

**Conceptualizing the ‘New Sociology of Art’: From the Platonic Schema  
toward an Aristotelian Understanding**

**Abstract.** In this paper, I aim to diagnose the tension between sociology and art borrowing light from Martin Heidegger (1971) ’s insight that the real tension is deeply rooted in the representational schema that can be dated back to as early as Plato’s matter/form distinction, the question of which still has a huge implication today on how we should perceive artistic practice as social representation or something that has its own intrinsic value. Artistic practice for no doubt is social, but the key question in this paper is how does a piece of artwork come into existence as a social being? The paper will start with settling the disagreement between Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin over the social role of ‘phantasmagoria’ and pinpoint that the key obstacle is exactly the representational schema. In the second half of the paper, I will try to formulate an Aristotelian response while believing that Aristotle’s Poetics not only serves historically as a critique to the Platonic theory of art but may also shed some light onto a new non-representational paradigm in the emerging discussion of the ‘new sociology of art’.

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## Introduction

Artistic experience is an integral part of social life in every human society. However, there has historically been a rift between the sociology of art, which has a tendency to ‘unmask’ the social production and consumption behind artists and their artworks, and art theories and practices that emphasize the ingenuity of artists and artworks. Pierre Bourdieu’s ([1981] 1993, 139) declaration that “sociology and art do not make good bedfellows” best captures this tension. Bourdieu’s *distingtion* and Howard Becker’s *Art Worlds* are considered to be the ‘foundational text’ for later academic scholarships on the sociology of art (de la Fuente 2007, 410). These approaches are essentially to uncover the complex social relationships and hierarchies at the bottom of each artwork that make it appearing shiny on the top and pose very powerful challenges to aesthetic essentialism that seeks to find essential aesthetic qualities inside artworks independent of any perceiver. However, the sociology of art is also counter-criticized for being too reductionist. As Nick Zangwill (2002, 209) points out, “the fundamental problem is that such [sociological] considerations explain some aspects of works of art but not all of them”. Zangwill’s key argument is that even if it is true that we all are deceived by artworks, and what really draw us into art worlds are some hidden social structures, there is nevertheless something aesthetic about each artwork that makes us deceived; the hidden social structure alone would not suffice to explain why we are deceived and even presupposes an aesthetic explanation which is exactly the reason why the social structure is only hidden. Therefore, Zangwill (2002, 214) claims that “if there is to be a

sociology of art, what we need is a sociology of the aesthetic, not the sociology of the illusion of the aesthetic.”

Zangwill’s argument might be too strong in accusing that all major sociological theories of art are reductionist, but there are indeed some new works emerging in the discipline that can be termed as ‘the new sociology of art’, which can be seen as attempt to study art as art while maintaining a sociological perspective without retreating back to essentialism (de la Fuente 2007). In this paper, however, I will first go back to a 1938 debate between Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin over the social role of ‘phantasmagoria’. In trying to settle the debate, I will borrow Martin Heidegger’s insight and argue that the real tension is deeply rooted in the representational schema that can be dated back to as early as Plato’s matter/form distinction, the question of which still has a huge implication today on how we should perceive artistic practice as social representation or something that has its own intrinsic value. Then, I will try to formulate an Aristotelian response while believing that Aristotle’s *Poetics* not only serves historically as a critique to the Platonic theory of art but may also shed some light onto a new non-representational paradigm in contemporary discussion on the sociology of art.

### **The Adorno-Benjamin Dispute**

In one of his letters written to Walter Benjamin in the year of 1938, Theodor Adorno wrote: “materialist determination of cultural traits is only possible if it is mediated through the

*total social process*” (Adorno and Benjamin 1999, 283). In this letter, Adorno criticized Benjamin’s *Arcades* study for its lack of mediation between art and the total social process art is embedded in; Benjamin’s study of Baudelaire’s *flâneur* was accused of being too “subjective” and “located at the crossroads of magic and positivism” (Adorno and Benjamin 1999, 283). The central sociological question here is that how does a piece of artwork come into existence as a social being? Besides the dialectical materialism Adorno insisted upon, what he seems to suggest is that art has to be understood through mediation; a piece of artwork thus is neither created out of pure disinterested sensuous experience in the Kantian sense, nor is it in direct contact with its immediate surroundings.

In Benjamin ([1935] 1999)’s *Arcades* study, the city construction of the nineteenth century Paris was depicted as realization of wish images under the flourishing of commodity fetishism. The term “phantasmagoria” was introduced to describe this coming-true of people’s illusory images under which they could have been distracted and sought refuge in the capitalist society. Under Benjamin’s elaboration, the emergence of arcades, decoration of domestic interior in city dwelling, the world exhibition, Baudelaire’s *flâneur*, and even all the city planning of Paris came under this phantasmagoric character.

It should be noted that the term “phantasmagoria” itself was subject to Adorno’s criticism. In the objection he wrote to Benjamin, he proposed that the term should be liquated and objectified or that “the study itself should assume a phantasmagoric character” (Adorno and Benjamin 1999, 281). In Adorno’s reading of Benjamin, the term serves as Benjamin’s

mediated link between art and society, and under Adorno's account, this mediation is too subjective and magically bewitched to be qualified to fit into a sociological model of art.

However, as Giorgio Agamben (1993, 114) points out, the crucial difference between Benjamin and Adorno is exactly that Benjamin did not view "phantasmagoria" as mediation. In Benjamin's reply to Adorno, he wrote a defense for his approach that his approach is indeed a philological one; the philological approach "consists in an examination of texts which proceeds by details and thus magically fixates the reader on it, ... [and] only when [a] poem has come into its own in this way can the work be touched, or even shaken, by the act of interpretation" (Adorno and Benjamin 1999, 292). In Benjamin's account, phantasmagoria is not what mediates between art and society but is what the piece of artwork is, which consists of its magical power. He did share the Marxist conviction that it is a product of commodity fetishism, but what interested him more was the magical power of it i.e. its power to transfigure its surrounding.

For Benjamin, the magical power of a piece of artwork is part of what the artwork is. It ought not be a satisfactory answer for Adorno, for whom art must come through mediation. Putting the Hegelian context aside, we can see that the real tension here is exactly the old question of whether a piece of artwork can have its own value or only serves as a means to an end. The question concerns the role of art plays in society, and if this question is unresolved, then we really cannot make any further progress on the matter.

### **The Role of Plato's *Mimêsis* in Adorno's Aesthetic Theory**

There is indeed a long European tradition to see artistic practices as means to some higher end, and the root of it could be dated back to Plato's representational theory of art. For Plato, if art indeed did have any magical power, then the power would only be a negative one. In the Platonic dialogue between Socrates and Ion, assumingly an acclaimed rhapsode at the time, Socrates makes Ion eventually concede that he is no more than a representative of the great poet Homer, who is again a representative of gods (*Ion*, 535e). The twofold representation is the key to understand Plato's aesthetics. In *the Republic*, the antinomy between ideas/forms and sensible objects is the constant theme that drives him into his hierarchical understanding of reality. Artistic practices, in his view, unfortunately lie in the sensible realm and thus are considered inferior. He introduces the concept of *mimêsis*, which can be translated either as imitation or representation, to his understanding of artistic practices. For Plato, artistic practices are always people's imitations of particular sensible objects, which again are representations or appearances of forms. Through this kind of twofold representations, artistic practices are therefore always misleading and should be banned for moral and political reasons.

It is ironic that, in the history of Western ideas, Plato is probably the greatest enemy of both the practice of art and the practice of the social. For Plato, if there were anything that can be aesthetically appreciated, that thing would only possibly be the form of the good; all other things serve as intermediaries to it. This ideology of course has been abandoned by

philosophical and social thinkers of modern times, but the representational theory of art somehow has survived. Art as mimesis mediating between the real world and the realm of forms is also a major theme in Adorno's culminating work *Aesthetic Theory*.

Of course it should be noticed that at the time, Western aesthetics had developed for more than two thousand years since Plato. Kant's critique seemed to suggest that there ought to be some disinterested faculty of judgment in human aesthetic experiences. If the Kantian approach were fully right, then development of art ought to become completely asocial and ahistorical; sociologists would have no saying on the subject matter. It also appeared phenomenologically true that art had achieved some independence as movements like "art for art's sake" prospered in the nineteenth century. Adorno's ([1977] 2008) *Aesthetic Theory* served as a sociological response to it. He agreed that art had gained its autonomy after it was freed from its earlier cult function, and after its secularization, it had developed its own inner logic. He writes:

It is defined by its relation to what is different from art. This other makes it possible for us to arrive at a substantive understanding of the specifically artistic in art. It is this approach to art that alone meets the criteria of a materialist and dialectical aesthetic, which evolves by segregating itself from its own matrix. Its law of motion and its law of form are one and the same.  
(Adorno [1977] 2008, 360)

The mimesis here becomes a dialectical one in a mediated way between the empirical world and its other. The notion is brought from Plato, but Adorno changes the hierarchical relation between matter and form into a dialectical one. “The dialectic of art resembles the social dialectic without consciously imitating it” (Adorno [1977] 2008, 362), as he maintains. In Adorno’s account, art’s autonomy comes as a result out of the tension between people’s empirical reality and its empirical other; through this inner logic, autonomy can thus be further developed. Under the Hegelian dialectics, empirical reality and its empirical other are all and the same:

[The] moment of unreality is a structure resulting from quantitative relations between elements of being, relations which are in turn a response to, and an echo of the imperfection of real conditions, their constraints, their contradictions, and their potentialities. Art is related to its other like a magnet to a field of iron filings. (Adorno [1977] 2008, 363)

In Adorno’s aesthetic theory, mimesis serves the role of bridging the aesthetic world, namely the world of forms, and the social world, that is the empirical world, together. The relationship that this bridge plays in Adorno’s theory however is different from Plato’s. He replaces Platonic hierarchy with Hegelian dialectics, and under this approach, the two worlds are mediated by art. The world of forms steps down from the hierarchical top to the empirical other, but art as mediation, still plays the representational/imitational role inherited from Plato

although what is represented and imitated has changed; for Plato, the imitation is a top-down hierarchical imitation while for Adorno, the imitation is a dialectic one.

Adorno's aesthetics should be seen as his attempt to secure art, and mediation plays an essential role in his differentiation of art from non-art. In Adorno and Horkheimer's attack on culture industry, mediation is precisely the thing that is accused of being missing in culture industry. Having gone through modern development of standardization and technological rationalization, production in culture industry is accused of becoming mere copying and reproduction, by which cultural products have become representation of totalitarian sameness while aesthetic sublimation from reality to unreality is found missing (Horkheimer and Adorno [1947] 2002, 111). The sublimation is Adorno's dialectic mediation. According to Adorno's aesthetics, the value of a piece of artwork is neither found in the artist nor in the pure content of the artwork, but only in the mediation through which the artwork is embedded in the total social historical process. For Adorno, Benjamin's appeal to philology would be no excuse for his lack of mediation because without mediation, study of the philological content alone would be all in vain.

### **The Imitational and Magical Function of Art**

Martin Heidegger ([1975] 2001, 347) gives the best summary of the role imitation plays in Platonic aesthetic tradition:

The distinction of matter and form is *the conceptual schema which is used, in the greatest variety of ways, quite generally for all art theory and aesthetics.*

This incontestable fact, however, proves neither that the distinction of matter and form is adequately founded, nor that it belongs originally to the domain of art and the art work.

If we see Adorno's aesthetic theory as a redemptive attempt that tries to give art a secured place, then the redemption nevertheless is constrained in the schema set out by Plato. In the schema, art plays the role of linking matter and form, and this role is all what art is about. Besides this role, art has no any other intrinsic value. Adorno's attempt to revise the hierarchical relation to a dialectic one secures art certain progressive character. But we can see from his attack on culture industry that as soon as the dialectic relation disappears, cultural practices would then immediately fall back to what Plato accuses of, that is being misleading, deceptive, and corruptive. Therefore, if the prototype of Adorno's aesthetics is indeed Platonic, then in order to gain a further insight into the social being of art, we have to go back to Plato's mimesis and have it contested.

Perhaps it is true that artistic practices always take the form of imitation, but whether this statement is true is beyond the interest of this paper. The essential question that concerns the sociology of art should be that does art exist solely as imitation but nothing else? A natural answer is to be found in Aristotle's *Poetics*.

*Poetics* can be seen as Aristotle's response to Plato's aesthetics. Although his major concern in the work is about how plots and characters should be arranged in Greek poetry, Plato's mimesis nevertheless poses an obstacle that Aristotle has to overcome. He accepts the view that artistic practices are imitations but emphasizes its necessary function. "Imitation is natural to man from childhood ... that he is the most imitative creature in the world" (*Poetics*, 1448a4), as he writes. In his study of Greek tragedy, tragedy is "the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself ... with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such motions" (*Poetics*, 1449b6). From Aristotle's definition of tragedy, we can see that Greek tragedy is imitational, but it evokes its audience's pity and fear and plays the role of catharsis, that is to release and purify the emotion of pity and fear. In Aristotle's philosophy, there is no distinction between the world of matter and that of form but only one world; art as imitation is very much this-worldly and plays certain social functions like that of catharsis. Imitation although is the form in which art takes, but the social role of it is not determined by itself but rather by what it does e.g. to evoke audience's pity and fear and play the role of catharsis in the case of Greek tragedy.

Aristotle's notion of nature and his teleological explanation of the world have largely been abandoned by modern men, and the remaining work of his *Poetics* is far below a comprehensive aesthetic theory. But his view on art and imitation should still provide us some insight over the role of art as imitation. Evoking pity and fear is still what today's works of tragedy are doing, and it should be an important and necessary social link if we don't think of

it teleologically. If there is any ingenuity to be found in modern artworks, it should be found in artists' magical power of integrating and/or transforming the society they live in as tragedians did by releasing catharsis of their audience. Benjamin's philological attempt is precisely to capture such magical power of a text that "fixates the reader on it."

Then with respect to culture industry, instead of asking the Platonic question of whether it deceives people, I would like to propose an Aristotelian question: do pop music, soap operas, and blockbuster movies today perform any magical power of social integration as religious activities did in ancient times?

For Adorno, the answer is precisely yes, but the question exactly leads to his conclusion. As Horkheimer and he ([1977] 2008, 115) writes in "Enlightenment as Mass Deception,"

The culture industry is perverting it into a barefaced lie. It appears now only as the high-minded prattle tolerated by consumers of religious bestsellers, psychological films, and women's serials as an embarrassingly agreeable ingredient, so that they can more reliably control their own human emotions. In this sense entertainment is purging the affects in the manner once attributed by Aristotle to tragedy and now by Mortimer Adler to film. The culture reveals the truth not only about style but also about catharsis.

Indeed, as long as Adorno insists upon the distinction between matter and form, magic would by its very definition have its deceptive and corruptive nature. His *Aesthetic Theory* rather would suggest that Aristotle's catharsis belongs to art's earlier cult function, and art has gained autonomy after it freed itself from the cult function. He acknowledges art's earlier religious function but holds that as impure. It should be noticed that his Hegelian concept of the autonomy of art and his refusal to go back to art's earlier cult function is based and contingent upon his view on humanity and his belief of Hegel's absolute spirit. He writes: "as society grew less humane, art became less autonomous. Those constituent elements of art that were suffused with the ideal of humanity have lost their force" ([1977] 2008, 358). Therefore, it would be a misreading to say that Adorno does not realize culture industry's religious function; rather, he precisely sees it in a negative light.

### **Autonomy and Origin**

However, Adorno's autonomy of art seems very much peculiar for several reasons. First, the use of Hegelian dialectics as the basis of the autonomy and even the whole theory of his aesthetics is not philosophically well-justified on its own ground. Rather, Hegelian dialectics serves as a pre-established ready-to-use tool in Adorno's aesthetic theory. The problem would become further questionable if it is assessed from a Marxist point of view. The incompatibility between Hegelian dialectics and Marxist dialectical materialism has been well pointed out by Louis Althusser ([1965] 1990) that Hegelian dialectics is by its very much logic not ready-to-use in Marxist dialectical material determinism. If the whole autonomy of art is

based on its inner logic, then this Hegelian kernel is very much hard to survive in any Marxist critique of art. This incompatibility also holds true in Adorno's letter to Benjamin, in which he identifies Benjamin and himself as both "paying tributes to Marxism," and his dissatisfaction with Benjamin's *Arcades* study is precisely because of Benjamin's disconformity with Marxism. Agamben (1993, 118) also rightly points this incompatibility out:

Smuggling in this Hegelian concept of 'mediation' and 'total social process' as authentic Marxism means nothing less than erasing, at a stroke, the Marxist critique of Hegelian dialectic as 'abstract, formal process' which constitutes the melodic theme on which there unfolds the counterpoint of the 1844 Manuscript.

The second problem is the historical question of how did art indeed free itself from its cult function? For Adorno, art has its inner logic, and by its inner logic of development, it separated and purified itself from magic. In Hegelian dialectics, the driving force of a development should always start within itself. Then the historical question we need to ask is that how artistic practices first come into existence as religious activities and later separate itself from religion? Instead of asking about the inner logic of the separation, we should also ask about the inner logic of the whole development of art. Only then can we understand how art comes into existence. In other words, art's early association with religion should also be explained by its Hegelian kernel, its inner logic, and only then can we have a full picture of the Hegelian dialectic of art and fully understand how art gains its autonomy.

Furthermore, from a Marxist perspective, the autonomy even seems further questionable. John Dewey ([1934] 1958, 8-9) has provided the best account of the historical emergence of fine art:

The growth of capitalism has been a powerful influence in the development of the museum as the proper home for works of art, and in the promotion of the idea that they are apart from the common life. ... Generally speaking, the typical collector is the typical capitalist. For evidence of good standing in the realm of higher culture, he amasses paintings, statuary, and artistic *bijoux*, as his stocks and bonds certify to his standing in the economic world.

... The mobility of trade and of populations, due to the economic system, has weakened or destroyed the connection between works of art and the *genius loci* of which they were once the natural expression. As works of art have lost their indigenous status, they have acquired a new one – that of being specimens of fine art and nothing else.

Although Dewey is no Marxist, his account of the emergence of fine art, which can be read as an explanation of art gaining its autonomy, is certainly subject to Marxist interpretation. Under this account, art's autonomy comes out as a historical result of commodity fetishism. The development of it is only historically contingent upon the material flourishing of European capitalism; its 'inner' logic could only possibly be the contradiction between labor and capital

and that of the class struggle between proletariat and bourgeoisie, and the division between fine art and common life can only be understood as the division between proletariat and bourgeoisie. Again, there should be no Hegelian kernel in this autonomy.

If the autonomy is only historically contingent, then it ought no longer to provide any logical basis for the mediation between matter and form. Indeed in Adorno's aesthetic theory, the autonomy is the sole driving force that grounds the mediation between the empirical reality and its empirical other. If the autonomy is not logically founded, then nor are the dialectics and the matter/form distinction.

Then in our inquiry into the social existence of art, instead of always postulating the matter/form distinction, I want to suggest that we should overcome it and come back to this world since "the actual work of art is what the product does with and in experience", as claimed by Dewey([1934] 1958, 3), whose explanation of mimesis is very much close to Aristotle: "the vogue of the theory [of conceiving art as reproduction or imitation] is testimony to the close connection of the fine arts with daily life. ... For the doctrine did not signify that art was a literal copying of objects, but that it reflected the emotions and ideas that are associated with the chief institutions of social life" (Dewey [1934] 1958, 7).

While coming back to this world, we should see that the social aspect of art is precisely its magical power of fixating and transforming its audience, which is very much like the religious role it played in ancient times. Children dying of hunger everyday in some far off

place would concern not so many people, but a documentary of dolphin slaughter can make a million people cry. If a sociologist continues to wonder where this magic comes from, then he again falls back to Plato's representational schema for the answer is only to be found in another world. Bourdieu ([1981] 1993, 138) rightly spots the this-worldly character of magic in his examination of *haute couture* in which the magic of haute couture is believers' collective misrecognition. However, his use of the phrase 'collective misrecognition' replacing Mauss' 'collective belief' leads him into a desacralizing manner while the root of the desecralization is the representational schema. If we do not think of art as representing some ultimate truth, then there would be nothing for believers to misrecognize.

Rather, "art is truth setting itself to work", as Heidegger ([1971] 2001, 42) makes the claim. And as he rightly observes, "the sculpture of the god, votive offering of the victor in the athletic games [,]... is not a portrait whose purpose is to make it easier to realize how god looks; rather, it is a work that lets the god himself be present and thus is the god himself". What he means here is that in the piece of the portrait, not only is the artwork associated with religion, but the portrait itself is the very religion. Perhaps we should even stop saying that art performs any magical function because art itself is magical whereas the term "function" implies a means to an end.

Then in the case of the culture industry, the disappearance of art's 'dialectic' autonomy as well as the disappearance of the division between fine art and common life would only suggest the disappearance of class in contemporary society, where commodity fetishism has

prevailed. If phantasmagoria in the nineteenth century Paris was the realization of dreamy images of the bourgeoisie's commodity fetishism, then in the culture industry, *Titanic* and *Star Wars* would be the phantasmagoria of today's commodity fetishism that is prevalent everywhere in society. Benjamin ([1968] 2008) is perhaps right to point out that the disappearance of *aura* marks the disappearance of the ritualistic character of art, but what this statement infers is that the magic of modernist art has taken on a non-ritualistic and rather playful approach, the insight of which is also best postulated in Michael Fried's (1998, 163) famous essay "Art and Objecthood" that modernist art is becoming increasingly dependent on its ability to defeat theater.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, this paper starts with an attempt to diagnose the disagreement between Adorno and Benjamin over the subject of phantasmagoria. In settling the disagreement, it is found out that the representational matter/form schema, which has underlain Western aesthetic thought from Plato to Adorno, should not be easily postulated without being contested. Rather, we should turn this-worldly to understand the social role art plays in our society, the prototype of which could be seen in Aristotle's *Poetics*. This role is precisely the magical power that art has in its ability to transform society. When Steve Jobs said that "a lot of times, people don't know what they want until you show it to them," he was exactly referring to this magical power that he himself mastered. It would empirically be very hard to explain the whole story

of Apple's success by just utilizing concepts like 'habitus', 'post', or any other external social structure. Some ingenuity is surely to be found in the magic.

But what implication can we then make on the emerging scholarship of 'the new sociology of art'? Zangwill is right that the world of art cannot be all reduced to underlying political or economic relationships, and some 'folk' experience of aesthetical taste should always remain explanatory. But essentialism is not the way out; what I argue in this paper is that what is aesthetical is precisely social, and I believe this could well be the spirit of the 'new sociology of art'. Eduardo de la Fuente (2007, 2010) has given some brilliant accounts to some of the newly developments in the field. He shows that both Tia DeNora and Harvey Molotch's recent sociological works on art have promoted the notion of co-production of the 'aesthetical' and the 'social', while Alfred Gell and Jeffrey Alexander have also respectively transcended the enlightened conception of materiality in their studies of 'things'. Perhaps, the dichotomy between the 'sociological' and the 'aesthetical' has always been a hypothetical one. What was previously considered to be magic and fetishism by the enlightened men are now becoming the forefront of sociological inquiries.

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