

Hans Magnus Enzensberger: A Great
Poet and Political Harlequin

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What an ending: During a hospital stay in Munich, 90-year-old Hans Magnus Enzensberger narrowly escapes an assassination attempt. The perpetrator is a nurse who has a habit of sedating his elderly patients with overdoses of tranquilizers when he has a hangover and wants to have his peace in the ward room. Enzensberger's doctor, in agreement with his wife, overrides his living will and initiates resuscitation measures. Enzensberger survives and subsequently spends about two more years peacefully at home in Munich.

What a start: at the age of 27, Enzensberger, who had shortly before received his doctorate in literary studies, is celebrated as the most important German-language poet of the present day. His book *Verteidigung der Wölfe* causes a sensation. Alongside echoes of Brecht, there are echoes of Gottfried Benn, the master of form with Nazi leanings. When Enzensberger receives the most important German literary prize, the Georg Büchner Prize, he is only 33 years old.

In the late 1950s he plays a leading role as a critical journalist and essayist in the restorative Federal Republic. In terms of content and

thought, his works, primarily for radio, are not original; he takes his motifs and arguments from Adorno, Kracauer, Brecht, and Benjamin. Linguistically and stylistically, however, they are unique and outstanding.

When Enzensberger's subject is language, gems of the critique of ideology emerge that have retained their radiance to this day, such as his 1957 critique of the "language of *Der Spiegel*." Decades after Enzensberger's 1957 analysis, the Hamburg-based magazine was still doing everything it could to confirm the South German critic's findings about that organ's jargon and storytelling compulsion. "It is a language of poor universality: it considers itself competent in every case," Enzensberger notes. *Spiegel* writers use "rapidly applied terminology," "buzzwords," and the "slang of the season." They flirt "with their own shrewdness." The inevitable transformation into a "story" transforms the news "into a pseudo-aesthetic entity whose structure is no longer dictated by the matter at hand."¹

Enzensberger acts in that period as a bold plagiarist, but as if it were in the service of a good cause, of sharp and intransigent enlightenment. In 1957, he delivers an analysis of the cinema newsreel on the radio entitled "Scherbenwelt: The Anatomy of a Newsreel."² His critique paraphrases Siegfried Kracauer's 1931 analysis of the newsreel format, without citing the source.³ Measured against its own standards, Enzensberger says, the newsreel is "journalistically worthless. It is an instrument for paralysis, not for the development of consciousness"⁴; it drags National Socialist forms and racist stereotypes into the present. A reform of the genre under the conditions of the public broadcasting system seems to him to be the way out. In newsreels, history is always "experienced unhistorically,"⁵ Enzensberger says, almost in Kracauer's words.

At the end of the 1950s, it would have been not only honest but also strategically important to make Kracauer known again in West German discourse. Kracauer, however, apparently does not take offense. In 1962, in a letter to Adorno, he remarks laconically: "I would like to have a long talk with Enzensberger [...]. It was worthwhile. But he still has a lot to learn (and some to unlearn)."⁶

1 Hans Magnus Enzensberger, "Die Sprache des *Spiegel*," *Einzelheiten*, Bd. I: *Bewußtseins-Industrie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1979), 80 et seq.

2 Hans Magnus Enzensberger, "Scherbenwelt. Die Anatomie einer Wochenschau," *Einzelheiten*, Bd. I: *Bewußtseins-Industrie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1979) 106–133.

3 Siegfried Kracauer, "Die Filmwochenschau," *Kino. Essays, Glossen und Studien zum Film*, ed. Karsten Witte (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974), 11–14.

4 Enzensberger, "Scherbenwelt," 128.

5 Enzensberger, "Scherbenwelt," 116.

6 Theodor W. Adorno and Siegfried Kracauer, *Briefwechsel 1923–1966*, ed. Wolfgang Schopf (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2008), 535.

At the beginning of the 1960s, Enzensberger publishes the fruits of his reading of the culture industry chapter from *Dialectic of Enlightenment* under the title “Consciousness Industry.” He wants to distinguish himself against Adorno’s critique of the culture industry, whose basic theses he more or less adopts without even mentioning their author. He claims that the term “culture industry” is insufficient. He accuses the authors of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* of not having gone beyond the tradition of bourgeois cultural criticism and of not having seen that culture is only a part of what Marx deciphered as socially produced consciousness. The “name culture industry,” according to Enzensberger, “trivializes the phenomenon and obscures the social and political consequences that result from the industrial mediation and transformation of consciousness.”⁷ To accuse the authors of such a thing, who made Marx’s critique of political economy the basis of the complete subjugation of the cultural sector to the capitalist value system, is not without unintentional comedy. It seems that Enzensberger has not studied his older philosopher friend’s texts as thoroughly as one might expect from a perceptive reader.

Adorno, however, has no grudge against Enzensberger. He is too important to Adorno as a public and private interlocutor. “I do not want to soften the sentence that writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric [...]. But Enzensberger’s retort also remains true, that poetry must withstand this verdict, must be such that it does not surrender itself to cynicism by its very existence after Auschwitz,”⁸ Adorno confesses in 1962. He did not often make such concessions to his critics. In the same year, he writes to Kracauer that Enzensberger is, like Alexander Kluge, a “tremendously gifted person.”⁹

In the course of the 1960s, Enzensberger becomes radicalized. My father once told me about long tavern evenings in Frankfurt, where Enzensberger and he made plans for a left-wing anti-*Bild* newspaper that was to become an enlightened counterweight to Axel Springer’s ideological agitation (which, however, did not come to pass). Enzensberger wants Adorno to subject the “Godesberg Program,” in which the SPD had abandoned its radical critique of capitalism, to a critical analysis in his left-wing avantgarde journal, the *Kursbuch*. After a long back and forth, Adorno’s scruples about following in Marx’s footsteps prevail. He does not want to lash out at the SPD, from which, despite all his reservations, he hopes for an improvement of the social climate in the FRG.

7 Hans Magnus Enzensberger, “Bewußtseins-Industrie,” *Einzelheiten*, Bd. I: *Bewußtseins-Industrie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1979), 9.

8 Theodor W. Adorno, “Engagement,” *Noten zur Literatur*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, eds. Rolf Tiedemann et al., vol. 11 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1974), 422 et seq.

9 Adorno and Kracauer, *Briefwechsel 1923–1966*, 557.

The fact that ideological media formats are not really reformed under the conditions of the public broadcasting system has not escaped Enzensberger. In 1970, he publishes a theory of mass communication media that follows Brecht and Benjamin and adapts their theses to current developments. Since almost everyone has audiovisual, electronic devices and networking, universal communication could now be realized. Thus the “egalitarian” character of the consciousness industry could be harnessed. The “memory” provided by the new media is “social. The stored information is open to the access of all [...]. It is enough to compare the model of a private library with that of a socialized storage device to see the structural difference between the two systems.”¹⁰

The clear-sighted Enzensberger anticipates Web 2.0 here: “The new media are action-oriented and not contemplative [...]. Their time relationship is completely contrary to that of bourgeois culture, which wants possession, that is, duration, preferably eternity. The media do not produce objects that can be hoarded and auctioned off. They dissolve ‘intellectual property’ par excellence.”¹¹ Like the anarchic internet euphorics from California, he expects the spread of new media to have “mobilizing power”: it can “make people more mobile than they are. Free like dancers, quick-witted like soccer players, surprising like guerrillas.”¹²

Of course, Enzensberger quickly realizes that nothing will come of this. But he does not draw the consequence of intensifying the criticism of the ideological media and state apparatuses in deregulated capitalism. Always on the trail of positions that can win a majority, he switches to casual irony. This does not make his cultural criticism any less lucid. “An economy whose problem is no longer production but sales,” Enzensberger notes in 1985, “needs qualified consumers.”¹³ Educational programs are being replaced by television programs, especially those of the private stations recently permitted in Germany. The ideal of the universally educated person pales before the reality of a new cultural type. He is perfectly adapted to a socio-cultural environment in which historical awareness, the ability to concentrate, and poetic obstinacy are not important and are not demanded. “The ideal medium for the secondary illiterate is television.”¹⁴ It has taken over from radio the function of a background medium and,

10 Hans Magnus Enzensberger, “Baukasten zu einer Theorie der Medien,” *Kursbuch Medienkultur. Die maßgeblichen Theorien von Brecht bis Baudrillard*, eds. Claus Pias et al. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt DVA, 2000), 272.

11 Enzensberger, “Baukasten zu einer Theorie der Medien,” 272.

12 Enzensberger, “Baukasten zu einer Theorie der Medien,” 265.

13 Hans Magnus Enzensberger, “Lob des Analphabetentums,” *Mittelmaß und Wahn. Gesammelte Zerstreuungen* (Frankfurt am Main/Wien: Büchergilde Gutenberg, 1991 [Suhrkamp, 1988]), 68.

14 Enzensberger, “Lob des Analphabetentums,” 68.

like radio once did, creates a series of purposeful illusions: One does not feel alone, feels a connection to the environment, can relax as nowhere else. This is what Enzensberger calls the therapeutic benefit of the “zero medium”¹⁵ of television.

As sharp as his cultural criticism remains, it becomes less and less critical of society. Over the years, Enzensberger repeatedly proves himself to be a political renegade. In 2003, he joins the chorus of supporters of the war in Iraq and equates Saddam Hussein with Hitler.

In 1968, at a student congress in Frankfurt, Jürgen Habermas insulted Enzensberger as a “harlequin at the court of the pseudo-revolutionaries,” who, “because for so long he had to borrow implausible metaphors from the language of the twenties for poems that were inconsequential at the time, now quickly sets himself up as the poet of the revolution – but still in the posture of the irresponsible, who does not care about the practical consequences of his triggering stimuli.”¹⁶ There is no more talk of this in Habermas’s respectful obituary in 2022. There he boasts that Enzensberger “embodied the plasticity of the human spirit in a literarily unique way.”¹⁷ That is really a nice euphemism for the opportunism of the criticism that Enzensberger has exemplified since the 1970s. “There is the brother lightfoot story of the one who goes along everywhere and constantly changes his conviction,” Enzensberger himself stated in 1995. This, he wrote, is probably a “legend”—but “there is something to it.”¹⁸

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15 Hans Magnus Enzensberger, “Das Nullmedium oder warum alle Klagen über das Fernsehen gegenstandslos sind,” *Mittelsmaß und Wahn. Gesammelte Zerstreuungen* (Frankfurt am Main/Wien: Büchergilde Gutenberg, 1991 [Suhrkamp, 1988]), 89 et seq.

16 Jürgen Habermas, “Scheinrevolution unter Handlungszwang,” *Der Spiegel*, June 9, 1968.

17 Jürgen Habermas, “Der Elektrisierende. Meine Erinnerungen an Hans Magnus Enzensberger,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, November 26/27, 2022.

18 “Zwischen den Zeilen. André Müller spricht mit Hans Magnus Enzensberger,” *Die Zeit*, February 10, 1995.