

Günter Anders and the modification of reality

Abstract

It's time for Western philosophy to reflect on the effects provoked by the technique's invasion developed since the XIX century until nowadays. What's technique today? Who's the human being after technology elements had invaded its life? My research will be based on the relationship between individual and technic and particularly on the transformations produced by it in its origin on human beings existence. In the first volume of *The obsolescence of man*, Günter Anders reveals the new technologies's danger. His texts try to melt theory and practice, pushing away an exclusive contemplative philosophical life giving back meaning at the Philosophy as a doctrine necessary for an authentic existence.

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Introduction

Günter Anders' philosophy intends to show us pieces of nowadays life coming from singular and temporary facts. Anders' writing could be defined as practical and coherent, with an inner praxis of his own thought and critical spirit. It shows what he talks about and writes about what can be seen. What Anders writes about are faces, bodies, gestures, behaviours or actions, where the apocalyptic sense of his analysis is expressed. In the deterioration of a face, it becomes possible to perceive the deterioration of a whole era. In the first volume of *The obsolescence of man*¹ it is already possible to notice how the visible and superficial are expressing a meaningful sense of invisibility and deepness. The portrait described by Anders during the Cold War days and economical recuperation times would be incomplete without the description of the girls' *make-up* or the inorganic sex appeal, which both reduce bodies to manipulable objects.

Anders unravels the Promethean shame of the human being for having lost control over his devices and his inability to foresee the consequences of its production. Technical devices, as they gather into an autonomous system, overcome individuals escaping from them. "Individuals do not feel ashamed of the severe consequences caused by the artificial manipulation they have done to the nature on the contrary, they are ashamed of not being something else, of not being as perfect as a machine, a clone, as it is desired by professionals in the fields of human engineering and genetics"¹ Human beings get to the paradigmatic, irrational and stunning conclusion of desiring to be an object. Individuals within the technological society found themselves subordinated to the machines they have created, getting a feeling at the same time of shame and hypophora. Mechanical devices, which are always more efficient reveals human as something out of date. Machine's perfection comes from its ability to reproduce in mass, and from its potential for immortality, gifts not granted to human beings.

When individuals face mechanical perfection, they devalue themselves, as having human needs such as sleeping, eating, having fun or relax, all of which, within the technical age are considered as defects. Within the industrial society, machines become the core engine running the social lives of the individuals. Promethean shame overcomes the stadium of reification as far as the human being recognizes the superiority of things over himself. The first reason of

this superiority can be found at the machine's production phase, composed by multiple individual acts which are traceless. The second reason can be represented by the fact that the human being, as something organic is not repairable, thus deteriorating, whether machines have the possibility of being substituted and repaired. In consequence, individuals live in the illusion of a comfortable existence in the age of technique, a repetitive, neutral, automatic and futile time. The age of technique, in order to complete its development has the need of creating a reality of its own, different from the original as its system aims to be omnipresent as physical and metaphysical superstructure.

Bearing the main responsibility of this development, inhabiting the individuals' daily lives, is television. It is the symbol of the new age, a visible face of the advanced phase in which mass culture is immersed. Günter Anders has been a true television's physiognomist and predicted the apocalyptic fate to be brought by it; nobody has been able to describe its unreality effect as he did. Television for Anders means a no way-back road for the human race, which finds itself on the edge. At the beginning, audience had the possibility of gathering in a place in order to assist to a show, such as a cinema play, for example. "It was a way to share their time and emotions with others"¹.

With the arrival of the television that did not happen any longer; the domestic side of this mean implied the loss of the collective emotional capacity in human beings. Television's main objective is the consumption, of its content by the mass individual. This mean bears responsibility in turning the consumption world from a collective dimension to an intimate one. Products' consumption is done by the individuals directly from their homes. The individual recipient of these products steps away from what it is real, dreaming about his own singularity, for having the chance of observing the universe from his living room. This world delivered home, however, is a ghost of the original, an artificial reproduction. Each consumer, assures Anders, "becomes an unpaid domestic worker who contributes to the creation of the mass individual"¹.

The unemployed, or the worker in their free time, keep on participating into the production process in a total new different way; on one side the product is consumed through the television, while on the other side through this consumption the individual is being

modeled. The subject constantly cooperates in the individual mass production and the consumption of the mass media products. Basically, the consumer pays to be sold itself, to be objectified. This process highly desired by the system increases the appetite of the consumer to be integrated within the machine, of being part of its process, reducing itself voluntarily and conforming, to be an apparatus within the productive system. The familiarization created by the medium with this world delivered home, creates the individual alienation phenomenon. The individual loses his true relation with the world, and at the same time he loses himself, his individuality. The gradual oddness towards reality operated by the mass-media produces a constant comfort as living in hallucination, to the extent that the audience merges with television and cinema characters, participating passionately in their lives, while considering reality as something weird and hostile. The creation of the mass-hermit is a direct consequence of bringing together the external world and the inner one. "The mass media hermit is the one consuming in a private way mass media products; it is the final product of singularity's massification, a schizophrenic and unreal subject".¹ This individual loses his loquacity, becoming an obedient, subordinated subject, without arguments of its own.

Big mass concentrations, as in the time of the dictatorships, are no longer needed in order to annihilate the rational sphere of the subject. Through the individual dimension of the consumption, the conditioning process happens with an apparent freedom of choice. Media creates the illusion of a private life when in reality; the domestic sphere is completely invaded by pre-directed images. Each media product acts with a unidirectional doctrine function over the subject, prescribing how to feel or say, modifying his intentions and trying to erase any space for individual thought. "Each mass hermit listens, thinks, buys and talks about the same topics, forgetting about the originality and the emancipational potential within the creative, being trapped within the ethics of the technical mean".¹ We are facing a phase of dehumanization for the human being, a limit situation in its experience. Living in a hyper-media reality turns desire for the audience, who choose the technical mean as a model, making possible the command of these copies and matrix over the human behavior.

Television determines solely, under the author's point of view, a loss; a loss of reality, experience, intelligence, sensibility, understanding, critic and action. This loss hides itself, being sold as a reality and experience acquisition. The distance between the audience and what it is broadcasted is lost, increasing the strangeness. Anders aware how human beings are ever more determined by the technical medium, by its anti-human ethics, as now it is the ghost of the world who ensures the existence of reality; it is the medium the matrix which shapes reality to its image, alienating the audience through a bombing of images which end up designing the world they live in. Anders does not hope for any positive influence from the television, as long as this one contributes to approach the world to human beings, with the final objective of annihilating it. "The illusion of living in the world in a safer and more comfortable way provokes in the individuals a forgetting effect about what a non-alienation world is".¹

The true function of mass media is modelling the individual both as consumer and merchandise through the imposition of this outside world over the inner one. The direct human exploration of reality is no longer valid, as experience becomes old-fashioned, antiquated. "The substitution of experience with the *live experience* is an example of the falseness provoked by the transformation operated by the medium".¹

The audience believes in living true moments, not pre-recorded events; nevertheless, at the same time what it is believed to be real, actually comes from a previous organization process, neither free, nor spontaneous, but calculated and programmed with a high degree of censorship. The world as a phantom becomes reality through the images. The characteristic of this ghost is the fact that it is neither close, nor far, being at the same time absent and present; its ontological statute is the ambivalence, the opposed coexistence; a parricide against Parmenides. "The ghost generates apathy and disorientation, restricting possibilities to the inner praxis".¹

Anders sees the radio and television as dangers, being the ones who created a new alienating universe. What this mass reproducing media broadcast, gives to the actual fact a status of appearance, where image and reality melt without distinction. The universe of the real turns this way into pseudo-real, a ghost of itself." The whole picture of the world, comments Anders, obscures the truth and makes the world disappear behind its own image".¹ The author not only notices how the television darkens and transforms the world, but how it produces it this way; television's images represent its matrix, what gives the world its origin. Anders anticipates to the code notion by Baudrillard, denominating it "matrix" surveying the intrusion of fixed schemes responsible for the modeling of the world. The matrix operates mostly towards the satisfaction of needs, contributing to their creation. It gets to the human sensibility and moral qualities, shaping his individuality in a way he does not get far from the mediatised process. The induction to consumption ravages the individual, which is dependent on the commodities which he possesses, or better said, the commodities possess him.

The image produced by the television -most of all the digital one- is also something new, special; it is a super real image (we could refer to HD television). It does not come up as the Baudrillard's simulation idea, but it is close enough, as far as the television's world it's made by manufactured codes, designed to shape a stereotyped world. Reality turns into derealization and a fake, as it is systematically substituted by truer images of itself, hyper representing it, they end up making it unreal. Reality compared to the HD representation becomes obsolete, old-fashioned. The old distinction between true/false, real/unreal, truth/lie vanishes. Image then is not only guilty of turning the world into ghost, but of producing it, shaping and generating it through itself and for its own means. An inversion happens, where is no longer the image which chases the world in order to copy and reproduce it, but the world is the one which follows the image, aiming to copy this reproduction, transforming into it and this way be able to recognize itself. The medium generates a system where it is the image the one which creates the world, where they are the original, the model, a reference to impersonate by the reality. The copy is the original product, serving as an inspiration for the real world; the reproduction becomes reality's model for originality. Anticipating Baudrillard's perfect crime, Anders understands how the hyper realisation of the world made by the television could mean its own end. "The kind of perfection's world for this fake reality it's the easiest to reproduce for the audience's consumption".¹

The television to which Anders refers to is the US one, to begin with, and later during the Cold War it includes as well the European. It is the television which manipulates events in order to transform them into broadcastable content; if there is space for the original reality then it is aimed only to be used by its copies. Television projects directed pseudo realism where the annihilation of the world's memory

is predominant. The paradox of this matrix is that at the same time it shapes the world, it makes the world disappear. This reminds closely to the paradox expressed by the “Dialectic of Enlightenment”, where the promise of progress and freedom made by the mass media, turns into a regress, a cage where mass-media individuals from the cultural industry end up living. The world under a technical optic is valuable as long as it is a product, and obeys only to the logic of the industry and progress. Also, for Anders, the relation subject-object has been turned upside-down, not only because the world has been transformed into merchandise, but also because his creator, the subject, remarkably desires this objectification. The fact that the proof of reality is given by something artificially created by the matrix, confirms the prevail of the reason’s irrationality in the technical age, an idea in line with the philosophers of the Frankfurt School. Then, it is possible to talk about the technic’s irrationality, about the technique’s dialectic in order to update to our time the analysis process of the technological product.

Also, as it was for the Frankfurt thinkers and for the French philosopher Jacques Ellul, the ethics of the technological product customized by Anders consists in deleting or absorbing anything which does not belong to its system. It no longer exists a reality which is not compatible with the world of television, and if it does exist, it has to be mediated and turned into hyper reality. For Anders, as well as for Jacques Ellul, we are not free to decide the use given to the technique; “it is this last one which disposes and models the shape and meaning of the human being’s occupations”.² It does not exist any dialectic within the medium; its function is illusion, taking away the world from the individual, and the individual from the world; television creates a perfect and whole de-realization.

The world, as it was for the Situationists, changes within the show of its own existence. It is not possible for Anders discerning where the border between reality and fiction is; this edge has been erased; we could observe that Baudrillard’s idea of simulation is already present here. Due to the lack of positive connotations of this media usage for Anders, the victim of this derealisation effect it is the individual, the ghost *par excellence*. The audience loses the original and direct relation with the world as mediated by the mass reproduction media. Television conditionates and pre-determines the physical and mental condition of the human being, their souls and bodies, affecting mostly to their behavior within this derealisation context. Pre-manufacturing the world serves to modify human’s subjectivity.³⁻⁵

“Image serves to prepare the individual, constitute it and shape it, in order to leave him only with reality’s ghosts to live”.¹ Living an existence totally filled with images it is the television’s first objective, to the extent that the individual doesn’t have to live outside of the hallucination created by it. As in Plato’s cave, the human being understands reality through images projected over the wall, not having any direct experience with it. The system of images induces individuals to a mere contemplation of an illusory world. It is the media itself, and not only images and content which shape human’s behaviour. These are not just media, but true individualities shaping human beings and their relations with the world, in line with the technique’s mandate described by Ellul. The behavioural model inducted by the media is validated by the contributions of the modern cognitive sciences. It is well-known the use of psychology techniques by marketing experts. Science is completely transformed into media objective, aiming to trespass into the individual’s private sphere, evaluating his existence as a needing state.

The manipulation operated by the media wants to create the illusion of broadcasting real facts, such as news, which represent pre-manufactured judgments according to Anders. Events are to be produced artificially; they are no longer spontaneous as they have to respect the logic of their creator. Information’s world then becomes a world of disinformation production. Being able to access to the world’s information comfortably from home, the individual is cheated and uninformed, as this information is created and manipulated in order to create a fooled and uninformed individual, like in Marcuse’s book *One dimensional Man*. Media acts as a silent terrorism, liquid, leaking through any fissure, evaporated and creating an atmosphere of its own, intoxicating individuals and seducing them with its power. The lack of freedom seems then something normal and obvious to the human being’s eyes, which is not conscious of the perversion and danger attached to this way of life. The truly worrying fact is represented by the inability to perceive this lack of freedom and this alienation. Individuals can shape their world without noticing the price to be paid for it. The technique allows this illusion, when submitting human beings to its own manufacturing process. Image, shaping an artificial universe, comes to this artificial elaboration process of the individual, whose value is measured as a product. There is no coming back for a ghost, neither dialectic which can intervene over something which is not continuous. The medium has annihilated the real and any form of dialectic.

Between the real atomic bomb, and the virtual one represented by television there is no difference. In both cases, human beings have created something which got out of control and now commands over them. The atomic bomb represents the division between a merchandised world and a world which obeys only to the blind machinery production and its own merchandise. The post-atomic principle is about producing technical products apt to work and leisure, in order to get used to the machine’s omnipresence. After the atomic bomb, individuals represent only the worker of the technical system, and his survival is just an option. What happened in Hiroshima and Nagasaki was the annihilation of the world and the individual, creating a world without individual and an individual without world. That is what television does according to Anders, in a subtle way, reducing the world and the human being to ghosts. Anders hopes for a raise of awareness by the human being, against the medium represented by the matrix. Why would an individual, who is alienated, wake up one day from this media slavery and wonder about the reason of this alienation? Anders appeals to the human being’s ancient love for truth, which nowadays seems to bear no importance.

Anders analysis aim is to warn humanity about the need of apocalyptic awareness, which the individual needs to fight against. Anders hopes for an exit, for a capacity within the human being for transcending the limits of derealisation trying to retrieve consciousness, imagination and feelings. Behind his despair, Anders hides the hope of a human awake in order to destroy the *medium*. For the author, one of the possible solutions to this media alienation consists in destroying television and mass media, in order to retrieve the individual and his independence. Machines and objects had become the main characters in the story, and for this reason, Anders craves for a human being come back through the machines’ destruction. The awakening of this voluntary slavery situation by the individual includes not only the awareness of the media domination, but the media destructive praxis. For Anders, machines have to be sabotaged, destroyed and dereal-

ised, as it was for the Luddites. Differently from them, it is no longer a fight of the crafter against the factory production, or the labourer against the machine, but a fight of all human kind against the global and widespread derealisation, to be found in the atomic bomb and home television, in the huge consumption of manufactured images at a global scale.⁶⁻⁹

This modification process of reality, started by post modernity and described by Anders, has a global side, getting to every continent and social class, in every house and every individual. The medium is the matrix in the assimilated show, in this simulation society and virtual reality. Machine has destroyed, and keeps on doing it, the human being, reason which leads Anders to a campaign to raise awareness in the individuals so they would take over this destruction and give it back to the machines, deleting at the same time any form of dialectics. In my opinion, it is of utmost importance to analyze the origins of the technique's phenomenon, in order to not forget about its prints, its processes, which as it happens with machinery's construction, get lost with time. It is important remembering that all of this did not exist, that the construction of this ever more autonomous system is a human production. Anders analysis anticipates the world we live in nowadays, it unravels the technique's cheating process and this new type of alienation brought in by technology and its ethics. Internet and computers are progressively substituting the television, which nevertheless keeps existing and updating. The world delivered home has become part of the reality and daily nature for human beings, who are no longer bothered by this problem. It is because of that, that Anders' message is vital to awaken the few critical individuals to this manufactured world, who do not want to live a manufactured existence, but living in the most authentic and free possible way.

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Conflicts of interest

Author declares that there is no conflicts of interest.

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