

Nietzsche, Mass/Social Media, and the Question of Education and Spectacle¹

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Abstract:

Since Nietzsche's death technology expanded and spread in many areas of social life and communication that today it is impossible to find any public (or even perhaps private) place where one or another form of recent mass/social media is absent in the technologically advanced societies. Although none of these forms (radio, TV, internet, and social media) was present in Nietzsche's own life time, his ideas on how individuals are influenced or shaped in a given culture, whether they are made into blind followers with herd mentality or inspired to become great individuals, are still relevant today. There are two areas of reflection in Nietzsche that can shed light on this issue: one is the question of breeding, formation, and education and the other one is the problem of spectacle and spectacular relations. In this paper, I will present Nietzsche's ideas on both of these issues and bring them together within the context of contemporary mass/social media.

The recent emerging technologies, specifically those that effect formation of the self directly like the internet and social media, have posed many problems for thinkers and they will keep doing so, as they become integrated into public life at the global level more and more in the coming years. To a large extent, they have already permeated technologically advanced societies. Today many of us are already integrated into these mediums and rely heavily on them for our communication and interactions. How can we approach this question of technology based on Nietzsche's critique of culture of the 19th century Europe? This will be the focus of my reflection in this paper. I will approach this problem from two areas that are crucial in Nietzsche's thought: first, spectacle (*Schauspiel*), second, formation/education (*Bildung*), as well as the kinds of types and affects that are produced in and through them. It is important to keep in mind that these two distinct but overlapping domains of culture are directly connected to Nietzsche's philosophy of value.

The Question of Spectacle

The question of spectacle preoccupied Nietzsche from *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) to *The Case of Wagner* (1888). While in the former he was concerned with the disintegration of poetic, mythic and Dionysian forces and the rationalization of arts and culture in ancient Greece and

¹ A different version of this paper was presented at the Nietzsche Now panel, organized by the Nietzsche Circle, at the World Congress of Philosophy in Athens in August 2013.

their impact on European culture up to the 19th century, in the case of Wagner he saw the symptoms of ascetic idealism, nihilism and *decadence*. Although more than two millennia separate Wagner from Euripides, what we can gather from Nietzsche's critique of Euripidean and Wagnerian artistic spectacles are as follows: artistic spectacles, that are in the position of retaining and uplifting the greatness of culture, must not *degenerate* into popular forms of media, while they, at the same time, uphold the Dionysian ecstatic core via music, dance and singing, and the unity of spectacle and all beings. Rationalization, popularization, the decline of Dionysian functions, the decline of the power of creation and bodily regimes are both symptoms (what they inherit from the macro-culture) and affects (what they re-produce) of these non-Dionysian spectacles. To strive for and to uphold the highest forms of creation are the demands of the eternal return of the same and overhumanliness; demands that, in Nietzsche's assessment, the tragic and agonal Greeks² met or strove to meet, but post-Socratics did not. In the post-Socratic age, according to Nietzsche, Dionysian artistic functions and bodily regimes declined and heroes and gods, the higher types, became subject to popular sentiments or caricatures; hence, the withdrawal of mythopoesy, the primordial creative life forces of a culture. The main philosophical aporia from the beginning to the end of Nietzsche's philosophical life, which persists in his thought, despite the variations in the way it is expressed is this: greatness (great values and types) must reign over a culture in its Dionysian connectedness to existence. No doubt, what is greatness and how great values and types rule are questions that remain unending question marks for Nietzsche, and his assessment of culture moves along these lines. For example, Parsifal is no hero and Wagner succumbed to the problems of the moral world-order and nihilism.

Furthermore, Nietzsche raises the question of disinterestedness of spectator in response to Kant to emphasize the physiological, Dionysian functions that are at work in spectacular relations. Nietzsche's point of departure in this criticism of Kantian aesthetics (in GM III) lies in the artistic experience of the work of art from the artist's perspective; therefore, any notion of spectator that creates a detachment of the spectator from spectacle (the problem of impersonality) is not acceptable by Nietzsche, and not any spectator can be the judge of aesthetics (the problem of universality). Although Nietzsche's interpretation of Kant's

² See my *Agon in Nietzsche* for an in-depth discussion of this topic.

disinterestedness is a poor interpretation, misguided by Schopenhauer according to Heidegger,³ the issues he raises are of significance for a theory of spectacle:

Schopenhauer made use of the Kantian version of the aesthetic problem—although he certainly did not view it with Kantian eyes. Kant thought he was honoring art when among the predicates of beauty he emphasized and gave prominence to those, which establish the honor of knowledge: impersonality and universality. This is not the place to inquire whether this was essentially a mistake; all I wish to underline is that Kant, like all philosophers, instead of envisaging the aesthetic problem from the point of view of the artist (the creator), considered art and the beautiful purely from that of the “spectator,” and unconsciously introduced the “spectator” into the concept “beautiful.” It would not have been so bad if this “spectator” had at least been sufficiently familiar to the philosophers of beauty—namely, as a great *personal* fact and experience, as an abundance of vivid authentic experiences, desires, surprises, and delights in the realm of the beautiful! But I fear that the reverse has always been the case; and so they have offered us, from the beginning, definitions in which, as in Kant’s famous definition of the beautiful, a lack of any refined first-hand experience reposes in the shape of a fat worm of error. “That is beautiful,” said Kant, “which gives us pleasure *without interest*.” Without interest!⁴...

A parallel idea, namely that the highest place of the artistic spectacle cannot be reduced or lowered to the common denominator of the spectator, was introduced in *The Birth of Tragedy* where Nietzsche discusses the artistic freedom of the chorus by way of Schiller. Here Nietzsche, to show the high and lofty ground of artistic experience, aims at a wrong target in Kant, because

³ In his Nietzsche lectures, Heidegger explains what is beautiful and what is meant by disinterestedness in Kant: “...in order to find something beautiful, we must let what encounters us, purely as it is in itself, come before us in its own stature and worth. We may not take it into account in advance with a view to something else, our goals and intentions, our possible enjoyment and advantage. Comportment toward the beautiful as such...is *unconstrained favoring*.” A few paragraphs later he says that if Nietzsche understood Kant by himself, “...then he would have had to recognize that Kant alone grasped the essence of what Nietzsche in his own way wanted to comprehend concerning the decisive aspects of the beautiful.” (*Nietzsche*, tr. by David Farrell Krell, San Francisco: Harper, pp.109-111). To apply all of these ideas to spectacle (and not only to the beautiful), one can say that spectacle is that which shows itself purely as it is in itself, and spectators are connected to this spectacular event through their comportment of letting-be and through their rapture.

⁴ *On the Genealogy of Morals*, translated by Walter Kaufmann, New York: Vintage Books, 1967, Third Essay, Sec.6, pp. 103-4.

Kant is not talking about the same thing; his aporia has to do with the conditions of aesthetic experience, and the disinterestedness is that of the imagination in relation to other (cognitive) faculties of the mind. Nietzsche may respond to that by saying Kant is not an artist and is not writing about aesthetic experience the way an artist would; see how Stendhal, for instance, looks at art, he would say.

Another important aspect of Nietzsche's interest in spectacle is its festive nature. In ancient Greece, like many other archaic societies, festivals occupied a significant space in the life of culture, as in competitive games (there were four major sites for such games in ancient Greece) or in the performance of dramas (in Athens there were four drama festivals per year). And Nietzsche must have had a good knowledge of these festivals from his early studies. As Bergmann observes⁵, Nietzsche's festival ideal⁶ is formed at an early stage, roughly around 1867 before his Wagner phase, and coincides with his interest in the Greek culture of competition. Upon meeting Wagner and Burckhardt shortly after Nietzsche's festival ideal is further encouraged, and Burckhardt was one of the leading historians of festival at the time. According to Burckhardt's vision, festivity captures the religious, moral, and political life of a people and constitutes the point of transition from everyday life into the world of art; and thus it functions as a unifying principle. In his *Die Griechische Kulturgeschichte*, he claims that the Greek city-states used the festivity of the contests to sustain a sense of PanHellenic unity after the colonization of the Mediterranean.

There are several instances in Nietzsche's early works where he discusses the role of festival in ancient Greece. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, he writes not only about the Dionysian festivals of ecstatic states, but also the Apollonian festivals of rhapsody (one can even add, to the list, the festivals dedicated to other gods and goddesses, which Nietzsche does not discuss in this text). In his unpublished "Greek Music Drama," he attributes the greatness of the Greeks to their agonal festivity; one central idea here is that "...genius was only realized in the act of displaying oneself

⁵ Peter Bergmann, *Nietzsche, The Last Antipolitical German*, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987, p.60.

⁶ I do not know the exact number of festivals Nietzsche attended, but one festival he experienced in the company of the Wagners was the Singers' Festival in Lucerne in August, 1869.

in the public arena.”⁷ Again in an earlier note, art, festival and education are placed together in terms of their importance: “When life, like the Athenian life, carries continuously duty, demand, undertaking, and toil inescapably, so one knows also to honor and desire arts, festival and, in particular, education; in this way it becomes cheerful.” (KSA 7, 748) Moreover, festivals give vent to our human passions and emotions: “For many natures it may be good to give, from time to time, a festival to their passions.” (KSA 8, 571)

Nietzsche’s interest in the festival ideal did not subside in his later writings. In *The Gay Science*, he refers to the art of festivals as the “higher art.”⁸ In a note from this period the Greeks come up again and this time the term ‘danger’ and ‘festival’ appear in the same sentence: “Greeks lived only in danger: in their force, calmness, and justice they revered their convalescence, their inhalation, and their festival...”⁹ That ancient Greeks “lived in danger” or played with fire is a recurrent theme in Nietzsche’s works, which highlights the intensity and the depth of Greek expressiveness; the Dionysian ecstatic expressions, the agonistic games, the festivals, the political life all point to this Greek expressiveness in which Nietzsche sees a great vitality. Finally, he regards death as festivity: “It is a festival to go from this world over to the “dead world”...” and “to be released from life and to become dead nature again can be felt as festival—by those wanting to die...”¹⁰ Many cultures celebrate death, and the burial rites are organized as festivals. That death is part of life and can be celebrated festively just like any other aspect of life (as in funeral games) is another point Nietzsche shares with the ancients.

There are many scenes in *Zarathustra* that are presented in the spirit of a festival, including the circus-like scene in the market place in the Prologue, and the scene where the higher men appear in the last part of the book. Besides the fact that Zarathustra in general is a festive spirit like a troubadour and that his journey, his grand spectacle can be considered a long festival, being with him is also portrayed as a festival: “Living on earth is worth while: one day, one

⁷ Bergmann, p.63.

⁸ GS Aphorism 89, p.144. This aphorism carries the sense of grand artistic spectacle presented as a spectacle. Our age is contrasted with that of the Greeks (without being named) in which the works of art served for such festive, grand spectacles.

⁹ KSA 9, p.343 (translation is mine).

¹⁰ KSA 9, p.468 and p.486 (translations are mine).

festival with Zarathustra, taught me to love the earth.”¹¹ These words are uttered by the ugliest man, the murderer of God. With the death of God, one *festival* is over; another festival is yet to start.

The Problem of Education

In his reflections on formation or culture (*Bildung*) in any of its form (general formation, upbringing or academic education), Nietzsche repeats the same problem of production of greatness in the form of great values and types, great culture in general, vis-à-vis the concerns of society, whether they be economic, social or political. Now the problem is presented within a larger field of culture than an artistic field, in the strict sense of the word. In the lectures that Nietzsche gave in five parts in early 1872 at Basel University, called “On the Future of Our Educational Institutions,” he presented, via a fictional encounter with a philosopher, the problems of education, which still elude us today. If I can summarize the basic idea of these lectures, it would be this: practical, professional education for self-preservation functions must not be confused with the education of great artistic, philosophical spirits, and, more importantly, the latter must not be compromised with the demands of the former. Our modern educational institutions have gone in the direction of the useful and deprived culture from producing its great examples of spirit. In these lectures, Nietzsche’s critique is focused on the ‘useful’ functions in human existence that stand in the way of greatness and the production of great spirits. As the philosopher in FEI laments, “...all over I smell that ‘resistance of the stupid world,’ i.e., *your* guiltiness.” (FEI, p.93)

In a similar vein, in the *Twilight of the Idols* from the last year of his philosophical activity, Nietzsche regrets the decline of the German education and spirit: “Even a rapid estimate shows that it is not only obvious that German culture is declining but that there is sufficient reason for that.” (“What Germans Lack,” p.508). In this critique, Nietzsche’s scope is very broad; spirit, education, and university education are all included. He points out the fact that German culture no longer produces greatness as exemplified by Kant, Goethe, Hegel, Heine, and Schopenhauer. Since there are no great living examples, Nietzsche concludes that there are no educators. “Educators are lacking, not counting the most exceptional of exceptions, the very first

¹¹ TSZ, Part IV, “The Drunken Song,” Sec.1, p.429.

condition of education...” (p.510) In this context, Nietzsche diagnoses the problem in politics and the rise of the German state, as he shows how investment in politics in this way, in grand politics, is a divestment in culture. “If one spends oneself for power, for power politics, for economics, world trade, parliamentarianism, and military interests—if one spends in *this* direction the quantum of understanding, seriousness, will, and self-overcoming which one represents, then it will be lacking for the other direction.” (TI,p.509). Hegemonization of political power in the hands of one big state machine emaciates cultural power and the power of mythopoesis, as it turns citizens into an army of automatons.

Mass/Social Media and their Affects

Educational and spectacular concerns, those of *Bildung* and *Schauspiel*, come together in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Zarathustra presents a grand spectacle and, at the same time, is an exemplary model for formation; his journey is a symbolic spectacle of self-overcoming and he is the teacher of the Overhuman and, as such, an educator, in the sense Schopenhauer was an educator, *Erzieher*, in UM III. While Zarathustra brings together all artistic and spectacular functions in himself and struggles for higher states of being, he sets himself up as an *educator*, the educator of the overhuman. While upholding the morality of breeding of higher types, Zarathustra must undo the morality of taming; the former treats individuals qua individuals while upholding bodily regimes and the latter throws around a cloak of general education and functions repressively with its ascetic idealism.

Nietzsche was critical of the newspaper culture of the 19th century, the only dominant form of mass media that existed then. He often refers to this culture as ‘journalistic.’ “A degenerated human being of culture is a serious thing: it affects us fearsomely to observe that our collected learned and journalistic public carries the signs of this degeneration within itself.” (FEI, p.113) The impact of such culture is the annihilation of the individual. Since the 19th century, mass media have proliferated in many forms from radio and TV to the Internet and its offshoots. In every form of mass media, one can ask the same questions that Nietzsche raises regarding the affects these mass media create and their quantitative proportion, within a cultural context, to those affects produced by great spirits (or the Overhuman) either as “educators” or as grand spectacle makers. This, no doubt, is a function of culture and cultural production.

This last point about conflicting affects notwithstanding, what may be the debilitating elements of the mass and social media from a Nietzschean standpoint? Below are some points I would like to make:

There is a disintegration of Dionysian forces in mass culture. Mass media produce more isolation, alienation, and detachment, while taking up the place of *spectacular* forces. For Nietzsche spectacle was the core of the Dionysian forces, a festive space. Mass media along with its cohort social media, on the other hand, disrupts that communion and retain spectators in their isolated state, as it inflates the *Ersatz* experiences to the further decimation of somatic experiences. It is claimed that virtual experiences will replace physical experiences in the coming ages.

There is rampant information thrown around, mostly “useful” information, with no regard to what is high and what is low. All that is available have equal status; everyone is lost in the giant labyrinth of information production, which has also permeated educational institutions. This exacerbates the already eclectic world as related to the disjunction between the inner and the outer and creates a weekend personality. In the second *Untimely Meditation* Nietzsche diagnoses it as a problem of modernity: “Thus the individual grows fainthearted and unsure and dares no longer believe in himself: he sinks into his own subjective depths, which here means into the accumulated lumber of what he has learned but which has not outward effect, of instruction which does not become life.”¹²

In the form of a giant encyclopedia, the dominant mass media has taken the Alexandrian culture of all knowing to a further level; now, the presumed knowledge seems to be out there, available to all. In former times, one had to struggle to know, but this struggle seems futile. Knowledge is presumably under the tip of our fingers. On the other hand, faith in knowledge seems to be reinforced at a deeper level, and the unknown is brushed aside. The artistic uncovering, which Nietzsche speaks about in BT, Sec.15, is now further obliterated; we are no

¹² UM II, sec.5, p.84.

longer interested in puzzles, in the process of uncovering, in hidden meanings, and in ambiguities; all is clear, all can be known.

Mass emails with no specific target audience, which function with the “anything for anyone” mentality, subsume individuals to certain categories to which they don’t belong; categorization exists in our social lives, and mass/social media operates with it. Herd mentality is dominant in the world of the Internet and social media; the recent political events in the Middle East in which social media were used, are mass uprisings. They are not events inspired by free-spiritedness. Mass movements will be stuck in the vicious circles they create. Media usurps even the spirit of protestation; what may be left is pseudo-protestation.

Readers or viewers are treated in the same, uniform way, reducing their individuality to mobilized or mobilizable forces; they are seen as numbers or as buyers in the market place. They are assumed to be passive forces rather than an active audience; things are already made. This is mostly true for mass media, but social media also have restricted boundaries for creativity, if it has any, and levels of bureaucracy, which hinder creative activity. The presumed initiative for creativity in social media is a false one; it is there as an Ersatz for the creative deed, but it is only pseudo-creativity. (BT, Sec. 4, TSZ, Prologue on the Last Man who knows it all, but is not creative, etc.)

Epilogue

There needs to be a new ethos of media and spectacle to counteract the surging tides of mass movements in recent times, as they have been reinforced by technological media. Both the technology and the media it has enabled must be questioned; those alienating and alienated elements, treatment of human beings as numbers, as a standing army to be mobilized, as instruments for the market place, as objects and subjects of ideologies (to be followed blindly), as objects of repression in all forms, all of these issues must be confronted. It is in this way that a new ethos that embraces these new technologies in an *active*, life-affirming spirit, will emerge. Mass media and social media as they exist today are infused with the spirit of reactivity; the “world stage” is taken over by the masses in one form or another, whether at the level of grand

state politics or at the level of pop culture. Only a new ethos can change things in meaningful ways.

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