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The Faculty of Pursuits: Rethinking Benjamin's Aesthetics

by Brian Casario

(Honors Seminar Philosophy 2250/Architecture 2250)

The Assignment: Students are required to choose one text from the reading list in the syllabus that will become the center of research for the term paper. The task is to discuss and critically analyze an artwork in the context of a philosophical theory. This paper should offer distinct insights regarding the complex phenomenon of art.

If Kant's conception of aesthetic cognition posited in his third *Critique* is indeed true, then it would be sound to infer that the enterprise of artistic pursuits are a necessary part of humanity, unable to be thwarted. When the two mental faculties of the imagination and the understanding operate together to cognize an aesthetic experience, they don't reach a "definite" concept; instead, they mutually enliven one another in a state of harmony, or "free play." Kant later uses the theory of "free play" of the human faculties to help explicate his argument of the universality of aesthetic experiences (9). Thus, to explore the extraordinary enigma that is the imaginative enquiry of making, from craftsperson to artist, is to realize the sublime potential of the human body and soul. This utilization of our phenomenal faculties – seeing, hearing, thinking – is to peer into the ineffable state of essence within our existence. In the late nineteenth-century, with an industrial revolution enveloping Europe, this process was of contentious debate. Why would individuals, artisans, be needed for their handicrafts when a machine could make it faster and more preciously? Today, with personal computers readily available, the same contention is posed: are individuals who use computers to make "art," artists? If you use a "machine," is it art at all? Since the sweep of the Industrial Revolution well over a century ago, the position and validity of the modern artist has been diligently called into question. One significant essay, by the German theorist and social critic Walter Benjamin entitled "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," has succeeded in transcending time with its multivalent, critical outlook of art in the twentieth-century. Benjamin, who wrote on a wide body of provocative issues, and provided provocative, penetrating answers was an active member of the Frankfurt School. Comprised of academics across multiple disciplines, the school's mission was to derive its basic insight from the idea that thought can transform itself through a dialectical process of self-reflection in history, and thus change society. With such a critical provocation in mind, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" examined and critiqued issues of an artwork's authenticity, reproducibility, and overall function. I will argue, however, that while Benjamin's essay is profound in many aspects, it conflates and negates many other important facets essential to a full comprehension of artistic pursuits in the new mechanical age. A qualitative case for embodied knowledge and the human faculties, in light of Kant's theory of "free play," will be made to demonstrate that the use of computers in present day artistic processes are not only sound, but entail an interdisciplinary character of intellectual rigor. Two primary examples will be drawn from the respective fields of architecture and music to elucidate this point.

Completed in 1936, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" investigated two prospects of art during its time: first, the ontology of an artwork made with replication in mind and second, the impact an artwork embodying such properties would have on the viewing public. The substantial commentary and keen insight of the latter will not be used to great depth in this paper; however, a discussion of the aesthetic qualities that Benjamin outlines will be the focus instead. Benjamin's main thesis in the essay deals directly with what he calls the "loss of aura" that occurs

when an artwork is made to be mechanically reproduced. He postulates that even the most perfect 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 the outcome of a particular “history”: the culmination of the various changes it endures over time. Thus, Benjamin asserts: “The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity” (417). Because a work of art that has been “reproduced” by a machine cannot be traced back to an “original,” it is not entitled to the status of “authentic.” The author carries on to stipulate that because “the authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning” (417), the reproduced work of art has subsequently lost its “authority” as well.

The impetus of my contention with Benjamin’s analysis, however, lies in his poignant, yet contingent affirmation of the artwork, namely that: “By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence” (417). He prefaces this proclamation by stating that although one might perpend the “aura” of an artwork to be present in the reproduced work, such a contention is simply a “symptomatic process whose significance points beyond the realm of art” (417). Here Benjamin’s thinking is rather credulous; his assertion is reductionist in nature. Via emphasizing the materialist ontology of an artwork, he is defaming the creativity and vision of the artist and consequently the emanation of the artistic pursuit as well. Benjamin seems to overlook a crucial principle that is part of the creation of art – the imaginative process. Flexing the human faculties, the imagination and the understanding in a free play interaction, as Kant wrote, in a creative manner – an artistic pursuit – is an essence of being human: this is a “symptomatic process?” Moreover, making a “plurality of copies” of an artwork has no necessary connection to the degradation of a substantive piece of art, whether a photograph or a film. That is, if we place the overarching value of the artwork on quantitative aspects, i.e., the “original,” we lose sight of why one pursues it in the first place. If an artwork has been crafted with care and insight it exudes a property of inarticulable knowledge, contextual understanding, and dedicated practice – that cannot be lost. The “unique existence” of the work of art is that inextricable connection with humanity’s unique existence. Mechanical reproduction is a surface quality; no process, mechanical or other, could extinguish the time, knowledge, and mindfulness that goes into making a work of art. From the time of inception, through the process of creation, to the completion, an artwork lives its own life, as Benjamin said, experiencing its peculiar “history,” interacting with its observers, looking to the infinite. This meta-physical quality of the work is its call to “authenticity,” not the brutal physicality of the “original” as defined by Benjamin. Furthermore, every artwork has its own authenticity, not predicated off its material creation, but its intellectual one, given to it by the artist who created it. Exploiting Benjamin’s own words, I would argue that: “The whole sphere of authenticity is *outside*...technical reproducibility” (417).

Yet, if we criticize Benjamin’s thesis by which he purports that technical reproducibility imposes a necessary degrading of the work of art, this does not mean, as the German philosopher Peter Bürger writes, “that we deny the importance the development of techniques of reproduction has [had]” (440). Instead, we need to understand the modified role of the artist in this new society. The process of industrialization was not created in a vacuum. Bürger articulates, “Technical development must not be understood as an independent variable, for it is itself dependent on overall social development” (440). In Benjamin’s essay, incidentally, a comprehensive understanding of the historical context of technological change is seemingly negated. Bürger sees this as well, “One cannot resist the impression that Benjamin wanted to provide an *ex post facto* materialist foundation for a discovery...the discovery of the loss of aura. But such an undertaking is problematic for the break in the development of art...which would be the result of technological change” (439). Consequently, Benjamin places the artist in the midst of revolutionary societal changes and provides no empathy for the systemic effects such changes have on artistic pursuits. This transmutation, however, cannot be seen independent of human consciousness. In today’s technologically prevalent

world, if we are to grasp the role of the artist, a full contextual understanding must be reached.

II.

“Unless the distinction vanishes in some cyborg future, people will always be more interesting than technology,” writes Malcolm McCullough, professor of architecture at Harvard University, in his celebrated book *Abstracting Craft* (x). The love of making things need not be confined to the physical world; an evolving “subsystem” of craft and artistry flourishes in the “virtual” reality of computers. McCullough observes that the qualitative principles of art in the “physical” world have now been transplanted into the digital realm – “machine” as medium rather than “tool.” He writes, “Clearly we have escaped that industrial age in which technology and talent were so directly opposed. In the process, we are reuniting skill and intellect” (x). Current usage of computers involved in creative making by artists is statically significant and cannot go unnoticed. However, many critics abhor the notion; cries of “inauthentic” and “non-human,” reminiscent of Benjamin’s conceptualization, ring out from the masses. I argue, conversely, that we need a “reconceptualization” of the electronic medium, so we do not irresponsibly disregard an amazing breadth of new artistic expression and possibly sever the ties of skill and intellect “once more.”

McCullough proposes a philosophy of “abstracting craft,” that is, using the computer as a medium in which we apply our faculties to give way to “form.” Clearly, the adaptation of modern technology to artistic pursuits is an intellectual and human one indeed. For example, our hands are used to discover the world around us. By pushing, pulling, and pointing, hands act as conduits for the artist’s volition. In digital craft this is true as well, yet taken for granted. Immense power lies in the usage of pointing: continuous visibility of the object of interest; rapid, incremental, reversible, physical actions on the object, and immediately visible results of direct manipulation demonstrate the manifestations of the hand in “virtual reality” (McCullough 23). Possibly more important than the hand, is visuality. The contemplative eye, because of its staggering act of perception, is perhaps the most closely connected to working and thinking. In addition, personal vision is the impetus of creating. Capacity for envisioning what to try and for recognizing desirable form amid the flux of possibilities is a talent that should not be taken lightly. On this phenomenon, McCullough writes, “The ability to develop an image in the mind’s eye from which to give form to artifacts in the outer world, by means of continuous manipulation [sic], should be a far better acknowledged aspect of electronic art and digital craft” (53). Of course, a “personal vision” presupposes the involvement of the mind itself. An apogee among human faculties, the mind lets these actions take flight, without it, the artist would be lost. Modern day artists subsume the computer in their work because it adds a new depth of thought emanating from the mind – new possibilities, and new envisages of exploration. “Ultimately,” McCullough elaborates, “the computer is a means for combining the skillful hand with the reasoning mind” (81). By emphasizing our human faculties, our embodied knowledge, as an essential instrument to epistemological development, cognitive processes, and artistic articulation, I propose a synthetic resolution to the historical “separation” of traditional craft and artistic pursuits in light of new technologies. Rather than pitting them in an apparently inevitable, unproductive opposition, a position taken by the pundits, as well as Benjamin, I place intrinsic value on the new intellectualism and breadth of the computer-cum-artistic medium.

But what artists are using this new medium? And how does it manifest itself? To elucidate and bridge-the-gap of this theoretical proposal with practice, we will look at explorations in modern architectural endeavors, as well as music composition.

The topological approach in architecture, which has developed progressively throughout the last decade, is one example of the computer-medium as aperture for theoretical and artistic expression. Architects of this visage are searching for an alternative way of responding to the complexity of the contemporary world (Di Cristina 7). They execute this, via computer, through a

continuous transformation of geometrical curvilinearity and pliant systems that are in a constant state of flux. Architectural theorist Giuseppa Di Cristina writes of this phenomenon, “Their purpose is to model the conditions that constitute the dynamics of the urban context, from which a new urban life emerges” (7). Furthermore, the distinguished architectural theorist Greg Lynn argues in his treatise *Animate Form*, “Because of its dedication to permanence, architecture is one of the last modes of thought based on the inert” (9). According to Lynn, challenging this mode of temperament will not “threaten the essence of the discipline, but will advance it” (9).

Interpolation of multiple disciplines, specifically that of science, mathematics, and philosophy, is the core energy of topological theory. This intellectual aptness, Di Cristina argues, has led to “an interdisciplinary attitude – or rather a ‘transdisciplinary’ one – that tends to transpose concepts from one field of thought and human activity to another” (7). The process of interweaving cross-disciplines is one echoed throughout modern music as well. Musicians, with the direct involvement of computer-as-medium, are pushing the limitations of what music composition has traditionally been idealized to be. Composers such as John Cage and Karlheinz Stockhausen have used a formal process of composing called “algorithmic composition” to great effectiveness. Using an algorithm created by the human user, the computer binary manifests a “composition.” However, to create such an algorithm is an extensive process entailing knowledge of many disciplines including mathematics, physics, computer science, and music theory (Roads 834). Once again, we see the faculties of humanity and technology come together to form an irrevocable bond of unity and authority.

In conclusion, taking the celebrated essay “The Work in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” by Walter Benjamin as an impetus to delve into the state of art and artistic pursuits in the age of mechanical reproduction, I have argued that, primarily, we need to fully understand the intricacies of the context of the modern artist. While Benjamin’s unflinching critique of the reproductive dangers of art (e.g., as propagandistic materials) inherent in the mechanical age are insightful, he ostensibly distills the work of art itself to mere quantitative factors of “originality,” an ephemeral dimension. Instead, I argue for the meta-corporeality of qualitative embodied knowledge: using the human faculties, the imagination and the understanding together in a harmony of free play. Transposing this point-of-view to present day artistic pursuits, a necessary transformation of historical contexts that Benjamin excluded for the artists of his time, I demonstrated the use of technological and intellectual enquiry with pragmatic examples of topological architecture and algorithmic composition in music. Additionally, these two practices embody the discursive process of intellectual adaptation throughout history.

To reiterate, the whole sphere of authenticity, found in artistic pursuits, is outside that of technical reproducibility.

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