Interface Designer as Cultural Producer: A Dialectic Materialist Approach to the Role of Visual Designer in the Present Digital Era

Authors : Cagri Baris Kasap

Abstract : In this study, how interface designers can be viewed as producers of culture in the current era will be interrogated from a critical theory perspective. Walter Benjamin was a German Jewish literary critical theorist who, during 1930s, was engaged in opposing and criticizing the Nazi use of art and media. 'The Author as Producer' is an essay that Benjamin has read at the Communist Institute for the Study of Fascism in Paris. In this article, Benjamin relates directly to the dialectics between base and superstructure and argues that authors, normally placed within the superstructure should consider how writing and publishing is production and directly related to the base. Through it, he discusses what it could mean to see author as producer of his own text, as a producer of writing, understood as an ideological construct that rests on the apparatus of production and distribution. So Benjamin concludes that the author must write in ways that relate to the conditions of production, he must do so in order to prepare his readers to become writers and even make this possible for them by engineering an 'improved apparatus' and must work toward turning consumers to producers and collaborators. In today's world, it has become a leading business model within Web 2.0 services of multinational Internet technologies and culture industries like Amazon, Apple and Google, to transform readers, spectators, consumers or users into collaborators and co-producers through platforms such as Facebook, YouTube and Amazon's CreateSpace Kindle Direct Publishing print-on-demand, e-book and publishing platforms. However, the way this transformation happens is tightly controlled and monitored by combinations of software and hardware. In these global-market monopolies, it has become increasingly difficult to get insight into how one's writing and collaboration is used, captured, and capitalized as a user of Facebook or Google. In the lens of this study, it could be argued that this criticism could very well be considered by digital producers or even by the mass of collaborators in contemporary social networking software. How do software and design incorporate users and their collaboration? Are they truly empowered, are they put in a position where they are able to understand the apparatus and how their collaboration is part of it? Or has the apparatus become a means against the producers? Thus, when using corporate systems like Google and Facebook, iPhone and Kindle without any control over the means of production, which is closed off by opaque interfaces and licenses that limit our rights of use and ownership, we are already the collaborators that Benjamin calls for. For example, the iPhone and the Kindle combine a specific use of technology to distribute the relations between the 'authors' and the 'prodUsers' in ways that secure their monopolistic business models by limiting the potential of the technology.
Keywords : interface designer, cultural producer, Walter Benjamin, materialist aesthetics, dialectical thinking
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