by Sputnik’s impact on US national science-education policy. I have a body and mind as much constructed by the post-World War II arms race and cold war as by women’s movements.

(Haraway 1990: 215)

Haraway’s political consciousness was forged in the 1960s–70s; a period of anti-Vietnam protests, civil rights, gay liberation and women’s rights. Once married to a prominent gay rights activist, Jaye Miller, and long-time member of a commune, she has eschewed a number of social conventions as well as intellectual etiquette. Hence she prefers to be called a ‘cyborg’, rather than a ‘cyberfeminist’,

a 'neo-marxist' or a 'postmodernist' (Haraway 1990: 194, 199, 1997b). Her point is that all these epithets indicate contested, shifting and situated domains of knowledge production (Haraway 1997b). There is no (racialized, sexual or gendered) body that is a priori 'natural' (Haraway 1997a) just as technology (as instrument, knowledge, systems) is not 'neutral'. For Haraway, humans are 'inside of what we make, and its inside of us. We're living in a world of connections – and it matters which ones get made and unmade' (quoted in Kunzru 1997: 5/7).

Writing from out of the Marxian and Feminist traditions of social theory and cultural critique (Jaggar 1983; Leonard 1990), she strives to avoid the excesses of both 'techno-utopians . . . (and) . . . the "knee-jerk techno-phobia" of most feminist politics' (Kunzru 1997: 3/7). This stance characterizes her choice of subject matter, inter-textual comparative method, and terminology. The effect is a style that

sets new standards for sheer immersion in the texture of the history of ideas, institutions, research traditions, individuals' reflections in themselves. It is exhausting to read, and her style makes no concessions to mellifluous cadences, yet it is very, very exhilarating. It is 'too much' in the best sense.

(Young 1992: 9 WWW)

Whilst not everyone would agree with the above assessment, seeing in Haraway's approach more evidence of 'postmodern' indulgence than critical rigour, many others acknowledge her ability to upset intellectual and political taboos, from within the Left/Feminist traditions particularly (see Mentor 1994: 7–10/12). The point about Haraway, as with Benjamin in his time, is that she is looking to re-construct a politics of engagement that empowers disadvantaged, dispossessed groups in the face of emergent techno-economic structures of domination (Benjamin 1973: 234–5; Haraway 1990: 199, 203, 1997b). Haraway writes out of a conviction that, despite apparent failure and paralysis for

me – and for many who share a similar historical location in white, professional, middle-class, female, radical, North American, mid-adult bodies . . . [there are] . . . grounds for hope by focusing on the contradictory effects of politics designed to produce loyal American technocrats, which as well produced large numbers of dissidents, rather than focusing on the present defeats.

(Haraway 1990: 197, 215)

Like Benjamin in the face of the Fascist war machine, the Cyborg Manifesto was written at a time of deep despondency and confusion in the Left in the face of neoliberalism's political and economic inroads.

Historical and Intellectual Issues

The structural relations related to the social relations of science and technology evoke strong ambivalence . . . For excellent reasons, most Marxisms see domination best and have trouble understanding what can only look like false consciousness and people's complicity in their own domination in late capitalism. *It is crucial to remember that what is lost, perhaps especially from women's point of view, is often virulent forms of oppression, nostalgically naturalised in the face of current violation.* Ambivalence toward the disrupted unities mediated by hi-tech culture requires not sorting consciousness into [dichotomous] categories . . . but subtle understanding of emerging pleasures, experiences, and powers with serious potential for changing the rules of the game.

(Haraway 1990: 214–15, emphasis added)

This statement, from the Cyborg Manifesto, echoes the times and sentiments of Walter Benjamin in more ways than one. At that time, 50 years after Benjamin published the Artwork Essay, high capacity and polluting assembly lines of heavy manufacturing were making way for 'clean' just-in-time production lines of the 'knowledge economy' and microelectronic manufacturing (Castells 1997; Bernard 1999). Computerized techniques took hold in the printing and film industries and the 'Postmodernist' critique of Western enlightenment thought began in earnest. Broad political mobilization from the Left was sagging under the effects of de-unionization and flexibilization as neoliberal macroeconomic orthodoxies sacrificed employment to monetary stability. Somewhere at the epicentre of all these complex changes (whose constitution and ramifications are by no means decided upon as yet) was the emergence of digitally integrated ICTs (or 'informatics' in the vocabulary of the time). These have come to define

an emerging system of world order analogous in its novelty and scope to that created by industrial capitalism: we are living through a movement from an organic, industrial society to a polymorphous, information system . . . from the comfortable old hierarchical dominations to the scary new networks . . . called the informatics of domination.

(Haraway 1990: 203)

The latter term and its successor (ICTs) also operate, then, as a rubric for a complex series of political economic developments in the mid-late twentieth century with all the observable sociocultural repercussions thereof (Castells 1997; McChesney *et al.* 1998; Jordan 1999; Dufour 2001). Broadly speaking, these saw the privatization of telecommunications, electricity, and water utilities, the observed convergence of the information technology, telecommunications and media industries to form mega-corporations which produce and market new consumer items 'globally' under inter/governmental regimes based on monetarist macroeconomic presumptions.

Haraway's manifesto confronts these structural shifts, and political inertia

in the face of them, directly and relentlessly. But she is also confronting another set of issues; the intellectual and theoretical consternation of many Left/Marxist scholars in the face of sophisticated and multi-faceted critiques of Western – Enlightenment – ontological benchmarks and knowledge-making that had started in the 1960s (Nicholson 1994; Best and Kellner 1991). These postmodern and/or post-structuralist challenges to incumbent theoretical frameworks and research in the academe along with concomitant developments in (postmodern) architecture and (pop) art and (science fiction) film were – and still are – either greeted with varying degrees of horror and/or inquisitiveness by the progeny of Marx and Engels, whether they be Feminist and/or Frankfurt School Critical Theorists (see Benhabib and Cornell 1987). But the rifts are still tangible. Not to put too fine a point on it, for many embracing the ‘acid tools of postmodern theory (Haraway 1990: 199) is tantamount to succumbing to’ false consciousness (op. cit.: 201–2).⁸ Haraway deals with this ideological and disciplinary conundrum as a *construction*, as yet another myth-of-meaning that relies on positing another – better – totality that dismisses the relevance of ‘partial explanations’ (op. cit.: 202). In so doing, she contends, the modernists versus postmodernists tussle for epistemological supremacy rage on in spite of significant changes in how race/ethnicity, sex/gender, mind/body, cultural and political economic life are being reconfigured in worlds ‘charged with microelectronic and biotechnological politics’ (op. cit.: 204). Although this theme is not new in Haraway’s own research and writing (see 1992, 1997b), the Cyborg Manifesto took it to meet 1980s debates in Marxist/Socialist/Feminist circles. Aided and abetted, I might add, by the prodigious reproductive and distribution attributes of ICTs – the Internet/World Wide Web in particular.⁹

I will return to some of the differences between Benjamin and Haraway’s approaches in due course. In summing up this section, a word of caution would not go amiss. Original thinkers such as Benjamin or Haraway, who buck their own status quos and who also resist easy pigeon-holing, as much by their style as by their eclecticism, can be called upon by dedicated followers of both hi-tech fetishism (see Leslie 2000) and closet sufferers of hi-tech phobia (Harvey 1989: 346 *passim*; see Spiller 2002: 11–12). Intra-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary arguments about ideological affiliation, methodological and political applicability abound when it comes to both Benjamin (Roberts 1982: 23; Leslie 2000: viii; Wolin 1994: xxi) and Haraway (Ferguson and Wicke 1994; Nicholson 1990; Young 1992). Having said that, these meta-theoretical concerns and the way both these pieces have been reproduced by their respective fans, need not deter the interested reader from reading them for herself. Both studies simply need to be read in the context

of other intellectual traditions, as well as new historical circumstances . . . The greatest disservice one could do to [these] theoretical initiatives would be to accord them the status of received wisdom, to assimilate them uncritically or wholesale. [Their] mode of thinking, both alluring and allusive, [invite] commentary and exegesis, which should not be confused with adulation.

(Wolin 1994: xxi, emphasis added)

The Artwork Essay and Cyborg Manifesto are comparable 'theoretical initiatives'. And when they are juxtaposed at the cusp of the twenty-first century, many 'fruitful couplings' can occur.

3. CONVERSATIONS

3.1. The Artwork Essay

'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' looks at the impact of rapid technological change on 'the artistic processes' in both the so-called high and low cultural realms (see Wolin 1994: 208). Or, more precisely; 'the nature of the repercussions that these two different manifestations – the reproduction of works of art and the art of the film – have had on art in its traditional form' (Benjamin 1973: 214). Benjamin argues that techniques of reproduction like photography and film herald significant changes in how industrialized societies perceive, experience, and then reproduce the world around them in general and the relationship between art (and its philosophical, economic and moral underpinnings) and society at large in particular. This new reproducibility – of a sacred image, person's face, landscape – makes a 'unique' object into one of many and then allows it to be made more readily available to many more people anywhere and at any time. Technical (non-manual) reproducibility can put 'the original in situations which would be out of reach for the original itself' (ibid.). He argues that new technical capabilities to represent, reproduce and distribute images have 'revolutionary' potential. In plotting out how the *material* attributes of film and photography challenge traditional aesthetic sensibilities, Benjamin's theoretical concern is whether or not in the 'age of mechanical reproduction . . . the very invention of photography [and film has] not transformed the entire nature of art' (op. cit.: 220). His answer is 'yes, it has'. This transformation has implications for contemporary and future politics. Given the moribund state of Art and Theatre at the time (op. cit.: 214–15) this is a historical moment that contains potential for more egalitarian and empowering forms of cultural and artistic expression.

This shift 'represents something new' (op. cit.: 212) in that it heralds the

collapse of long-held hierarchies between 'high' and 'low' culture, art lovers and the general public (the 'masses') by upsetting the relationship between the authority vested in an 'authentic' work of art and concomitant assumptions about the role of 'tradition' in providing this authority (op. cit.: 215).

Upsetting this particular apple-cart has a profound effect on not only the business (in every sense of the term) of art(istic) production and reproduction, transmission and reception but also on the very nature of 'art'. The upshot is 'that which withers away in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art' (ibid.; see Jay 1973: 210; Gasché 2000: 184).¹⁰ For Benjamin, the 'most powerful agent' for this breakaway is film. But this is also a double-edged sword as the very elements that make film-making and film-watching so particular, so fascinating and so politically potent can be exploited by both Fascist and Capitalist agendas alike.

In his analysis of how photography and film actually operate, Benjamin goes on to examine how changes in perception also constitute (changes in) spatial relations; or rather, assumptions and habits about what spatial relations mean. Distance versus proximity for instance (op. cit.: 216). Some of these dynamics are partly down to the 'increasing significance of the masses in contemporary life' (ibid.) who want to get closer to things 'spatially and humanly' (op. cit.: 217) anyway and so rejoice in having access 'to an object at very close range by way of its likeness' (ibid.).

Whether seeing the 'real thing' with the 'the unarmed eye' (ibid.) is superior to seeing it as a reproduction is closely related to the power invested in the tradition of uniqueness (see McCole 1993; Lesley 2000).¹¹ For Benjamin, tradition is far from static, however. It is 'thoroughly alive and extremely changeable' (op. cit.: 217). Following the spirit of the Frankfurt School (see Best and Kellner 1991: 215 *passim*), Benjamin argues that there is nothing inherent in the 'unique value of the "authentic" work of art' beyond its basis 'in the service of ritual' (op. cit.: 217). The gatekeepers (secular and religious) of these rituals (cultural and political) to the 'first truly revolutionary means of reproduction, photography' (op. cit.: 218) in the preceding century tried to maintain their power over what is/is not 'art'. Benjamin argues that such reactions simply underscore how for the

first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual. To an ever greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility . . . [The] instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice – politics.

(ibid.)

In the main body of the essay, Benjamin alternates between the history of art – from painting, to photography, to the cinema, the changing relationships between artist, gatekeepers, and the public, and the specifics of film-making techniques. The ‘mechanical reproduction of art [changes] the reaction of the masses toward art’ and in doing so underscores the sharp ‘distinction between criticism and enjoyment by the public’ (op. cit.: 227). The latter is a ‘progressive reaction’ in that traditional art and art criticism (destined for the few by the few) have become far removed from ‘the critical and receptive attitudes of the public’ (ibid.). New art forms should be judged according to their ‘social significance’; their ability to traverse the ‘graduated and hierarchised mediation’ that characterizes the history and public life of traditional art (op. cit.: 228). In short, popularity is not necessarily in inverse proportion to aesthetic worth.

These are complex processes, needless to say, which is why Benjamin draws upon psychoanalytic theories in order to underscore the complex relationship between human consciousness (where the unconscious operates even when it is not immediately apparent or recognized) and social reality (which is not reducible to only observable phenomena). He celebrates film’s ability to open up ‘our taverns, and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories [that] appeared to have us locked up hopelessly [so allowing people to] calmly and adventurously go travelling’ (op. cit.: 229). These liberating tendencies are not divorced from broader political economic and cultural forces, however. Such shifts, revelations and subjugations can only be seen in ‘critical epochs in which a certain art form aspires to effect which could be fully obtained only with a changed technical standard, that is to say, in a new art form’ (op. cit.: 230).

The 1930s were one such critical epoch. And there lies the rub for many critics of his optimistic take on the popular arts (see Wolin 1994: 197 *passim*). For Benjamin is more interested in examining the ‘transmutations’ in art and technology of the time than he is in deciding between what is/is not ‘art’. Popularity needs to be taken seriously in that the ‘greatly increased mass of participants has produced a change in the mode of participation’ (op. cit.: 232). To judge this to be a superficial development is ‘at bottom the same ancient lament that the masses seek distraction whereas art demands concentration from the spectator’ (ibid.). This is not only a specious separation but also an elitist assumption of what constitutes ‘art’ in the first place let alone its facilitating role in political struggle.¹²

The Epilogue tackles the flip-side; how these techniques get appropriated by commercial, cultural and political agendas which threaten the chance to reinvigorate and liberate ‘artistic processes’ from the strictures of ‘art in its

traditional form' (op. cit.: 214). In the first instance, 'capitalistic exploitation of the film denies consideration to modern man's [sic] legitimate claim to being reproduced. Under these circumstances the film industry is trying hard to spur the interest of the masses through illusion-promoting spectacles and dubious speculations' (op. cit.: 226). In the second, the return to 'tradition' and the celebration of 'authenticity' by Fascist regimes

organize the newly created proletarian masses without affecting the property structure which the masses strive to eliminate. Fascism sees its salvation in giving these masses not their right, but instead a chance to express themselves. The masses have a right to change property relations; Fascism seeks to give them an expression while preserving property. . . . The violation of the masses . . . has its counterpart in the violation of an apparatus which is pressed into the reproduction of ritual values.

(op. cit.: 234)

The nascent changes in 'human sense perception' allowed for by the creative and empowering potential of technical innovations (op. cit.: 217, 218–19) have been sucked into serving the needs of war. Not only does war become 'the artistic gratification of a sense perception that has been changed by technology' (op. cit.: 235) but there is also an all too painful

discrepancy between the tremendous means of production and their inadequate utilization in the process of production. . . . Instead of draining rivers, society directs a human stream into a bed of trenches; instead of dropping seeds from airplanes, it drops incendiary bombs over cities; and through gas warfare the aura is abolished in a new way.

(ibid.)

The Epilogue's seeming tone of despair only really makes sense in the light of the preceding deconstruction of film and photography – as techniques and (new) art forms. By virtue of their popularity, if nothing else, they can challenge for whom, and by whom, art (or politics) is made (op. cit.: 244, n. 21). But there is also a tension between these competing appropriations and uses of new technologies/art forms, political mobilization and everyday perception and daily habits. The window of opportunity is but a small one, as Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* makes all too clear (Haraway 1990: 211, 231, n. 26).

3.2. In Dialogue with Cyborgs

The Cyborg Manifesto

Haraway's 'A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s' greets the 'postmodern, non-naturalist' mood of the 1980s (Haraway 1990: 192) in an 'argument for pleasure in the confusion of boundaries and for responsibility in their construction' (op. cit.: 191) as opposed to an entrenchment into reified (Marxist and Feminist) categories and political dogma.¹³ With an explicit attack on longstanding 'leaky' separations between 'human and animal', 'animal-human (organism) machine', and 'physical and non-physical' (op. cit.: 183, 195), Haraway – like Benjamin – seeks to regain a political prerogative by reclaiming discursive territory and political agency dominated by the 'New Right' versus the 'old Left' in a time characterized by 'the extent and importance of rearrangements in world-wide social relations tied to science and technology' (op. cit.: 203). Remembering that this was the era of Reaganomics in the USA and Thatcherism in Great Britain (Hall 1996), Haraway's critique of what she calls the 'informatics of domination' (op. cit.: 203 *passim*) is focused on the appropriation of ICTs for neoliberal economic and/or conservative cultural agendas. Most particularly, she is concerned with how these appropriations affect those women (especially from disadvantaged minorities) as a newly exploitable and vulnerable labour force (op. cit.: 207 *passim*). Her approach is squarely placed within Marxist/Feminist critiques of capitalist/patriarchal societies in a deliberate 'effort to build an ironic myth faithful to feminism, socialism, and materialism' (op. cit.: 190) that uses irony as a 'rhetorical strategy and a political method. . . . At the centre of my ironic faith, my blasphemy, is the image of the cyborg' (op. cit.: 190–1, 1997b: 51).

Whilst Benjamin celebrates the new capacities of photography and film to subvert and open up sense perception and experience for ordinary people, Haraway urges a comparable embracing of existing 'fabricated hybrids of machine and organism' (op. cit.: 191). With her critical eye on conceptual and literary practices that would deny the permeability of boundaries (op. cit.: 205), Haraway is also interested in the 'social significance' of 'cybernetics' in the age of digital reproduction (op. cit.: 191–2; Spiller 2002: 14, 108–9). But instead of their facilitation of new sorts of 'pictorial reproduction', Haraway looks at how ICTs (re)produce the biological body, and women's bodies in particular, as 'cybernetic' organisms and workers in a new mode of production (op. cit.: 212 *passim*, 1992, 1997b). Whilst Benjamin examines the repercussions of the withering away of the artwork's aura, Haraway embraces a new 'myth' – the cyborg. Here she is

referring to beings that are ‘simultaneously animal and machine, who populate worlds ambiguously natural and crafted’ (op. cit.: 191). Haraway posits this utopian ‘creature in a postgender world’ (op. cit.: 192) as a counter ‘myth of political identity’ (op. cit.: 215) that can empower women – and men – under current conditions of ‘racist, male-dominated capitalism’ (op. cit.: 191, 217).

The *Cyborg Manifesto* is comprised of six titled sections of roughly equal length (as opposed to the fifteen short, untitled sections of the *Artwork Essay*). The first section introduces the reader to the crisis of our ‘mythic’ times (op. cit.: 191), the paucity of current intellectual frameworks to counter this and her way out – or rather through – this impasse; the cyborg. Teleological rationality, ‘biological-determinist ideology’ (op. cit.: 193), dialogues of the deaf all constitute the boundaries Haraway wants to break down in order to make her ‘political fictional (political scientific) analysis’ (op. cit.: 196) of the place of women, of bodies vis-à-vis machines under the ‘worldwide intensification of domination . . . in technologically mediated societies’ (ibid.). ‘Progressives’ – and here she refers to subsequent generations of Critical Theory – whether Feminist or Marxist/Socialist err in these circumstances by dependence on the same eurocentric and monistic matrices of identity, race/ethnicity, sex/gender, masculinity/femininity that inform the ‘big science’ story of progress and modernization (Haraway 1992; Harding 1998). That all these are actually ‘fractured identities’ occupies the second section. Haraway passes through some examples of how these various essentialisms operate in (radical) feminist and (orthodox) Marxist analyses of women-as-a-group and (re)productive labour as a ‘pre-eminently privileged category’ (op. cit.: 200) for both. By applying postcolonial feminist theoretical insights, she argues that both still have the ‘Western self’ (ibid.) at the centre of things. This is ultimately another *cul-de-sac* as ‘history and polyvocality disappear into political taxonomies that try to establish genealogies’ (op. cit.: 202).

This plea for recognizing difference, and non-Western, non-white understandings and experiences of (inter)subjectivity (Franklin 2001; Ling 2001) does not mean, however, that all differences are equivalent. Some are ‘poles of world historical systems of domination. Epistemology is about knowing the difference’ (op. cit.: 203). It is these other sorts of differences, as techno-political-economic shifts in gender-power relations, which Haraway unravels in the next three sections; *Informatics of Domination*, *The Homework Economy*, *Women in the Integrated Circuit*. In the first, Haraway engages with the broad contours of the ‘new world order’ of information flows and flexible labour (op. cit.: 203–4) in a still potent (albeit still dualistic) ‘chart of transitions’ (op. cit.: 203; see Spiller 2002: 110). She uses this list to unravel the way communications technologies

(as influenced by developments in computing) and modern biology (likewise influenced) both frame the social relations and biological organisms as 'a problem of coding . . . problems of genetic coding and read-out' (op. cit.: 206). Why this is so important for the Left to take on board is that these shifts provide 'fresh sources of power' that demand 'fresh sources of analysis and action' (op. cit.: 207). The next section takes the newly emerged 'homework economy' as an example. Echoing Benjamin (1973: 211–12), she looks at how such shifts underscore how 'boundary-making images of base and superstructure, public and private, or material and ideal have never seemed more feeble' (op. cit.: 207). The penultimate section is a prognosis for 'women's historical locations in advanced industrialised societies' (op. cit.: 212) under the 'social relations of the new technologies' (op. cit.: 211); *Home, Market, Paid Work Place, State, School, Clinic–Hospital, Church*. This is not at all an optimistic view of things to come. Looking back nearly 20 years after this piece first appeared, many of her predictions have become all too true (op. cit.: 213–15).

Nevertheless, Haraway urges there is even more reason to forge other 'bases for new kinds of unity across race, gender, and class' (op. cit.: 215) in the face of new hardships and socio-economic exclusion (of which she provides many examples). In other words, Socialist/Feminist political organization and/or theorizing does not 'need a totality [man/woman, white/black, science/culture] to work well' (ibid.). As if that were not enough, the final section, 'Cyborgs: A Myth of Political Identity', takes the reader into (Feminist) Science Fiction (see Spiller 2002: 12–13). Her point about de-essentializing politics also entails a clear position on the politics (and technology) of writing. Similarly to Benjamin with film and photography, Haraway uses feminist writers in an area of popular culture – science fiction – as a source for inspiration and a chance for 'recoding communication and intelligence to subvert command and control' (op. cit.: 217). She also consciously uses contemporary writing by women of colour as exemplary of the 'great riches for feminists in explicitly embracing the possibilities inherent in the breakdown of clean distinctions between organism and machine and similar distinctions structuring the [white] western self' (op. cit.: 218).

After a walk-through some specific examples of the genre, Haraway then draws the manifesto to a close by a recapitulation of why the cyborg image is not necessarily one of the enemy (op. cit.: 222). Firstly because 'bodies are maps of power and identity. Cyborgs are no exceptions. . . . We can be responsible for machines; they do not dominate or threaten us. We are responsible for boundaries; we are they' (ibid.). Secondly because taking on such a 'myth system' can enable a 'political language to ground one way of looking at science and technology and challenging the informatics of domination – in order to act

potently' (op. cit.: 223). And finally, and this is the window of opportunity that concerns Haraway, because it is

that science and technology are possible means of great human satisfaction, as well as a matrix of complex dominations. Cyborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves. . . . It is an imagination of a feminist speaking in tongues to strike fear into the circuits of the super savers of the New Right. It means both building and destroying machines, identities, categories, relationship, spaces, stories. . . . I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess.

(ibid.)

3.3. Implications for Theory and Research

It is highly likely that if Haraway and Benjamin were able to engage with each other in the same part of the time-space continuum, such a conversation would not be without its contentious moments. For one, Walter Benjamin was not a Feminist as such. For another, his cultural and literary references are quintessentially continental European whereas Haraway's are North American. Moreover, the way in which (commercial and/or artistic) photography and cinema have perpetuated racial and cultural stereotypes of male and female sex-gender roles, femininity and masculinity, hetero/homosexuality, the eroticized body-as-commodity are also part of new 'technologies of visualisation . . . the deeply predatory nature of a photographic consciousness' (Haraway 1990: 211 and n. 26). The very techniques of reproduction celebrated by Benjamin are now indispensable to the marketing and advertising campaigns of neoliberal global restructuring and owned and controlled by not only Hollywood (Benjamin 1973: 226) but also mega-media conglomerates (Franklin 2002).

Perhaps Benjamin would be taken to task by Haraway for his own investment in the 'necessary domination of technics and [recourse] to an imagined organic body to integrate our existence' (Haraway 1990: 196). Conversely, Haraway would need to deal with the implications of her 'molecular' level of analysis for mobilizing dispersed cybernetic organisms in ICT-drenched societies that still manage to be centralized enough to wage wars, however defined and at any level of simulacra (Spiller 2002: 13). As Benjamin observes, the very 'destructiveness of war furnishes the proof that society has not been mature enough to *incorporate technology as its organ*, that technology has not been sufficiently developed to cope with the elemental forces of society' (Benjamin 1973: 235, emphasis added). What they would both agree on, though, is that from the point of view of framing political action and engaged theory and research in any critical epoch, the 'adjustment of reality to the masses and of the masses to

reality is a process of unlimited scope, as much for thinking as for perception' (Benjamin 1973: 217). In this respect, juxtaposing Benjamin and Haraway means re-examining ongoing and future theory and research into the technology–culture–politics matrix. Doing so means raising meta-theoretical as well as empirical and practical political issues.

So what can such a juxtaposition actually offer critical theory and research in the age of digital (re)production?

Firstly; this brief encounter between two such 'blasphemous' thinkers (see Haraway 1990: 190) underscores their mutual interest in the creative and political potential of new(er) technologies. This does not preclude them, however, from critically analysing their impact on the physical senses, the (un)conscious and the individual – alone and in a group (Benjamin 1973: 227–30; Haraway 1990: 203–15). The pessimistic side of Benjamin's take preludes contemporary concerns about the ramifications of hi-tech forms of warfare, genetic engineering and intrusive surveillance techniques, to which Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* directly speaks. Whether these are aided and abetted by the spread of World Wide Web-based communications and the boom and bust of the Internet gold rush or not, the need to ask new questions persists. Unlike the 1930s though, by the turn of the twenty-first century, the composition of political party affiliations has shifted from clearly signposted political ideological platforms between 'Left' and 'Right', or Fascism and Communism. Even as the technologies in question, the cultural references, and the 'change agents' in these two essays are not identical, both authors treat all these as sites of political and cultural contestation rather than foregone conclusions. In other words: 'The structural rearrangements related to the social relations of science and technology evoke strong ambivalence. But it is not necessary to be ultimately depressed by [their] implications. . . .' (Haraway 1990: 214).

Second, both Benjamin and Haraway are dealing with the socially and historically constructed nature of techno-cultural-biological change (Haraway 1997b). The former is 'prequelling' these later, post-world war, post-cold war debates. Haraway in turn is revisiting Marxist and Feminist praxis from deep within the later constructivist (and arguably postmodern) moods and neoliberal historical conjuncture. Both are aware of just how delicately balanced these processes are for political struggles and artistic expression and all the boundaries and crossovers that there are between the technological, cultural and political economic realms. As in the 1930s, and even though the novel techniques of mechanical reproduction Benjamin examines have become old-hat these days, a comparable set of struggles for ownership and control of new(er) techniques of reproduction – and destruction – are emerging in the age of digital reproduction

(Haraway 1990: 203–12). For Benjamin, war is the epitome of the immaturity of (Western) society (Benjamin 1973: 235). Haraway develops this concern about misappropriation on the one hand and retreat into ahistorical myth-making on the other in the Information Age: ‘we are not dealing with a technological determinism but with a historical system depending upon structured relations among people’ (Haraway 1990: 207).

Both these proclivities are evident in Research and Development of contemporary ICTs, which is largely funded by huge commercial and political strategic interests. These operate to produce comparable ‘mechanical [digital] equipment’ that feeds off ‘a sense perception that has been changed by technology’ (Benjamin 1973: 235) and then justifies the products (hi-tech biological weapons, anti-missile defence systems, punitive surveillance techniques) as responses to ‘consumer demand’ or threats to national security.

A third theme relates to achieving nuanced, non-universalizing analyses of ICTs from within a critique of capitalism and commitment to political and social empowerment that is beholden to Critical Theory (see Roberts 1982; Best and Kellner 1991; McChesney *et al.* 1998; Burchill and Linklater 2001). Problem is; many critics from Marxist and/or Feminist frameworks lean towards a more jaundiced view of the shifts, particularly in terms of how they relate to the rise of Postmodernist art and architecture and neoliberal politics in the 1980s on the one hand and the postmodernity as an historical phase in (neoliberal) capitalist accumulation on the other (Jameson 1984; Harvey 1989). Space does not allow for a full exploration of this point. But suffice it to say that many see digital reproduction’s impact on ‘art’ and ‘culture’ as a negative anti-social force per se. According to this standpoint, one that takes its cue from Adorno’s critique of the mass culture industry rather than Benjamin’s (Best and Kellner 1991: 181 *passim*, 215 *passim*), there is more being lost than gained. At the risk of erecting a straw man from what is a range of sophisticated and variegated analyses, the main thrust of this perspective is that aesthetic sensibilities, theoretical rigour, and political commitment are being corroded by ICTs’ impact on cultural and political life. In this respect, mid-twentieth-century architectural developments, computer-animated films and literature, interactive computer games, Graffiti Art, Rap/Hip-Hop musical forms are all symptoms of this corrosive shift, an ongoing decay in ‘authenticity’. The concomitant predominance of a high degree of simulation, multi-imaging, conscious copying (or musical ‘sampling’) that is enabled by new techniques of digital reproduction underscore how popular forms of art in the Digital/Internet/Information Age continue to challenge the authority of the ‘unique’ work of art as the only legitimate form of artistic expression. Moreover, these latest challenges to traditional art (whether explicitly defined or not)

are regarded as inherently damaging for organized politics, if not the individual psyche (Castells 1998; Dufour 2001). Their uptake by disadvantaged groups (the dissemination of these popular art forms through the World Wide Web notwithstanding) is overlooked in using their popularity as more evidence of their anti-aesthetic, politically suspect qualities.

Benjamin's essay addresses some of the deeper aesthetic and ontological hierarchies operating in such attitudes in order to go beyond 'non-progressive' modes of observation (Benjamin 1973: 241). Haraway goes even further as she takes contemporary dogmas to task as more-of-the-same 'misleading ideology, even to show how . . . dichotomies construct each other in practice and in theory' (Haraway 1990: 212, see 1992). Feminist and Marxist discourses (in all their respective hues) are thereby paralysed in the face of new 'webs of power and social life' and unable to learn 'new couplings, new coalitions' that do not have to begin from a 'standpoint of "identification", of a unitary self' (Haraway 1990: 212).

Fourthly; both these pieces were written as think-pieces to spur discussion on fundamental issues. Hence the many ways in which both the Artwork Essay and the Cyborg Manifesto have been interpreted and applied. As Benjamin argues, the problem is that in reducing new art forms and techniques of (digital) reproduction to their circumstantial link with ('late') capitalism and/or fundamentalist politics, or reifying them by confining them to tried and true categories, their emancipatory dimensions are pushed underground. More to the point, in so doing, these new spaces and places for 'human sense perception' to go travelling, for everyday exploitative power relationships (based on hierarchies of class, hetero/sexuality, sex/gender, race/ethnicity, religion) to be readdressed and challenged through the 'cathartic' effect (amongst others) of new art-and-technology are filled in by far less tolerant forms of political mobilization and identity formation. The challenge to cultural and social closure (most particularly from the point of view of non-Western forms of artistic-cultural expression) that these newer techniques offer, and their potential to open up other spaces for mobilization and expression are either ignored or condemned to dichotomies such as the 'clash of civilisations' between Christianity and Islam (see Senghaas 2002), global homogeneity versus local heterogeneity (Scholte 2000) and so on. Without conflating the early twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Benjamin's focus on the material, symbolic, social and political dimensions to art/culture, politics and technology as they interact is still powerful. It can converse with Haraway's distinctive approach because both thinkers are arguing against blind faith in mutually exclusive and moribund cultural and political categories, and the privileges they confer (Peterson and Runyan 1999: 46–7).

Finally, a note on reading Benjamin for digital days and Haraway vis-à-vis the Frankfurt School. Doing so is not without problems given the different political and philosophical nodes of the prefix *critical* nowadays. It now designates intense debates between Marxist and non-Marxist scholars over the last 30 years at least. In addition there has been criticism of the armchair politics, equivocation at times of political and cultural unrest of many a 'critical' thinker and those from the Frankfurt School especially (Roberts 1982: 66; Leonard 1990; Best and Kellner 1991; Ferguson and Wicke 1994).¹⁴ This is the attitude that Haraway acknowledges and criticizes (Haraway 1990: 214, 1997b). There is a fine line between ambivalence and scholarly *hautain(e)* in this respect. What both writers are articulating is an underlying tension when analysing the interaction of humans and/or machines and taking a political stand. Namely; much 'criticism, like resistance, cannot exist without being complicit with what it criticises and thereby resists' (Ferris 1996: 2). Hence the need to find and create practicable exit strategies from the discourses and practices bound up in the 'informatics of domination' (Haraway 1990) and the 'aestheticisation of politics' (Benjamin 1973), respectively. Here, feminist and postcolonial scholars' attention to the gender-ethnicity-sexuality material and discursive dimensions of these processes resonate with Benjamin's focus on aesthetic openings rather than apparent loss (Benjamin 1973: 227-9).

4. CONCLUSION

[T]aking responsibility for the social relations of science and technology means refusing an anti-science metaphysics, a demonology of technology, and so means embracing the skilful task of reconstructing the boundaries of daily life, in partial connections with others, in communications with all of our parts.

(Haraway 1990: 223)

The first thing I would like to say by way of conclusion is to urge the reader to read these two essays for themselves. As with many famous, and therefore often regurgitated texts, both the Artwork Essay and the Cyborg Manifesto reach people in various sorts of re-produced, sampled forms which invite, indeed imply, various receptions (de Certeau 1980). Following both Benjamin and Haraway, these differing versions need not be seen as inferior per se to the 'real thing', ongoing debts to the tradition of intellectual 'authenticity' and 'authority' in academia notwithstanding. But the very same can also operate to stifle important substantive details and nuances when reproducing/interpreting the 'original' expositions for new audiences. For instance; Benjamin's optimistic take on mechanical reproducibility gets conflated with his condemnation of war-as-

mechanical-reproduction in many renditions and references to the Artwork Essay (see Harvey 1989: 346 *passim*). Similarly for the Haraway essay as endless references to the early pages of the Cyborg Manifesto with its radical cyborgism and unabashed pleasure at syntactic and conceptual boundary-hopping overlook her sharp critique of the alliance between ICTs and 'advanced capitalism' (Haraway 1990: 202) in the belly of the text.

The paraphrases that comprise the juxtaposition being made here also acknowledge historical strictures as well as challenges. Namely; Benjamin's analysis, speaking from the 1930s is dealing with the impact of what are today 'old' technologies on even older traditions in art, culture and politics. But leaving him there would too conveniently confine the tensions he confronts to arcane discussions in aesthetic theory or early twentieth-century politics. As others have already shown (Roberts 1982; Benjamin and Osborne 2000: ix–xiii; Leslie 2000), this not only does a disservice to the historical resonance of his thought, and research, but also arrogantly assumes that today's philosophical and political debates about technological and social change, art and culture, science and progress, have moved on; just as Western/industrialized societies have 'developed' and 'progressed' to a higher evolutionary plane. Not necessarily. By the same token, however, past scholarship is not sacrosanct. As many a feminist and/or postmodernist critique has shown, bodies of theory and research are just as beholden to their own ancient 'cult values', 'traditions' and categorical 'auras' as are the arts (Haraway 1992; Docherty 1993; Nicholson 1994; Harding 1998). Relying on thinkers like Benjamin and others to frame the debates in new areas of theory and research (the Internet, cyberspace, digital aesthetics, space exploration, biotechnology, cyber/warfare) must not subsume important differences in the intellectual, techno-economic and political climate of the times.

Having said that, I have focused here on contemporaneous cross-pollinations between the two. Along with their political, theoretical and stylistic affiliations – and differences – both Benjamin and Haraway seek to re-examine intellectual and aesthetic traditions in order to entertain new political opportunities at times of intense change (and equally intense resistance to same). And even as both celebrate newness and are aware of the political implications of shaking up hierarchical boundaries, they also resist being hopelessly optimistic about the future of mechanical/digital reproducibility for empowerment. Both are examining emergent technologies in terms of gender–power relations; by whom and for whom they are being appropriated. Both Benjamin and Haraway argue, in different ways, that the political questions to be addressed lie in struggles over the control and ownership of these techniques, and access to the new art forms and political moments they facilitate and also push underground.

Who cyborgs will be is a radical question; the answers are a matter of survival.

(Haraway 1990: 194–5)

Furthermore, this study is well aware that both these thinkers have their own readerships, speak to – and from – distinctive historical, theoretical and intellectual perspectives and have had their work (mis)appropriated, rightly or wrongly, in different ways. There is a long-established and distinguished Benjamin intellectual industry and a recognizable Haraway one, online and offline. Even as a historiographical and thematic time-line could be traced from one (Benjamin) to the other (Haraway) over the half-century that separates the publication of these two essays, professional, biographical, and philosophical differences do abound. That being so, this article puts Benjamin and Haraway into a conversation in order to highlight the mutuality of their radical critical spirits and self-reflexivity. Written at techno-historical cusps, the Artwork Essay and Cyborg Manifesto are role models of critical theorizing that look to techno-cultural change as a harbinger of hopeful possibility rather than lost opportunities. This article has juxtaposed Benjamin's take with that of Haraway to highlight the way both succeed in engaging with the tensions between developments in mechanical (and now digital) reproduction, changes in political economic power relations, art and culture, and polyvalent reception of the same. They offer a productive way of dealing with this intellectual and emotional ambivalence – then and now.

This article has also read Benjamin in conversation with Haraway for their distinctive and overlapping contributions to conceptualizing technological change *as it is occurring* (Wolin 1994: 185). As Benjamin himself concurs, it is not easy examining complex 'developmental tendencies of art under present conditions of production' (Benjamin 1973: 212) and to do so without lurching from an uncritical celebration of all that is new to a nostalgic lament for the (often exclusionary) cultural and political traditions under threat (Haraway 1990: 214–15). This reading highlights how Benjamin's political commitment intersects with Haraway's in terms of their recognition of the empowering dimensions to seemingly disempowering changes. Theory and research into ICTs, the Information Society and so on needs to take account of these radical takes on the political potential of major technological change from within the Critical/Marxist/Feminist traditions (*sic*). Under the current conditions of commodified research and development into ICTs Benjamin and Haraway provide ways to achieve this delicate balance between the critical circumspection of 'engaged political critique' (Leslie 2000: vii) and a rigorous, non-positivist approach to sociocultural–technological shifts (Roberts 1982: 157–8; see Wolin 1994: 164).

And do so from the point of view of those groups who do not control their current trajectory.

Precisely because of the wealth and intricacy of Benjamin studies (see Ferris 1996: 3; Leslie 2000) and the enthusiasm of Haraway fans,¹⁵ I have concentrated on their respective analyses of *the relationship between* technology, politics, art-and-culture. I have done so in order to recall that the strength of critical thought, as espoused by Benjamin and Haraway, is its ability to elucidate nuance at moments of significant social and/or technological change. Taking risks is part and parcel of the exercise. Taking a critical stance that engages with the political and cultural concerns of the day and to do so with theoretical and empirical rigour entails not only a healthy circumspection towards the glitter of all that is new – let alone the beckoning of the familiar – but also an awareness of the potential for empowerment contained in the same. A good dose of self-awareness and an ironic sense of humour are also crucial ingredients (Benjamin 1973: 221, 225, 233–4; Haraway 1990: 190). Both Benjamin and Haraway provide important entry-points and substantive insights into the psychic-emotional and political economic tension between how new ways of (re)presenting the world technically can actually challenge rather than reproduce the status quo. Art and cultural life are not divorced from or reducible to either technological or socio-economic divisions and political struggle. And how symbiotic psycho-emotional and material realities are (re)presented and (re)produced are not necessarily emancipatory or alienating by virtue of being mechanically, or digitally, reproducible. ‘We’ get the technology (and art) ‘we’ deserve in that respect. It is more a question of whose realities, and reproductions thereof, hold sway in the interaction between the arts, politics, and the vagaries of everyday human sense perception. Analysing these relationships allows for the creation and discovery of spaces for practically mobilizing without assuming that the current (neoliberal) capitalist agenda for (re)producing art–politics–technology is a *fait accompli*; the ‘only alternative’.

In this sense, I would rather be a cyborg than a clone.

NOTES

- 1 It is a moot point as to where the dividing line is between these two realms. This hierarchy, let alone the very definition of ‘culture’ and/or ‘art’ is hotly disputed in Media and Communication Studies and Cultural Studies (Huysen 1990; Best and Kellner 1991; Hall 1996).
- 2 Allusions to the Artwork Essay abound. Jay (1973: 205 *passim*) and Buck-Morss (1977, 1992) deal with it from the point of view of the Frankfurt School’s intellectual and philosophical peregrinations. Wolin also has a chapter discussing its role in – and articulation of – Benjamin’s theoretical ‘dispute’ with Adorno (Wolin 1994: 183 *passim*). Roberts (1982:

- 157 *passim*) looks at it in the context of Benjamin's application of Historical Materialist method and conceptualization of technology – *Technik*. See also Leslie (2000) for an in-depth study of Benjamin that focuses on countering 'the hyper-cyberbabble of the new millennialism' (2000: x). Her chapter on the essay (2000: 130 *passim*) takes into account all three versions in order to look more closely at 'Benjamin's critical breakdown of *Technik* into component parts. . . . It is on this basis that Benjamin grounds a strategy for a critical political practice that utilizes technology in a "truly revolutionary way"' (2000: 133). See also the lucid reading by Gasché (2000) in a chapter that links Benjamin to Kant. Weber (1996: 32 *passim*) looks at it in his comparison of Benjamin and Heidegger. McCole (1993: 5–8) focuses on the essay as Benjamin's position-statement on the social and political implications of the 'vertiginous, disorienting acceleration of the pace of social and technological change in the opening decades of the twentieth century' (op. cit.: 1). The volume edited by Fischer (1996) has a number of short reflections on Benjamin that allude to this essay from the point of view of gender, ecology, and contemporary theatre and performance art. And the list goes on. Nearly all studies dealing with Internet-influenced (cyber) culture also recall Benjamin's contribution somewhere along the way. For instance, see Spiller (2002: 13–14) for an excellent compilation of 'cyber-writings for the digital era' and Maresch and Rötzer (2002) for a German language collection of European, British and American scholars. Leslie (2000) has a thorough and up-to-date Benjamin bibliography.
- 3 See Haraway (1990, 1991, 1997a). There are also copious Donna Haraway-related websites as her work not only has many fans but also intersects with Science Fiction literature; a source she herself draws upon in the later version of the *Cyborg Manifesto* (1990). Her work is best known, however, in the fields of Science and Technology Studies and Feminist Theory (Haraway 1997a, b). Haraway writes from within a rich body of Feminist theory on science and technology that dates back to the 1970s at least (see Harding 1998; Haraway 1990: 225–6; Spiller 2002). To echo Neil Spiller on the *Manifesto* itself, Haraway is 'one of the very few . . . [who] . . . adequately expresses a mature political thesis and a thoughtful feminist view' of technological change (Spiller 2002: 109).
 - 4 Many lists of Haraway texts and secondary literature can be easily found on non-commercial spaces of the World Wide Web. Whence various productive links to Benjamin, and vice versa. See for example: *Popcultures.com Theory and Critics: Donna Haraway* at <http://www.popcultures.com/theorists/haraway.html>, *Hyperlink to Donna Haraway* at <http://www.asahi-net.or.jp/%7EERF6T-TYFK/haraway.html>, *Donna Haraway* at <http://www.sou.edu/English/IDTC/People/haraway.HTM> and at <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/feminism/Haraway.html>. And for a good list that includes both, see *Contemporary Philosophy, Critical Theory and Postmodern Thought* at http://carbon.cudenver.edu/~mryder/itc_data/postmodern.html.
 - 5 As one commentator astutely notes in the light of how often this aspect to Benjamin's rocky career-path is stressed: ' . . . pursuit of a career is not always compatible with the maintenance of a high intellectual independence. But that does not mean that the reverse – maintenance of intellectual independence without any regard for career – is itself of any value . . . Benjamin neither sought nor believed in isolation . . . And the story of his "career" is the story of a struggle to exploit unsympathetic or refractory organisational structures for his own purposes' (Roberts 1982: 23–4).
 - 6 For those who want to read more, or dip into Benjamin as opposed to immerse themselves

- in his Correspondence or Collected Works, the edited collection *Illuminations* (1973) is a good place to start. Another is *One Way Street and Other Writings* (1979), which include his 'Short History of Photography'. Leslie (2000: 219–25) does a very good section on the history and impact of 'Benjamin Studies' on the reception of his work. See also Arendt (1973: 9–10).
- 7 Haraway's notes (1990: 225–33) provide the best overview of the debates involved here. See Mentor (1994) for a discourse analysis of Haraway and Marx's manifestos as 'violent' 'writing technologies'.
 - 8 This divide and/or crossover, one which underscores Haraway's note on how to treat 'leaky boundaries' (Haraway 1990: 193) between disciplines and concepts, is still a thorny issue for many from Marxian scholarship (see Jameson 1984; Burchill and Linklater 2001) and is far too complex to trace here. See Franklin (2003) for a brief summation as this pertains to Benjamin and Feminist theory, respectively. Linda Nicholson (1994) does one of the best jobs in summing up and collating key examples of these complex interactions between (Marxist) Feminism and Postmodernism. Butler and Scott (1992) and Ferguson and Wicke (1994) are collections along the same lines. Best and Kellner (1991) look at the Frankfurt School, Marxism, and Feminist Theory under the impact of postmodernist critiques of Enlightenment thought and historical shifts from modern to postmodern societies. In short, both these shifts entail moves that question 'the dominant goals and assumptions informing modern theories of society, history, politics, and the individual, while embracing a variety of new principles and emphases' (1991: x). Whilst their treatment of Feminism is cursory, their study is very helpful in navigating this difficult and deeply polemical terrain. Huyssen (1990) provides another angle on 'this thing called postmodernism' from the point of view of art and architecture which intersects with Benjamin's interests as well. Harvey (1989) is an influential condemnation of the same shifts in the cultural sphere.
 - 9 Moreover, as Steven Mentor notes, 'if Haraway's 1985 article had limited itself to a critique of totalising feminist and socialist narratives, or to a weave of feminist theories and postmodern economics, it might never have left the predictable orbit of the *Socialist Review* and its readership. Instead, like Marx . . . she uses violence as well as precision to achieve a powerful analysis of technology and politics in the late 20th century' (1994: 7/12).
 - 10 The term, aura, is a complex one. Benjamin's own definition in a footnote will suffice for now: 'The definition of the aura as a "unique phenomenon of a distance however close it may be" represents nothing but the formulation of the cult value of the work of art in categories of space and time perception. Distance is the opposite of closeness. The essentially distant object is the unapproachable one' (Benjamin 1973: 236, n. 5). I would add that un-approachability is not necessarily defined by corporeal presence (or absence).
 - 11 One only has to think of the mystique surrounding seeing the 'real' *Mona Lisa* in the Louvre, recall debates about the artistic merit of *Mona Lisa* reproductions (whether as postcards, T-shirts, or Andy Warhol's screen-prints), or note the huge financial stakes involved in the discovery of (and market in) forged and/or authentic 'masterworks' to get Benjamin's point here.
 - 12 This is also at the heart of the aforementioned disagreements between Benjamin and Adorno (Jay 1973; Best and Kellner 1991). Space prevents a closer look at these debates. Suffice it

- to say, they also speak directly to the 'currency' (*Aktualität*) of this essay (Wolin 1994: 205; Leslie 2000: ix) for comparable arguments about digital aesthetics, digital democracy and cyber-activism.
- 13 Whilst there are formal and stylistic differences between the essay genre and a manifesto, the subjectivity – *engagement* – of the writer is a characteristic of both. In the first instance in 'an analytic or interpretative literary composition usually dealing with its subject from a limited or personal point of view' and in the second in 'a public declaration of intentions, motives or views' (*Webster's Dictionary*). Both Benjamin and Haraway are aware of these nuances, and of the relationship between writer and reader. For Benjamin, the blurring of the latter hierarchies go along with the advent of film and the popular press: 'to present verbally is part of a man's [*sic*] ability to perform the work. Literary licence is now founded on polytechnic rather than specialised training and thus becomes common property' (Benjamin 1973: 225, see his admonitory n. 13). For Haraway, writing – conventions – is also a technology constituted by gender–power relations: 'Writing is predominantly the technology of cyborgs, etched surfaces of the late twentieth century. Cyborg politics is the struggle for language and the struggle against perfect communication, against the one code that translates all meaning perfectly. . . .' (Haraway 1990: 218; see Mentor 1994).
- 14 The 1930s notwithstanding, other dates spring to mind; the differing (non-)action of Frankfurt School scholars during the student and civil rights demonstrations of the 1960s and the intellectual climate in the USA, and parts of Europe, after the events of 11 September 2001 (*London Review of Books* 2001; Butler 2002).
- 15 And I admit, without blushing, that I am one of them.

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