

The Transition of Art Production: From Ritual Representation to Economical Commodification to Technological Expression

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Abstract

History reveals how the production and function of art have been progressively changed. This paper will investigate the emancipation of a work of art derived from historical accounts that are grounded in Marx and Engels' theory of communism concerning the abolition of private property. This inquiry encompassed three phases: In the first phase, nature rules over man; in the second, private property develops and nature is reduced to a simple object for man; and in the third phase, man revolutionizes and eliminates everything. This study will tackle the historical development of art, including 1) on ritual activity, 2) on commodification and exploitation, and 3) on revolution and distribution, to describe the present condition of art. Finally, surpassing modernity and moving into a new condition, the work of art arrives at its final point of departure—maturity. Upon entering the information age, the attitudes of art emancipate from ritual representations to economic commodification into technological expression. Nevertheless, the emancipation of the fine arts into mass art is expected to take place.

Keywords

Art Production, Economical Commodification, Ritual Representation, Technological Expression

1. Introduction

In the political economy domain, it is said that the complete project of Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Frederick Engels (1820-1895), specifically in the theory of communism, could be captured in a single sentence: the elimination of private property (Lawrence & Wishart, 2010b: p. 498). It is believed that through the elimination of private property, the total expression of freedom may only be

achieved by humanity. While in the aesthetical sphere, the problem of a work of art could also be addressed and inevitably arise, as indeed, the subject of the present dilemma as well. The relics of the past (like paintings, sculpture, pottery, architecture, and the like) are privatized and become an instrument for capitalism. The M-C-M cycle is the transformation of money (M) into commodities (C) and then back into money (M) with transformed value (Lawrence & Wishart, 2010a: p. 158). This general formula of capital is thus the purchase of the commodity of labor power and its metamorphosis into surplus value based on the exploitation of labor time as surplus labor. Capitalist purchases to sell. As a result, its objective is to create not only a use value but also a commodity, not only a use value but also a value, and not just a value but also surplus value (Lawrence & Wishart, 2010a: p. 187). The modern society created by the dominant bourgeoisie class allows the work of art to serve as a commodity rather than a symbolic relic of a rich cultural heritage. The proletariat masses are deprived of the right to intervene with their social property as a result of this rabid modern capitalist system. It also alienated the masses from their own identity and history. The aesthetic products of the past were capitalized by the bourgeoisie class, who deliberately manipulated and privately collected them. Who could appreciate or be capable of hanging a painting on their wall, for instance, the work of Picasso? Who could afford to buy a ticket to experience the symphony orchestra's performance? None! Except perhaps for those who are of higher social rank, most probably the bourgeoisie class, which is capable of managing such a prestigious and expensive piece. If the proletariat could wish to have some famous pieces, it might be just a replica of a mechanically reproduced one. This predicament of the proletariat demonstrates the need to eliminate the hierarchical system that exists in the arts. Thus, the work of art must be liberated, distributed, and the sensible must take place in the accessible general public.

2. Production of Art (Discussion)

Artistic practices, according to Jacques Rancière (b.1940), are “ways of doing and making” that intervene in the general distribution of ways of doing and making as well as in the relationship they maintain to modes of being and forms of visibility (Rancière, 2009). In time, the artistic production encompasses different shapes. Here, there are three moments of art production: ritual representation, economical commodification and technological expression.

2.1. On Ritual Activity

At the beginning of time, man was dominated by nature. According to Marx and Engels, labor is a process in which both man and nature are active participants. Man initiates, regulates, and directs the material responses between himself and nature of his own volition (Lawrence & Wishart, 2010a: p. 187). It is seen in the ancient period, particularly during pre-historic times, in Egyptian and Mesopotamian civilizations, where art was regarded as a cultural activity intended to express their magical belief system (Adams, 1996: p. 4). A sort of “animism” could

be used to describe this practice. Animism implies that much of their work was regarded as a ritual function. Paleolithic cave art, for example, consists of images of animals carved, painted, or engraved on the rock surface of caves, such as deer, horses, and bulls found in France, Spain, and other parts of the world. The Neolithic architecture includes Stonehenge in England and Great Serpent Mound in Ohio. Egyptian figures are intentionally conceptualized in their inspiration from nature, for instance, a head of an animal in a human body and the like. They prefer the psychological appearance of the figure. Their works are linked to their superstitious beliefs and are intended to depict the afterlife rather than the real world. Egyptian characteristics include fascinating works of architecture, monumental statues, imaging, and wall writing. In the same manner, Mesopotamian art is associated with the same feature of animal motifs. Its distinctive features included stylized representations of carved figures, walls rich in reliefs, and paintings. They also developed a famous type of pottery for its technical perfection and its dynamic ornament. Their walls are often constructed of sun-dried bricks that have been polychromed and kiln-burned. Hence, people in this era though built in contrast to nature, but their creations were still related to the natural environment (Janson, 1977: p. 10). Their works may reflect an attempt to achieve mimetic representational forms that are inspired by the surroundings to which they have been exposed. This is clearly an interaction between man through labor and nature through materials (Lawrence & Wishart, 2010a: p. 194). The ancient mind is confined within the very narrow limits of the universe (Hume, 2009).

We assume labor in a way that makes it identifiable as being performed only by humans. While a bee outdoes many an architect in the design of her cells, a spider performs tasks that are similar to those of a weaver. According to Marx and Engels, the worst architects are those who raise their structures in their minds before erecting them in reality (Lawrence & Wishart, 2010a: p. 188). This is what sets them apart from the best architects. A man is capable of imagining things, playing, and deliberate actions (McCabe, 2008) that result in labor for himself and others. Even if the species that produce them have genetically coded such bee constructs (Adams, 1996: p. 5), the outcome of every labor activity is always what the worker had in mind when the labor process began. He alters the form of the material he works with, but he also realizes a personal goal that governs his method of operation and to which he must submit his will (Lawrence & Wishart, 2010a: p. 188).

On the contrary, the classical period is regarded as the age of “humanism.” In the Greek and Roman eras, man attempted to attain the prominence and perfection of nature. Classical art production is based on naturalistic or idealized imagination. They have left us a huge number of visible monuments scattered throughout their empire, from England to the Persian Gulf, from Spain to Romania. This era shows how a work of art was utilized for political engagement, especially in building an ideal polis. It is seen through Plato (427-347 BCE), who uses art in politics. He integrated art into his newly founded university of Athens

as a method of nurturing citizens (Graham, 2008). He is the one who first identified art as a bodily movement. Aesthetics and politics, then, are seen to be relatively interconnected.

Moreover, at the beginning of another story of human civilization, the medieval era arose. Though it was the continuation of Greco-Roman heritage, the Middle Ages marked a new trend ruled by the church. Much of this time may be characterized by the influence of Christian culture but remains flavored with a Greco-Roman motif. Medieval works include Early Christian structures, Byzantine frescoes and mosaics, Romanesque illuminated manuscripts and shortened relief, and Gothic elongated sculptures and stained glass.

The Middle Ages are distinguished by their distinctive approach to iconographic distortion, a style where it dehumanizes the formal appearance of the subject. The subject was intentionally distorted, which may be compared to the looks of a mannequin. Distortion is the mark of the medieval style, in which it was believed to be strictly dictated by the powerful priest to eschew accusations of idolatry. Artisans were commissioned to work and labor following religious devotion. Marx and Engels saw this submission as more than just a passing gesture. In addition to the physical strain on the body, the process calls for the worker to remain steadily focused on his goal during the entire operation. This denotes careful observation. The less he loves the work's nature and method of execution as something that allows him to use his physical and mental faculties, the more his attention is compelled to be concentrated (Lawrence & Wishart, 2010a: p. 188). Christianity teaches us that we must look forward to the rewards of heaven. Therefore, man's attitude towards the world is experienced in a mere supernatural representation.

The Renaissance is the great comeback for classical art after a long stagnation in its religious dictates. It is characterized as the age of science—an epoch of humanism. The difference in the attitudes of the previous period is that the classical world is concerned with “idealizing nature.” For the medieval world, it was a “dehumanized subject.” However, the revival of classical endeavors this time is “humanizing ideals.” Until that time, around the 1490s AD, the aim of achieving perfection had come in the High Renaissance through three important figures: Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519), Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564), and Raphael Sanzio (1483-1520). These three are the giants of the Renaissance who discovered and invented the fundamentals of visual art. Perhaps their contribution involves the elevation of craft into the fine arts. Their works are emancipated and not just restricted to depicting divine or noble figures only, which is the preference of the past, but, for the first time in history, ordinary people become the subjects of most portraits, like the Mona Lisa, painted by Da Vinci. Accordingly, Mona Lisa came from a noble family in Italy but eventually underwent hardship. Later, when she was younger, she was forced to marry an old silk merchant and live in the middle class. The hierarchical order of society, particularly its intervention in a work of art, has changed. From medieval symbolic iconography, art turned into classical portraiture of the particular individual.

Murals that typically paint, cut, carve, or engrave directly on the walls are then painted on movable surface—canvas. Have you ever wondered why paintings in this era popularized canvas instead of other materials like wood, leather, or metal? It might have a great connection or relationship with the market conditions during that time.

As we all know, barter was already an existing system during the Renaissance period. Merchants exchange their goods for another commodity, carrying spices, silk, and fashionable objects. For this reason, without further or significant explanation, canvas may be inevitably popularized and it is no wonder that it may be conventionally utilized for painting, especially with the combination of newly invented oil paint that was introduced during the early Renaissance.

Furthermore, according to Marx and Engels, the discovery of America and the rerouting of the Cape gave the burgeoning bourgeoisie access to new lands. The East Indian and Chinese markets, the colonization of America, and the growth in the availability of commodities, in general, provided commerce, shipping, and industry a hitherto unheard-of impetus, hastening the development of the revolutionary element inside the crumbling feudal system. From this picture, we could realize that the production of art consequently involves the practice and process of commodification. Hence, a work of art might trace the tendency of commercialism, and we might foresee that even at this moment, art cannot escape from its destiny—capitalism.

The Renaissance that began in Italy gradually spread to the rest of Europe. It was followed by the Baroque, Rococo, and Neo-classicism periods. Until such time, the age of modernity was about to start and swiftly emancipated the work of art due to the rise of modern industrialization. “The Bourgeoisie and the Proletariat are two large, hostile factions that are increasingly dividing society as a whole. Therefore, the first towns’ chartered burghers emerged from the Middle Ages’ serfs. According to Marx and Engels, these burgesses were the forerunners of the bourgeoisie. It has replaced the previous classes, oppressive regimes, and means of resistance with new ones” (Lawrence & Wishart, 2010b: p. 485). Class rivalries still exist in the contemporary bourgeois society that emerged from the ruins of feudal society. Hence, another intimidator rises in the new epoch—the capitalist of modern society.

2.2. On Commodification and Exploitation

In this succeeding phase of new condition—modernity, private property grows and nature becomes merely an object for man. The production of art from previous ritual activity shifts into commodity fetishism. A work of art transformed into mere fetishism, serving no symbolic function. In contrast to the ritual engagement of our ancestors in the past, artists and artisans of modern society and economy (Oliver & Robison, 2017) are forced to engage with labor intended for commodification, which is the condition of the manufacturing process. By then, the symbolic meaning, the aura of the past, had been lost (Walter, 2008) and a work of art had become an economic utility intended for creating use-value ob-

jects. A work of art has evolved into a commodity for the general public, and creating art generates surplus value. The capitalist controls the process of producing goods. He buys labor power to use it, and labor power in use is labor itself (Lawrence & Wishart, 2010a: p. 187). Hence, the capitalist owns the production of commodities and is the responsible agent of commodification.

The period of modernism is the rise of capitalism. It is said to be an epoch of free-market capitalism. To be free means to engage in free commerce, free selling, and free purchasing under the current bourgeois conditions of production (Lawrence & Wishart, 2010b: p. 499). The economic and political structure of a nation in which private proprietors, acting for financial gain rather than the government, control its trade and industries. Marx and Engels contend that having a social standing in production as a capitalist entails more than just having a simply personal status. This suggests that money is a form of social power (Lawrence & Wishart, 2010b: p. 499). This is evident in a capitalist society, where the bourgeoisie has stripped every profession that had previously been revered and held in high esteem of its halo. Physicians, attorneys, clergymen, poets, and men of science have all been turned into paid-wage employees (Lawrence & Wishart, 2010b: p. 487). The calculative bourgeoisie class superseded the contemplative noble class. The sacred activity of a dignified man, its symbolic vocation, and its sentimental relationship were reduced to a monetary relationship.

From around 1760 until roughly 1840, the first industrial revolution occurred (Schwab, 2016: p. 11). It was brought on by the development of railroads and the steam engine. It introduced mass production using machines. Mass production was made possible by the second industrial revolution, which began in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and was aided by the invention of electricity and the assembly line (Schwab, 2016: p. 11). Art was utilized for commercial purposes as a result of the melting points of the first and second industrial revolutions.

The pragmatic/utilitarian function is one of the attitudes of art, according to Harold Osborne (1905-1987). For manufacturing objectives (Osborne, 1970: p. 24), art is regarded as beneficial. Art encompasses a broader range of processes for the creation of various crafts and objects. Manufacturing entails the creation and processing of artistic designs. This innovative design incorporates aesthetic elements such as ceramic utensils, statues, and even food products imported and exported by creative artists or artisans, craftsmen, and other skilled laborers.

The commodification process opens up to severe exploitation between capitalists and their paid laborers. It is believed that the dilemma arises in the working class, particularly for artists or artisans who are forced to produce art objects. Under the capitalist system, artists and artisans are considered workers who may suffer from alienation conditions. Marx and Engels talk about alienation that shapes in four conditions: alienation from products; alienation from labor processes; alienation from themselves; and alienation from fellow workers. Alienation occurs, for instance, in the manufacturing of products such as vintage cars, fancy shoes, or even a piece of a candy wrapper. Those created objects do not belong to the artists or artisans who created them, nor can they be owned by

them. They may not be acknowledged as the creators, but they have denied its existence. Credits go only to the company owner who invests in production and distribution. The capitalist has the sole advantage of acquiring profits from the labor of its employees. More than this, labor itself is not a voluntary act but a coerced bodily movement in the course of the labor process. As we have mentioned above, the capitalist buys labor power to use it (Lawrence & Wishart, 2010a: p. 187). As a result, artists and artisans are paid wage laborers for capitalists. Laborers were exploited and robbed of their dignity to the point of losing their essence, resulting in alienation from their species' being. They were treated like machines that worked continuously, produced repeatedly, and were dehumanized by society. A laborer alienates a fellow worker. They were separated and alienated from each other. No feelings are attached, no sympathy or loyalty is involved but collectively centers on one common interest and faith—capitalism. Laborers are treated as an instrument for production, reduced to objects stripped of humanity. Labor power, the object of labor, together with its instrument for commodification, is nothing but a privatized property. Nevertheless, the production of art in the modern epoch appears to be a commodification process that was dominated, generated, and controlled by the capitalists who owned and ruled society.

2.3. On Revolution and Distribution

In the final stage, private property is gradually melting down. The creation of the internet signaled the beginning of the computer or digital revolution, which started the third industrial revolution in the 1960s. As a result, it was accelerated by the invention of semiconductors, mainframe computing in the 1960s, personal computing in the 1970s and 1980s, and the internet in the 1990s (Schwab, 2016: p. 11). Klaus Schwab (b.1938) thinks that the fourth industrial revolution is only getting started in the 21st century. It started around the turn of the century and grew out of the digital revolution. It is distinguished by a considerably more pervasive and mobile internet, smaller and more potent but less expensive sensors, artificial intelligence, and machine learning (Schwab, 2016: p. 11). The fourth industrial revolution gave us a tremendous aesthetic experience.

The advent of the information age is perhaps the consequence of the emergence of socialism. The capitalist economic system merges with the socialistic technological conditions. Richard D. Wolff (b.1942) assumes that socialism is the product of capitalism (Wolff & Epstein, 2019). “He said that socialism has no single description but is rather a large complex. Indeed, with the introduction of socialism, the information age democratized people, disseminated experience, and stimulated the senses. This transformation stimulates freedom, equality, and prosperity”.

Since we are living in the computer/information age, new media appears to be dynamic in human intervention, particularly in art. The information age is the revolutionary epoch that completely transformed the condition of the masses. “Revolution” denotes an abrupt and radical change (Schwab, 2016: p. 11). Tech-

nology supersedes and elevates art to its maximum public function. Art (through the aforementioned technology) occurs as an instrument for the vicarious expansion of experience (Osborne, 1970: p. 24). It provides the ability to perceive and conceive by extending the senses. Experiences in certain places of the world become closer to the senses. Through virtual imagination, travel from different places as well as adventures in space and time, either reality or fantasy, have been made possible through art.

The 21st century's fourth industrial revolution, the age of information, seems to be the height of the great aesthetical distribution. Distribution signifies free participation of the public individual particularly the working class—the proletariat. According to Rancière a distribution of the sensible establishes at one and the same time something common that is shared and exclusive parts (Rancière, 2009). This apportionment of parts and positions is based on a distribution of spaces, times, and forms of activity that determines the very manner in which something in common lends itself to participation and in what way various individuals have a part in this distribution (Rancière, 2009). Here, the work of art allows people to experience and participate. Everyone has the right to freedom of expression, the social right to hold beliefs without interference, and the freedom to look for, receive, and share information and ideas through any medium and without respect to boundaries. Art begins to liberate us from the prolonged deprivation of aesthetical experience over our historical past.

Retrospectively, the liberation manifest goes way back to the modern revolutionary art movement. It stems from the aesthetic interventions of the artists, beginning with the Romantic literary forms that attempted to understand society, the Symbolist poetics of dreams, or the Dadaist elimination of art, and continuing up to the contemporary performance and installation modes. Along with this, the coup of technological images and signs on the visual surface and the wide-ranging sound of communication; from newspaper pages to radio frequencies to television channels to internet platforms, the public masses equally share their expression by practicing and demonstrating their social freedom in their society. People in the community, regardless of class status, can freely voice their opinions through the new trend of social media.

To some extent, private property is mechanically reproduced (Walter, 2008) and digitally distributed. Personal art collections, data, and private information are exposed. It was entirely democratized and made available to the general public for the first time in history, allowing the people to control its use and accountability. Whereas the conglomeration of art genres such as paintings, sculptures, architecture, music, dance, films, photography, performance art, and the likes, nor the body of knowledge such as inventions, research, e-books, and other data of information are all found on the world-wide-web. Those are the results of genuine efforts and the contributions of the entire human race. Thus, the emergence of public participation in bringing art into everyday life, a well-ordered aesthetical distribution of sensory expression was achieved (Rancière, 2009).

Despite the current success of the aesthetical revolution and distribution, the

capitalists still concealed and ruled over industries. In other words, we are still confronted by the shadow of capitalism even though we are intersecting with socialism. Marx and Engels warn, however, that the advance of industry, whose involuntary promoter is the bourgeoisie, replaces the isolation of the laborers, due to competition, by their revolutionary combination, due to association (Lawrence & Wishart, 2010b: p. 496). As a result, the development of modern industry (as well as technology) undermines the bourgeoisie's ability to produce appropriate goods. Therefore, the bourgeoisie produces its own grave-diggers more than anything else. Both its demise and the proletariat's victory are inevitable (Lawrence & Wishart, 2010b: p. 496). Art, without doubt, arrives at its point of departure toward its maturity. Upon entering the information age, art turns from ritual representation to economic commodification into mere technological expression. Consequently, fine art is anticipated to be emancipated into mass art.

Finally, the production of art in contemporary conditions explicitly shows the heights of the aesthetical revolution. The liberation of artistic participation strikes towards an extreme distribution of the sensible. This indication is a clear manifest that the public individual, particularly the working class—the proletariat—has completely attained freedom, equality, and prosperity.

3. Summary and Conclusion

The investigation into art production was critically analyzed through historical development. Marx and Engels assert that labor is a process in which both man and nature take part, and in which man initiates, directs, and manages the material interactions between himself and nature. From this, the production of art seems to encompass three phases of progression. This paper discussed the impulse of man that has been emancipated in three conditions: 1) man is dominated by nature, 2) nature is conquered and dominated by man, and then 3) man revolutionizes and abolishes everything. Each condition corresponds to a specific stage in history where man defines himself through his labor in a particular way.

Firstly, man follows the flow of nature and enjoys what nature can only provide. The advent of the history of human civilization shows us that art was first used for pragmatic and naturalistic representation (animism, naturalism, and symbolism). Whereas the piece was utilized as a spiritual and sensual function. Here, man lives dominated by his nature.

Secondly, man dominates nature, conquering all natural resources and the things that sustain his desire; from man via labor and nature via material. With the shift of modernity, private property grows, and nature becomes merely an object for man. The artists or artisans are exploited and alienated as a result of these outcomes. "Art is deemed a commodity and dynamic representation of human creativity" (Santiago & Subia, 2021), useful for manufacturing purposes. Therefore, art was utilized for the economical function.

The findings illustrate the emancipation of artistic production derived directly from historical accounts: from ritual action to commercial exploitation into personal engagement and expression. The work of art reaches its goal through the development of the digital revolution and ongoing, forward-moving technological interventions.

In the inclusive inquiry, it is also obvious to expect that the abolition of private property is anticipated. Public participation in integrating art into daily life leads to an effective dissemination of artistic sensory expression. For that reason, the democratization of art will be fully attained as a result of the technological revolution and aesthetical distribution.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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