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Walter Benjamin and 4'33"

by Zach Porlier

(Philosophy 2250)

In Walter Benjamin's piece entitled "The Work Of Art In the Age Of Mechanical Reproduction," he expresses how "a work of art has always been reproducible, [but the reproduction] is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be" (416). This unique existence is part of what Benjamin refers to as the aura of a piece of work, which he also attributes not only to the context that the piece of art was created in, but also the history that it is embedded in. He argues that industrialized societies are "overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction," and attributes this trouncing to modern technologies (Benjamin 418). But there are some composers, such as John Cage, who wished to create music that "[would] find beauty in everyday modern life, [thus] encouraging a different relationship [with] society" (Gann 1). In one of his most famous compositions, 4'33", Cage sat behind a piano for four minutes and thirty-three seconds and played no notes. In a composition such as this, many people became enraged and questioned the definition of this piece as music. But if one looks at Benjamin and Cage's philosophies, perhaps a different perspective can be taken.

When asked about his silent piece, Cage responded, "what really pleases me in that silent piece is that it can be played any time, but only comes alive when you play it. And each time you do, it is an experience of being very, very much alive" (Solomon). This sounds very much like the concept of the unique aura of a piece of art in Benjamin's text, and reflects this composition's resistance to technological reproduction. Cage disliked the recording of his pieces, as he pioneered chance music that changed with every performance. Yet, if one goes into the iTunes music store from Apple, one may find a recording of Cage's 4'33", and it is precisely as the piece is proposed—completely silent. But this is not the intention of the piece. Its purpose is to force the audience to hear the noises around them, the noises of everyday life. It is in this "unique existence at the place where it happens to be" that makes this silence much more than mere silence (Benjamin 416). This radical idea of music in silence enraged many spectators, and Cage "lost friends because of this piece" (Solomon).

Benjamin saw that the rise in technology created an effect of mass production that causes a "decrease in the social significance of an art form," thus creating an artistic atmosphere in which "the conventional is uncritically enjoyed, and the truly new is criticized with aversion" (Benjamin 425). People were used to hearing classical composition such as Mozart and Bach, or rather, music full of notes to distract from other sounds. People looked in the industrial age turned to music, as well as television and film, as a form of entertainment, not social criticism. Cage saw "music [...] as a social situation [...] involving people and their activities" (Cage "You Must Take A Global"). But in a society where technology has turned the purpose of art towards a money-making venture and a mass business, creating music as a silent critique of society had no place, and caused people to lose interest. This mass consumerism and power that lies therein was something Benjamin was very critical of, and Cage too had his concerns.

Benjamin was very concerned with the rise of Fascism in the last years of his life, but he also took a stance against the "development of capitalism," (Lowy). In industrialized societies, Benjamin criticized commodity fetishism, or the supposed magical power of consumerism. This consumerism has fueled the capitalist machine, and Cage believed that "capitalism is its own destruction," partially due to "a greater interest in credit than in money" (Cage "You Must Take A Global"). With a modern

capitalist society being told what was necessary to purchase, consumerism grew and grew, and the role of art as a profit venture was further established. With consumption being the goal in a society, media art lost some of its importance. With the sole aim to sell, it became reduced to less than the products it was promoting, whether that be a bar of soap, or the latest fashion. Cage believed when one enters “in the economic-political structure of capitalism, you no longer have any time for art,” yet Benjamin suggested a different role art could take in the industrialized age (Cage “You Must Take A Global”).

The invention of the radio allowed music to be broadcast directly into peoples’ homes, but the device also allowed other things to be introduced into the home atmosphere, as well. As early as 1935, advertising companies began investing more money into the radio as “public trust in print media declined but grew stronger in radio” (Schoenherr). And how do advertisements grasp the public’s interest when a visual spectacle is not available? Companies began relying on music and catchy melodies to sell their products. And while the radio technology began to render music powerless and distract the population with consumerist ideals, the very same technological advance was used to introduce war into the everyday perspective. During popular programs, stars began calling for people to conserve resources for use in World War II to support the war efforts. In 1942, the American government created the “This Is War” program on the CBS channel, which was intended to broadcast propaganda across the country via radio, and by 1944, 20% of the broadcasting on the radio consisted of news, slowly overtaking the presence of music on the airwaves (Schoenherr). When people tuned in to hear their favorites records and programs, the shows became increasingly cluttered with news of World War II, and created a sense of fear in the country. During these times, however, lighthearted programs and music recordings appeased the public while technology continued to evolve, beyond the relatively modest invention of the radio, to the creation of dominant weapons to be used to exterminate the other side’s population, ultimately coming to the creation of the atomic bomb. And the American public sat at home listening to “God Bless America” (Schoenherr).

In 4’33”, Cage forces the listeners to become consciously aware of the surrounding atmosphere and sounds, not just mindlessly accepting a piece of music as music. In the example of radio, if the war bulletins are interspersed in the musical program, it becomes just as much a part of the broadcast as the music, and the public just accepting it as such. When war is introduced into the beauty of a symphonic program, or other popular music show, “war [then becomes] beautiful because it combines the gunfire, the cannonades, the cease-fire, the scents, and the stench of putrefaction into a symphony” (Benjamin 428). But the public will not recognize all of those sounds in the war bulletin, as the reality of war becomes masked by the grandiose message of victory, quickly leading back into the music program.

Cage wanted to make his music expose the American public to an atmosphere “in which we don’t have rules [...] [making] things [...] more powerful than [...] other things, but in which each thing is what it is,” which is the opposite of the goal of war (Cage “You Must Take A Global”). In order to enjoy and fully understand 4’33”, people need to recognize their surroundings and come to terms with what they are hearing, and not be discomfited by having to recognize the nuances of the everyday life. If one is discomfited by the sounds of their everyday life, the same discomfort can easily be used to create fear, and then give the public an alternative. For example, Nazi propaganda appeased the German public by making them believe the party’s interest was in the interest of the entire country. And in order for Hitler’s message to be broadcast to the maximum amount of people, Germans were sold discounted radios, as well as loudspeakers being stationed in the German streets (Trueman). While modern society associates the Nazi party with the atrocities of World War II, at the time, the German public believed the party was performing some heroic duty. And those who thought otherwise were too afraid to publicly disagree. If one did not support the war, it was as if he supported the unknown lifestyle associated with losing the war, that which the public feared. The

Nazi government sought to appease their public by creating a fabricated reality, one that would hide the atrocities being committed. The reality the public saw, however, was that of a superior Germany, of a party performing the necessary duties for the glory of their country.

Benjamin is concerned with fabricating the reality of society and technology creating “entirely new structural formations of this subject” (Benjamin 426). He understands the importance of recognizing “the necessities which rule our lives,” but warns against technology using those necessities and warping them for purely creative means. Cage’s piece does not create a different everyday reality than what is already there; he just forces the listener to recognize it. In a way, this goal creates a piece very similar to a period of meditation disguised as music. When there is no sound, one begins to hear only “themselves” through thoughts. While advertising may be exposing people constantly to what one is “supposed” to need, if one stops for a moment of introspection, one may find he does not need that new car, the flat-screen television, or other consumer “needs.” But the advertising still says otherwise. There’s always something enhanced for one to be striving to purchase, therefore quelling the fear that one may be without something he “needs.” In a very similar manner, government propaganda would have one believe that whichever war one’s country is participating in is necessary, that winning is essential. And the soldiers sound overjoyed to be winning, because winning is all that matters. But if one takes another introspective view, winning a war is another way to settle the fear in the population, much like the Nazi propaganda. No matter which side ends the war, the war ends, but one would not want the opposing side to be the one who ended it. Winning appeases the fear held by the public of the concept of losing and the mysterious lifestyles it may bring. One’s country remains superior by winning, just as one with the newest and nicest possessions feels superior over those who do not, and that superiority is comfortable. What the public does not hear, however, are the screams of soldiers, the gunfire, and the destruction of human life, but that is not what matters to the public. This utilization of art to romanticize society again can lead to the implication that “war is beautiful,” yet if one takes a look at what war really is, it becomes clear that the violent carnage of the actual act and reality of war is not as beautiful as one may be made to believe (Benjamin 428).

I believe that while Benjamin has a valid point in being critical of the emerging technologies in the reproduction, and consequently the role, of art, technology should not be completely stepped away from. Even though John Cage was against recordings of music, he became one of the pioneers of electronic music, thus showing that technology can be used in the arts in an effective and critical manner. Being critical of the mass consumerism of art and the ramifications that may result therein becomes less and less of a concern if the society has conscious consumers who recognize the distinction between reality and fabrications in a society. Technology used for ideologically driven propaganda and glorifying war is an extremely dangerous thing. This danger can be seen in the above case of technology, though contributing to a form of societal development, also contributing to more destructive forms of warfare. But, on the other hand, denying technology will put one at a disadvantage in a rapidly evolving and industrialized world. While one can romanticize about a society where technology and war are obsolete, the world is not at that stage quite yet, and denying technology too soon can be almost as dangerous as using it for warfare means. Technology should not solely be associated with negative aspects, such as its use in warfare. Advancement in technology has contributed to fields outside of weaponry, such as music, and in a grander positive sense, medicine. Medical technology, for example, has been used to rehabilitate those injured during warfare, in a hope of masking the danger of technologically advanced weapons of war with the benefits of technologically advanced medicine in healing those wounds. Saying that abolishing technology will abolish war and create a utopian society is naïve. I think that in order to transcend war, we need to take some of those brilliant minds that contribute to weaponry technology, and use that knowledge to increase diplomacy. We should work with emerging technologies in order to create an improved society, not shy away from technology, leaving those who still use it at odds with

those who do not. We should also strive to not use technology's power to create weapons more powerful than necessary. If modern societies continue to try and outdo each other's weapons systems, this creates further tensions, further perpetuating war.

Benjamin's chilling account of what can happen in a society that is not critically applying and assessing technology and art, and accepting anything those who pursue a particular agenda tell them is true is certainly a reality that can happen if critical minds cease to exist. How does one critically analyze and evaluate a piece of music that is, to the casual audience, entirely silent? It is by recognizing that the piece is meant to showcase the real world, not try to mask truth with a plethora of notes. Songs used in advertisements use popular melodies that listeners can sing and thus support the company's product, whether the listener knows it or not. But if one listens to these advertisement songs in the same way one is supposed to listen to Cage's piece, the outward appeal of the melody is quickly overshadowed by the greater purpose of selling that is in the advertisement. Cage's 4'33" introduces that critical listening technique into the public psyche. That is the aura of this piece. Critical listeners realize this meaning, and therefore can enjoy the piece for what it is, not simply a gimmick. Benjamin's concepts of the aura forces viewers of art to criticize and try to recognize the original intention and importance at the core of a piece by looking at the time and method of its original creation, thus stripping away the frivolities that may be presented. With a radio, for example, one is being bombarded with music and advertisement, being explicitly told what to purchase, and what to listen to, with little freedom to wonder why one must purchase a product, or why the broadcaster deems a song one to be noted and listened to. Many of the popular songs and advertisements have no importance or intention other than to sell, and once one recognizes that aura, the appeal of those pieces is then stripped away. In Cage's piece, however, one is still listening, as if listening to a popular symphony on the radio, but there is freedom within the context. Cage relies on the audience member to actually listen and experience the piece, not solely listen to the music as an outlet for entertainment. And since the core of this piece is always the same, silence, the context of the listener changes the specific notes every time it is listened to, as long as the audience is willing to listen. If one does not realize the intention of this piece, than one simply hears "silence" every time. But if a listener recognizes of the aura of Cage's silent masterpiece, then the experience is different and new every time. And that is something that cannot be reproduced.

If the music used in advertisements is experienced in the way the Cage piece is, a critical consumer can look at the music and the product as two separate pieces, and recognize the role of each, thus recognizing the product at the core of the advertisement, not the music. While in the advertisement, the music and product seem to be inseparable, if one recognizes the aura of the advertisement; the product is really all that matters, the music may be judged on its own. In the context of humanity, as long as there are those in industrialized societies who continue to recognize the frivolities in the present roles, and rules, of the society itself, and expose those in the effort to create a more conscious society, people should not fear technology as an attempt to halt societal evolution with consumerism and violence through warfare.

If a society continues to rely solely on other outlets, such as music, to tell them what to think and purchase, that creates a dangerous atmosphere. And with people listening to popular music, much of that advice comes from popular artists of the time. But if artists, such as gangster rap musicians, continue to fabricate and romanticize a violent and womanizing society that engages and thrives in this lifestyle, the audience may trust that the life presented in the gangster rap songs is the life they want to live. That is not the ideal mindset for positive technological use or societal functioning. But in the same way that technology can be used for positive and negative means, so too can music. In a contemporary example of the influence music can have is rap. Many rap artists have contributed to bringing attention and focus to the ghetto areas, and certain songs give empowering messages to women and youths. These songs, like Cage's 4'33", give the listener an account of the reality their life in the ghettos, not painting life in those areas as solely reliant on

money and violence. But these songs lose their meaning if the audience does not understand the purpose, or aura, of them. If one does not critically listen to these songs, and recognize the messages behind them, then just like Cage's 4'33", the message is ultimately lost. But if one listens and understands the songs, a greater societal understanding can be recognized. Societies should seek to acknowledge the reality of the life around them without having to submit to a mindless fabrication of a life that is created in an attempt to popularize an agenda, perhaps at the expense of human lives. Once we recognize and accept the reality, and subsequently the needs, of modern society, we can then decide how to use technology to solve issues facing today's public, and not waste our efforts on creating more effective ways to destroy each other.

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