

Rereading “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”

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摘 要

在〈在機械複製時代的藝術作品〉一文中，班雅明(Walter Benjamin, 1892-1940)遵循馬克思主義的歷史唯物論，探討做為下層建築的機械複製技術對做為上層建築的藝術的影響。在他看來，機械複製技術對藝術的複製品，以及以機械複製技術製作的電影，將會衝擊藝術的靈光效應，賦予藝術以社會功能。可以發現，他提出了對於藝術自主性的批判，並且認為，機械複製技術將終結藝術自主性，其批判主要集中在自主性藝術與社會之間的否定關係。由於未嘗試調和藝術的自主性與他異性，因此，班雅明糾纏於法西斯主義與共產主義的對立。儘管如此，由於「靈光」一詞具有濃厚的宗教色彩，「靈光消逝」仍意味著對藝術的類宗教社會地位的質疑。

關鍵詞：靈光消逝、無涉利害性、為藝術而藝術、藝術自主性、政治藝術

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A Synopsis of “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”

Preface to Section Six

IN the preface of “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,”^[1] Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) declared that it was then the right time to explicate the influence of the substructure on the superstructure, namely the influence of the conditions of production—the technology of mechanical reproduction—on the developmental tendencies of art. Essentially, Benjamin followed the Marxist idea, by means of which he wanted to address the revolutionary art called the politics of art: Within a given society, the development of substructure would change the superstructure.

Since the change of substructure is underlined, the development of reproductive technology is briefly introduced in the following: founding, stamping, woodcut, printing, engraving, etching, lithography. Then, with the advent of photography, its mechanical reproduction is deemed as a medium which could undermine the authenticity, the uniqueness, and the “aura” of art because it can provide image and sound that give more details than natural perception and because it is easy to access and disseminate. In this way, with the idea that the change in quantity triggers the change in quality, Benjamin argued that the aura of art would be depreciated and that art reproduced by mechanical means would not be any more built on ritual, but on politics.

The most interesting and important point within the first six sections of this essay is that Benjamin briefly alluded to his own view of Western art history in its fourth section: He seems to take advantage of the theory that art originates from religion to attribute its value to aura and cult. From Ancient Greece, to the Middle Ages, to the Renaissance, this ritual function was gradually secularized in the imitation of beauty, which developed for three centuries. Due to the advent of photography, the crisis of representation appeared. Art was placed in a critical situation. In order to preserve the aura and cult value, art, in the name of pure art, has reacted with the doctrine of “l’art pour l’art,” the autonomy of art, which transformed art into a negative theology without social function (Benjamin 1969: 223-224).^[2] Based on Benjamin’s prognostic statements, the technology of mechanical reproduction would lead art to have an exhibition value, thereby engaging the social function.

Section Seven to Eleven

AT the beginning, Benjamin was of the opinion that the crisis of representation in the nineteenth century mainly manifested itself in the dispute between painting and photography; however, at that time, the impact of mechanical reproduction

was not clarified, and the historical transformation regarding the phenomenon of the decline of the aura, i.e., the disappearance of the autonomy of art, was not recognized. To extract the practical meaning of that dispute in the modern age of mechanical reproduction, Benjamin compared painting and theater with photography and cinema.

For him, mechanical reproduction can provide such simple, straightforward recordings of reality that photography and film can be expected to display the scenes of daily life without modification. That is why he criticized the capitalistic films in Western Europe that have fostered the artificial build-up of the cult of movie stars. On the other hand, painting is expressing reality in a pretentious way, and its artistic value is primarily attributed to beautification, to the assignment of sacred, supernatural meaning to a work of art that deviates from reality. Benjamin claimed that, like a surgeon penetrating into a patient, a cameraman dives deeply into reality. The representation of images is composed of multiple fragments of social features (Benjamin 1969: 232-234). These kinds of reproductive technology edit real life together, and so the art produced by them does not stay in the sphere of beautiful semblance anymore.

In a nutshell, for Benjamin, the crisis of representation seems to have been not about the situation that photography would replace painting, but depreciation of artistic beautification and consecration. That is to say, the goal of art is to present images, not to alter them so that it can strive to offer an exhibition of reality without sacred value or supernatural meaning. Furthermore, the images are captured from ordinary life and can provoke a strong reaction from audiences, who are, in modern times, more or less, experts from all walks of life by virtue of division of labor. In this sense, the nature of art is supposed to be totally changed into a public medium. ^[3] It is the reason why the technology of mechanical reproduction can be attributed to social function, and why its artwork has a political effect.

Section Twelve to Epilogue

IN the last few sections, Benjamin related his comparisons of painting and film to the aesthetic experience of their recipients. He held the view that, for example, paintings of Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), as well as works of fauvism and surrealism, could lead the public to have a negative, reactionary attitude towards art, but movies of Charlie Chaplin (1889-1977) lead the masses to react more positively and progressively (1969: 234-235). For him, the cinema can hit the spectators like a bullet, shocking them and distracting them from immersing themselves in aesthetic contemplation of the art; this is because it provides various aspects of reality with which the audience is somewhat familiar, and thus

allows the public to play the part of critic. The art of mechanical reproduction can form a new mode of participation in reality. Its recipient becomes a reviewer of daily life, commenting on reality rather than thinking deeply about or falling into artistic beauty. ^[4]

With the contrast of reactionary and progressive attitude, which is connected to the opposition of both cult value and exhibition value, Benjamin wanted to talk about two types of relationships between art and society: One is that art plays a detrimental role in the progress of society, and the other is that art as an advanced medium can contribute to the change of society. In the former case, art is alienated from society, devoid of any social function; this is referred to by Benjamin as the aestheticization of politics. In the latter case, art made by mechanical reproduction, expressing everyday life to depreciate the aesthetic value of beauty, and to undermine its aura, promotes or is expected to promote social progress. This is considered to be the politicization of art. Based on the contrast between political ideologies that were in strong opposition during his lifetime, Benjamin paralleled these ways of thinking with fascism and communism, respectively.

Brief Summary

IT is well known that the loss of aura is the most critical thesis in this essay. Benjamin believed that the aura of art will be depreciated by mechanical reproduction for the accessibility and dissemination of its products; as a result of the technology that allows for advanced photography and film, they will attain a positive social function and promote a progressive societal attitude on account of benefiting their viewers in accessing a vision of reviewing unaltered reality, thus furthering political practice. He suggested quitting artistic beauty and its passive, reactionary, contemplative effect that is disadvantageous to social progress; that is, the loss of aura characterizes an argument about the end of art. To put it even more precisely, his argument is about the end of “art for art’s sake,” the end of the autonomy of art. In the article “Walter Benjamin on Photography,” written in 1979, Hein W. Puppe stated:

For him (Benjamin), the total change in the function of art as the result of technological advance is essentially identified in negative terms: loss of aura, severing the links with which art is tied to cult and ritual, the end of autonomy of art, the loss of uniqueness as a characteristic of the work of art in the age of the mass production of images. (283)

By virtue of the loss of aura, Benjamin strongly accentuated the technology of mechanical reproduction as it can devalue the passive social effect which results from the idea of the autonomy of art. His justification is that photography and cinema as advanced media provide the possibility for the population en masse to simultaneously view and inspect images of reality. This influx of public participation contributes to the further transformation of quantitative into qualitative changes. Accordingly, art would not encourage the mode of individual, personal contemplation any more, but build the atmosphere towards communal, public criticism and develop its social function. The most salient point of Benjamin’s considerations lies obviously in the lack of a socio-political meaning of art founded upon the idea of autonomy. To see if his argument is reasonable, it is then productive to explore the idea of the autonomy of art.

The Origin and Development of the Autonomy of Art

The Origin of the Autonomy of Art

AS to the autonomy of art, it can be said that its central notion is so called “disinterestedness.” The relevant statements date back to the thought of the empirical aestheticians in the eighteenth century. It was the Earl of Shaftesbury (1671-1713) who first talked about the disinterestedness in beauty and in the aesthetic experience, neither of which has anything to do with personal desire or practical use. For example, he distinguished the enjoyment of possessing and mastering the ocean from the enjoyment of contemplation of its beauty; he also mentioned the difference between getting enjoyment in the scenery of a forest and simply going there to satisfy hunger as animals do (Shaftesbury 126-128, 137-138). Accordingly, the Earl of Shaftesbury believed interest can interrupt one’s sense of beauty. ^[5]

Reviewing his discussions, from which the disinterested perception can be derived, it should be noted that they were essentially based on the thought of the sameness of good and beauty reaching back to ancient Greek philosophy. He believed that humanity has the inherent ability to intuitively recognize right and wrong as well as beautiful and ugly. In moral cases, this intuition helps the individual to practice selflessness rather than prioritize their own considerations. Similarly, it also contributes to aesthetic contexts, disregarding personal interests and their fulfillment to exhibit a pure expression of beauty (Shaftesbury 251-252). It can be observed that this idea of disinterestedness has been brought from ethics to aesthetics.

Coincidentally, a meaningful event has to be mentioned: In the middle of the eighteenth century, Charles Batteux (1713-1780) addressed for the very first

time the concept of “fine arts” (beaux-arts). As the title of his treatise *Les Beaux Arts réduits à un même principe*, published in 1746, allude, Batteux tried to group together five human activities which were previously seen as being a part of “τέχνη” (tékhne), a concept which included all crafts and technical skills, and instead designated them “fine arts,” namely: music, poetry, painting, sculpture, and dance. Although the principle by which they can be reduced to a specific group is the problematic concept of imitation, the reason why they can be collected together is also that their objective is not to be useful for the satisfaction of man’s needs, which belongs to the function of the “mechanical arts” (les arts mécaniques) (Batteux 5-9). That is to say, Batteux’s distinguishing criterion refers actually to the quality of disinterestedness that was already implied by the Earl of Shaftesbury’s statements. In other words, the emergence of “fine arts” is one of the most important phenomena of the autonomy of art, describing that art is independent from craft, thereby shifting the locus of its value from one of practicality to one of aesthetics.

Strictly speaking, the Earl of Shaftesbury did not directly use the concept of disinterestedness to describe beauty and aesthetic experience. It was then Karl Philipp Moritz (1756-1793) who used the German word “uneigennützig,” which means unselfish, altruistic, disinterested in English, to separate beautiful things, which he identified as art assigned intrinsic value, from functional things, which he identified as tools with extrinsic value. Furthermore, he took advantage of the selflessness in ethics to address the self-forgetfulness in aesthetics (Moritz 8-11). Most notably, he tried to explain the relationship between beauty (together with nobleness) and uselessness. According to him, beauty is the highest level in terms of human behavior; uselessness is the lowest. Each of them is situated at either end of the spectrum. However, Moritz claimed that there is a commonality shared by beauty and uselessness in that neither of them is of any external purpose (Moritz 30-38). Like the Earl of Shaftesbury, he also talked about disinterested aesthetics with the claim of the sameness of beauty and good but, in regard to the association between beauty and uselessness, his statements hinted at the possibility to disjoint goodness and beauty.

This disjointed relationship was then clearly formulated by Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). In *Critique of Judgment* in 1790, he used plainly the German word “uninteressiert” (disinterested) to analyze aesthetic judgment about beauty. According to him, beauty is devoid of all interest, having to do neither with satisfaction of sensation nor with admiration for the good; the idea of good involves the sense of usefulness and morality. In order to explain the disinterestedness of beauty, Kant gave an example of palace:

If anyone asks me if I find that palace beautiful which I see before me, I may answer: I do not like things of that kind which are made merely to be stared at. Or I can answer like that Iroquois Sachem, who was pleased in Paris by nothing more than the cook shops. Or again, after the manner of Rousseau, I may rebuke the vanity of the great who waste the sweat of the people on such superfluous things . . . This may all be admitted and approved, but we are not now talking of this.

(Kant 38-39)^[6]

As to the beauty of palace, it does not account for the practical purpose of a palace that is designed to be a magnificent building, flaunting itself to public notice, nor is it based on personal preference, like the Iroquois Sachem preferring cook shops in Paris, nor does it take a moral stance, as Rousseau would. Contrasted with the Earl of Shaftesbury and Moritz, Kant clearly disassociated beauty from goodness. It can be said that in the course of the eighteenth century, with the transformation of the meaning of disinterestedness, the idea of beauty has gradually been abstracted from the idea of good; it has finally become an independent category solely to describe the aesthetic experience that is irrelevant to the fulfillment of sensory enjoyment, practical use, and moral concern.

The Development of the Autonomy of Art

IN the nineteenth century, owing to the popularity of Kant’s aesthetics, the most well-known development to come out of the autonomy of art was the slogan “l’art pour l’art” in France. Reportedly, it first emerged in the diary of Benjamin Constant (1767-1830). On February 10, 1804, he wrote: “I have a visit with Robinson, pupil of Schelling’s. His work on the *Aesthetics* of Kant has some very forceful ideas. *L’art pour l’art* without purpose, for all purpose perverts art” (qtd. in Wilcox 360). This text showed that “l’art pour l’art” echoed back to the purposiveness without purpose of judgments of taste in Kant’s analysis of beauty.^[7] However, according to him, “every purpose [. . .] always carries with it an interest” (Kant 56). So, put it simply, “l’art pour l’art” can also be seen as a compact expression for aesthetic disinterestedness. In the same line, in a lecture given in 1818, Victor Cousin (1792-1867) addressed: “religion for the sake of religion, morals for the sake of morals, art for the sake of art,” “the true artist has no other end than to excite the pure feeling of beauty,” and “the feeling of beauty is entirely disinterested” (qtd. in Wilcox 367-368). He introduced the point of view that, with the doctrine of “l’art pour l’art,” art is freed from the restrictions of religion, morals, social conventions, etc.

An interpretation of this idea of freedom of art appeared in the statements of Théophile Gautier (1811-1872), who was the most typical propagandist for “l’art pour l’art” and used easily-comprehensible words. During the 1830s, he wrote: “In general, as soon as something becomes useful, it ceases to be beautiful. As soon as it enters (into) everyday life, poetry becomes prose, (it loses its) freedom and becomes enslaved,” and “There is nothing truly beautiful but that which can never be of any use whatsoever; everything useful is ugly [. . .]. The most useful place in a house is the water-closet” (qtd. in Cruz 31-32). For Gautier, it can be said that art is disinterested in practicality, i.e., in involving itself in life, so that art can free itself from the fetters of reality.

Regardless of different phrases, a similar scheme can be found in the aesthetics of Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860). In *The World as Will and Representation*, published in 1819, he proposed the “law of sufficient reason” to explain the aesthetic experience. According to him, the manifestation of the “law of sufficient reason” puts the principle of individuation into practice, with which the method of knowledge for one’s general experience of reality is staged for the individual subject and the individual object. By contrast, aesthetic experience rises from abolishing the “law of sufficient reason” and, as a result, suspending the realization of individuation. At this very moment, the subject loses itself entirely in the object, transcending the logic of general experience and becoming detached from life (Schopenhauer ch. 34, 38, 41).^[8] Obviously, Schopenhauer’s claim can be classified as aesthetic disinterestedness.

In the twentieth century, the idea of the autonomy of art was kept in most of the major modern aesthetics, taking on a great variety of expressions, e.g., Benedetto Croce’s (1866-1952) famous statement that “art is intuition” (8). In *The Essence of Aesthetic* published in 1921, he employed “ex negativo” formulation—by means of depicting what art is “not”—in order to clarify what art “is.” He claimed that art is not physical fact, utilitarian act, moral virtue, or conceptual knowledge, for those are what settle us in practical life and establish reality. Art is a pure image of unreality and a “triumph over all utilitarianism, moralism, and conceptualism.” This outlook on art serves “as the point of departure for modern aesthetic thought” (Croce 8-22). Similar to Schopenhauer, from Croce’s account can be drawn a denial of art that is closely bound up with aesthetic disinterestedness; in fact, this idea reappears across several famous theses, such as “the aesthetic attitude” (Bernard Bosanquet, 1848-1923), “psychical distance” (Edward Bullough, 1880-1934), and “isolation in art” (Hugo Münsterberg, 1863-1916) to mention just a few.

In addition, just like Croce identified pure image as “pure form,” the autonomy of art was implied in formalist art criticism. For example, in accordance with being disinterested in reality, Roger Fry (1866-1934) held that

art “depends upon cutting off the practical responses to sensations of ordinary life” (Fry 159). In a similar spirit, Clive Bell (1881-1964) believed that art is “shut off from human interests” and that by it “we are lifted above the stream of life” (Bell 25). In this regard, it is imperative that one not go without mentioning Clement Greenberg (1909-1994). He took withdrawal from the public as the critical moment for the avant-garde artist to maintain his art. Correspondingly, “art for art’s sake” appears and “subject matter or content becomes something to be avoided.” Inasmuch as art is conceived as a form of imitation and is now instead created for its own sake, the primacy locus of origin for artistic inspiration has shifted from the external to the internal. Greenberg was then of the opinion that modern art is the “imitation of imitating,” expressing “the disciplines and processes of art” which he recognized as abstraction (Greenberg 5-7). It was apparent to Greenberg that the autonomy of art was transformed from “l’art pour l’art” into the formalist methodology of artistic practice that dominated the development of modern art until the 1960s.

In the 1960s, Pop Art reached its peak and challenged the dominant position of Formalist art such as Abstract Expressionism. Taking famous *Brillo Boxes* from Andy Warhol (1928-1987) and a pile of Brillo cartons in a supermarket as examples, Arthur Danto (1924-2013) argued that the difference between a work of art and something which is ordinary—even if the two are outwardly indiscernible—is made by artistic institutions. He wrote in his 1964 essay *The Artworld*: “To see something as art requires something the eye cannot decry—an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an artworld” (Danto 580). His account outlined the institutional theory of art, by which it can be said that the qualification of art has nothing to do with the physical properties of something but is instead based on aesthetic interpretation for it, explaining why it is a work of art even if it is an ordinary object seen or used in everyday life. Danto believed that this characterized the end of modernism as monistic master narrative, and then came the end of art, after which came the pluralistic contemporary artworld. Seeing that “artistic institutions” refers to museums, private collections, commercial galleries, art schools, etc. as a whole, it can be seen as a full-fledged social mechanism that consists of the internal rules and laws of art, legislating and mediating the production and reception of art. In this sense, what is implied in the institutional theory of art is actually that the autonomy of art has become the operating principle of artistic institutions, which has caused them to develop into a discrete subsystem of society.

Brief Summary

INVESTIGATING further into the idea of the autonomy of art, the main points are summarized as follows: The concept of the autonomy of art originated from the disinterested aesthetics of the eighteenth century. By differentiating between goodness and beauty, Kant provided the autonomy of art with a complete theoretical foundation, which is intimately intertwined with the conceptions of uselessness, functionlessness, impracticality, etc. They are also the ideas with which art and craft can be differentiated from each other, bringing about the concept of “fine art.” From then on, to judge art by disinterestedness has been generalized in popular artistic thought, yet specialized in the varieties of aesthetic lexica, such as “l’art pour l’art” in the nineteenth century and the theories of art of the twentieth century. It is especially noteworthy that abstract art can be seen as the most obvious artistic practice developed from the autonomy of art, in which art has become its own subject, becoming independent from all other things. Furthermore, regardless of the differences between the arguments in favor of artistic autonomy, a commonality they share is aesthetic negativity, by which art is withdrawn from those worldly matters which are interested in pragmatism and, as a result, obtains extraordinary qualities. However, from a certain point of view, this manifests itself, in effect, in the social parallel between high art and popular culture. By means of artistic institutions as an autonomous social mechanism, the images and objects of popular culture can be qualified as art. Nonetheless, this transformation into “fine art” requires an aesthetic atmosphere in which expertise is subject to governance only by the rules and laws of art itself. As the most influential media for artistic production and reception nowadays, artistic institutions work automatically as a subsystem in society, in charge of giving artistic qualification. Giving a brief overview, since the autonomy of art emerged, it has turned into a general, self-evident principle of artistic practice regardless of the differences in the forms and aesthetic jargon of modern art and the claim of a pluralistic contemporary artworld, e.g., the Dantoian account.

Discussions

ART, with which we are familiar, is intensively connected with the concepts of uselessness, functionlessness, and impracticality; these characteristics are what differentiate art from craft. Basically, they stem from aesthetic disinterestedness, “art for art’s sake,” the autonomy of art. Over the past three centuries, it has become the ubiquitous, subconscious principle of artistic practice. It can be said that the autonomy of art describes artistic isolation from pragmatically interested worldly affairs. In “The Work of Art,” Benjamin interpreted this as loss of art’s sociopolitical meaning. His idea of the “loss of aura” centers on the possibility

of devaluing the autonomy of art in order for it to come to an end and of attacking the negative relationship between art and society. He employed the Marxist economic determinism, and he claimed that by virtue of accessibility and dissemination, the products of mechanical reproduction can encourage positive social engagement with art. However, Benjamin’s prophesied end of the autonomy of art has thus far failed to come to pass. It seems that no kind of advanced cinema which would be able to encourage public engagement with reality has yet developed. Furthermore, the autonomy of art has not yet come to an end because it has become an intuitive, polyonymous precondition of artistic practice which has been subliminally applied to art. In our time, a time in which the production and reception of art are still conditioned by the autonomy of art, Benjamin’s prediction was obviously not prescient. However, his arguments do not cease to be the source of numerous discussions.

In 1935, the Italian regime of Benito Mussolini (1883-1945) launched a war to invade Ethiopia. In support of this, the then-futurist artist Filippo Marinetti (1876-1944) published *Estetica futurista della guerra*. Taking this manifesto as an example, in the epilogue to “The Work of Art,” Benjamin argues that the idea behind futurism is not merely to celebrate modernity shaped by speed and technology, but to demonstrate the connection between the artistic aura and fascism. The fascist potential can be fulfilled by the destruction of the self and the world. He quoted the fascist phrase “Fiat ars—pereat mundus” (let art be created, though the world perishes) to describe the consummation of “art for art’s sake,” referring to the artistic gratification of war (Benjamin 1969: 242). This is taken as the aestheticization of politics in opposition to the politicization of art with regards to communism, but it is the last statement in his essay; he gives no further explanation. In *Benjamin’s Communism*, published in 2021, Alison Ross argues that in his writings, Benjamin tried to “come to terms with what he considers the impoverished state of experience in bourgeois society”; his understanding of communism only takes into account a specific type of collective experience rather than any type of social organization. Moreover, Benjamin attempts to “account for the possibility of collective experience in bourgeois society on the basis of the most extreme forms of individualistic experience”; he understands the collective experience as being “necessarily a modulation of the collective memory that is lived by the individual” (Ross 21-22, 24).^[9] Her arguments are related to Benjamin’s employment of the Proustian distinction between “*mémoire involontaire*” and “*mémoire volontaire*.” In 1940’s “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” he mentioned that:

If we think of the associations which, at home in the *mémoire involontaire*, seek to cluster around an object of perception, and

if we call those associations the aura of that object, then the aura attaching to the object of a perception corresponds precisely to the experience (Erfahrung) which, in the case of an object of use, inscribes itself as long practice. The techniques inspired by the camera and subsequent analogous types of apparatus extend the range of the *mémoire volontaire*; these techniques make it possible at any time to retain an event –as image and sound–through the apparatus.
(Benjamin 2003: 337) ^[10]

For Benjamin, “*mémoire involontaire*” connects to experience with regards to aura; “*mémoire volontaire*” refers to “voluntary, discursive memory,” which can be encouraged by the technology of reproduction (Benjamin 2003: 337). Arguably, the modulation of collective memory can be carried out by reproductive technology, which is able to disperse “*mémoire involontaire*” and develop “*mémoire volontaire*.” This is in line with Benjamin’s depreciation of individual aesthetic contemplation in the case of painting and his emphasis on a collectivity in a state of distraction in the case of film. Since it is unlikely for technology to be employed totally neutrally, the modulation of collective memory and the extension of techniques seem to propose an art form that collectively impacts the individual’s lived experience, i.e., art at the service of society. ^[11]

In this respect, behind Benjamin’s setting of specific political ideologies as opposite, there can be found a conceptually poor dichotomy in his contrasting of the idea of art as useless and that of art as useful. ^[12] The former expresses that art is based on its own autonomy and disinterested in social reality; its most representative example is formalist art. The latter is that art is heteronomous and at the service of society, being used as propaganda; socialist realism is its most prominent example. ^[13] This dichotomy can theoretically be reconciled by dialectics. The reason is that uselessness itself can reveal usefulness. I think the arguments of Theodor Adorno (1903-1969) are helpful in this regard. As a matter of fact, he has once criticized Benjamin:

The failure of Benjamin’s grandly conceived theory of reproduction remains that its bipolar categories make it impossible to distinguish between a conception of art that is free of ideology to its core and the misuse of aesthetic rationality for mass exploitation and mass domination, a possibility he hardly touches upon. (Adorno 56) ^[14]

On the other hand, he proposed that art is today aporetic: Without autonomy, art “delivers itself over to the machinations of the status quo”; with autonomy, art “submits to integration as one harmless domain among others.” Nevertheless, “by crystallizing in itself as something unique to itself,” art “criticizes society by merely existing,” which can be regarded as “socially useful.” As a result of its autonomy, “art becomes social by its opposition to society” (Adorno 335, 352).

In contemporary aesthetics, we can see the following example, which is analogous to this dialectical approach:

In *The Aesthetic Heterotopia* written in 2010, Jacques Rancière (1940-) addressed the “distribution of the sensible” to describe “a relation between ways of doing, ways of seeing, of speaking, thinking and so on,” that is to say, “a whole organization of the visible, the thinkable, and the possible, determining what can be felt, seen, thought, and done by this or that class of beings” (17). There exists “the representative regime of art” in which these hierarchical social structures are imitated. This manifests itself in the separation between activity and passivity, between knowledge and ignorance, etc. By contrast, “the aesthetic regime of art” can restage or reconfigure the existing social order, withdrawing from the division of social hierarchies. Rancière stated:

The withdrawal is at the heart of the very definition of the aesthetic judgment in Kant’s “Analytical of the Beautiful.” It takes the form of a twofold negation. The object of the aesthetic judgment is neither an object of knowledge nor an object of desire. The “excellence” of the aesthetic form has to be judged apart from epistemic or ethical criteria. It is no coincidence that Kant illustrates this theoretical statement with the example of the form which is, more than any other, fraught with issues of geometric perfection, social hierarchy, and ethical judgment, the form of palace [. . .]. When we see the palace aesthetically, we ignore those matters of appearance and reality, necessity and superfluity, or sweat and vanity. We withdraw it from the hierarchical distribution linked with matters of needs and desires. This is what the “disinterestedness” of aesthetic judgment means. (Rancière 18)

It can be found that disinterestedness is interpreted as the suspension of any given functioning social distribution, which is also known as “aesthetic subversion.” In terms of producing a disruption of social distinction, Rancière claimed that the aesthetic disinterestedness is principally concerned with “a political form of dissensus.”

Another analogous example can be found in the writings of Boris Groys (1947-). In his article “On Art Activism,” published on the internet in 2014, Groys asserted that design and art, respectively, perform different categories of aestheticization. Design is to aesthetically improve the status quo, i.e., to make it more attractive to the user. Likewise, it can make political movements more seductive, which can be perceived as “the politicization of aesthetics” (Groys para. 16-18). On the other hand, modern and contemporary art are supposed to turn an object into one not of use, but instead one of pure contemplation. This artistic annulment of practical applicability and efficiency means to make the status quo dysfunctional, absurd, and unworkable; this can be seen as “the aestheticization of politics.” Furthermore, to Groys, this revolutionary aesthetic can be traced back to Kant’s palace. He mentioned:

Kant is not interested in the existence of a palace as a representation of wealth and power. However, he is ready to accept the palace as aestheticized, that is, negated, made nonexistent for all practical purposes—reduced to pure form. (Groys para. 9)

It is obvious that this disinterestedness is regarded as a lack of social function. Accordingly, modern and contemporary art manifest the aesthetic negation of political effect by aestheticizing the present to the point of failure. That is to say, art is a kind of socio-critical practice because it exemplifies the uselessness of the existing reality.

It can be said that the most remarkable development of the autonomy of art in the twenty-first century is the assignment of dialectical meaning regarding the idea of the great use of uselessness. In other words, disinterestedness can be considered a way of social engagement. This is likely to be demonstrated by the argument that in a capitalist society, which on the whole operates on the principle of profit (interest) maximization, the autonomy of art can be then characterized as incompatible, non-cooperative, and unintegrated due to its disinterestedness. In this sense, Benjamin’s critique of the autonomy of art plainly sticks to the opposition between usefulness and uselessness, which is reflected in his overly rigid correlation between the aestheticization of politics or the politicization of art and a respective political ideology.

Nonetheless, there is something crucial to be gained from the Benjaminian artistic aura. In “Benjamin, Adorno, and the Decline of the Aura,” published in 2004, Michael Rosen once mentioned:

In the case of the work of art, however, this exalted quality (what Benjamin calls its “cult-value”) is closely tied to the

religious or quasireligious element in art—a remnant of that association between art and religion characteristic of premodern society. (Rosen 47-48)

For Benjamin, I believe that there are two kinds of quasi-religious qualities that can be ascribed to art. One refers to the fact that art was in the service of religion, communicating religious beliefs, customs, values, etc., particularly in premodern times; another relates to the phenomenon that art has replaced the role of religion since the modern age. In the latter case, the autonomy of art is of significance. The relevant explanations can be found in the writings of Max Weber (1864-1920). According to his idea of "the disenchantment of the world," people no longer believe in the existence of gods and spirits, and true comprehension of the world is thought to be accomplished through scientific technologies and calculations. In addition, he was of the opinion that via the development of intellectualism and rationalization, "art becomes a cosmos of more and more consciously grasped independent values which exist in their own right. Art takes over the function of a this-worldly salvation" (Weber 342). It can be said that in modern society, the role of religion has been replaced by art. In other words, the disenchantment of the world leads to the enchantment of art; art promises spiritual satisfaction or commits to delivering us to a beautiful world, a paradise, as religion did. From my point of view, the possibility for this substitution of religion for art results from the idea of the autonomy of art, which enables art to be conceptually and discursively supported in its redemptive role, its aesthetic salvation. Thus, Benjamin's endorsement of the decline of the aura implies a criticism of the social status of art as quasi-religion, which is why he considers "art for art's sake" a negative theology. Furthermore, this brings to mind the critique of religion proposed by Karl Marx (1818-1883). In the introduction to *Critique of Hegel's "Philosophy of Right"* in 1844, he argues that religion is made by man but leads man to search for a supernatural, non-human being in the fantastic reality of heaven and to give up on the true reality that he must seek. The point of criticizing religion, therefore, is to criticize its aura, a world of spiritual ambience. In short, the critique of heaven is the critique of earth (Marx 131-132). I believe that for Benjamin, the autonomy of art refers to a quasi-religious spirit in which this-worldly commitment accompanies other-worldly ideas. That is to say, the loss of aura connotes the dismantling of the quasi-religious social position of art. If reducing the association between art and religion, a contemporary version similar to Benjamin's critique can be found in "From the Object to the Concrete Intervention," published in 2005 by the Austrian contemporary art group WochenKlausur. They declared that

Art should no longer be venerated in specially designated spaces. Art should not form a parallel quasi-world. Art should not act as if it could exist of itself and for itself. Art should deal with reality, grapple with political circumstances, and work out proposals for improving human coexistence.”
(WochenKlausur 462) ^[15]

Because of its lack of religious terminology, it may be surprising that this argument as to why art is venerated and forms a parallel quasi-world can be further clarified with Benjamin’s use of the religious term “aura” to describe both the autonomy and enchantment of art.

Today, when we talk about art, we “naturally” use terms such as creative, genius, eternal, valuable, or mysterious; when we visit art museums and exhibitions, we deliberately keep quiet, speak softly, and move slowly among the works of art with a sense of reverence, or even call a visit to a certain exhibition a pilgrimage. Basically, these concepts and attitudes are closely related to religion; they reflect the quasi-religious quality of art. To some extent, only God can carry out creation in the true sense of the word, and only God can exist eternally. However, these concepts were somehow transferred to describe art as a human activity. In this regard, the assertions of Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) are very enlightening. He referred to this situation and provided a short list of people who “have reinvented in their own fashion the theory of the ‘creator,’ of the ‘other world’ and of pure contemplation” (Bourdieu 295). Expectedly, most figures in his list are people who contributed to the formation of the autonomy of art based on disinterestedness as mentioned previously. In the preface of “The Work of Art,” Benjamin mentions that ideas such as creativity, genius, eternal value, and mystery would be rejected, and he would introduce different concepts into the theory of art. It can be said that the loss of aura also challenges our general recognition of art.

Conclusion

IN “The Work of Art,” Benjamin employed the Marxist idea and believed that mechanically reproductive technology as a substructure would make an impact on art as a superstructure. Accordingly, he proposed the loss of aura which refers to the end of the autonomy of art. When diving into the genesis of the autonomy of art, it can be found that its core is the concept of disinterestedness that emerged in the eighteenth century and made it possible to acknowledge the functionlessness or uselessness of fine art. Since then, unbeknownst to us, this avoidance of instrumental value has become the fundamental and prevailing

understanding of art. In this sense, Benjamin’s critique of the autonomy of art can be characterized as questioning the general, prevailing, and dominant recognition of art. However, Benjamin applied the dichotomy between usefulness and uselessness of art to interpret art’s relationship to society and to make it correspond to the opposition between communism and fascism. This would leave no possibility to consider a dialectical approach to the autonomy of art. In this regard, it can be said that Benjamin’s arguments are problematic because he was too strictly adherent to his juxtaposition of opposing political ideologies. On the other hand, the term “aura” has a strong religious flavor that implies the enchantment of art. In light of this, Benjamin’s high expectation for mechanical reproduction concerns the Marxist critique of religion, calling the quasi-religious social position of art into question. Since art is also made by man, for Benjamin, the critique of the autonomy of art, i.e., the decline of the aura, can be considered the critique of society via the disenchantment of art.

◎本文為國科會人文及社會科學研究卓越計畫(計畫編號:NSTC 113-2811-H-A49-511)的研究成果之一。在計畫主持人國立陽明交通大學應用藝術研究所許峻誠教授擬定的研究重點中,如機械複製技術、數位複製技術,筆者考察了班雅明談論攝影術的經典文本而撰寫此文。匿名審查者們提出的寶貴意見,使筆者獲益良多並得以補充本文論點,謹在此一併致謝。 This paper is one of the research results of the National Science and Technology Council’s Project for Humanities and Social Sciences Excellence Research Program (No. NSTC 113-2811-H-A49-511). Among the research foci set by the host of the program, Prof. Chun-Cheng Hsu of the Institute of Applied Arts, National Yang Ming Chiao Tung University, such as mechanical reproduction technology, and digital reproduction technology, the author explored the classic text of Benjamin’s discussion on photography and wrote this article. In addition, the author would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments, which have greatly supplemented the arguments of this paper.

Notes

1. Hereafter cited in the text as “The Work of Art.” A reviewer suggests the second version of *The Work of Art*, for there are some specific and interesting remarks on the traditional concept of art. As far as I know, there are, in total, four versions for *The Work of Art*. It is said that in order to be published, Benjamin came to a compromise and revised the first version to the second version by reducing the

thoughts related to Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956). For me, it is then hard to tell which parts speak to Benjamin's authentic ideas. In addition, the most circulated version is the fourth version, which was composed by Benjamin from 1938-1939 and served as the basis for English translation in *Illuminations*. I believe that it is the most representative version of this essay (Cai 2016: 108-109). Furthermore, from my point of view, the main shared theme of the different versions is still the critique of the autonomy of art.

2. A reviewer reminds me to clarify the strangeness of Benjamin's arguments here. Firstly, in order to explore the artistic aura, Benjamin traced its development back to ancient art, for example, the ancient statues of Venus. Secondly, Benjamin was of the opinion that the invention of photography induced the idea of "art for art's sake." These two points are surely problematic. As to the first point, the relevant explanation by Benjamin may be found in the following sentences: "In other words, the unique value of the 'authentic' work of art has its basis in ritual, the location of its original use value. This ritualistic basis, however remote, is still recognizable as secularized ritual even in the most profane forms of the cult of beauty" (Benjamin 1969: 224). But, with this argument, we can barely understand how or in what way it is possible that artistic aura can be transformed from a kind which encourages with a definite use, e.g., an ancient statue of Venus, into one which encourages the autonomy of art, which is antithetical to instrumental value. In addition, as far as I know, the emergence of "art for art's sake" has nothing to do with the invention of photography. Like I mention in this paper, it is said that the first place "art for art's sake" appears in writing is in Constant's diary of 1804, decades before photography was invented.
3. For example, Rainer Rochlitz (1946-2002) was of the opinion: "In a peculiar manner, his sociological theory of art now leads him to be interested not in works of art, but only in the social functions that art as such fills 'in the age of its mechanical reproducibility.' Yet these functions are no longer linked to the significance of a unique work. In a certain way, for Benjamin—at least in this essay—the medium is already the message; the significance of art is reduced to the medium through which it addresses the public" (Rochlitz 1996: 158).
4. It can be said that through the technology of mechanical reproduction, for Benjamin, art can work as a public medium to create the democratic atmosphere required for the freedom of expression, which can be seen as the manifestation of the "exhibition value" and "progressive attitude."
5. Correspondingly, Jerome Stolnitz (1925-) stated: "Lord Shaftesbury, writing in the opening decade of the eighteenth century, is the first philosopher to call attention to disinterested perception" (Stolnitz 1961: 132).
6. Kant's aesthetics characterized the maturity of the autonomy of art as Casey Haskins (1954-) wrote: "'The autonomy of art' is sometimes used as a slogan for the view that works of art are devoid of any practical function and thus devoid, as works of art, of instrumental value. This view, traditionally, traced back to Kant's *Critique of Judgment*" (Haskins 1989: 43).

7. It is without question that Kant’s aesthetics contributed to the emergence of “l’art pour l’art.” For instance, Gene H. Bell-Villada (1941-) mentioned: “The third of these, the *Critique of Judgment*, eventually came to be viewed as the sourcebook for Art for Art’s Sake” (Bell-Villada 1996: 20).
8. Therefore, Sandra Shapshay (1969-) argued: “Schopenhauer follows in the 18th century tradition of understanding aesthetic experience as *disinterested*, that is, as a form of engagement in the world in which one attends to and takes pleasure in an object for its own sake rather than for the sake of bodily gratification, pragmatic concerns, or moral interests” (Shapshay 2012: 12).
9. Thanks for a reviewer’s tips, which provided this inspiring information: “Walter Benjamin’s Communism” by Alison Ross.
10. The relevant arguments are as follows: “The crisis of artistic reproduction that emerges in this way can be seen as an integral part of a crisis in perception itself. –What makes our delight in the beautiful unquenchable is the image of the primeval world, which for Baudelaire is veiled by tears of nostalgia. [. . .]. This does not happen in the case of technical reproduction. (The beautiful has no place in it.) Proust, complaining of the barrenness and lack of depth in the images of Venice that his *mémoire volontaire* presented him, notes that the very word “Venice” made those images seem to him as vapid as an exhibition of photographs. If the distinctive feature of the images arising from *mémoire involontaire* is seen in their aura, then photography is decisively implicated in the phenomenon of a ‘decline of the aura’” (Benjamin 2003: 338).

A brief explanation is as follows: “[T]he difference between these two types of memory is that . . . [mémoire involontaire] has an accidental but full relationship to the past, whereas . . . [mémoire volontaire] though clearly present in its ‘attentiveness’ to the past, happens to retain no trace of it” (Sinha 2005: 33).

11. In Benjamin’s writing, it is not hard to find arguments that lead to the idea of art at the service of society:

“*The Critic’s Technique in Thirteen Theses*. [. . .] II. He who cannot take sides should keep silent. [. . .] V. “Objectivity” must always be sacrificed to partisanship, if the cause fought for merits this” (Benjamin 1978: 66-67).

“I should like to demonstrate to you that the tendency of a work of literature can be politically correct only if it is also correct in the literary sense. That means that the tendency which is politically correct includes a literary tendency. And let me add at once: this literary tendency, which is implicitly or explicitly included in every correct political tendency, this and nothing else makes up the quality of a work. It is because of this that the correct political tendency of a work extends also to its literary quality: because a political tendency which is correct comprises a literary tendency which is correct” (Benjamin 1998: 86).

“[A]ctivism and [. . .] political commitment, however revolutionary it may seem, functions in a counter-revolutionary way so long as the writer experiences his solidarity with the proletariat only in the mind and not as a producer” (Benjamin 1998: 91).

12. A reviewer's opinions inspire me to employ this dichotomy to consider that in Benjamin's arguments the opposition between fascism and communism is easily related to the opposition between the autonomy of art and the heteronomy of art. Similarly, Boris Groys (1947-) gives the examples of Novecento Italiano, which was also dedicated to supporting the fascism of Benito Mussolini (1883-1945) in the classical style, and the Soviet artists Kazimir Malevich (1879-1935) and Vladimir Tatlin (1885-1953), who did not use the realistic approach, but instead developed abstract art, to demonstrate the problems with Benjamin's arguments (2014).
13. Socialist realism was adopted by communist states that were politically close to the Soviet Union. It was official cultural propaganda and first proposed by the First Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934.
14. In this regard, Richard Wolin (1952-) was of the opinion: "Adorno would accuse Benjamin of proceeding undialectically. He criticizes Benjamin's unqualified and uncritical acceptance of technically reproduced art as well as the essay's complementary rejection of *all* autonomous art as being inherently 'counterrevolutionary.' [...] That is, Benjamin failed to consider that fact that there occurs a 'dialectic of rationalization' on the side of *l'art pour l'art* (or autonomous art)" (Wolin 1994: 191-192).
15. This critique by the contemporary art group WochenKlausur can be traced back to Benjamin's insight. Furthermore, it also demonstrates that the autonomy of art has become a general principle of artistic practice in spite of the claim of the plurality of the contemporary artworld as mentioned in the text.

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Rereading "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"

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ABSTRACT

In "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) engages with Marxist historical materialism and examines the impact of mechanical reproduction as a substructure on art as a superstructure. For him, the mechanical reproduction of art, and the cinema made by mechanical reproduction, would impact the aura of art and give art a social function. It can be found that he criticized the autonomy of art and believed that mechanical reproduction would be able to bring it to an end. His critique focuses mainly on the negative relationship between autonomous art and society, which, without an attempt to reconcile the dichotomy of the autonomy and heteronomy of art, has become entangled in the opposition between fascism and communism. Nonetheless, because the term "aura" has a strong religious flavor, the loss of aura calls into question the quasi-religious social position of art.

KEYWORDS: The Decline of the Aura, disinterestedness, art for art's sake, the autonomy of art, political art