Absorption, Contemplation, and Affection: Benjamin, Adorno, and Spinoza on Critical Aesthetics

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ABSTRACT: I explore critique through art, a meaningful problem as art is pervasive and ideology plays a role in social progress. I also consider the debate between Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno, a question of passive absorption versus active contemplation. I argue Baruch Spinoza's psychology of affects presents a critique of Adorno, allows a defense of Benjamin, and provides a thicker understanding of both thinkers. I criticize Adorno for implying that rationality is immediately possible and argue social progress must be historical and procedural; rationality cannot be a means to this progress. Affects are the proper means for this historical moment. Passive absorption of art, particularly through film, is more effective than active contemplation due to the causal function of affect.

Introduction

If critique and social progress are important, then so too is understanding the necessary conditions for the possibility of critique and social improvement. In the late 1930s, Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno each produced thought on this possibility in cultural aesthetics. Benjamin praised the critical possibility presented by film in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," and Adorno critiqued the mass conformity, deindividuation, and passivity incited by mass music in "On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression in Listening." These works present a stark difference in theory vis-à-vis critical aesthetics, particularly in the differing values placed on passive absorption and active contemplation. Again, the outcome of this debate matters significantly to social progress and to a living, active critique. In his *Ethics*, Baruch Spinoza presented a psychology of humans as being affected by interactions with other objects, thus immediately limiting any claim to full freedom from one's environment through rationality. I argue that Benjamin's advocacy for film as a critical aesthetic form can be better understood through the lens of Spinoza's discussion of affections, that Spinoza's psychology highlights a material problem in Adorno's work, and, consequently, that Spinoza offers a defense against Adorno's well-articulated and intuitively correct assertions by showing that Adorno operates from a mythic psychology. I take as secondary consequences of this paper the implied importance of an accurate human psychology in critical theory and in philosophy in general and discuss the importance of a procedural and historical conception of the self and of social progress.

Mechanical Reproduction, Shock, and Passivity in Benjamin

Benjamin begins his argument by presenting the history of the evolution of mechanical reproduction in art. Mechanical reproducibility is the ability to recreate a work of art through technical rather than inventive-artistic means. Forgeries (reproduced works made by hand, "manual reproduction" in the text) exist somewhere between these two procedures, i.e., human originality and mechanical reproduction. Benjamin argues that a work of art always has been reproducible but that such reproducibility has been maximized in the modern era with the introduction of photography and of film ("Work"). Art was reproduced with bronze by the Greeks, with woodcut later, with engraving and etching in the Middle Ages, and with lithography in the nineteenth century.[1] Benjamin is herein concerned primarily with visual re-

production and explicitly states that while the invention of printing had significant effects in literature, it "is merely a special, though particularly important, case." Lithography was quickly taken over by photography, which significantly accelerated the efficiency and speed of visual reproduction, even allowing it to "keep pace with speech" ("Work"). Consequently, the invention of photography as an art form preconditioned the invention of film.

A principle consequence of reproduced art is its lack of historicity—"its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be" (Benjamin, "Work," section 2). The reproduced work requires the presence of the original to have authenticity, which would constitute a presence in time and space. In conjunction with Benjamin's "Theses on the History of Philosophy," this would imply a methodological problem. Benjamin argues that the historian must interact with a past epoch from the position of her own ("Concept," addendum A). Thus, if the art fails to possess its own epoch, i.e., its presence in time and space, then the possibility of historically-grounded critique would seem to be significantly lacking. Reproduced art would appear to act as myth. This seeming contradiction demands resolution since Benjamin otherwise praises the critical merit of film; it is likely the case that since film is not a full reproduction, it does not suffer from total ahistoricity. The original is presented to the audience in semi-authentic form as an edited sequence of images. Another possible explanation is that film, as a work of art that reproduces life but does so in such a way that it reproduces what was never real in the first place (e.g., the acted scenarios), finds its historicity in myth itself. Because film is not reproducing an original, authentic history, its own history becomes the myth it tells its audience.

This historicity exists in what Benjamin terms a work of art's "aura" ("Work," section 2). Thus, the loss of historicity caused by mechanical reproduction results in the decimation of a work's aura. The aura can also be experienced in reality, i.e., via the unarmed eye when one looks at mountains, branches, or any other material entity (these are Benjamin's examples; "Work," section 3). The aura is the phenomenon brought up with the implicit awareness that an object has a unique history. For added context, the lack of the aura seems to mirror Karl Marx's fetishized commodity, and thus, negatively, the aura itself resembles the unfetishized entity (Marx). Since Benjamin does not make this comparison, it must be inferred that this analogy is only a rough one and that there are subtle differences in Benjamin's concept of aura that are not adequately reflected by Marx's discussion of fetishization (otherwise Benjamin would not need a concept of aura).

A central consequence of the loss of the aura through mechanical reproduction is the loss of tradition. Aura, being inextricably—almost tautologically—connected with the historicity of the object, embeds the object in tradition (Benjamin, "Work," section 4). Inversely, the destruction of the aura through mechanical reproduction shocks tradition, freeing the object from the ritual within which it would otherwise exist (Benjamin, "Work," section 2). Further, because tradition is ritualistic, emancipation from tradition is synonymous with emancipation from binding ritual. The shift from authenticity and historicity to reproduced, ahistorical pluralities, which parallels the loss of the aura, also mirrors the shift from cult value, i.e., ritual/traditional value, to exhibition value, i.e., value in perception. Benjamin does not take a stance on the direction from which this mirroring originates—i.e., whether the changes in mechanical reproduction result in the change of valuation or whether the changes in cultural taste result in a demand for greater mechanical reproduction—instead implying a self-reinforcing symbiosis, wherein there operates both "the adjustment of reality to the masses" and "of the masses to reality" (Benjamin, "Work," section 3). Important for the discussion herein is that the removal of art from its ritualistic fabric releases it into the political sphere, allowing art to take on a truly critical, revolutionary function (Benjamin, "Work," section 4).

Exhibition value enables viewers to take the standpoint of the critic, facilitating the testing of the work of art external to the reinscribing myth of tradition (which, for its part, loses its claim to historicity each time it is thoughtlessly re-inscribed) (Benjamin, "Work," section 8).

Dadaist art, by destroying the aura of traditional art through the familiar, comfortable, and subversive guise of art itself, presented the world with a shock effect, a tactile quality, which startled and shook the viewer (Benjamin, "Work," section 14). Likewise, the technical aspects of film (e.g., cutting and editing together different series of frames), with its consistent change in viewpoint and intermittence in time, shocks the audience. While this technical shock is only the physical component of that which existed inside Dadaism's cultural shock effect, it still offers the material possibility of critique—the physical preconditions for taking a critical standpoint. When employed critically (rather than from a bourgeoise mentality), it has the capacity to highlight both the untimely and the uncanny, thereby facilitating and instigating social change.

Further, in contrast to the painting, which demands contemplation, the distinct images of the film flash by before they can be contemplated (Benjamin, "Work," section 14). This is central to Benjamin's argument for the critical potential of film. The work of art that is contemplated absorbs the viewer, but the work of art that is distractedly seen is absorbed by the viewer (Benjamin, "Work," section 15). Through contemplation, art subsumes the subject, but through distracted passivity, the subject is able to harness the important consequences of the work. Further, anything that is learned distractedly becomes habit. For the lesson to appear in one's actions via distracted absorption implies a lack of willful action on the part of the agent. Thus, if the action is taken without conscious will, it must be the case that it is habit. The subsumption of the critical standpoint to the realm of habit allows for the appropriation and the utilization of the standpoint in critical-historical moments of action. "The tasks which face the human apparatus of perception at the turning points of history cannot be solved by optical means, that is, by contemplation, alone. They are mastered gradually by habit, under the guidance of tactile appropriation" ("Work," section 15). Further, the distracted characteristic of the viewer's relationship to the film presents the methodological boon of tactile familiarity, which is indeed nothing more than habit itself.

Thus, film possesses two critical characteristics: the tactile shock effect and the possibility of distracted absorption. Benjamin argues that the combination of the film's mechanically-induced shock effect with the overarching passivity of the viewer (because the images are forced upon the viewer) creates a well-measured balance wherein the shock positions the viewer as critical interpreter who, at the same time, exists as such passively, thus *habituating* the critical standpoint. "The public is an examiner, but an absent-minded one" ("Work," section 15). She is poised to habituate freedom from the parasitic, ritualistic tendencies of tradition.

Familiarity, Deindividuation, and Contemplation in Adorno

Adorno indirectly critiques Benjamin's view on the possibility of critique in aesthetics with his (Adorno's) critique of mass music. Specifically, Adorno critiques the regression of individuation and of the standpoint of critique as exemplified in and caused by mass music. This is a critique of Benjamin's "Work of Art" insofar as Adorno heavily criticizes the lack of active contemplation from the subject in his relation to mass music, which Benjamin instead praises as observed in film-viewers.

Adorno argues that mass music commodifies the subject (273). Instead of the subject's purchasing the commodity of music, music is algorithmically formulated and liquidates individuality so that a person is molded into one who is perpetually willing to purchase the formulaic music. He develops a taste, or lack thereof, for the familiar. Circularity ensues:

because it is familiar, it becomes popular, and because it is popular, it becomes more familiar. The conformity of music operates as a self-reinforcing system; historical authenticity reinscribes as mythical reproduction where it ought to have died off. The consequence of this reinscription is that music becomes banal, but the subject does not perceive this. Instead, this banality is comfortable to the masses, and they sit in their formulaic comfort like children being spoon-fed mass-produced baby food.

Music itself becomes commodified insofar as it transitions from an art form into a fetishized consumption. Much like the Rolls Royce (Adorno, 279), mass music becomes a marker of status, the value of which lies not in the aesthetic quality of the music itself but in the reification of the fetishized value through the purchasing of records and concert tickets (Adorno, 277). In other words, the subject values the music because it is an expensive marker of status, not because the music has any meaningful aesthetic worth. The music itself has even adopted a new creation-history of commercialization—of managers, producers, marketing experts, and executives—in lieu of one of individuated artistry (Adorno, 276). The Romantic hero is subsumed by the corporate conglomerate, and the masses impatiently demand more prechewed banality. They go from their highchair back to their crib, enslaved by their inability to chew, and they thank their caretaker for feeding them (Adorno, 280).[2] That is, the complacent masses exist as enslaved by mass music and by the pacification it has had on their ability to critique; they "[love their] cell because [they have] been left nothing else to love" (Adorno, 280).

Individuality is liquidated so that the subject may be corralled to the record store. Taste is manipulated. The individual willingly submits to this through the re-inscription of familiarity due to comfort. Rather than actively and critically participate in higher-order music, the subject accepts the changes in the superstructure of musical taste, which are reflected in her character, for the sake of ease and of status. In both the mindless consumption of mass music and the purchasing of the concert ticket, the subject forfeits his claims to individuation, continually regressing further with each passive assent. Even in the cases where mass music does something slightly unfamiliar, it still operates within the socially prescribed limits—"accidental differentiation within the strict confines of the prescribed" (Adorno, 280). Commodified mass music does not take risks; it is impossible, then, for mass music to present a radical critique since it is unwilling to rock the boat.

In forgoing this critical component for the sake of familiarity, the subject loses not only individuation but also contemplative rationality. "Deconcentration is the perceptual activity which prepares the way for the forgetting and sudden recognition of mass music" (Adorno, 288). Insofar as deconcentration is a necessary condition for precognition of the familiar in mass music, the existence of the latter implies the former—thus, Adorno's critique of Benjamin. Whereas Benjamin argued explicitly for the benefits of the passive nature of film for introducing the masses to a critical mindset, Adorno polemically argues against such passivity, indicting it alongside a lack of individuation (much like Kant's conception of enlightenment). For Adorno, this passivity represents an immaturity that begs for critique rather than acceptance. Far from inciting a revolutionary moment, the passivity of mass music turns the masses into mindless consumers, algorithmically commodified to purchase similarly commodified mass music.

Affections and the Thoroughly Historical Subject: Spinoza and Benjamin

The purpose of this section is to explicate Spinoza's views on affections and to show that his psychology helps to defend Benjamin's critical aesthetics against the critiques of Adorno.

In Part 3 of *Ethics*, Spinoza defines adequate causes and inadequate causes in such a way as to show that human beings are not entirely self-determined (Spino-

za, 278). There are three definitions that establish this point. The first definition is that an adequate cause is one that intelligibly entails its effect; the effect can be discerned from knowledge of the cause alone. Likewise, an inadequate cause does not intelligibly entail its effect; there exists a different, external adequate cause. The second definition is that human beings can be said to be active when they are the adequate cause of something. Human beings are passive when they are merely the inadequate, or partial, cause of an effect. Thus, by making a distinction between adequate and inadequate causation, particularly from the standpoint of the subject, Spinoza accounts for the possibility that human beings are not in full control of their actions. This is in contrast to the view that human beings have total control over their actions and that an immoral or, more relevant herein, uncritical, action is due to a lack of morality or discipline (both of which are, in this latter view, assumed to be within the capabilities of the subject). The final definition of Part 3 accounts for the causes of affects and their effects. Affects, through transferring to another body states or images, increase or diminish the power of activity of bodies. This is further explained by Definition 7 of Part 2: "If several individual things concur in one act in such a way as to be all together the simultaneous cause of one effect, I consider them all, in that respect, as one individual" (Spinoza, 244). Thus, if the subject is not the adequate cause of all its actions, then the identity of the self extends beyond the subject. The mind is not only the conceptions it creates and the perceptions it undergoes, but it is also the historical existence of all past influences, which themselves have past influences, *ad infinitum*. Thus, the self as agent is thoroughly historical, ceaselessly influenced by a barrage of external adequate causes. Important herein is that the self is not contained in the body or the mind and that it is influenced, in matters upon which it is passive, by external entities.

This theory of affection and the historical self explosively displays itself in Benjamin's final section in "The Work of Art." Notwithstanding the merits of habit—which themselves seem to imply passivity—the call for a passive absorption of the critical standpoint in film, à la everyday perception of reality, is indicative of a theory that does not believe that human beings are capable of being totally free in their actions. Benjamin reads as a Spinozist. From the other direction, Spinoza's affect theory, which states as a definition that human beings are not entirely free, sheds light on and defends an otherwise strange conclusion from Benjamin. The call for passive ideological transmission, particularly through habituation, becomes one of necessity for it no longer makes any sense to demand individuated rationality and higher-order critique. Adorno's critique of passivity, negatively implying an approval of individuation and of rational contemplation, stands in contradiction to Spinoza's psychology. Again, from the other direction, Spinoza's psychology highlights a material error in Adorno's critique, namely, the assumption that individuals are capable of being perfectly rational and thus rationally free. Further, while it may be true that the masses become more passive in general through passively absorbed art, the habituation of praxis dissolves the need for individuation and contemplation (let alone Benjamin's argument that contemplation does violence to the subject through subsumption into the work of art). Presumably, the critical goal of contemplation is to take correct action—to achieve a desired end effectively—but if the proper action has been habituated,[3] then there is no longer any wrong action to correct against.

It would be wrong to dismiss Adorno's critique entirely. Even if we take Spinoza to be correct and Adorno to operate from a faulty psychology, this does not imply any untruth in the conclusions for which Adorno argues (i.e., the critiques he levies); indeed, his discussions of reification and the liquidation of the individual are compelling. The problems with mass music that Adorno highlighted must be addressed, but such resolution must be done from a materially correct human psychology. In fact, the liquidation of the subject makes

even more sense from the perspective of affect and the historical self. The self is liquidated because its history becomes predominantly myth; the fetishization of music is absorbed into the subject, and the self becomes an incoherent amalgamation of contradictory myths. To attempt a more rational, isolated self (i.e., one with critical-contemplative capacity) would threaten the identity of the self by undermining the veracity of its history (which is constituted by the aforementioned amalgamation of myths), and consequently, the distinct subject (as freed from external adequate causes) is rarely attempted from the liquidated standpoint.

However, to argue against this loss of a historical self to myth and fetishization by critiquing a lack of contemplation and individuation is mythic itself by not trying to work through the material conditions inherent to the present moment (e.g., the pre-existing conditions of passivity and affect); to combat affect and myth with rationality and argumentation is a non-sequitur, much like trying to teach someone calculus without explaining algebra or arithmetic. Going straight to the end of rationality without working through the progressive history toward that goal is hopeless, and while rationality and argumentation may certainly be appropriate ends, they are not also means. Feeling love in return from a loved one is a natural consequence of loving that person, but it is not the process itself. The return of love back to yourself is the consequence and perhaps even the (selfish) goal, but loving the other is the process by which this goal is achieved. It is impossible to force someone to love you just as it is impossible to force someone to be rational. One must be motivated through affect.

Conclusion

In the face of Adorno's criticism of mass art as deindividuating and pacifying, Benjamin's advocacy of the passive absorption of film as a fruitful form of critical aesthetics finds a defense in Spinoza insofar as Spinoza's psychology of affects highlights serious material falsehoods in the work of Adorno. In light of Adorno, Benjamin is threatened, but in light of Spinoza, Adorno becomes myth. Though Adorno scathingly argues against the commodification and fetishization of mass music and the liquidation of the subject, these criticisms must be evaluated in terms of an appropriate psychology rather than from our common viewpoint (which itself is rife with a belief in freedom and rationality). It matters little for Adorno to speak ardently about the way one ought to interface with art when such a relationship is materially impossible (at least presently). Adorno also fails to account for the historically necessary conditions for change in the present, namely, a focus on affect toward rationality with a strong presence of mind to the fact that this process is painfully slow and unsatisfactorily procedural. I take as an assumption that Spinoza is correct, but, of course, this is tenuous at best. Further research would include a defense of Spinoza, perhaps with assistance from Aristotle.

Notes

[1]Woodcuts are much like wooden stamps. Lithography, unlike woodcut, did not require raised edges because it used oil or fat on the part with the desired image and water on the rest of the surface to demarcate the image from the non-image.

[2]This metaphor is of a textual point.

[3]Aristotle's virtue ethics can help add depth to this point. See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Books 2 and 4.

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