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Reproducing What is Lost in Technological Reproduction: *Instagramism*

Philosopher, Walter Benjamin, writes in his *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility* that “For the first time in world history, technological reproducibility emancipates the work of art from its parasitic subservience to ritual,” (24). Benjamin constructs a model for artistic value based on two poles: cult value (artistic value for magical or ritualistic purposes) and exhibition value (25). He argues that “The emancipation of specific artistic practices from the service of the ritual” prevails with technological reproduction, as “opportunities for exhibiting their products [their exhibition value] increase,” (25).¹ Such a drastic shift this is, Benjamin notes, that “the scope for exhibiting the work of art has increased so enormously,” (25). Benjamin explores this particular shift signaled by the invention of photography and film since the “primeval era,” (26). Indeed, Benjamin writes that this “change” is “most fully evident in the case of film,” (26). In this essay, however, I investigate an even more recently emerging form, called by some academics as *Instagramism*, and where Instagramism resides between the poles of cult and exhibit value. To this end, I employ the logic used in Benjamin’s investigation of photography and film in this analysis of Instagramism.

¹ To clarify the distinction between art with cult value and exhibition value, take, for example, a live stage play. The additional commentary and reactions from the audience-- even the lack thereof (or silence)-- is a fundamental part to the theatrical experience. This is art with cult value, or value of the audience in a shared space and time. Conversely, a film that is reproduced separately by individuals in isolation, at different times, behind their own digital screen emphasizes exhibition value; an audience member’s reaction does not add to the aesthetic experience for other audience members behind their screen.

Benjamin describes the transformation following the (widespread) advent of technological reproducibility (especially with regard to film) as when “exhibition value begins to drive back cult value on all fronts,” (27). In other words, when visual and auditory replication of a piece of art begins to prevail as a form, the cult value diminishes. Benjamin reasons that film as an artform is especially guilty of this for two primary reasons. Firstly, film moves away from cult value “since the film actor performs not in front of an audience but in front of an apparatus,” (31). In film’s modern form, i) the absence of a shared (often ritualistic) time and space (in which the original artwork product and the audience both occupy) accounts for the loss in cult value-- no longer are the actors (who for the purposes of this paper are also authors, or creators of artistic meaning) able to engage in interplay with the audience. Along this same line, the actor “before the apparatus” must simply assume that they are “confronting the masses,” (33). Since there lacks an audience in which the actor can readily identify, the “invisibility” of the audience “heightens the authority of their [the audience’s] control, (33). Interestingly, the loss of cult value in art, specifically as regards the development of film as a medium, is also due to a second factor: ii) film “exclud[ing] large masses from production,” (34). That is, the concept of “at any moment, the reader is ready to become a writer,” ceases to hold true for film, as the common film audience does not have similar access or knowledge to film-making as the actor or director, and cannot meaningfully respond with their sentiments in a way that affects how other audience members interpret the film elsewhere. These two aspects of film, combined, reduce the overall cult value of art.

However, the two aspects of film reproduction that emphasize “exhibit value” play out differently in more recent forms of technological reproducibility. The development of the art movement *Instagramism*, as coined by Lev Manovich, is inextricably paired with the emergence

of social media networks and widespread usage of smartphone devices. These networks massively enable people to engage in both familiar and global networks of sharing images and clips easily. As for the first prong, i) Instagram (and other similar social medias for sharing images) admittedly fails to link the audience into viewing a film or photo in the same space and time. That is, even though *Instagramism* may be able to more strictly reinforce the distinction of sub-communities (which could inform authors (or users) within those communities further of their audience), it is reasonable to assume that users (who are the artists themselves) act without knowledge of exactly what audience will view their work. As regards this component of technological reproducibility, film and *Instagramism* both fail to join the audience in a common space and time. However, after that, the two forms diverge; Manovich writes: “Instagrammers can be said to own the means of cultural production,” (4). In situating this concept into the second prong of analysis used by Benjamin, Instagramism radically reimagines who can participate, since there is no fee to Instagram, dramatically expanding access to cultural production and response. This argument does not propose that *Instagramism* is a full return to wholly placing emphasis on cult value; after all, it is still a form of technological reproducibility in which users view images at different times and spaces. However, this argument does propose that *Instagramism* is a much closer reflection of interpreting a work with cult value, in which users can easily engage in their own production of art-- responding to the art (a post) in the comments, and so forth. Additionally, users viewing an Instagram-post (as a piece of art) simultaneously view the comment section and other paratextual elements, which further re-create a shared experience to viewing a piece of art. As Manovich writes, users, like an audience, are profoundly “in the scene, in the situation, in the moment,” (12). If *Instagramism* were to completely replicate film and rely on exhibition value, then the audience would not function as a

paratextual influence while viewing an art piece, as in the case of film having constitutive exhibit value. Art on *Instagramism*, however, is interpreted in conjunction with what others respond with in the comments, similar to how an audience's presence plays a role in interpreting art with cult value. The development of *Instagramism*, therefore, marks a pivotal moment in technological reproducibility, in which elements of what could not be reproduced with film are now undergoing attempts to be reproduced. On a grander scale, the ability for artforms such as *Instagramism* to overcome borders to cult value marks a new age of technological reproduction, in which the possibility of truly re-situating art in proximity to the pole of cult value nears.

Works Cited

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