



# Understanding Modern Art Creation and Cultural Dissemination from Benjamin's Critical Theory

Xiaojing Sun<sup>(✉)</sup>

Ludong University, Yantai, China

1172372106@qq.com

**Abstract.** By reproducing the rules of past culture and social operation and comparing them with the cultural phenomena in the era of modern mechanical reproduction, Benjamin showed the destruction of human integrity caused by social culture after the development of German industry, which is still enlightening to modern culture. By combining his critical thoughts with the current development of modern culture, this paper explores the new features of modern literary and artistic creation, including the excessive emphasis on subjective feelings and the disappearance of “light charm”, the emphasis on “shock” and the disappearance of the ability to tell stories, and the separation of people’s sense and cognition under the impact of modern culture. Through the analysis of his thoughts to find the path of self and soul liberation in the modern consumer culture and commercial world, to explore the new possibilities of literary creation and cultural transmission.

**Keywords:** Walter Benjamin · A halo · Shocked

## 1 Introduction

Under the background of the rapid development of modern Chinese literature and art, commercial literary and artistic works occupy every aspect of public life. Works in the age of mechanical reproduction no longer have the unique “authenticity” characteristic of previous works of art, triggering a series of discussions about the gradual demise of modern art. Benjamin was born in Germany when art history was booming. After the 20th century, philosophers such as Engels and Hegel launched profound criticism and research on literature and art. Benjamin also dialectically absorbed the advanced views of the mainstream trend of art and philosophy, and put forward speculative views on the social and cultural phenomena after the emergence of modern technology such as modern architecture art and video camera. Including painting skills, the press and radio, actors performance skills and art exhibitions and other aspects of the cultural phenomenon. The modernity and advanced nature of its theory and thinking perspective are still of great practical significance to the creation of contemporary literary and artistic works. Based on the rapid development of modern communication technology, this paper analyzes and studies the new features of art under the social background of that time by Benjamin, in order to obtain new guidance on literary and artistic creation in parallel with the development of technology.

© The Author(s) 2023

I. A. Khan et al. (Eds.): HWESM 2023, ASSEHR 760, pp. 559–565, 2023.

[https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-068-8\\_70](https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-068-8_70)

## **2 The Enlightenment of Benjamin's Criticism of Culture and Art to the Spread and Development of Modern Culture**

### **2.1 Modern Culture's Emphasis on Subjective Feelings and the Disappearance of "Light Charm"**

After looking at modern architecture and objects available for exhibition, Benjamin explores the reality of the gradual disappearance of "light charm" in artworks in the era of mechanical reproduction. Benjamin's "Light charm" provides an appreciation perspective of works of art, and this appreciation perspective allows people to perceive social changes and fully understand the historical features and unique charm of works of art. But in modern art, this charm is fading. In Benjamin's work "Art in the Age of Machine Reproduction", describes the characteristics of "light charm" in art works, all artworks have their own unique forms of expression of light charm. In Benjamin's description, the "light charm" of the mountains can be used to gaze at the continuous mountains on the horizon while resting on a summer afternoon, and the "light charm" of the branches is associated with the shadow cast on the rest. Machine replication gradually dries up the charm of modern artworks. Benjamin believes that although technological replication can bring original works to places that cannot be spread before, at the same time, it will dissolve the "authenticity" of works, that is, the length of existence and historical inheritance. When viewing modern art works, the value of the copied products lies only in their symbol consumption characteristics, rather than the historical "light charm" it carries, which is gradually exhausted in the modern art world.

Benjamin's thought of language degradation holds that language no longer has an unshakable influence on actions and thinking, and there is no "Tao" in words that leads to the truth of the universe. Words and language become an empty shell that no longer carries truth and truth. It is not only speech that has fallen, but also consumer goods and works of art that have gradually lost their function of carrying thought-provoking meaning. He believes that language and artworks in the age of consumption have already become symbols available for consumption, and can no longer become sublime things that shock the soul and carry faith. The symbolic consumption that Benjamin thinks is divorced from the meaning is nihilistic. Although it attracts people to stop, it is essentially an illusory whitewash. With the development of modern technology, power is gradually divided, authority loses its ruling power, and civilians become the subject of creation and voice, which contributes to the equal development of society. Modern culture is characterized by decentralization. When everyone becomes more and more self-focused, the cultural content of consumption becomes the nourishment for individuals to absorb identity and self. Individuals pay attention to their own feelings and have a one-sided understanding of cultural content. Comments with emotional tendencies spread along with it. People pay more and more attention to the impact of information content on emotions in the age of information explosion. They consume illusory cultural symbols with the mentality of "loiterers", and cannot have a comprehensive understanding of real artworks with historical value, let alone realize their own spiritual liberation. For example, under the impact of consumption concept, a large number of kitsch works appear in painting art, which is extremely pleasing. Compared with presenting cultural and historical spiritual context, modern culture is more willing to emphasize subjective

feelings, regards works as consumer goods, and relies on the imagination of consumers to complete the construction of works.

## **2.2 The Emphasis on Shock and the Lack of Storytelling Ability in the Creation of Modern Literary Works**

Modern works are created for the purpose of causing “shock”. Benjamin’s theory of “shock” can also be translated as the theory of “shudder”. It is used to describe the phenomenon that the visual experience of “loiterers” in the era of machine reproduction is stimulated by senses when they come into contact with literary works. During the viewing, literary works bring instant visual or sensory impact to the audience. This sensory impact is against thinking and contemplation, and is also a self-protection mechanism for people in the era of consumption to seek new and different cultural phenomena. Benjamin divided the causes of shock into two types. The first is that people are stimulated by unexpected situations in the external world, and people’s brains will suppress the external stimuli, resulting in the interaction of “shock” experience; the second is “psychological experience when the past experience cannot adapt to the external world, and the two are fractured.” The “shudder” experience is created by the conscious mind in order to balance the stimuli of the external world to the senses. The brain goes first and shrouds the senses with the shock experience, and the less external stimuli the person is exposed to. Benjamin believes that the structure of language becomes increasingly loose and gradually collapses after the emergence of image art. With the function of picture reproduction, image art has weakened the priority of language to record events.

The ubiquity of advertising content in the consumer age takes “shock” as its number one priority. In the age of information explosion, the works that can best complete the consumption function are the works with the most sensory stimulation effect. Meanwhile, in order to generate more consumption, producers constantly use technology to create sensory experience that people have never had before to seize the market. For example, the emergence of 3d and 4d cinemas, the appearance of cultural products that combine auditory and visual touch, and the reproduction of vast cosmic scenes in science fiction films achieve the effect of “shudder” by presenting audiences’ experience that they have never had before. Benjamin’s assessment of Dadaism draws analogies to such cultural phenomena. Dadaism is a rough style, they use the painting to complete the effect of modern painting and film on people. The kind of effect Benjamin describes is the “shock” effect of the instant shock, which hits people like a bullet, paralyzing them into a state of confrontational thought and contemplation. Image art is a loose moment, which is unable to achieve continuous moment experience. Behind the frozen moments are cultural history and the lengthy and complex real world. But the moment of freeze frame is excluded, the photo is important, the moment of preparation after the photo is not important. People are used to the consumption of such “instant” moments, and their attention is attracted by the instantaneous information in the photos, so they will lack the accumulation of real experience and cannot concentrate their attention. People’s exploration and experience of modern network life are scattered, cut, fragmented and discontinuous feelings, unable to experience continuous spiritual and cultural products with historical context, and unable to tell a complete story. Modern film technology has developed rapidly, but it cannot match the technology with the core of a good story, and

the characterization is flat and lacks three-dimensional sense. For example, in recent years, the big animated films are often criticized for creating grand scenes and beautiful special effects, but few thought-provoking story lines. Therefore, although the Chinese animation *Summer of Goblins* uses the most simple animation effects, it is highly praised for its story development based on the sad reality of contemporary workers. Therefore, only relying on “shock” to attract people’s attention can not do the job.

### **2.3 From the Duality of the Concept of Nature, We Can See the Separation of Modern Sense and Cognition**

Modern sense is separated from each other, it is the media to prolong our sense, become fragmented. Benjamin put forward the definition of nature. He believed that in Goethe, the first nature was the “original phenomenon” or “model”, which refers to a transcendental, pure, complete, perfect and ideal spiritual law. And the second nature is the experiential “phenomenon”, is the real existence, directly visible, perceptible, even with the various things we live day and night. This shows Benjamin’s emphasis on nature as it should be, especially in the context of the German economy as big machines invaded every aspect of people’s lives. Benjamin emphasizes the “authenticity” of artistic works, which can explain/explain the nature emphasized by Benjamin, that is, the natural “light rhyme” of things with social history. People’s senses are in harmony and unity at this moment. Without the disturbance of things that stimulate the senses, people can meditate and worship the beauty of things with natural “light charm”.

In the age of mechanical reproduction, people’s senses are segmented, and the integrity of the person is destroyed due to the incongruity of spirit and action. Benjamin proposed that thought becomes unity in action, and that the two merge and permeate. People’s bodies are particularly fragile in the mechanical age, and their spirits are divided by fragmented information. In modern artworks, people’s bodies show incongruous characteristics. When people outsource their senses through media, what they get is only illusory media consumption experience instead of complete appreciation and comfortable enjoyment. In this process, human spirit is alienated by machine. It is difficult for people to feel the complete intention from artworks, and simple and thin artworks occupy the mainstream. Benjamin attaches great importance to works of art with religious colors in the past. In his opinion, the unique artistic value of the original works of art comes from theology, which is a kind of secular etiquette and expresses the worship of beauty. This kind of beauty is with social function, is conducive to the coordinated development of people’s spirit. Benjamin has always been fascinated by the artistic beauty of nature, and his emphasis on the beauty of real experience and non-technical reproduction can be seen in the films he reviews on camera. “The non-mechanical aspects of reality are the most artistic aspects, and the attention to the immediate reality is a blue flower in the land of technology.” Benjamin believed that the body, which represents worldly experience, naturally dies when the spirit gradually flourishes. Modern technology is committed to reviving people’s sensory experience in the electronic world, creating a virtual but simulated world. At present, electronic social software has prompted a large number of people to transfer their social relations to the online world, and electronic communities are gradually flourishing. People have electronic names, identities and bodies that can be changed at will. Through online visual and auditory simulation, the “meta-universe”

is a new type of network political ideology group in the future. Therefore, people's secular experience is gradually missing, and the priority of realistic experience gradually gives way to online information consumption. "In the decay of the bourgeoisie, the act of concentration becomes an antisocial act, opposed to distraction as a way of playing social behavior." This separation of body and mind is a new danger sign in the modern age of commerce and consumerism.

### **3 From Cognition to Action – Finding the Way of Self-liberation in Benjamin's Criticism**

Benjamin observed the cultural phenomenon in Germany after the economic development, and made a serious criticism. It is this powerful critical perspective that can awaken people from the current desire of information explosion, find the way to truly realize inner peace, find the real desire with "authenticity", and find the fundamental purpose of artistic creation. Even if the current consumerism paralyzes people's sensitivity to reflection and criticism in some aspects, the old media and cultural traditions will not disappear completely, but will be revived in the new media, adapt to the form of the new media, and find their functions and effects again. The purpose of criticism and reflection is to make people master the path to truth in the current chaotic and fragmented age. On the one hand, the development of technology has given the common people the right to speak out and weakened the social inequality. However, technology is also a sharp edge for capital to control the thought of the common people. Only through sober thinking and practical actions can we obtain human integrity and realize self-development.

"The more the social significance of art is reduced, the more the audience's critical and appreciative attitude is dissolved." Kitsch and ingratiating cultural symbols are appreciated, while innovative ideas and cultural products are often more controversial. Criticism is protested and unpleasant, but art should not only exist for consumption, but also serve the function of enlightening the mind and demonstrating social and historical values. People should firmly devote themselves to the real life practice, to accumulate real life experience, bravely face up to the crisis signal hidden beyond the false symbols of reality, and reveal the real people's living conditions. People's feelings are important, and people's needs need to be met. However, unlimited consumption of social information content and increasingly strong needs will actually cover people's real survival needs for seeking true beauty and spiritual liberation. When a work of art is just a bullet that needs to cause people to "tremble", then people can't focus on their current situation, nor can they form a continuous experience, let alone tell a good story. Benjamin emphasized that people should throw themselves into the real life in a sober and rational way, gain the opposition to the unreal reality, regain the natural state of human beings, and find the value of being human.

### **4 Conclusion**

"It seems that technological progress is associated with a huge increase in productivity and rapid development of goods, but the reality is more than that. The other side of progress is a series of problems that need to be solved. Benjamin was acutely aware of

this disease. He saw the negative effects of lack of experience, and his response was to recognize the value of the past in order to reconstruct the value of the present.” By reproducing the rules of past culture and social operation and comparing them with the cultural phenomena in the era of modern mechanical reproduction, Benjamin showed the destruction of human integrity caused by social culture after the development of German industry, which is still enlightening to modern culture. This paper combines his critical thoughts with the current development of modern culture, including modern culture’s excessive emphasis on subjective feelings and the disappearance of “light charm”, literary and artistic creation’s emphasis on “shock” and the disappearance of storytelling ability, as well as the separation of people’s senses and cognition under the impact of modern culture. Through the analysis of his thoughts to find the path of self and soul liberation in the modern consumer culture and commercial world, to explore the new possibilities of literary creation and cultural transmission.

## References

1. Walter Benjamin. Lyric Poets in the Age of Developed Capitalism [M]. Translated by Wang Yong. Shanghai: East China Normal University Press, 2017:223.
2. Walter Benjamin. The Origin of German Sad Drama [M] Translated by Shuangzhi Li and Wei Su. Beijing Normal University Press, 2013:30.
3. Yanfang Wei. Criticism in Defense: Lowenthal’s View of Mass Culture and its Enlightenment [J]. Journal of Nanjing University of Technology (Social Sciences Edition), 2012, 11(01):69–75.
4. Wengui Xu. Benjamin’s Surrealist Criticism and Its Body Politics [J]. Studies in Literature and Art Theory, 202, 42(04):181–190.
5. Zhuge Yi. On Benjamin’s Modern Art Thought [J]. Humanities Journal, 2022, No.316(08):81–92.
6. Zehao Liu. Study on Benjamin’s Visual Thought from the Aestheticized Perspective of Daily Life [J]. Yinshan Journal, 201, 34(05):59–64.
7. Yuqing Zhang. “Intoxication” or “Sobriety”: Walter Benjamin’s Research on the Concept of Jena’s Romantic “Criticism” [J]. Society, 202, 42(02):151–178.
8. Junling Li, Wu Jiani. “Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”: Understanding Podcasting from Benjamin’s Broadcasting Practice [J]. Chinese Culture and Communication Research, 2021(01):72–79.
9. Benjamin. Art Works in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction [M]. Translated by Wang Caiyong. Beijing: China City Press, 2002.
10. Wenchao Lu. Materiality and Eventuality from the Perspective of Art Events: Re-reading Benjamin’s Works of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction [J]. Literary Review, 2019(04): 64–70.
11. ROSA. Social Acceleration: a New Theory Of Modernity [M]. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013:109.

**Open Access** This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

