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On the Triumphs and Travails of Committed and Autonomous Art

In their respective texts on *Commitment* and *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin deconstruct the relation between art and politics in contemporary society. While Benjamin emphasizes the emancipatory possibilities of overtly political art, Adorno instead advocates for deliberately apolitical art, suggests that intentionally political art betrays its own exaggerated mission of liberating the masses. In this paper, I will examine the ideal relation of art to politics under the lenses of both Benjamin and Adorno, exploring how their respective notions of the political nature of art qualify, complicate, complement, and negate each other.

From Benjamin's perspective, the age of technological reproduction has rendered art independent from its traditional cult origins. Benjamin notes two contradictory lenses through which to view a work of art: the artwork's cult value, and its exhibition value. The cult value of artwork stems from their construction as "figures in the service of magic…[whose import rests on] their existence, not their being on view" (Benjamin 225). In this sense, art is not meant to be appraised by the masses; it does not need to be validated by their praise. Rather, it functions as an otherworldly thing whose mere existence, hovering in ethereal splendor above the ranks of men, fulfills its own purpose.

Consequently, such artwork revered for its cult value often "remain[s] hidden…covered nearly all year round…invisible to the spectator" (Benjamin 225). It is too special, too uniquely

glorious to taint with the dumb gaze of philistine onlookers who cannot even hope to dream of comprehending it. In direct opposition to this notion of cult value lies that of exhibition value. Exhibition value is the value attributed to art through its public presentation. "Instead of being based on ritual, [art becomes] based on…politics (224). In this sense, it is championed as art for the people. Art takes on an instructive role. It is able to communicate its message to a greater amount of the populace, allowing it to perform a new function via its wide dissemination, made possible by advancements in technological reproduction—it begins to take on the "primary social function....[of] train[ing] human beings" (226). Rather than being haughtily out of reach of the common man, too good for contemplation, it aims to reach out, to kindly educate and nurture, bringing the unenlightened closer to a more nuanced, complete view of society.

Such is the form of art which Benjamin advocates for. He desires a union between art and politics that fosters a renewal in the viewer, stirring in them a "new understanding" and evolved consciousness. Benjamin believes film to be the ideal medium of this marriage between art and politics, insisting that "by focusing on hidden details of familiar objects, by exploring the commonplace under the ingenious guidance of the camera, [film] "extends our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives" (Benjamin 236). Benjamin is under the impression that film, by virtue of its ability to emphasize certain elements of the scene over which our unattuned eyes might gloss over, to rehearse a scene countless times until it is perfectly enacted and edited into the final cut, reigns as the ultimate art form. In Benjamin's eyes, film performs a "revolutionary" social function in that it concocts the ideal montage, a refined mélange of images and sound that form a plotline designed to bring the viewer to realizations they would be unable to come to on their own.

Yet Adorno would vehemently disagree, saying that Benjamin trusts too much, placing too much faith in the product of a culture industry founded upon the exact antithesis of the function which he perceives film to perform. Adorno believes that the "culture industry transfers the profit motive naked onto cultural forms…[consequently, that which it trumpets as] "enlightenment [is actually]…mass deception…a means for fettering consciousness" (Adorno, *Culture Industry Reconsidered* 106). Because the culture industry is ultimately revenue-driven, its core mission is not to disseminate truth but rather to accumulate profit. The products which it churns out only serve to reiterate the dominant ideology of the state, operating within a capitalistic framework that perpetuates itself. As Benjamin extols the ability of film to capture the veiled minutiae of life which we our likely to miss on our own, Adorno would respond by asking him to consider the agenda of the cameraman. The audience sees what the filmmakers want them to see. Someone is in control of the camera—someone is attempting to control the viewer, and the conclusions they draw from the film. Film is often not open-ended; it does not leave the viewer to come to their own conclusions. There is one right answer, and it is broadcast before their very eyes. Rather than being an objective medium, encouraging independent thought, film leads the viewer where it wants them to go. The entire story is never known to the audience, the entire image can never be examined—the audience is only privy to the selective plotlines and scenes which are edited scrupulously and deliberately into the ultimate production.

Thus, in this sense, film inhibits the agency of the audience, "imped[ing] the[ir] development [as] autonomous, independent individuals who judge and decide consciously for themselves" (Adorno, *Culture Industry Reconsidered* 106). They passively imbibe the scenes that are cast before them, subconsciously assimilating the agenda of the filmmaker into their respective bodies of individual knowledge. Thus, under the guise of innocuous entertainment, film

indoctrinates the masses into believing what it wants them to believe, letting the masses think that they reach those conclusions on their own when in fact those conclusions have been carefully constructed and arranged into the film in such a way that maximizes their chances of integrating seamlessly into the ideology of the audience at large.

Yet Benjamin still argues that "the public is [put into] the position of the critic…[a] position [which] requires no attention" (Benjamin 240). Adorno would find this position laughable, as he believes the culture industry stifles productive criticism rather than encourages it. After all, such careful examination and productive, active criticism of the culture industry would be its end. The continued hegemonic domination of the culture industry rests on its ability to keep the public safely entrapped in a state of blind, mindless routine. Thus, rather than acting as the interactive educational beacon Benjamin believes it to be, such art becomes rote dogma. "Conformity has replaced consciousness," as this form of art does little to incite intellectual debate (Adorno, *Culture Industry Reconsidered* 104). As the credits roll, the subject is firmly closed for discussion.

Adorno terms this form of art—which Benjamin believes in so devoutly—committed art. In short, committed art is art with political strings attached. While it "is not intended to generate ameliorative measures, legislative acts or practical institutions…[it] work[s] at the level of fundamental attitudes…awaken[ing] the free choice of the agent" (Adorno, *Commitment* 78). It aims to cultivate a change of mindset, the renewal of political self-efficacy that Benjamin wants to inspire in the common man.

Adorno would audibly interject here, arguing that such didactic art, "trivialize[s] political reality… for the sake of political commitment, which [in turn] reduces [its] political effect" (Adorno, *Commitment* 81). In the artist's fervent mission to take on the role of priest, baptizing consumers of his art in the carefully constructed holy waters of his ideology, he inadvertently

bends the truth, distorting the facts of an objective political reality—a reality that often does not need to be falsified, a reality which unadulterated could actually justify his politics—to more bluntly convey his beliefs so that they can be "directly comprehended" by the uneducated layperson (83). Reality is not so easily decipherable, yet committed art aims to reduce it into its simplest parts to exaggerate the legitimacy of a particular ideology. In this sense, Adorno asserts that the committed artist detracts from his own message, making it seem like "dramatic implausibility" rather than truth (83).

Adorno cites the work of Brecht as a notable example of the tendency of committed art to minimize political reality and lend itself to naïve generalization. And surely enough, Brecht, overtly political in his aims, so reduces reality to conform to his pointed political agenda that his work cannot possibly be said to convince anyone of its legitimacy who is not already in agreement with him. This becomes readily apparent in his screenplay, *He Who Says Yes / He Who Says No*. In this work, a boy falls ill on a group journey, unable to continue on. The fellow members of his group follow a primeval Custom which dictates that anyone who cannot continue the journey be thrown into the valley to die.

When asked if he will "consent…[to being] hurled into the valley, as the Custom prescribes," the boy refuses, saying he does not consent (Brecht 58). The boy turns out to be a revolutionary: he begins to pontificate about how what they need is "a new Great Custom…[which prioritizes] thinking things out anew in every new situation," rather than blindly following tradition regardless of situational context (59). And just like that, in less than the span of a page, the group acquiesces, deciding to found this new Custom, refusing to let "any ancient Custom discourage [them] from adopting a right thought," when just minutes ago they were ready to throw him into the valley into certain death (59). Brecht makes it quite obvious here that he is advocating for a

political era heralded by freedom of thought, unconstrained by societal convention, in the hope that it will pave the way for a more just, rational society.

Yet Adorno would think his approach unbelievably contrived, and excessively moralistic. It is contrived in the sense that, never once, in the entirety of the screenplay up until this moment, does he hint that this mere young boy is even slightly political, let alone a fiery ideologue championing a progressive new age of Enlightenment. Moreover, how this child is able to convince a group of blind partisans into completely abandoning their entire belief system—for a new ideology directly rival to the core tenets they have been politically socialized into regarding as truth!—is never explained. The reader is simply expected to accept, without hesitation, that a small child is capable of singlehandedly reversing such a deeply entrenched, ancient societal norm within minutes. This is politically "inconceivable," as anyone who has even been slightly exposed to the political sphere knows full well that people do not simply change their minds about politics so easily, if at all (Adorno, *Commitment* 81).

Of course, it is likely that anyone reading this play who already believes in an ideology similar to that which Brecht espouses, will find it positively magnificent, in a classic case of confirmation bias wherein the individual favors information which confirms his preexisting beliefs. Yet any objective cynic would hardly find it as damning evidence of the legitimacy of Brecht's political ideology. Thus, Brecht ends up "preaching to the converted…[achieving a] primacy of lesson over pure form" which ends up working against him, as it convinces no skeptic of his politics and "falsifies the very objectivity which [he] labored to distil" (Adorno, *Commitment* 82). Brecht's attempt to make his version of the objective truth of the world as obvious as possible hurts his argument in the end, as his play ends up not resembling objectivity at all. Thus, his arguments are rendered null and void.

In opposition to Brecht's committed art, and committed art in general, Adorno advocates for autonomous art; that is, "art for art's sake" (Adorno, *Commitment* 76). Standing directly across from the aforementioned notion of committed art, autonomous art does not seek to educate. It has no deliberate political aim, yet, coincidentally, it is not without its politics. While autonomous art does not intentionally invoke politics, "[to it] falls the burden of wordlessly asserting what is barred to politics…[thus], politics has migrated into autonomous art" (89). Because politics under the dominant order only serves to reinforce the status quo, art—even autonomous art, which has no political goal—becomes politicized, but in a discreet way that protects it from suffering the same dismal fate as committed art. Adorno cites Kafka as an example of this uncommitted art, which actually "compel[s] the change of attitude which committed works merely demand" (87). Committed art begs the viewer to believe in its legitimacy, insisting that its way is the right way and that no other way exists. But because autonomous art does not seek to politicize the viewer, it coincidentally inspires in them the nuanced political contemplation that committed art could never achieve. Adorno believes that anyone who experiences an autonomous work such as those of Kafka "[loses] for ever both any peace with the world and any chance of consoling himself" (87). Autonomous art thus induces in the viewer a stirring, enduring shift of character mindset. In his ambiguous prose, undetermined by any obvious political mission, Kafka is able to perform the function which committed work aspires to but can never attain. There is no clearly discernible, simplistic moral to be derived from such autonomous art—it causes one to reflect, to analyze, to assess it against their existing beliefs, driving intellectual discussion and debate.

By refusing to treat the audience as a passive, lowbrow mass to be injected with the correct political mindset, autonomous artists invoke in them an unnerving sense of appreciation for that which they have just experienced, and allow them to actively engage in their own education. In

this sense, Adorno's ideal work of autonomous art "point[s] to a practice from which [it] abstain[s]: the creation of a just life" (Adorno, *Commitment* 89). Emphasizing form over function, it operates as an intellectual stimulus, never seeking to educate nor edify. Thus, its subtle nuance and indirect style ends up prompting intellectual dialogue and contemplation that has the potential to spur progress towards a "just life"—a term that Adorno, perhaps intentionally, leaves vaguely undefined, as it is likely dependent on the subjective interests and feelings of the individual.

Benjamin would insist that such "just life" is the consequence of well-executed committed art. He believes that art's social function, because it is rooted in its exhibition value, requires that it ideally possess the ability to "present [itself] for simultaneous collective experience…[providing the masses with a way] to organize and control themselves in their reception" (Benjamin 235). This is arguably the natural expectation placed on art when one judges its potency according to its ability to convey a political message. The more widely a political message is disseminated and absorbed by the masses, the greater its success. Thus, by ensuring that the art form allows for a collective, simultaneous experience, the artist reaches a broader audience, increasing the likelihood that their message is heeded.

Adorno would intervene here, arguing that such audience-driven, message-oriented artwork, aiming to attract the masses to its altar, is perhaps a product of the culture industry and is not nearly as revolutionary as it purports itself to be. "The work of art becomes an appeal to subjects…bleating what everyone is already saying or at least secretly wants to hear" (Adorno, *Commitment* 78, 88). By anchoring the success of his work to its reception by the masses, the artist subconsciously caters his message to what he believes will evoke the reaction he desires from the audience, in a preemptive attempt to configure his artwork's own success. Yet even if such an artwork is received by a wide audience that adopts its message as its own, can it really be

considered a success when the artist preemptively sacrificed a truly novel, revolutionary message, knowing that it would not be nearly as well-received? No—after all:

> Even if it touches the lives of innumerable people, the function of something is no guarantee of its particular quality. The blending of aesthetics with its residual communicative aspects leads art, as a social phenomenon, not to its rightful position in opposition to alleged artistic snobbism, but rather in a variety of ways to the defence of its baneful social consequences (Adorno, *Culture Industry Reconsidered* 102).

If anything, an artwork's mass appeal—the fact that it "touches the lives of innumerable people"—can be regarded as an indicator of its diluted, antirevolutionary quality, for the culture industry has indoctrinated the people into liking only what is socially acceptable—that which maintains the existing social order. By "blending" aesthetics and politics in such an overt manner that deliberately emphasizes function over form, committed art is assumed to have a largely positive effect—after all, it overtly states its intent and does not obscure its political affiliation, does it not? Yet Adorno would argue that this becomes an automatic justification for committed art that ignores the "baneful social consequences" which such art discreetly encourages—that is, the collective inculcation of the masses with ideology that masquerades as novel truth yet in reality is but a reinforcement of the existing social order. And so the masses are fed a diluted concoction of the recipe for their own alleged salvation.

Benjamin agrees with Adorno insofar that he notes that, during the creation of such committed art, "independent reactions are predetermined by the mass audience response they are about to produce" (Benjamin 234). Yet he does not seem to recognize the harmful connotations of this preemptive, intentional structuring of audience reaction. Adorno would say that committed art tends to be dishonest, as the lessons it purveys as high, unspoken truth only go so far as to inform

the masses of that which already lies within the boundaries of the political realms which they have been conditioned to confine themselves. It is not revolutionary. Simply "the notion of a 'message' in art…already contains an accommodation to the world: the stance of the lecturer conceals a clandestine entente with the listeners, who could only be truly rescued from illusions by refusal of it" (Adorno, *Commitment* 88). The existence of a message implies the intention of communication, the aura of believability. That a message is being conveyed from the artwork to the individual implies that it is is not completely out of the scope of plausibility.

Yet any message worth conveying to the viewer—any message that intends to invoke in them that aforementioned new sense of understanding that Benjamin insists is the true social function of art—would be too unbelievable, too implausible, if not entirely ineffable within the context of the prevailing social order. It would paradoxically preclude its own existence. Thus the messages that committed art attempts to convey to the audience are those which said audience "secretly wants to hear"—messages pre-approved by the culture industry, which serve to reinforce its continued existence, implicitly underpinning its ideological domination of the people. Thus committed art becomes a parody of the vision it intends for itself, unable to escape the structures from which it inevitably spawns.

Ultimately, it becomes clear that both Benjamin and Adorno qualify and complicate each other's political demands for art. In his emphasis on the emancipatory potential of committed art, Benjamin seems to overlook the place of such art within the context of the culture industry; at the same time, Adorno criticizes the complacency of committed art within the regime of the existing order, arguing that autonomous art is the true, ideal form of art. Considering their respective nuances, it is interesting to ponder what each might think of the state of political art that dominates our current modern, digital age of late capitalism. It is worth investigating further into how we

may—if we may at all—utilize their frameworks to create art that could potentially emancipate us from the suffocating grasp of the culture industry.

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