On autonomy and the avant-garde

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Surveying the current state of Anglophone art criticism, cultural theory and philosophical aesthetics, I am repeatedly struck by how disoriented or effervescently celebratory this writing is in the face of the art of the last thirty years. Indeed, the problem of how the last thirty years of art might be assessed and periodized after the great achievements of modernism would seem to present an inordinate stumbling block, particularly on the Left where there remains an unfailing distrust of art’s disaffirmative complexities and critical identity under the conditions of late capitalism, despite the rush to turn art into cultural practice. In this respect, this bewilderment or effervescence coheres under one substantive question: how is art to function and to be evaluated under the impact of the new technologies and the logic of the Spectacle? That is, how is art to operate in conditions that openly reify and dissolve the traditional values of art?

In an obvious sense this is an old question for art and modernity, as old as the 1860s, but its implications are now unavoidable under advanced technological culture. Since the 1960s it has usually been answered in two directly opposed ways: (1) by insisting on the need for the category of art to continue ‘out of time’, so to speak, with the mass culture to which it is symbiotically linked; and therefore on the need for art to cultivate an aesthetic distance from popular cultural forms; and (2), by insisting on the need for art to be ‘in time’, to embed its techniques and modes of attention in modern forms of technology and the visual structures of a ‘shared, popular culture’. In broad terms, the latter position is what is now known commonly as postmodernism and the basis of what largely passes for art theory in the academy. The dissolution of the traditional categories of art after conceptual art is relativized as a series of strategies of intervention into social and artistic institutions and forms of everyday life. This position, in fact, is now the cultural dominant of our age. It presents a vision of art as a kind of low-level or micro-social practice.

But if this position rightly demolishes the opposition between art and technological mediation enshrined in late modernist theory it nevertheless suffers from its own kind of blindness: the identification of technological mediation with the democratization of form. By subsuming art under technology, this kind of thinking renders the connection between form and ethics harmless or redundant. For instance, in the contemporary assumption that ephemeral, mass-produced forms in art – art as t-shirts, art as flyers, art as beer mats etc. – are able to provide an unassailable democratic solution to the would-be elitism of high forms such as painting. There is an absence in postmodernist art theory of what I would call a discourse of the critical work of art – its continuous labours of negation – from inside the social relations of technological mediation. In simply subsuming art under technology as an abstract category of machines and democratic reproduction, an understanding of technological mediation as a set of problems immanent to the identifications and resistances of modern practice is left out of the picture. This is why it needs to be made clear that the internalization of the technological mediations of modern experience has been the basis of both art’s modernity and its resistance to this modernity over the last two centuries. Manet’s quickly mapped flat colour and Van Gogh’s rapid, ferocious handling of painterly surface – as ways to avoid the laborious process of drawing, colouring and glazing in academic practice – are no less mediations of modern technology than Duchamp’s ready-mades. Postmodernists tend to positivize the social effects of technology at the expense of the technologies of form; while latter-day modernists, confronted by the vast technological landscape of contemporary practice, are continually trapped by their mourning for what they feel to be the lost modernist object. Any projective commitment to thinking art and technological mediation in terms of practices of critical reinscription is thereby dissolved.
This is why the debate on art and Spectacle, art and mass culture, continues to generate such confusion over the question of art’s autonomy. Autonomy is invariably hyponostatized as a modernist hangover and as fundamentally antithetical to the post-conceptual democratization of form, rather than the means by which art might sustain its claims to sensuous particularity – or permeated ‘otherness’ – against the instrumentalities of its inherited institutions and received practices. Thus when I talk about critical bewilderment or effervescence in the face of the art of the last thirty years, I am talking essentially about how the issue of autonomy remains undertheorized or occluded.\(^2\)

### A red herring

Since the 1960s, with the demise of the modernist understanding of art as in external conflict with mass culture, it has been commonplace to talk about the irredeemable loss of modern art’s autonomy. Pollock’s work represents the great turning point of this realization: the idea of Modern Art, as something defiant, brave, insurmountably ‘other’ to the degradations of mass experience. In a superficial sense this historical outline is true. Art cannot hold a match against mass culture, in the way Greenberg and others have understood it; and, as such, the kind of postmodernism I have described represents this long-term process of assimilation. But for the defenders of this reading of postmodernism, what this perceived shift in cultural values for art identifies is not so much how the social content of art’s autonomy has been transformed in the light of mass culture and its democracy of form, but how autonomy is historically coextensive with a set of particular modernist categories and experiences, and therefore how incompatible the notion of autonomy is with art’s new cultural position and democratic status. The fact that autonomy is not a thing, but a set of social relations – and as such the set of conditions under which art is forced to labour under commodity society – is conveniently forgotten. Autonomy is the name given to those practices of formal and cognitive self-criticism which art must undertake in order for it to produce and reproduce its conditions of emergence and possibility. The social content of these practices of self-criticism are unavoidably the practical and theoretical outcome of the contradiction between the art work’s exchange value and use value. Because art is brought into social being through its exchange value (its institutional and market visibility) art is continually forced by its conditions of alienation to find aesthetic (or anti-aesthetic) strategies which might resist, obviate or delay this process.\(^3\) Hence the would-be loss of (modernist) art’s autonomy after 1945 is a misnomer. The crisis of art’s autonomy is not particular to this stage of commodity culture and the advance of the Spectacle; it is the inescapable reality of art’s production and reception under universal commodity production.

In essence, art’s modern cultural assimilation into mass culture is a red herring. Why? Because the dilemma of the modern art work’s continual ideological renormalization through technological and cultural assimilation is a dilemma which art cannot avoid – under prevailing conditions of production – if it is to continue to signify as art. That is, it is to signify as a set of experiences whose sensuous particularity distinguishes it from other kinds of cognitive and cultural experience, including those experiences that we now know historically as ‘modern’ art. Autonomy therefore is that name we might give to the relations between technology, subjectivity and aesthetic tradition as the basis by which the risk of making art and talking about art is sustained. In other words, autonomy is the sign under which art is forced to labour on itself and its institutions in order to sustain its independence – independence not from the social world but within the social world – irrespective of passing political conjunctures and the forces of technological change. This is why there is so much misplaced mourning and hand-wringing on the Left at the moment over the questions of autonomy and the avant-garde. For, there is a general confusion between the end of the historic avant-garde as the positivization of revolutionary transformation in action (which lasted for perhaps no longer than fifteen years from 1917) and the avant-garde as the continuing labour of negation on the category of art and the representations and institutions of capitalist culture. The former may have ended – for now – as a historical possibility, but the latter continues inexorably to exert its demands and responsibilities, whether these demands and responsibilities are recognized by artists and critics or not.

I am troubled, therefore, by the way writers as diverse in their anti-conservative affiliations as Fredric Jameson, Eric Hobsbawm and Perry Anderson, in recent responses to the condition of contemporary culture confuse the demise of the historic avant-garde with the would-be cessation of art’s labour of negation. Jameson’s unbending position on reification is well known from his work on postmodernism. But in his recent *The Cultural Turn* (1998) he sounds more like Baudrillard than Baudrillard himself. Because the image-as-commodity is now unassailable and totalizing, claims to autonomy are redundant. The
end of the modern spells the end of the aesthetic and the completed assimilation of art into the technological everyday. Anderson’s sense of an ending is equally emphatic but driven by somewhat different considerations, although his debt to Jameson seems clear. The avant-garde and neo-avant-gardes are dead because they no longer have the ‘privilege’ of a big and powerful bourgeoisie to challenge culturally; the mores and aesthetic values of the bourgeoisie have become ‘democratized’ or at least flattened out. Lastly, for Hobsbawm, this would-be absence of cultural conflict is reflected in the way that modern advertising has become the means by which mass culture has finally put the avant-garde out of business. Because the original avant-garde did not fulfill its historic social function, the avant-garde’s ‘justification is gone’. This spurious notion is no more nor less than the postmodernization of Stalinist defeat, and as such an example of how the violence done to the Hegelian labour of negation in both postmodernism and Stalinism now feeds the logic of ‘new realism’ on art and culture. Contra Jameson, Anderson and Hobsbawm, the collective vanguard character of the avant-garde may have ended in this historical period; but art cannot but remain attached to its own renewal in the hope of becoming the ‘future’s past’. In emphasizing the disappearance of the claims of autonomy as negation, these writers lose sight of the fact that the contingent problems of art-making are always and already inside technological relations, and therefore the opposition between technological mediation and the art object is a false one. The end of the avant-garde is a techno-postmodernist myth.

This is why the art historian T.J. Clark’s recent writing represents an interesting, if also problematic, test case for these new conditions and the question of autonomy. For unlike many commentators on the Left today he does not confuse the end of the historic avant-garde, and the assimilation of art into the structures of the Spectacle, with the end of negation and the work of autonomy. On the contrary, Clark asserts that the continuing effort of art to transcend itself, based on the recognition and incorporation of its ideological culpability and material depredations, remains a political project that continues to determine the high ground of art, irrespective of the forces that are arraigned against it. In this sense, Clark holds – for good reason – on to an Adornian sense of art’s possibility in historically unpropitious circumstances, although his use of Adorno is strongly qualified by his Situationist sympathies.

In response to an editorial by Perry Anderson in a recent edition of New Left Review on the state of the Left, Clark asks an important question: “what political or critical vantage point … might [art] have to deny itself, to keep the possibility of representation alive?” Clark answers emphatically: “a deep and ruthless materialism”. By this he means that if the pursuit of art’s autonomy is only possible through the recognition of art’s necessary
dependence on its alienated conditions of realization, then art is forced continually to criticize and modify where it finds itself. Period. In this way he holds on to the broader notion of modernism as the practice of modernity – that is, the means by which modernity and its symbolic modes are tested and retested. Accordingly, it is one thing to say that critical consciousness in art is now disconnected from the wider forces of socialist culture and is under the sway of the effects of the Spectacle; it is another to say that art’s autonomy under this directive is thereby superseded. Indeed, once the historical record is pulled up on screen, this is a calumny against modernism’s own history, given that so much of avant-garde practice in the twentieth century has itself laboured without the would-be consolations of a revolutionary culture. As Clark says, the years between the wars were “already an ending – a crushing and freezing of revolutionary energies”. Consequently, there is always something aesthetically reactionary in allowing modernism to be mediated by the failures of Stalinism. For what results, inevitably, is a loss of understanding of and empathy with the necessary contingency of modernist forms. This is why much of the response on the Left to the new art of the 1990s has largely misunderstood the historical dynamic in which neo-avant-gardes now have to function in the epoch of the Spectacle. If the demands of “ruthless materialism” are to have any meaning for art, then the pursuit of art’s autonomy out of the dialectic between representation and anti-representation, art and anti-art, will of necessity have to continue to seek its resources from the alienated materials and forms of mass culture. Yet ironically Clark, in Farewell to an Idea, loses sight of this commitment to this negative dialectic, what he once called the imperative of Hegelian habits of mind. In historicizing modernism as a lost object – that is, by defending the sensual achievements of modernist painting from 1850 to 1950 – the shifts and transformations in art of the last thirty years appear to evaporate behind a lost sense of possibility. But the struggle for autonomy is always the ever-present negotiation with this lost sense of possibility. As such, although Farewell to an Idea is a book about the contingency of modernism’s forms, this understanding fails to be applied to the art of the present and its technological relations, leaving its conclusion strangely inert – ammunition for all those conservative modernists, anti-avant-gardists and neo-Stalinist moralists who seek to restore some ‘order’ to the contemporary post-conceptual cultural landscape. Indeed, it is currently a much loved book by ‘new aesthetes’ everywhere.

There are two related points, then, I want to make by way of a conclusion: (1) the question of autonomy in art is not foreclosed, irrespective of the changing social composition of the bourgeoisie (easily exaggerated anyway); and (2) because of the transformed relationship between art and mass culture the social content of autonomy – the dialectic between representation and anti-representation, and between art and anti-art – will of necessity be developed out of different forms and technological relations than those of the modernisms with which we are already familiar. The specificity of these forms, however, we cannot – and should not – predict.

Notes

8. Ibid., p. 93.