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Reading Headlines: the narrative procedures of the global media

Every morning Hegel was reading newspapers and later updating the complex philosophy through the prisms of the fresh headlines in his lectures.

Commenting on this Hegel wrote:

“Reading the morning newspaper is the realist's morning prayer. One orients one's attitude toward the world either by God or by what the world is. The former gives as much security as the latter, in that one knows how one stands” (Hegel 2000).

He realised the role of the news as a powerfully externalised collective memory through the stereotypes which became the common culture with an impact on the ‘individual’. Thinking of the philosophy's dialectical attitude to news headlines in the nineteenth century and observing their impact on the popular consciousness in the age of globalised media points to the question: What kind of role headlines can play in the process of trans-individuation? Here I will argue that headlines function semiotically in a particular way of informing by sending and receiving messages, which causes certain ‘entropy’ while making the meaning of the information open for the receiver and plays the role in trans-individuation. It takes place by the ‘reading’ of the headlines differently. In the growing media industry, the information creates the milieu which exists as a convincing space of transmitting. For some it is totally convincing as it were, by taking for granted any information, whereas others perceive this milieu as a critical space which produces the entropic temporal object. It occurs by prominently questioning the role of knowledge, and the information as the unit of knowledge. It is the fuzzy nature of language which gives rise to the information. Headlines consist of semantically incomplete sentences and this incompleteness is the main point of departure for the further reading while encoding/decoding news. In a critical manner provided by the

work of the recent cultural theory, by the word ‘reading’ I mean not only “the capacity to identify and decode a certain number of signs, but also the subjective capacity to put them into a creative relation between themselves and with other signs: a capacity which is, by itself, the condition for a complete awareness of one’s total environment” (Hall 1996: 58). Differently from some current tendencies in philosophy, I also believe that any philosophical work needs to start from the discursive element (despite its being correlational) in order to reveal the meaning in the contaminated terrain of the use of the language.¹ Philosophy, for this matter, is not only the possibility of the thought to grasp the world in its exteriority and contingency, but also the philosopher’s position. News headlines are what Husserl called temporal objects and after him Stiegler critically called the tertiary retention.² Temporal objects are formed in the flux of time which coincides with the ‘montage-consciousness’. It plays a significant role in the ‘industrial temporalisation of the consciousnesses’ (Stiegler 1998).³ There is no doubt that headlines play role in the media’s

¹ Although I think the emergence of the new discourse in philosophy, namely ‘speculative realism’, (especially the work of Quentin Meillassoux), which actually rejects the discourse as it is “correlational” is an important attempt to renew philosophy’s attitude I absolutely disagree it’s abandoning the discourse and the role language plays in the political strategies, (such as feminism for example), altogether in order to have a ‘direct access to things’. This ‘naïve realism’ is diminishing the militant role of philosophy and cultural theory. However, interestingly enough, Meillassoux after abandoning ‘correlationalism’ altogether in his essay *After Finitude*, in another essay recognises the impossibility of the escape from the ‘meaning’ (Meillassoux 2012).

² I would like to point to the use of the concept of ‘a temporal object’ as originated from ‘a continuous function’ a concept coined by Karl Weierstrass. While studying mathematics with Weierstrass in 1878-1880 at University of Berlin, Husserl became interested in this concept. A continuous object is a geometric object (topos) which functions continuously in space, in a topological continuum. For Husserl this continuous function is ‘now’ or ‘a temporal object’.

³ Edmund Husserl coined the term ‘a temporal object’ in order to show that ‘the object of inquiry’ (the intention of the consciousness directed towards objects of the world) is a temporal state of the investigation itself. This temporal state creates the condition for the existence of a temporal object, which gives the ‘striking evidence’. The consciousness is the intention of the subject; the temporal object is the intentionality of the world. This idea is developed by Bernard Stiegler, who applies the notion of temporal objects to his critique of the technical “industrial temporalisation of the consciousness under the pressure of hyper-industrialisation”. Stiegler is critically engaged in the reading of Husserl’s notion of temporal objects.

controlling of the popular consciousness, although I don't exclude the possibility of the liberating aspect of the situation. In this situation the use of a certain form of knowledge through the articulation by the language produces 'pharmacological effect', which is both poison and remedy. From this angle the 'headlines' are interesting for the critique and the possible re-articulation in their readability. With headlines both the intelligible and the sensible fell into abeyance, into the position of being without and "*Waiting for Godot*".⁴ It is the media's manner of turning away from the world of intelligibility and sensibility by the intelligent means that causes the drying out of the reason. However in this drying out of the reason the repairing of the reason may also be possible. When we read headlines we are encountering the absence of reason, which is present in the immediacy and instantaneity which may be thrown away or skipped as something too temporary, but it may also be developed into a dramaturgy like in Orson Welles's film "*Citizen Kane*".⁵ In fact my own artistic and philosophical interest emerged from my analysis of this film which ended in the essay-installation entitled *Headlines etc.* which was shown first at the Venice Biennale.⁶ The installation addressed the narrative procedures of the global news and the possibility of their giving rise to a dramaturgy differently from the scenario of the media. It takes courage to acknowledge that in a position of 'being without' the only possible articulation is the return inquiry made into technics and this technics always already full of potential of forming a new language. As in a very radical philosophical thesis by Stiegler to which I have repeatedly referred: 'technics precedes thought' (Stiegler 1998). In order to make any sense of feeling into abeyance a new technicality is the possibility of retaining a new mode of thinking from the language. I am not suggesting that language should be taken as a basic inquiry as in Analytic philosophy or its

⁴ It is the reference to the title of the play by Samuel Beckett written in 1948.

⁵ Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* (1941) as a first film not only questioning news domination through headlines, but also a film made as headlines.

⁶ See: www.zeigamazizov.com

power of forming structures as in the Continental philosophy, but language as a technique explaining technics preceding thought and anticipating what may be remembered. Technics should be understood as a kind of inoculation as it produces pharmacological effects further. Language is not only power to speak; it is also a power to explain. Partly because language from the very beginning is the articulation of the collective memory and this collective memory is ‘cut’ into the subject from the very early on when one starts to speak and in speaking both the subject and the object inseparably connected. Like Althusser, who developed his notion of ideology inspired by Lacan’s theory, I believe that this particular aspect needs not to be forgotten, when one thinks of the interaction of the ‘private’ with the ‘public’.⁷ Through the collapse of the private with the public the control itself is internalised and ‘subjects speak by themselves’ (Althusser 2002: 953). To understand the power of the ideological control through the language of the media is the step towards the liberation of the subject. This understanding also includes that a singular mark should also be repeatable and iterable as mark, because any singular mark is an expression of multiple meanings. The ‘grammatisation’, to use Stiegler’s term, of retentions of memory rearticulated in these multiples meanings is the task of the ‘reading’.⁸ “Grammatisation’ is the ‘technical history of memory’, in which hypomnesis intermittently reintroduces the constitution of a tension within anamnesis. Since the industrialised memory may be understood as a language, grammatisation is an act of re-articulation of the missing dimension of time. The technical history of memory creates different levels or degrees of memory, because historically memory is exteriorised by different means, starting from the ‘pictographic writing’ to the recent use of ‘emojis’ and their reclassification in the manner of linguistics is called grammatisation. The reading of headlines follows the logic

⁷ Louis Althusser developed the notion of ‘ideology is structured like language out of Lacan’s notion of ‘unconsciousness is structured as language’ (Althusser 2002)

⁸ Bernard Stiegler explains his notion of ‘grammatisation’ and its role in the technical history of memory in (Stiegler 2013a)

of inclusion/exclusion, but also the possibility of becoming a part of the missing message in them through grammatisation. This creates both the mimetic aspect of reading and production of what follows the imitation. This critical ‘mimodrama’ is an important act of becoming aware of the ‘secretive’ work of the ideology in the media discourse (Derrida 1991: 172). Historically, after their first appearance in newspapers, headlines were adopted by artists of the early avant-garde. Soon after this and in its turn, the news media adopted the artistic element in order to expand its “palette” by bringing the aesthetic dimension into the political space of headlines. It is where ‘the aestheticization of politics’ starts, which was noticed by Benjamin immediately (Benjamin 1999:234). The early 20th century art, like cubist paintings or Dadaist collages, for instance, used headlines in order to show the articulation of public news in the realm of the individual experience. Headlines appropriated this act for its own insight, which demonstrated a complete collapse of the individual into the experience of the collective or rather popular consciousness, where ideology is inscribed in every single person’s experience. In this experience of ‘the shock of the news’ is the retention of the ‘shock of the new’ which was once told about contemporary art.⁹ In decoding headlines language helps to get clearer idea of the real function of the media, which today plays the role of hegemony by rapidly substituting and influencing arts. Art often imitates the act of the media in order to appear in headlines. Media borrows from art, literature and philosophy most radical structures by carefully avoiding their critical context. For example, semiotics, which came into existence for the critical reading of arts by radical thinkers, itself, became the basic language of the media. It does, of course, make the question of understanding even more complex, yet possible. By taking the complexity as a reality of our times this possibility is chance and

⁹ The Shock of the New is a 1980 documentary television series written and presented by Robert Hughes produced by the BBC. The book of the series was published in 1980 by the BBC under the title The Shock of the New: Art and the century of change. It was republished in 1991 by Thames and Hudson.

choice to avoid the globalised control overpopulation desires. It is the definition of the regime of computation (complexity to complexity) defined by Katherine Hayles as an alternative to classical metaphysics (simplicity to complexity) (Hayles 2005 : 15.) This complexity disorients on the one hand and directs towards the encoding/decoding on the other, which means each time encountering news headlines, there is a need to make an inquiry into the nature of work itself and to understand the ideological basis of the media as a work. Headlines connect our everyday experience of reality to events through our gadgets and devices. In this world of hyper- travelling and being constantly connected to a stream of images, the world itself is available as news headlines. This makes our planet look like an assemblage. For a contemporary person, who lives in the era of the Image, headlines provide a compressed image of events. These compressed images develop into fetishized forms of subjectivity that find their basis in geographical, cultural, and identity oriented stereotypes carefully coded in headlines. Headlines contain cyphers and codes of what took place in short sentences or even better to say, in “sentence-images”(Ranciere 2009). These “sentence –images” not only inform people, they also immediately return them back, towards the primal impulse. This return is not straight forward-it may create a clear answer foursome or a jigsaw puzzle for many. And according to Montagne images exist in the same way: “We do not move in one direction rather we do wander back and forth, turning now this way and now that. We go back on our own tracks (...)’ .¹⁰ Tarkovsky reflecting on that thought of Montaigne’s said:

“This thought reminds me about something I thought of in connection with flying saucers, humanoids, and the remains of unbelievably advanced technology found in some ancient ruins. They write about aliens, but I think that in these phenomena we are in fact confronting ourselves; that is our future, our descendants who actually travel in time” (Tarkovsky 1998).

¹⁰ Michel de Montaigne quoted in (Tarkovsky 1998)

After technics give rise to the thought a certain idea of reality first emerges in the brain and is then projected to the outside, absorbed in memory, memorised in images and then projected back as they are recorded by technology. This is how reality is produced by non-real means and defined as trans- human and constantly migrating indifferent directions as in news headlines. In headlines that form the ‘sentence–image’, one event precedes another while what follows unexpectedly disrupts what came before. Reality is replaced by carefully coded sentence-images, headlines that contain traces of events that have happened or that will never happen. Any headline is a hyper-real simulation of the population's fantasy of the lost art, which directly speaks to the viewer without any commentary. Headlines themselves are commentaries. On the one hand commentaries offer an alternative to the mainstream brainwash, but on the other hand “commentary is the world's greatest super power: one crumbles under statements of intent, diplomatic analyses, and interpretive biographies. Commentary has become a sort of star personality. But it is also a tremendous force of intimidation and standardization: Comment (faire) taire - How (to make) silent - that which escapes preset ideas” (Godard 2009). In this sense headlines are programmed. In the age of globalisation it is the common feature of any work; programmes have replaced ‘subject-object’ dichotomy for temporal objects, which industrialises the consciousness. What one needs is to learn to “read “them, in order to understand the ambiguity of headlines and the possibility of turning them into one’s own repertoire by grammatising. In his short text entitled *The biography of an object* the Russian/Soviet futurist writer Sergey Tretyakov very convincingly described how objects enter into subjects and create some sort of mutual readability.¹¹ His ideas emerged as part of the so-called ‘war with the novel’ by opposing the photographic narrative against

¹¹ The text based on the talk given in Germany in 1931, where Sergey Tretyakov came by the invitation of his friend Bertolt Brecht. Apparently Walter Benjamin was present in this lecture, who later quoted Tretyakov in his essay “The Author as Producer”(Benjamin 1999)

the narrative of the novel. For the early avant-garde novels were rejected as psychological machines in which subjectivity and affect prevail at the expense of objects and objectivity. As Tretyakov writes, “In the novel, the leading hero devours and subjectivizes all reality” (Tretyakov 2006 p.57-62). However, the biography of the object is a powerful alternative method. In this method:

(...)not the individual person moving through a system of objects, but the object proceeding through the system of people—for literature this is the methodological device that seems to us more progressive than those of classical belles lettres. There is, however, something more important here than genre and plot, and that is the question of what is enabled by the new object-focused approach (Tretyakov 2006: 57-62).

By telling an object’s story one discovers the hidden social relations behind its production and consumption. It makes the biography of the object look like a new type of narrative in which the story of an object becomes the story of the people who made it, providing a cross section of the social relations that shaped them. The biography of the object has an extraordinary capacity to incorporate human material. Subjects come into contact with the object through their social aspects and production skills, where “people’s individual and distinctive characteristics are no longer relevant” (Tretyakov 2006: 57-62). Written in the early period of the Soviet republic, this committed revolutionary writer without realising it himself predicts the dominating power of the media, which forms its own language or rather linguistics where ‘people’s individual and distinctive characteristics are no longer relevant’. Headlines are such a ‘linguistic’ category and this linguistics doesn’t need a grammar and for this reason and on purpose semantically headlines are open sentences. Yet, certain meta-linguistics, like grammatisation is necessary in order to ‘complete’ these semantically incomplete sentences to avoid being dominated by the message of the media. In the above mentioned text, while giving the privilege to re-production for its potentials of the further individuation, Tretyakov, in the manner of his time, wanted to cut-off with the past. Inspired by this text of Tretyakov, but engaged

with the question of the re-production in a pharmacological sense, (i.e. poison as remedy) Walter Benjamin pays attention to the importance of captions accompanied pictures as headlines already in the late 19th century, while problematizing the disruption in the autonomy of the sign. The meaningless sign can be given any meaning by the addition of a text. This particular way of controlling the sign by editing “at the same time picture magazines begin to put up signposts for the viewer, right ones or wrong ones no matter. For the first time captions have become obligatory” (Benjamin 1999:220). It was made in order to entertain audiences by telling them ‘real’ stories on the one hand and to control the popular consciousness on the other. These captions, which are headlines today, don’t need to be added to any image and can be made as a text only. Because the fiction created by the media is so convincing and it is unquestionable for the ‘post-truth’ world of headlines. Because by adopting the fiction for the media’s ‘truth’ and through the regular repetitions the fiction has entered into the lives of individuals. Fiction has replaced the ‘real’ and there is no need to see the real in pictures, which is usually the evidence of time. Headlines consisting of sentences absorbed the image-ness of the image and became sentence-images. Every image is ‘sentence- image’ and image-text, but every text, in the same manner, is an image. This inter-textual reversal makes sentence- images work as indices. The sentence-image is the index, which contains memory and the discursive reading of memory by grammatisation may become an alternative language. By turning the information into the habit of everyday life headlines become a technical image of the information. Decoding what is encoded in them with the mastery of a code breaker brings together the obvious with the peculiar, while clinging into the fragment, into the single sentence or sentence- image. Reading is clinging into the fragment and influences these sentences one upon another, which will translate the untranslatable into one’s own repertoire with a little return, a ritournell, which makes a big difference through the degrees of memory (Deleuze and Guattari

1987). The reading of headlines depends on the degree of memory or different levels of remembering and forgetting. Media as ‘a technology systematically orders memories’ (Stiegler2010: 64-87). This ordering doesn’t end in the complete closure, because the notion of ‘differance’ persists (Derrida 1991). Differing and deferral of the event of ‘reading’ is working differently depending on the degree of memory. These readings provide different reproductions. Reproductions, where ‘re’ is the imitation whereas ‘production’ is an open work, provides for the possibility of elaboration differently from their use in the news media. Sentence-images are remnants of time and they are imitations as an elaboration of the missing dimension of time. This dimension of time may be discovered elsewhere and the ideological space of the news headlines are no exception. In fact headlines are imitations of the remnants of images. While substituting the memory of images in peoples mind, news headlines offer a sentence -image which plays the role of the ‘remembering of the things past’ in the Proustian manner. In the same manner and in order to escape the oblivion to encode/decode these headlines is the potential for every individual, who wants to understand the ‘essence’ of the news. The amalgamation of images of the media with images of art, a natural language with the media language gives rise to a perceptual exchange, which is a symbolic exchange of mutual imitations. With the ubiquitous use of technologies any perceptual exchange is imitational. Here degrees of memory, in other words, remembering and forgetting, blindly believing and ambivalently forgetting resists any form of control, while leaving a choice for the desiring individual to become a personal editor of headlines while acting out of the technique of derushage as a mechanism of imitation. Adopted from the process of the montage in the post-production process, derushage (rushes of the video), as it is articulated in the work of Bernard Stiegler, is a possibility to remember the initial meaning of the information and making a sense out what is discovered at the beginning and at the certain end point (Stiegler 2011:27). Text is a great piece of the ‘derushage’ which

demonstrates how the reading of the text is writing at the same time, which means to read another author means to translate it into one's own repertoire. It takes place at the point of the temporary disuse of the language by the media. This aspect is crucial to 'reading headlines'. Reading like writing is imitation (Derrida 2002: 944). Imitation enters into the participation of the one in the other, as 'a part of which is not part' (Ranciere 2005). After the certain experience of gaining knowledge of the ideology while recalling the "news", which motivates the subject's imagination, the act of reading instigates a double reversal and dispersal of binary codes. In this reversal the proliferation of codes gives rise to the distinction between the internal and external, between incompetence and expertise. Waiting for something to take place, by receiving the meaning affirms the immediate presence of the absent. But this absence is 'transmitted' in the figure of the distance, the dashes and dots of the information coded in the news. One is waiting to discover the message, which may be decoded or not and this expectation is the return to the meaning that has gone missing together with the media's tendency to exclude. The possible reading of situations and ideas implicit in the media's work and articulated in headlines. In this reading the headline is iterable as mark, because any singular mark is an expression of multiple meanings. This multiplicity of meaning creates a great economy of reducing the mark to a 'singularity' but also to many different forms. It is also because if there is any singularity, it is the singularity made at the expense of the forced signification for the instant use only. This is what Husserl called an incomplete signification (Derrida 1991:190). After the use this 'singular' mark becomes empty and open to many different interpretations and speculations. But there is another important thing which makes the act of reading very unusual. It is the ambivalent imitation, a mimodrama, which helps to engage with the text fully without any linguistic prejudice. It is overcoming the limit of the language itself, which has emerged at the limits of the speech, which precedes it. In this transgression a shift from the language to a meta-

language is acting-out by grammatising, by becoming fully aware of the 'real' meaning of the message of the ideology. In other words, it is an act of the discovery of the missing dimension of time, a 'ritournell', a little return which makes a big difference. In a similar way the reading of headlines through the double negation while bringing into the negative space of media a positive dialectical engagement through the 'pharmacological effect' repairs the lack. The lack is in a total disengagement which alienates subjects distancing away from any sort of politics. The danger is that by doing so one becomes the subject of the control by the dominant politics. To escape this and to seize the control of the self is the ritournell at the abeyance; where disused language can be repaired by another reading. This possibility is the aleatory power created initially in the split between the speech and language, between the word and context and emerges in the cut between the word and the image. The 'cut' is elaborated by technology for the transmission of the news headlines in the distance. It is elaborated by the 'editors' interference by 'cutting and mixing'. This aleatory power makes possible the distant reading of the media message with critique and pleasure. The missing dimension of time brought back into its 'missing place' doesn't signify anything, simply replaces a lack. A lack negatively resided in the affirmative power of the 'yes' which replaced the negative. But this replacement itself is memory brought into another level. This level is the level of the liberation from the confusion, because "(...) the imitation (...) has always already interrupted natural plentitude, that having to be a discourse, it has always already broached presence in difference" (Derrida 1991). The suspended meaning is further re-articulated in the act of reading headlines as the 'switch board' connecting different times and places through the quotations, which reduces proliferated meanings to its own scheme. In this "scheme" the information itself becomes generic. The world is schematically presented as a wash of messages and every living thing is a unique signal. Meaning is an intricate switchboard, path for passing signals back and forth. By

its nature meaning is altering any perspective which it confronts and simultaneously changing its own perspective. At the same time the meaning also makes a shift by transforming the exchange based on the production into the production regulated by the exchange. At this point the meaning doesn't think or judge, it restricts itself to giving an exchange a new form. The subject and object collide and the collision becomes the hegemonic force articulating differences in the syntax of everyday reality through the incomplete sentences, which gives rise to its readability. Reading as technics precedes thought taking place in the abeyance of the technologized image of the information. Thought is the missing dimension of time, which is inseparable from the techniques and the emergence of thought is an event of discovery. While reading headlines, one is awaiting the arrival of the event, which may be accepted as a double negation. 'Yes' to the news, which hides the potentially readable content and 'Yes' to the content which is absent from the news yet possibly readable as it is hidden. This affirmation resists the dominance of the media, for the sake of the discovery of the missing dimension of time and its further grammatisation. This act, in Hegel's above quoted words "orients one's attitude toward the world ... by what the world is" (Hegel 2000). One can know only what one can make by acting out, in which making and thinking are inseparable parts of the grammatisation. Grammatization of what is gone missing as the act of reading while encoding/decoding of headlines, which takes backward and forward from the banal space of the media to the amalgamation of different degrees of memory is the elaboration of the lack. Reading headlines is the fuzzy ontology, which privileges the incompleteness as the condition of one's own making differently from the media's imposition of its "perfection" in the natural state of the incompleteness.

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