

To What Extent is the Transcendence of Art Retained Under Late Capitalism?

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The effects of capitalism on the entirety of art has generated a breadth of discussion. In particular, the transcendence of art has been largely effected by the advent of late, or post-industrial, capitalism. This essay explores the subtleties of these effects, and elaborates on their consequences by investigating theories of art and visual culture first suggested in the modernist era by the philosophers of the Frankfurt School. An investigation into how the conception of “cult-value” and “aura” delineate the foundation for the transcendence of art will be discussed, while an application of the theory of the culture industry will explore how capitalistic practices have usurped this transcendence. Further, an analysis of spectacular culture, with specific regard to fetishisation, will indicate how art has mutated from its historical function to work for the promotion of capitalist ideology. In the interest of setting the parameters for this discussion, the exact dialectic by which it is possible to initially consider art as transcendent must first be set forth.

For many, art holds a form of intrinsic value that is entirely separate from its critical function, monetary worth and public reception. Art, as theorised by Kant, holds its own intrinsic value and is set apart from other mundane non-art objects. The idea of autonomous art can be traced back to Kant's *Critique of Judgement* in which he writes about beautiful objects being "without any representation of a purpose."¹ The writings of art critic Théophile Gautier and philosopher Victor Cousin popularised these ideas during the nineteenth century. They termed the idea "*l'art pour l'art*", or "art for art's sake",² believing that art did not have to serve any function and its existence was self-justified. Oscar Wilde summarises this attitude at the end of his preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: "All art is quite useless."³

The notion of the autonomy of art is a divisive one: the idea that art can even achieve autonomy has been hotly contested. In his seminal essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Walter Benjamin denounces *l'art pour l'art* as "a negative theology."⁴ Instead, he believes that "the earliest artwork originated in the service of a ritual - first the magical, then the religious kind," further adding that "the 'one-of-a-kind' value of the 'genuine' work of art has its underpinnings in the ritual in which it had its original, initial utility value."⁵ Here, the so called "intrinsic value" of art is actually what

1 Immanuel Kant and John Bernard, *Kant's Critique of Judgement* (London: Macmillan, 1914), 90.

2 "Theophile Gautier," *Dictionary of Art Historians*, accessed 25 Oct. 2014, <https://dictionaryofarthistorians.org/gautiert.html>.

3 Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Ware: Wordsworth Classics, 1992), 4.

4 Walter Benjamin and J. A Underwood, *The Work of Art in the Age Of Mechanical Reproduction* (London: Penguin, 2008), 11.

5 *Ibid.*

Benjamin terms “cult value.” That is, the remnants of the utility value that once endowed art objects when they were created for a specific spiritual function in the service of mystical or religious rituals. This residual “cult-value” is what Benjamin famously terms the *aura*. Benjamin’s ideas attempt to understand art through its historical functionality, placing artworks within a framework of spiritual transcendence, rather than one of autonomy, defined by functionless-ness.

Contemporary theories around pre-historic cave paintings, such as those at Lascaux (fig.1), connect them to some form of shamanistic practice, indicating that they would have served a function in the spiritual rituals carried out by Palaeolithic societies.⁶

Benjamin suggests that “[t]he elk depicted by the Stone Age man on the walls of his cave is an instrument of magic. Yes, he shows it to his fellows, but it is chiefly targeted at spirits.”⁷ The functionality of historic artworks is almost undeniable. A cursory glance at the extensive history of Hindu iconography prevalent in South Asia indicates a whole myriad of functions. These range from promoting *dharma* (righteous living) to worshipers, or constructing richly symbolic narratives to educate the viewer about the history of an individual deity, to simply glorifying the deity through the creative act of depiction.⁸

6 Robert E Ryan, *The Strong Eye of Shamanism* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 1999). This text gives an overview of the shamanistic function of prehistoric cave painting.

7 Benjamin and Underwood, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, 12.

8 Vidya Dehejia, “Hinduism and Hindu Art,” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 2007, accessed 25 Oct. 2014, http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/hind/hd_hind.htm.



Fig 1. The Hall of the Bulls – Lascaux Caves, France (approx. 15,700 BC)

To return to the Western Canon of art history, Christian iconography is one of the best examples of art being created with the purpose of serving a spiritual function central to religious rituals particular to the Christian faith tradition. Dr. Sarah Brooks explains that “[i]n Byzantine theology, the contemplation of icons allowed the viewer direct communication with the sacred figure(s) represented, and through icons an individual’s prayers were addressed directly to the petitioned saint or holy figure.”⁹ Art objects were believed to allow an unmediated connection to the figure depicted; the image acts as a bridge between humanity and the divine (fig.2). This was its foremost purpose, taking precedent over any aesthetic appreciation of the image. It is the spiritual utility value of the painting that is the source of its worth. In the Judaeo-Christian tradition, this can be taken even further, as the act of creating these artworks would have been a reflection of God’s creative action. If God created mankind in his own image,¹⁰ then it follows that it is in man’s nature to create. It is presumably this line of reasoning that inspired Michelangelo to suggest that “the true work of art is but a shadow of

9 Sarah Brooks, “Icons and Iconoclasm in Byzantium,” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 2009, accessed 1 Sep. 2014, http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/icon/hd_icon.htm.

10 Genesis 1:27 New International Version.

the divine perfection.”¹¹ In this sense then, the creation of icons was itself a form of worship, which again displays a valuable religious function through the production of artworks. Therefore, it is possible to theorise that Benjamin was correct in his prognosis about the historical mystical functionality of art, and its continued heritage in a perceived autarchic value.



Fig 2. Madonna and Child – Berlinghiero (1228)

11 Ted Byfield, *The Renaissance* (Edmonton: SEARCH, the Society to Explore and Record Christian History, 2010), 231.

Given this spiritually dependent foundation, it comes as a surprise that mentioning spiritual ideas in a contemporary art practice is something of a taboo. Art historian and critic James Elkins examines the apparent divorce between the two. He suggests that “the sublime, ‘re-enchantment’ (as in Weber), and ‘the aura’ (as in Benjamin) have been used to smuggle religious concepts back into academic writing, but there is still no direct communication between ‘religionists’ and scholars.”¹² This separation is unmistakable in the contemporary art world. There are almost no practicing artists who discuss ideas of faith in a genuine way, and where religious concepts make their way into an artwork, it has a tendency to be with a mocking or critical quality. A prime example of this is Hirst and Bailey’s *Stations of the Cross*. This piece appropriates a traditional Catholic format in which artwork would assist in the worshiper’s meditation on and understanding of the passion. Typically, the stations take the form of 14 images, each depicting a scene from the passion narrative, from Christ’s condemnation to his burial. These would be hung in a church, and the faithful follow the progression of the stations stopping to reflect and pray at each. The original structure of 14 stations is maintained, and the work is even titled according to tradition. However, Hirst and Bailey’s *Stations* are sexualised, verging on pornographic, or are viscerally violent, with some religious content retained (fig.3). The juxtaposition of the sacred and profane, presented in a Christian format (albeit in a gallery rather than a church), makes the work palpably taboo. The twelfth photograph in the series shows a crucifix desecrated with cigarette butts and ash. The subverted image of the divine appears offensive, even if the artist denied it. As could be expected,

12 James Elkins and David Morgan, introduction to *Re-enchantment*, (New York: Routledge, 2009), i.

Christians did not respond favourably to the work.¹³ This instance demonstrates how some contemporary art practices contribute to the understanding that art and the spiritual are antithetical.

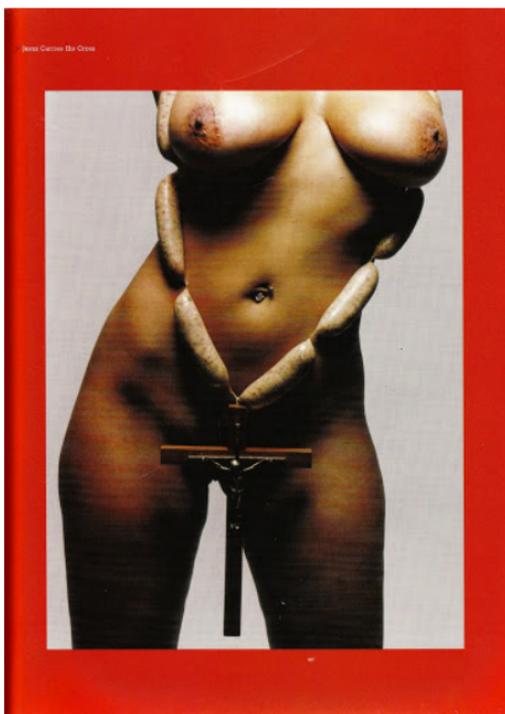


Fig 3. The Stations of the Cross – II. Jesus Carries His Cross - David Bailey and Damien Hirst (2004)

While the underlying reasons for the severance between spirituality and art remain contentious, the ideational writings of the Frankfurt School theorists point towards an answer. The theories of Theodor Adorno are of particular interest in regards to this subject. Adorno suggests “that art is no longer a privileged object but sim-

13 Will Bennett, “Hirst And Bailey Create An Unholy Alliance,” *Telegraph*, 2004, accessed 5 Nov. 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1460727/Hirst-and-Bailey-create-an-unholy-alliance.html>.

ply one more commodity in the world of consumerism.”¹⁴ For Adorno, the capitalist economic system results in the domination of exchange value over every other form of value; everything can be given a price and no object is exempt. This idea is set up as a negation of the autonomy of art: “Everything has value only in so far as it can be exchanged, not in so far as it is something in itself.”¹⁵ The dominance of exchange value is remarkably obvious in contemporary culture, with the best examples coming from the art world. Typically, in news articles concerning an artwork, the price is always a key piece of information, usually title-worthy (*‘Yellowist’ vandal who defaced £9million Rothko painting jailed for two years* was run in the *Telegraph*, for example).¹⁶ While the prices of famous artworks, and especially modernist masterpieces, are astronomically high, they are still prices. This information tagged on to any discussion of the work removes the artworks from the realm of the “priceless”, if such a realm can even be said to exist under late capitalism. If the Rothko painting can be broken down into the same units with which everything is purchased, from apples to vacuum cleaners, there is no longer anything special about the object; it is “simply one more commodity”, albeit an expensive one. The transcendence is lost and exchange value reigns.

14 Jeanne Willette, “Theodor Adorno and ‘The Culture Industry,’” 2014, accessed 13 Oct. 2014, <http://www.arthistoryunstuff.com/theodor-adorno-and-the-culture-industry/>.

15 Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, and Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 128.

16 “Yellowist’ vandal who defaced £9million Rothko painting jailed for two years,” *Telegraph*, 2012, accessed 5 Nov. 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/law-and-order/9742467/Yellowist-vandal-who-defaced-9million-Rothko-painting-jailed-for-two-years.html>.

Capitalist ideology's continued encroachment into every area of life can be seen as the greatest adversary to art's transcendence. Adorno, along with his colleague Max Horkheimer, coined the term *culture industry* to give a name to, and thus critique, the way in which capitalism seeks to implement control over the production of culture. Though other theorists had written about mass culture, they rejected this term, as they believed that the prevalent culture was imposed on the masses, and certainly did not originate from them.¹⁷ In the essay *The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception*, Adorno and Horkheimer outline the theory that the industrialisation of culture occurs to perpetuate capitalist ideology, and thus, the mass media are nothing but a reactionary tool, used for the subliminal dissipation of conservative thought. The culture industries are purported to add value to the economy for little cost. Unlike manufacturing industries, they do not require a huge amount of raw materials to function. However, the purpose of any industry is to produce commodities, and so with the rise of the culture industry, music, theatre, literature and even art become commodities. In an industrialised mode of production, all products are standardised and made according to a set prototype. Any product that does not match the original prototype is discarded as an error, a mistake in the reproduction. This manifests itself in the art world through limited edition prints. They are all printed to a standard and clearly illustrate how art production has been industrialised. Original artworks are turned into prints primarily as a source of income for an artist or gallery.

Further, Adorno believes that the culture industry aims to standardise culture as a whole, and so any per-

¹⁷ Theodor W. Adorno and Jay M. Bernstein, *The Culture Industry* (London: Routledge, 2001), 7.

ceived differences in cultural products are purely superficial. Hollywood movies are an example of this theory in practice. Popular cinema is divided into genres such as horror, action and comedy. Films that are produced to occupy a particular genre tend to be made up of clichés which are rife within the genre: the boy meets girl plot line in romantics, or the overcoming underdog in action. These standardised stereotypes allow the viewer to be spoon-fed the films storyline. No intellectual stimulation is required; the viewer is simply held and entertained. For Adorno, this use of leisure time is toxic - leisure time should be used for self-improvement or the pursuit of higher aims. And Adorno is not the first to hold this view; the utilitarian philosopher John Stuart Mill drew distinctions between high and low pleasures. Mill contends that given an equal access to the spectrum of different pleasures, in general, people will be drawn to those that appeal to their higher faculties. He is of the opinion that “[i]t is better to be a human dissatisfied, than a pig satisfied. Better to be Socrates dissatisfied, than a fool satisfied.”¹⁸

This parallels Adorno’s thoughts on true and false needs, though Mill’s philosophy was less politically minded. Adorno views the low pleasure obtained from interaction with mass culture as escapism, in which the working class seek freedom from the draining monotony of their work in film, television, music and so on. Ironically, the media in which they grasp for relief is just as repetitive as the work they must do. Adorno believed that the masses’ indulgence in low culture distracted them and was a primary reason as to why the working class had not reached class consciousness and overthrown the bourgeois class by whom they were exploited. He saw this most clearly in the popular music of the day: “It is catharsis for the mass-

18 John Stuart Mill and Roger Crisp, *Utilitarianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 14.

es, but catharsis which keeps them all the more firmly in line.”¹⁹

These ideas imply that the culture industry has consequences that impact art beyond just an alteration in its perceived value. Art is politicised beyond what its appearance would suggest. If the paintings, sculptures, photographs, films and installations of contemporary artists are to be truly considered part of the culture industry, then it must be concluded that they serve to only placate the masses. They function as a tool for sublimation, distracting the population from seeking political change. Benjamin too perceives this shifting context for art, describing the “politicisation of art.”²⁰ However, this line of reasoning can be critiqued as reductionist. It is clear that the context of artistic production, the motives behind its production and its entry into the broader market, differentiate it from popular music or film industries which would be more closely associated with the culture industry. Žižek’s analyses of contemporary cinema reveals the subliminal conservatism that is perpetuated in the film industry,²¹ for example. Art, according to Adorno, could still escape this system by displaying an alternative. He believes true art is “the social antithesis of society, not directly deducible from it.”²² Good art should not be revolutionary propaganda, but by its very existence should provoke the viewer to consider an alternative to the sta-

19 Theodor W. Adorno, Richard D. Leppert and Susan H. Gillespie, *Essays on Music* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002), 462.

20 Benjamin and Underwood, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, 38.

21 *The Pervert’s Guide to Ideology*, directed by Slavoj Žižek and Sophie Fiennes (2012; London, UK: Channel 4, 2013), DVD.

22 Theodor W. Adorno et al, *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Continuum, 2002), 8.

tus-quo. However, most art does not attain the stature of “social antithesis” and instead becomes a tool of the culture industry in one way or another.

Placing this theory within the context of a real world example may assist in the elaboration of this line of thought. On the surface, Michael Landy’s *Break Down*, appears to be a critical reflection on human attachment to possessions. The artwork was a performance, which took place in an empty shop on Oxford street. Landy’s possessions were placed in attention grabbing bright yellow crates, which travelled along a conveyor belt that was intentionally wound through the space to maximize visibility (fig.4). Upon finishing the journey, everything was destroyed in an industrial shredder. The complete destruction of every item one owns appears as an extreme act of asceticism. However, art critic Rachel Withers provides a different perspective on the piece, viewing the whole art-event as a spectacle. Withers perceptively points out that “despite the artist’s evident sincerity, one could be forgiven for wondering whether *Break Down*’s rationale might not serve to naturalise rather than criticise dominant ideas about consumption.”²³ It does so by its “reassertion of the sovereign rights of private ownership” which, when considered, lead to the conclusion that the artwork was not a radical critique, but a proclamation of establishmentarian values. *Break Down* shows how a seemingly personal artwork actually serves political conservatism through the apparatus of the culture industry’s ideological hold, despite the fact it has not been “commodified” in the conventional sense.

23 Rachel Withers, “Michael Landy: Break Down,” *Artforum*, 39 no. 9, (2001): 189.



Fig 4. Break Down – Michael Landy (2001)

Herbert Marcuse, another member of the first generation of the Frankfurt school, holds a similar opinion to Adorno in his criteria for judging the merit of art. He too believes that art should be “subversive and liberating,” that it should present “images of a gratification that would dissolve the society which suppresses it.”²⁴ The Frankfurt scholars clearly saw a revolutionary potential in art, but they also perceived the possibility of this being realised slip away, as art increasingly became commodified at the expense of its other purposes. The political dynamic discussed in relation to art suggests that there was something particularly special about art-objects as opposed to anything else which had become commodified under capitalism. Marcuse praised the antagonistic elements of surrealist art during the 1920-30s for its subversion of modern society but, at the same time, witnessed how these very elements could be absorbed and

²⁴ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 57.

pacified by that same society. He saw this antagonism as the foremost way in which art could transcend everyday experience, that it could suggest something radical to the viewer. The pacification of this antagonism, then, is the reigning in of art to make it part of everyday life, and to quell any radical insubordination.

The Marxian notion of commodity fetishism is integral to the critique of the capitalist system, and is heavily relied upon by Adorno and his colleagues in the Frankfurt School. Adorno expands on Marx's theory and applies it to the extreme commodification that occurs under late capitalism, which Marx had not witnessed. He believes that under late capitalism the commodity status of art is not only fully acknowledged but in fact celebrated: "For consumers the use value of art, its essence, is a fetish, and the fetish—the social valuation which they mistake for the merit of works of art— becomes its only use value, the only quality they enjoy."²⁵ Taking this into account, the "use value of art," which has been elaborated on for its spiritual functionality is fetishised, but this fetish is wholly replaced with the exchange value. It then becomes that which is fetishised; thus, the exchange value of art becomes the use value. Therefore, the exchange value of contemporary artworks are indicative of nothing but itself. In the past, exchange value denoted a use-value, but with the shift triggered by the industrialisation and commercialisation of art, art becomes desirable primarily because it is expensive.

Fetish, it would seem, is integral to the valorisation of art. Why were art-objects fetishised before they became commodified? The answer can be discovered in the understanding of the historical spiritual transcendence of art. If the spiritual function of art linked it to some form

25 Horkheimer, Adorno, Noerr, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 128.

of the divine for the viewer, then it can be assumed that there was, in the words of Benjamin, “a unique manifestation of a remoteness.”²⁶ That is, as with any object imbued with a degree of the sacred, such as a relic, there is a division between the holy and the worldly. The difference between the divine and human, immortal and mortal, leads to the sense that there is a palpable distance between the viewer and the object in question, no matter how close they may be in reality. This creates the desire to bridge the gap, to touch the object and close the distance, an act akin to sacrilege. The hangover of this historical phenomenon continues in the present in contemporary art galleries where to touch the work would be taboo, and is absolutely forbidden in all but some particular cases. It is the suppression of this taboo desire that leads to the development of this fetishising of art.

The fetishisation of art continues today beyond just that of commodity fetishism that Adorno allowed. The desire to touch remains, but it is no longer rooted in the allure of closing the gap between oneself and the sacred. If the transcendence of artwork is minimised under capitalism, as the writing around the culture industry suggests, then the desire to touch stems from elsewhere. It stems from the belief in the authenticity of art: “Whatever is considered to be authentic has been in touch with the body of an author... and such a status triggers the desire of a potential buyer to touch what has been touched by the author.”²⁷ The spiritual aspect of art is replaced with the fetishising of the “author’s” (or artist’s) hand. Rather than supplanting the idea of the artwork as a commodity, this particular fetish only cements that notion further.

26 Benjamin and Underwood, *The Work of Art in The Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, 9.

27 Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and Michael Marrinan, *Mapping Benjamin* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 127.

What the purchaser of a piece of art is actually paying for is the exclusive right to touch the piece. Many private collections are put on public display, but only the owner of the artwork is allowed to touch it. This can be read as a motivating factor behind the purchase of art, and therefore, central to the development of the “art-market,” both prior to and during the capitalist era.

Within the culture industry, art, or at least the majority of art, is removed from the framework of spiritual transcendence and is placed within a political framework. The writings of Neo-Marxist and Situationist Guy Debord further the ideas originally proposed by Adorno. Rather than talking about the culture industries, Debord terms the same notion the “integrated spectacle.” In his view, culture has become a spectacle, that is, something to distract the masses - something entertaining but of no real substance. While the writings of the Frankfurt School laid the foundation, the idea of the spectacle is taken much further. Will Self writes:

Nor does it do justice to the sustained, poetic involution of Debord’s prose, to conflate his conception of the spectacle with those previously produced by Marxist critical theorists. For Adorno and Horkheimer the culture industry - as its name implies - is an object capable of being analysed from without, and theorised from within. For Debord no such distance is possible: we are all jammed up against the plate glass of the spectacle, our faces crushed as we ‘*lèche-vitrine*’ in search for the same old commodified poison.²⁸

28 Guy Debord and Will Self, *The Society of the Spectacle* (London: Notting Hill Editions, 2013), xvii.

For Debord, the spectacle is all encompassing. He believes that it is not possible to situate oneself apart from the phenomenon of spectacle and theorise from the outside. Instead, everything happens within a spectacular context.

This idea led Debord to conclude, in opposition to Marcuse and Adorno, that art should not embody the antitheses of or be antagonistic to society, but should instead turn “expressions of the capitalist system and its media culture against itself.”²⁹ Debord calls this concept *Detournément*. If it is, as Debord believed, impossible to escape the integrated spectacle, it follows that it must be impossible for artists to make work that transcends the spectacle. Therefore, the best course of action is to utilise the language of the status-quo, and use it to critique the dominant system from within. Though he was working some years before Debord’s formulation of these ideas, the German artist John Heartfield created work that seemingly followed the parameters of this concept: “By cutting up existing photographs and texts, and by re-assembling them in new, unexpected ways, Heartfield directly engaged with the official culture, the dominant ideology - bourgeois and fascist - of European societies.”³⁰ By directly appropriating the imagery of the ruling ideology through techniques of photomontage, he was able to lambaste that ideology (fig.5). This continues Benjamin’s belief that new media held a revolutionary potential which the traditional media did not.

29 Douglas B. Holt, *Cultural Strategy Using Innovative Ideologies to Build Breakthrough Brands* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 252.

30 John Walker, *Art in the Age of Mass Media* (London: Pluto Press, 2001), 96.



Fig 5. The meaning of the Hitler Salute: Little man asks for big gifts.
Motto: Millions Stand Behind Me! – John Heartfield (1932)

Benjamin's idea that new media was inherently liberating is centred around his conception of the aura, that is, the residual "cult value" and "unique manifestation of a remoteness," as has already been discussed. He believes that mechanical reproduction resulted in the end of the aura because reproduction means that the singularity of the existence of a work of art is replaced with a plurality of copies. In the same line of thought as Marcuse, art is taken from a place of transcendence and is made part of the everyday. However, where Marcuse views this circumstance as mournful, Benjamin views it as an unchaining of art. He claims that "for the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the

work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual.”³¹ Benjamin saw this potential most clearly in film. He understood the suggestive power that film held over a mass audience. This is where a major distinction between Benjamin and Adorno is evident. Where Benjamin saw a democratic potential in the medium of film, Adorno was focused upon the authoritarian potential it held. Whichever position was the more accurate, the result on art is the same: it is no longer seen in light of the spiritual and instead serves a political agenda.



Fig 6. Baraka Film Still (1992)

One of the primary distinctions that must be drawn between new and traditional media is one of physicality. Painting, sculpture and performance all hold a physical presence from which a sense of transcendence can emanate. New media, and specifically digital media, lack a physical existence other than in the magnetised regions of a hard disk, which is entirely inaccessible except through

31 Benjamin and Underwood, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, 12.

reproductions of the content via a print out or screen display. By their very nature, reproductions are required to engage with the digital. It is this inherent lack of physicality that causes the severance between spirituality and art. This is even true for a film such as *Baraka*, despite its content being explicitly spiritual, including scenes from Angkor Wat, Church of the Holy Sepulchre, St. Peter's Basilica and Gunung Kawi Temple (fig.6). While this film explores the full spectrum of human spirituality, it does not connect to the transcendent itself. The watching of this film and the contemplation of an icon painting, for example, are two vastly different experiences.

Despite Benjamin's prognosis, the decline of the spiritual has led to capitalist ideals intruding on art. While art galleries maintain some semblance of the sanctorum, the increasingly ubiquitous museum shop does not. Art galleries attempt to maintain a ritualised reception of art in an undertaking to conserve the transcendent nature of artwork. Cathedral-esque buildings, hushed atmosphere and the separation from the tumult of everyday life are all elements in a design to instill a quasi-religious reverence for the work, a re-inculcation of spirituality that has long since departed. Galleries themselves are in fact a major part of the culture industry that has caused this loss. Major art-institutions such as the Tate differ only minimally in structure from the corporate-business model. This is apparent from the Tate's annual report which discusses the organisation's successes in a predominantly financial language. For example, the statements from the Chairman of the Tate trustees often focus on the economy of the museum: "Tate is one of the most efficient of the national museums and galleries, costing the public purse just £4.17 per visitor."³² The gallery gift shop is a space

32 John Browne, "Tate Report 2013/1014," Tate, 2014, accessed 11 Nov. 2014 <http://www.tate.org.uk/download/file/fid/42181>.

that does not pertain to the ritualised reception of art as in the rest of the gallery. Benjamin's insights are pertinent to the analysis of gallery gift shops in terms of their severance from ritual and their dealings in mechanical reproductions. Benjamin "whose ambition was to imagine and to conceptualise a politically revolutionary, a nonauratic, distracted way for the masses to appreciate works of art, was the prophet of customers in today's highly popular museum shops."³³

Small reproductions of artwork in the form of postcards are one of the museum shop's main products. They are produced on a domestic scale using cheap materials so they are affordable and, therefore, accessible to all, achieving a full democratisation of the masterpieces displayed in the gallery. The dissemination of the artworks through reproductions removes the artwork from its place of transcendence. This links to aniconism in Islam and Buddhism, or iconoclasm in Christianity, in that they illustrate the belief that iconographic reproductions disseminate the presence and authority in an uncontrolled way, and thus, supplant the singularity and transcendence of the original, whether God, or the enlightened one, or the paramount art-object. This belief is taken to an extreme in Islam in that any figurative image is considered blasphemous: "Even if the thing represented is a tree, a mountain or a cloud, the artistic act is certainly one of defiance, nay of presumed supremacy of the artist over nature or God."³⁴ While for the Christian painter the act of creation is a reflection of the nature of God, for the Muslim the same act is one of unholy impersonation. This belief has resulted

33 Gumbrecht and Murrinan, *Mapping Benjamin*, 284.

34 Ismail Faruqi, "Figurative Representation and Drama", in *Islamic Art: Common Principles, Forms and Themes*, ed. 'Isá, Ahmed Mohammed and Tahaoğlu, Tahsin Ömer (Damascus: Dar al-Fikr, 1989), 263.

in a faith tradition that is void of any depiction of God or holy figures, and so the inaccessibility and predominance of the divine remains.

In Christianity, as has been discussed, the depictions of the divine are intended to provide a platform for contemplation, to connect the worshiper to the celestial. However, contention arises when it is supposed that the veneration of the worshiper may be directed at the image itself and not at that which it depicts. In this instance, the image becomes a replacement for God and is consequently considered an idol. One of the commandments in the Decalogue strictly forbids this practice: “You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below.”³⁵ The veneration of a reproduction of the image of God is sinful and so the phenomenon of iconoclasm occurred, both during the Byzantine era and during the Protestant reformation, as attempts to put an end to the practice. To return to the art world, is it not possible to see the reproductions of artworks for sale in gallery shops as replacements for the original? Cultural critic Beatriz Sarlo suggests that “many museums arrange their postcard by period or artist, so that the visitor finds, in miniature, the sequence of paintings that s/he found in the galleries. One can, literally, touch those paintings; the difference of size and their reduced scale makes them ‘familiar’.”³⁶

35 Exodus 20:4 New International Version.

36 Beatriz Sarlo, “Post-Benjamin” in *Mapping Benjamin*, ed. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and Michael Marrinan (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 308.



Fig 7. National Gallery: Sainsbury's Wing Shop (2014)

In a capitalist culture, postcards can be considered to be superior to the originals of which they are a simulacrum. They are cheap, can be taken home and, perhaps most importantly, can be touched. Through reproductions of the artwork, the viewer is able to break the taboo they cannot in the gallery, closing the distance between themselves and the authentic object. Art is made totally mundane through reproduction, and so the “semireligious quality is dissolved by the familiarisation of art, by its integration into society, and by its inclusion in the commercial cycle of standardised products.”³⁷ Through

37 Aleida Assmann and Jan Assmann, “Air from Other Planets Blowing, The Logic of Authenticity and the Prophet of the Aura” in *Mapping Benjamin*, ed. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and Michael Marrinan (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 155.

the postcard, Adorno's cultural standardisation, Marcuse's societal assimilation and Benjamin's destruction of the aura are all realised. Capitalist tendencies have formed a mimicry of the aura through the ritualised reception of art which is then commodified through uniform reproductions, leading to any formally progressive elements being subsumed into the dominant cultural ideology.

The mimicry of the aura is an important technique utilised by the culture industry. It romanticises and mystifies artistic production and ultimately culminates in quasi-religious phenomena, such as the "cult of the movie star." The cult of celebrity, most obviously concerning individuals such as pop stars or movie stars, can also be applied to other cases. Blockbuster films, sell-out shows, and exhibitions of household name artists can all be seen as distinct elements of a single multifaceted conception. Many critics have witnessed this in contemporary culture and used it to evidence the claim that "the disappearance of aura has not come true."³⁸ However, Benjamin too witnessed this take place, though he dismissed the concept as nothing more than "rancid magic of its commodity character."³⁹ That which Benjamin disregarded has in fact become a primary cause for the fetishisation of art as a commodity. The culture industry instils the desire to purchase both reproductions and original artworks through a connection to a faux spirituality, a commercialisation of a perceived authenticity and an alleged transcendence. "The phoney spell of a commodity" has replaced the aura.

The relation of capitalism and spirituality is not a new idea; Max Weber, the German sociologist was one

38 Gumbrecht and Marrinan, *Mapping Benjamin*, 84.

39 Benjamin and Underwood, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, 21.

of the first thinkers to connect the two distinct areas in a meaningful way, doing so in the nineteenth century. He traced the impact of Protestantism, and more specifically Calvinism, Pietism and Methodism on the early development of capitalism, seeing the latter as a construct conditioned by religion.⁴⁰ This idea was expanded upon by later writers, including Benjamin, who claimed that capitalism was “an essentially religious phenomenon” in that it “serves to satisfy the same worries, anguish and disquiet formally answered by... religion.”⁴¹ Benjamin saw the two as intrinsically linked, even drawing parallels between religious icon painting and the iconography used on the currency from any contemporary capitalist economy. This connection delineates the foundation for a discussion of capitalism with regards to spiritual concepts.

The appropriation of spiritual notions by capitalist strategies is of vital importance to the discussion of capitalism’s impact on art’s historically spiritual foundations. Debord was aware of this strategy and saw an alteration in consumer attitudes move towards that of the worshipper. He claimed that “a use of the commodity arises that is sufficient unto itself; what this means for the consumer is an outpouring of religious zeal in honour of the commodity’s sovereign freedom.”⁴² The self-justification that Adorno sees in the supremacy of exchange value, through commodity fetishism, Debord recognises in spiritual

40 Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Scribner, 1958). In this text, Weber explains the cultural conditions influenced by religion that fostered the development of the capitalist economic system.

41 Walter Benjamin et al., *Selected Writings* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1996), 259.

42 Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1994), 43.

terms. The act of purchasing becomes an expression of veneration given to the commodity; in short, as much as it is a part of the integrated spectacle, the commodity is an idol. When this reasoning is applied to art merchandise, it is possible to see the printed postcards, coasters, cushions, pencils, magnets and anything else as idols in that they shift the purchaser's appreciation from the authority of the original, to the multitude of repeated images before them on the shop shelf. By this particular circumstance, art's loss of transcendence becomes a spiritual act in itself.

Debord perceives the connection between the transcendent and the commodity through the lens of fetishism. The spiritual fetishism that historically accompanied art objects is a model for their contemporary fetishisation as commodities. Debord claims that by "following in the footsteps of the old religious fetishism, with its transported convulsionaries and miraculous cures, the fetishism of the commodity also achieves its moment of acute fervour."⁴³ By this notion, the spiritual expression that accompanies the consumers' life under the spectacle is rooted firmly in fetish. However, it is possible to suggest that the cause goes beyond a fixation on materiality. If one were to say that art was developed to serve a spiritual function under the guise of many distinct faith traditions, then with the ascendancy of global capitalism, the transcendence of art is increasingly encroached upon. Global capitalist culture is then left with a void that was once filled with a connection to the numinous through art. This void creates a desire in the individuals living under that culture to seek a comparable form of satisfaction. The spiritual fervour that has become associated with the fetishisation of consumer goods is capitalism's foremost

43 Ibid., 44.

attempt to fill that void and stifle any discontent that could pose a threat to its continued global dominance.

It is possible to conclude that late-capitalism has removed the last traces of transcendence from art. The foremost change that has been brought about has been the shift from a spiritual reception of artworks, to a political one. Through the apparatus of the culture industry, or spectacular culture, contemporary art exists as part of an enterprise that seeks to entertain and distract the population as a way to dissuade from radical political thought. The only way artists can avoid serving this reactionary agenda is to critique the establishment through a misuse of its own language. Whether the product of the culture industry, or radical critique, art is firmly placed within a political framework. When a part of the former, art is extensively commodified through reproductions, paid exhibitions and the sale of the artwork itself. Through this course of action, art is brought down to the level of the ordinary, and ceases to be remarkable. In the words of Marcuse, this causes an “invalidating [of] the cherished images of transcendence by incorporating them into its omnipresent daily reality.”⁴⁴ In the rare occasion an artwork successfully avoids this incorporation and achieves a level of critique, it is under constant threat of recuperation, a pacification with its inherent radicalism twisted to serve conservative objectives.

Perhaps the only glimmer of pre-eminence, the last lingering suggestion of a spiritual heritage, can be found in the artist’s studio. In the brief period between an artwork’s completion and its exit from the studio into the wider world, the work has not undergone reproduction; it has not yet been assigned a culturally defined value, and it has no price. While these facts do not necessarily

44 Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 60.

imply that art can exist in a transcendent state for a brief period, the potential for its existence is conceivable. This theory would break down in many specific instances, but generally the artist's studio is a space that is plausibly set apart. It is a space that can be isolated, to an extent, from the rest of society without pertaining to a faux religiosity present in many gallery spaces. This can be dismissed as an overtly romantic notion, but the other options are a passive acceptance of the current capitalistic state of the art world, or an unflinching pessimism with regards to art's future prospects.

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