

Does Ritual Disappear as Walter Benjamin describes in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” in the Age of Digital Technology?

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Abstract

This article refutes Walter Benjamin’s opinion about the disappearance of aura and ritual in ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’. According to this essay, rituals disappear through a method of mass reproduction—a film. I argue one of the mass reproductions, the film, actually creates a new aura and new ritual unlike Benjamin’s opinion. In the digital technology era, numerous replicas influence the fact that the massive reproduction leads to create a new ritual phenomena as well. This phenomena appears as a piece of creative writing, a piece of fan-fiction in the cyber space. Firstly, we are going to look at a new ritual which is created by a character in the television series, Star Trek. Then, we will examine a new ritual phenomenon which is generated by a fan-fiction, in the late 1990s Korean pop culture, in the age of digital technology.

Keywords

Popular Culture, Creative Writing, Cyber Space, Fanfic, Aura, Ritual, Ceremonial Cheerleading, Balloon.

Introduction

“Mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual.” - Walter Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Re-production’

Walter Benjamin argues in his “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” that the mechanically equipped reproduction frees works of art from ritual¹, allowing them to transform into political art. Benjamin also believes that reproduction disseminates art to a wider audience. For Benjamin, film is the perfect medium for mass reproduction. I argue that despite Benjamin’s thinking, works of art cannot be freed from ritual. Aura has been recreated via the medium of film though film is not as radically open as Benjamin hopes. The masses recreate the ritualized aura using mass communication.

Benjamin discounts the reality of a pluralistic public. Dominant, hegemonic opinion can alter artwork, and this fact refutes Benjamin’s idea.

In section II of Benjamin’s essay, he states: “Which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art.” The result of the collapse of the aura is that the thing’s one-timeness is challenged by the mechanical equipment, mass reproduction. For instance, a rare valuable fine art object has a stronger aura than widespread multiple copies of that objects’ aura. When people go to a theater, they meet actors face-to-face in front of them. In that situation, the audience will be exposed to the actors’ and the characters’ auras via the play. This is called Audience-Actor aura. In Benjamin’s essay, the film is the most powerful agent of mass reproduction. He suggests that a film actor, acts in front of the camera, the mechanical equipment, for the public. Accordingly, the aura that conceals the actor vanishes, and with it the aura of the character he depicts.

Creation of Aura and Ritual

An Aura between Audience and Actor

However, I claim that the film is not an effective agent to explain the aura’s disappearance because the film cannot separate the Audience-Actor aura through Mechanical Equipment. Therefore, this mechanical equipment is a midway point journey of a new aura. The easiest and the most persuasive practical example is Hollywood’s star system. This system puts an emphasis on the image rather than an actor’s acting. Agents who work together with the actor create and plan the star’s persona through his/her filmography, lifestyle, and accidents that would expose to the public. The star system leads people to think s/he is a good/bad person, and this includes the reproduced aura through the moving images. Stars² are

¹ Ritual is a set of activities involving gestures, words, and objects, performed in an appointed place.

² The word ‘star’ in this context represents a person who is a subject of fandom. In many cases, it is replaced as ‘entertainer’ and ‘celebrity’ (Lee

about putting on their face to represent something that actually is not there. According to Suzanne Hayward's book, "Yet we as spectators accept this construct as real" (Hayward). This means that the actor makes a new virtual image that we can see on the screen. Therefore, because an enormous number of show venues run duplicated films, it is not possible to free the spectators from the imaginary image: this is the broadened definition of the audience-screen relation³. During the screening, people will perceive a cinematic character's aura as real. In other words, people will sense such a filmic experience as a projection of the actor's real character. Thus, to the spectators, film story delivers a new aura of the actors and the characters during and after the running time. For instance, a Vulcan⁴ salute (Figure 1) has become a popular gesture from the 1960s television series 'Star Trek'. It consists of a raised hand with the forwarded hand and extended thumb, while the four fingers are parted between the middle and ring finger. This hand gesture was created and presented by an actor, Leonard Nimoy; a half-blood Vulcan character, Spock. For over five decades, people still use this character's gesture as a casual salutation in various situation as Figures 2. A new greeting ritual has been created through the actor and the film.



Figure 1. The character 'Spock' makes a Vulcan salutation in television series Star Trek. ©greenbloodedcomputer

Hun-Yul and Ji Hye Min). In this essay, I mainly use two words, 'star' and 'celebrity'.

³ It is the same as 'spectator-screen relation', which includes the notion of voyeurism and lawless seeing (Hayward, p.345).

⁴ It is an imagined extra terrestrial in television series 'Star Trek'.

Actors know they have a relationship with the audience, although not one in real time, because the actor and the audience meet each other mainly through mechanical equipment. Hence the actor plays a part in creating the rituals which float around her/him in the movies. This is one of the reasons why actors and actresses prefer to portray a new character from one film to the next, and one of the reasons why they want to sustain the newly created aura as lifelong characters⁵. In sum, mechanical reproduction encourages the creation of new rituals by presenting newly generated auras to the public.

Art Is Not Freed from Ritual, but Creates It: Re-production and Digital Technology

The advent of the Internet encourages the creation of new auras and rituals as well as filmic mass reproduction. As a film has been copied in large numbers by mechanical re-production, text content has also been duplicated in the advent of the Internet. The Internet is a tool to interact with billions of people in the virtual space. In this space, anyone can have access to the information and can copy and paste contents from any web pages as many times as s/he wants. The contents consist of hyperlinks⁶ which navigate between web pages. It is a system that links topics on the screen to related information and graphics, which are



Figure 2. One of the MPs (Member of Parliament), Dr Philippa Whitford, performed a Vulcan salute as she concluded her speech and urged

⁵ Leonard Nimoy wrote an autobiography book call *I'm not Spock*. The title is quite sensational because he made the Spock and the character 'Spock' helped him to be a well-known actor, yet he denies the character's aura in his book title. We can see that the created aura is a double-edged sword: creation of new aura and ritual, and the disturbance of creating the new one.

⁶ A hyperlink is a link that transmits to a new document or to a specific element within a document.

ministers to envision the UK's space industry project in the House of Commons. ©Tim Sculthorpe, Daily Mail Online

typically accessed by a point-and-click method. One element of hyperlink is 'hypertext'⁷. For example, one web page contains lots of information such as pictures, words, banners etc. The hypertext makes it easy to access the information by a user's clicking on hyperlinks. In a book or printed text, a reader gets linear information when s/he reads the context, while the hypertext can provide information associated with what the readers want to navigate. Any phrases or words in any sentences are text data that is connected via node⁸, and forms an information network. Therefore, the hypertext user can produce his/her own non-linear web histories by interaction. In summary, such open accessibility and user interaction of the internet promote the creation of celebrities' new auras and new rituals in the digital technology era.

Art Is Not Freed from Ritual, but Creates It : Fan Fiction in Digital Technology

In the 1990s, internet was a text-centered environment, so writing became a more effective means of communication than images. As the Internet became an everyday tool starting in the mid-1990s, one new form of ritual emerged radically, specifically in Korean pop culture. Since the late '90s, in Korea, there have been lots of rising teenage idols⁹, and their influence has grown remarkably, especially that of boy bands, such as H.O.T. (High-five of Teenagers)¹⁰. Web-based fan fiction is a great example of the ritualized aura. 'Fanfic', which is a short term of 'Fan Fiction'¹¹, means fiction written and read by fans, and it is a type of cultural phenomenon

⁷ Hypertext is a text with hyperlinks, which is called an anchor text.

⁸ In the Internet, a node is an individual bridge of a data structure, such as linked lists and data.

⁹ A word 'Idol' is equivalently used as 'Talento (タレント)' celebrity who works in various media, such as singing and acting (*Idols and Celebrity in Japanese Media Culture*, 2012). However, in Korea generally the term is used as a celebrity who is a teenage singer.

¹⁰ H.O.T. is a fist generation of boy group from 1996 to 2001. It is the starting point of the fandom culture in Korean pop music industry. There are many broadcasting systems which introduce the first generation of fandom culture.

¹¹ A cultural recognition of fan fiction began from the women's book discussion and the television series 'Star Trek' fandom (Lee Hun-Yul and Ji Hye Min, 2015; Bacon-Smith, 1992).

within the fan groups. In fanfic, the main characters are the stars who the fan, an author, likes to write about the most. The author uses his/her own imagination to create a story. In fact, in the beginning of a story, the character's personality is based on the widespread image of the celebrity—it is also a created aura via rumor— yet it is mutated by the writer as the story progresses since anyone can access the story and can leave feedback and/or their ideas to the writer through the Internet. The fanfic author applies this feedback to the following stories. As such little changes accumulate, a new aura of the celebrity is created by the end of the story. For instance, it is hard to define which fanfic started the homosexual story¹² among H.O.T. fandom, yet specific homosexual couples, such as Jun-Ta and Ton-Hyuk¹³, were set as a common story structure gay fiction of the H.O.T. fandom.



Figure 3. A scene of H.O.T. concert. ©Ha-yan-cheon-sa

Since the readers create and know how the character evolves in the story as time passes, they feel that he celebrity is an intimate friend although s/he has not met the star in face-to-face. And each of these personal preferences leads to the construction of various fan clubs. Therefore, the mutated aura is dispersed through the fan fiction in the cyber space fan clubs.

In fact, the newly created aura in the digital environment has a power to gather the fans into a group in the real world from the virtual space as Jenkins points

¹² In the late 1990s, there was a lack of knowledge about the copyright issues in the internet, so every digital resources were vulnerable to be copied without authorities as well as its date of publication.

¹³ An imagined couple with Hee-Jun and Gang-Ta was called as 'Jun-Ta', Tony and Woo-Hyuk was called as 'Ton-Hyuk'.

out in his discussion on four elements¹⁴ in the media culture. The fans' meetings in the real space eventually turn out to compose a new ritual. The most popular ritual gesture in Korean pop culture is shaking colored balloons. Shaking a colored balloon began with the H.O.T. fan clubs¹⁵ and it has developed as a traditional cheerleading gesture among Korea popular culture. Here is an example in Figure 3. We can easily see a new form of ritual ceremony surrounding a Korean pop group, H.O.T. As you can see in the Figure 3, it is not a few balloons, but hundreds of balloons are shaken by the fans in the concert as a whole group. And during the concert, they normally shout out all the group members' names according to the order they agreed on in the virtual space. Finally, ever since this fandom created 'shaking a white balloon', current celebrities and idol-group fans follow this tendency.



Figure 4. A scene from a K-pop singer, Big-Bang's concert in Malaysia.
©Kristal Lee

¹⁴ Jenkins sees participatory culture, which is a culture with relatively low barriers to access, has four essential ideas: affiliations, expressions, collective problem solving and circulations. I carefully suggest that the Internet's accessibility and its interaction make the fanfic can be one of the participatory cultures.

¹⁵ There are two big categories of fan clubs. One is that some fans who organize and participate in formal clubs. Another is that those organize and maintain with fundraising and other activities, may attract a large enrollment (Bacon-Smith, 1991). These two types were included in the development of the H.O.T. fandom. And this tendency can be observed in current fandom culture in Korea.

¹⁶ Before H.O.T. fandom, only autonomous fan clubs existed. In H.O.T. case, they gathered the 34 autonomously appeared clubs into 'CLUB H.O.T.' and its an official number of the club member record was 780,000 and unofficial record was 1,580,000 (Kim, Dong-Hwan, 2015).

The material has advanced from a balloon to a stick-like light bulb today. Figure 4 is recent K-pop star Big-Bang's concert scene in Malaysia. Shaking the glow-in-the-dark light stick has become a new mode of ritual ceremony in contemporary art history. New forms of writings in the digital environment recreate a new aura of stars, and a new style of rituals. All in all, artwork cannot be detached from the rituals, but generates it.

Conclusion

Walter Benjamin thinks that the mechanical equipment leads the dissipation of the aura. He envisions that the film is the most perfect medium for mass reproduction. Benjamin insists that the mechanically equipped reproduction freed human beings from ritual art. However, aura has been recreated via the medium of mass reproduction. Benjamin misses three points:

1) As time passes, the advanced technological mass reproduction can boost up the number of replicas more than the film can do.

2) People can create new stories from the initial storyline as a group.

3) They can set their own rituals through the interactions.

In other words, he misses the entire fact that people feel a connection with the celebrity in a friendly way through the work of art via mechanical equipment, and it regenerates the contemporary ritual aspect in diverse artworks. Mechanical reproduction encourages the advancement of new aura and new form of ritual on the massive amount of people. Consequently, although Benjamin insists the disappearance of aura in 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', the work of art, creative writing, reconstructs a new aura and new rituals in the digital technology era.

Future Research Plan

In this essay, I introduce the regenerated aura and a new ritual in contemporary art specifically in Korean pop music. In Benjamin's essay, aura is never separated from its ritual—first magical then religious—function. However, the aura of the celebrity is created by both from the celebrity and the creative artworks in the digital technology era. Such mixed influences of the auras establish a new ritual in fandom culture: Shaking an object. It has changed as a traditional gesture to cheerleading the idols in Korea, and it has spread out to Southeast Asia. Through reading other scholars' articles, I can see that the popular culture in Korean music

industry has been explored in more various perspectives than I assumed, such as political and economical viewpoints. Yet it is hard to see any scholar who investigates ceremonial and ritual-like fandom in pop culture. I plan to continue exploring the links between text-based artworks in the digital technology era and its cultural influences.

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