

Images and Power in the Digital Age: The political role of digital visuality

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Abstract: The idea that digitalization, in general, and digital visuality, in particular, can have, alone, subversive or otherwise, emancipative effects on politics is based on the belief that the ideological apparatus supporting hegemonic relations consists of false ideas that the “power of images” can effectively challenge once larger parts of society are given access to this “power”. This idea misinterprets the role of digital visuality by misconstruing the role of ideology, and by positioning visual communication and associated technology in a sort of socio-political vacuum: beyond the reach of ideology and the relations of power supported by it. Based on the insights provided by the classical works of Walter Benjamin and Jean Baudrillard on the visual construction of reality, I argue that an authoritative discussion of the cultural, social and political implications of digital visuality in Western societies invites the intellectual positioning of this process within the broader framework of hegemonic capitalism and the problems of control associated with it. My main point is that in Western societies, the actualization of the subversive potential of digital visuality, as well as that of other forms of communication, requires material conditions that depend on ideology rather than technology. These ideological conditions explain why, for example, digital visuality may be effective in the cultural and socio-political subversion of non-capitalist societies. In Western societies, however, despite the extensive subcultural uses of digital visuality, the subversive potential is fatally reduced (if not nullified) by mechanisms that can be subsumed in what Frederic Jameson called “the cultural logic of late capitalism”. In support of my main argument, I offer some preliminary reflections on the media coverage of the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the uses of organized violence in the “Arab Spring” of 2011.

Keywords: visual communication, ideology, politics, Walter Benjamin, Jean Baudrillard

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