

# The Designer as Producer

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Walter Benjamin's ideas are explored (amongst other early 20th century avant-garde artists) in relation to the recent discussions around expanding the designer's role from that of problem solver to one of author—and producer.



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*Walter Benjamin is one of the most relevant German thinkers of the last century. He was a philosopher, cultural critic, traducer, historian, journalist – among others. He was born in Berlin in 1892 and focused his studies on culture. He emphasized that the only way to reach “emancipation” (from the state) was through the change of mentalities (that can only be changed by culture.) One of his most prominent texts is “The Author as Producer” where he considers the question: what is “good art”? On one hand, the communist party of his time considered that “good art” was one where a there was an explicit message in favor of communism. Another idea of the time was that good art was determined by its form. Benjamin rejected this division between form and content and claimed that good technique is the main component for a work of art (which would be the mix of proper content and proper form.) This would mean that the work would produce better perceptions and ideas and is produced in a superior manner.*

## 1900's

The slogan ‘designer as author’ has enlivened debates about the future of graphic design since the early 1990s. Behind this phrase is the will to help designers to initiate content, to work in an entrepreneurial way rather than simply reacting to problems and tasks placed before them by clients. The word author suggests agency, intention, and creation, as opposed to the more passive functions of consulting, styling, and formatting. Authorship is a provocative model for rethinking the role of the graphic designer at the start of the millennium; it hinges, however, on a nostalgic ideal of the writer or artist as a singular point of origin.



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## 1910 - 1920

The avant-garde movements of the 1910s and 1920s critiqued the ideal of authorship as a process of dredging unique forms from the depths of the interior self. Artists and intellectuals challenged romantic definitions of art by plunging into the worlds of mass media and mass production.

*Avant-garde (French term) which translates to "vanguard" discusses something that is ahead of its time, something visionary. Avant-garde refers to an innovation that is often misjudged and rejected in its own time. This artistic and innovative wave surges mainly in Europe during the first period of the XX century and later spreads across other continents like the Americas. It examines drastic social changes, in this context, occurring in the 1910's and 1920's. The avant-garde is an impulse of all those limits that are accepted as a norm, mainly in culture.*

In the 1920s, Benjamin met Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, the Hungarian Constructivist whose work as a photographer, typographer, artist, and writer made him a prominent figure at the Bauhaus.

*Laszlo Moholy-Nagy was born in 1895 in Hungary. He began his studies in law until he joined the army to fight in WWI, where he would be injured. This was when he began experimenting in the art world. In 1920, he moved to Germany where he would meet his future wife and mentor Lucia Schulz. Together, they began a unique photography style that would catapult them towards fame. In 1923, the prominent German school of art and design, Bauhaus of Weimar hired him as professor of the metal workshop. He later became general director of the school. His contributions to photography are still considered pillars within the domain. He believed that photography and light exposure were instruments for artistic investigation and creation.*

## 1920 - 1930

Benjamin was a Marxist, committed to the notion that the technologies of manufacture should be owned by the workers who operate them. In Marxist terminology, the 'means of production' are the heart of human culture and should be collectively owned. Benjamin claimed that writing (and other arts) are grounded in the material structures of society, from the educational institutions that foster literacy to the publishing networks that manufacture and distribute texts. In detailing an agenda for a politically engaged literary practice, Benjamin demanded that artists must not merely adopt political 'content,' but must revolutionize the means through which their work is produced and distributed.

*Marxism is known as the set of ideas, concepts, theories and proposals of philosophical, ideological, political, economic and social nature that are derived from the works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. It is a way of thinking about the human reality that has served as an ideological base of what is known as historical materialism, communism and different types of socialism. It is characterized by the rejection of capitalism and its economical thinking. Its thesis is the class conflict and the proposal is to build an equal society (classless). Its objective is for workers to control the means of production which would only be possible if social classes cease to exist; this would avoid that the minority accumulates the means of production to exploit the majority.*

Benjamin's 1928 collection of essays *One-Way Street* reflects on experimental typography and the proliferation of such commercial media as the pamphlet, poster, and advertisement, which were upending the classical book as literature's sacred vessel. Benjamin wrote: 'Printing, having found in the book a refuge in which to lead an autonomous existence, is pitilessly dragged out onto the street by advertisements and subjected to the brutal heteronomies of economic chaos. This is the hard schooling of its new form.' Describing the relation of authorship to technology, Benjamin predicted that the writer will begin to compose his work with a typewriter instead of a pen when 'the precision of typographic forms has entered directly into the conception of his books. One might suppose that new systems with more variable typefaces might then be needed'.

*One-Way Street* is a collection of essays written by Benjamin. They are both literary and intellectual essays. Included are his reflections on subjects like politics (greatly influenced by his childhood), language, psychology and history.

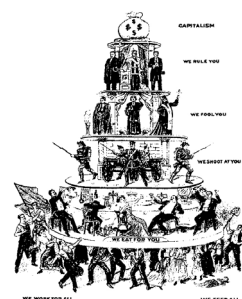
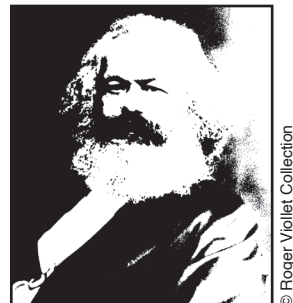


## 1930 - 1940

In 1934, the German critic Walter Benjamin wrote 'The Author as Producer', a text that attacked the conventional view of authorship as a purely literary enterprise. He exclaimed that new forms of communication – film, radio, advertising, newspapers, the illustrated press – were melting down traditional artistic genres and corroding the borders between writing and reading, authoring and editing.

Benjamin attacked the model of the writer as an 'expert' in the field of literary form, equipped only to craft words into texts and not to question the physical life of the work. The producer must ask, Where will the work be read? Who will read it? How will it be manufactured? What other texts and pictures will surround it? Benjamin argued that artists and photographers must not view their task as solely visual, lest they become mere suppliers of form to the existing apparatus of bourgeois publishing: 'What we require of the photographer is the ability to give his picture the caption that wrenches it from modish commerce and gives it a revolutionary useful value. But we shall make this demand most emphatically when we – the writers – take up photography. Here, too, therefore, technical progress is for the author as producer the foundation of political progress'.

Benjamin claimed that to bridge the divide between author and publisher, author and



reader, poet and popularizer, is a revolutionary act, because it challenges the professional and economic categories upon which the institutions of 'literature' and 'art' are erected.

Benjamin's Marxist emphasis has a tragic edge when viewed from the vantage point of today. By the time he wrote 'The Author as Producer,' abstract art was already at variance with Stalin's state-enforced endorsement of social realism. Benjamin applauded Dada and Surrealism for challenging the institutions of art, and yet such experimental forms were forbidden in the Soviet state he so admired. Benjamin's theory of the author as producer remains relevant today, however, even if one proposes more modest challenges to the existing structures of media and publishing, opening new paths of access to the means of manufacture and dissemination.

When Benjamin called for authors to become producers, he did not mean for them to become factory workers alienated from the form and purpose of the manufactured thing.

As Benjamin phrased it in 1934, the goal [to become a producer] is to turn 'readers or spectators into collaborators'. His words resonate in current educational models, which encourage students to view the reader as a participant in the construction of meaning.



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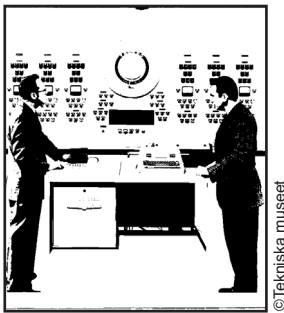
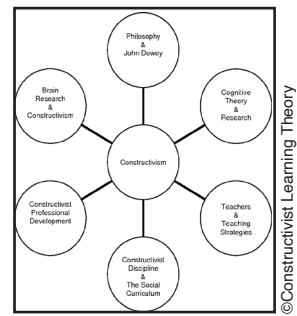
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*Dadaism is an artistic and literary movement that rose in WWI as a form to protest the dominant aesthetic canons. Artists wanted to overthrow all the conventions regarding art, creating a species of anti-art or rebellion against the established order. Some of the characteristics of the movement were the intimate relationship between word and image, daring use of typographies and the use of photomontages. The movement fought for art to be for the people- for everyone- not just the high class. In between both world wars, Surrealism was born, becoming the most important artistic movement of the time. More than a movement, it was a way of thinking. Its concepts involved subjects like the subconscious, the imaginary, and dreams. Surrealism wanted to transform life through the liberation of the mind of man and the restrictions that enslave them. The main player people ought to fight against is reason.*

*Now a days, many teaching models are based on the model of "constructivist teaching." This pedagogy is based on the principle that learning happens as learners are dynamically involved in a process of creating meaning and knowledge instead of just passively receiving information. In this model the learner is the creator of meaning and knowledge through an active, mental process of growth.*

1950 - 1960

## 1970 - 1980



*In the beginning of the 1980's, computers started to enter homes for the first time. The revolutionary devices allowed for millions of people to use and understand what these PC's (Personal Computers) were. Before, computers were seen as something that was reserved for data processing or a device used only by scientists, they were huge and required a lot of components to work. PCs were extraordinary-most people had never even seen one. In the 1970's electronics began to be miniaturized but they were still seen as too complicated or expensive for anyone to enjoy. That all changed when, in the 1980's, computers began to be advertised as an essential tool for education. They began to be ready-made (before people had to assemble them themselves, so it was seen as a hobby reserved for the people who had understanding of these technologies).*

## 1980-1990

The 'desktop' revolution that began in the mid-1980s brought these roles back into the process of design. The proletarianization of design offers designers a new crack at materialism, a chance to re-engage the physical aspects of our work. Whereas the term 'author,' like 'designer,' suggests the cerebral workings of the mind, production privileges the activity of the body. Production is rooted in the material world. It values things over ideas, making over imagining, practice over theory.





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As an alternative to ‘designer as author’,

## **I propose ‘designer as producer’.**

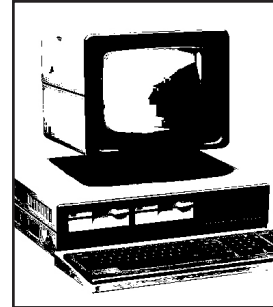
Production is a concept embedded in the history of modernism. Avant-garde artists and designers treated the techniques of manufacture not as neutral, transparent means to an end but as devices equipped with cultural meaning and aesthetic character.

... ‘new systems’ [*in typography*] are, of course, ubiquitous today in the form of software for word- processing and desk-top publishing. These tools have altered the tasks of graphic designers, enlarging their powers as well as burdening them with more kinds of work to do. Such is the rub of de-specialization. Benjamin celebrated the proletarian ring of the word ‘production,’ and the word carries those connotations forward into the current period.

Within the professional context of graphic design, ‘production’ is linked to the preparation of ‘artwork’ for mechanical reproduction, rather than to the intellectual realm of ‘design.’

Production belongs to the physical activity of the base, the factory floor: it is the traditional domain of the paste-up artist, the stripper, the letterer, the typesetter.

The challenge for educators today is to help designers become the masters, not the slaves, of technology. There exist opportunities to seize control – intellectually and economically – of the means of production, and to share that control with the reading public, empowering them to become producers as well as consumers of meaning.

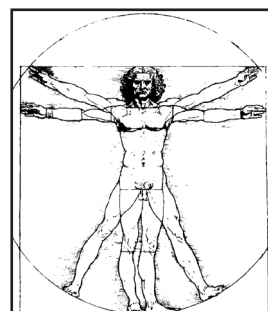


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*ubiquitous definition: present, appearing, or found everywhere*

*Such is the rub: Something that causes a difficulty or problem She’s an amazing cook, but she rarely has time to make meals. There’s the rub]*

*Production is rooted in the material world, and it privileges the activity of the body. The body and the mind working together is the ultimate goal.*



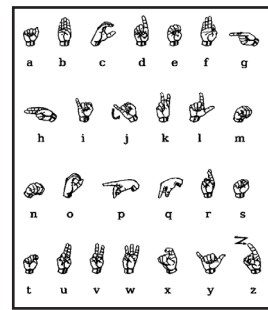
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## How can schools help students along such a path at this critical juncture in our history?

Language is a raw material. Enhance students' verbal literacy, giving them the confidence to work with and as editors, without forcing them to become writers. Theory is a practice. Foster literacy by integrating the humanities into the studio. Infuse the act of making with the act of thinking. Writing is a tool. Casual writing experiences encourage students to use writing as a device for 'prototyping,' to be employed alongside sketching, diagramming, and other forms of conceptualization. Technology is physical. Whether the product of our work is printed on paper or emitted from a screen, designers deal with the human, material response to information.

The medium is on the menu. Familiarize students with the many ways that information and ideas are disseminated in contemporary life. Give them the tools to find their rightful place in the food chain. The power of the term 'author' – its cultural authority – lies in its connection to the written text. In order for designers to take charge of the content and social function of their work, they need not become fluent writers, no more than an art director must become a professional photographer or illustrator in order to use these media effectively. In the business of film, a 'producer' brings together a broad range of skills – writing, directing, acting, cinematography, editing, and so on – in a work whose authorship is shared. For the designer to become a producer, she must have the skills to begin directing content, by critically navigating the social, aesthetic, and technological systems across which communications flow.

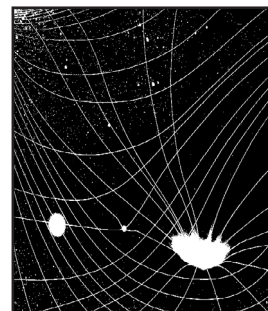


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*Students today should have the tools to create and idea from conception to finished product. It is not only understanding production as a process but as a concept as well. Tools like writing and technology should be taken advantage of to create new narratives of production.*



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