

Is the Magic Gone? Weber's "Disenchantment of the World" and its Implications for Art in Today's World

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The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization, and, above all, by the 'disenchantment of the world.' Precisely the ultimate and most sublime values have retreated from public life either into the transcendental realm of mystic life or into the brotherliness of direct and personal human relations. —*Max Weber*

In the above quote, Max Weber describes the “disenchantment of the world” as it results from the intersection of the Protestant Reformation and the scientific revolution in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber explains that these paradigm shifts have inaugurated a more rational understanding of events as people began to rely more on scientific investigations as the way to truth. This ultimately resulted in a decline of the use and belief in magic, God, and myth and a rise of secularization and bureaucracy. A Protestant work ethic facilitated the rise of capitalist economic systems coinciding with this new paradigm of reason. What effect does this have on contemporary works of art, if any? Are they, too, subject to this disenchantment, or can they serve as an alternative, providing magic and ritual to its viewers? At a glance, art may seem to provide an experience of magic or mystic ritual. Upon closer review, however, the extent of this experience of magic or mystical ritual is limited, as behind the façade of mysticism, art is inescapably connected to one of the driving forces of disen-

chantment: capitalism.

According to Weber, God, magic, and myth are now replaced with logic and knowledge. As Weber suggests, the retreat of magic in this age has had an impact on art, as it has now become its own sphere with its own set of values. Walter Benjamin also discusses this shift in the nature of art in his essay, “The Work of Art and the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” He notes that before the advent of science and technology, art had a distinctive character stating that “the earliest works of art originated in the service of a ritual—first the magical, then the religious kind.”¹ Art’s connection to ritual, Benjamin asserts, gave it what he calls an “aura,” or a certain authenticity given by its particular creation in history and space. But new technologies such as film and photography lend to mass reproduction of art and thereby a demystification of the process of art’s creation. Benjamin writes: “that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art.”² Both Weber and Benjamin agree that the modern age of science and intellectualism have greatly transformed the role of art in society.

For Weber and Benjamin, the factor that solidifies the rise of intellectualism at the intersection of the scientific revolution and the Protestant Reformation is the emergence of capitalism. The theories of Theodor Adorno reinforce both Weber and Benjamin on this point. According to Adorno, the establishment of the capitalist free-market system in modern society coincides with these events and is governed by a reliance on rationalism and bureaucracy. Weber sees a direct relationship between cultural forms and economic forms, as he notes a connection between art and economic interests.³ Benjamin elucidates this notion, as he maintains that culture has become an industry in the age of capitalism. He explains that art is no longer based on ritual and is now a commodity in the age of mechanical reproduction. Benjamin

notes that “with the emancipation of the various art practices from ritual go increasing opportunities for the exhibition of their products.”⁴

Theodor Adorno shares the notion of the relation between art and economics in the modern age. He describes the rational system of art as “products which are tailored for consumption by masses...manufactured more or less according to plan...The entire practice of the culture industry transfers the profit motive naked onto cultural forms.”⁵ If art production is thus driven by the rationale of profit-motives, as all three argue, then magic and ritual have fallen by the wayside. Is there a chance that art may still offer ritual or magic as an alternative to the current disenchantment of the world? Weber notes that with the “development of intellectualism and rationalization...[art] provides a salvation from the routines of everyday life.”⁶

This study will explore several mediums in which art seems to provide magic: film, photography, dance, literature, and television. It will also look at the ways art’s experience can be magical through exhibits and museums. While art may seem to provide an experience of ritual or magic, the following examples will show that the rational and coinciding capitalistic conditions of Weber’s “disenchantment” dominate them all.

First of all, both Benjamin and Adorno consider is the potential for magic in film. Viewers of films today arguably experience magic in the wide range of technologies in special effects. With the use of stunts and computer animations and manipulations, films can depict scenarios beyond reality or human capability such as the fight scenes in *The Matrix* movies or making Peter Pan fly. Also, the cult of the elevated status of celebrities also gives films a magical feel. Benjamin points out, however, that film is the medium most destructive to art’s aura in that the camera lens acts as barrier between actors and audiences and takes away the actor’s persona. Benjamin writes,

the film responds to the shriveling of the aura with an artificial build-up of the 'personality' outside the studio. The cult of the movie star, fostered by the money of the film industry, preserves not the unique aura of the person but the 'spell of the personality,' the phony spell of a commodity.⁷

Despite the magic movies and movie stars seem to exude, behind it all is a construction driven by the commodity market. The corporate structure of the film industry serves to further the destruction of the magic and ritual of filmmaking. Adorno points out this commercial-ly-driven system as well, describing a

star system, borrowed from individualistic art and its commercial exploitation. The more dehumanized its methods of operation and content, the more diligently and successfully the culture industry propagates supposedly great personalities and operates with heart-throbs.⁸

The dehumanization Adorno mentions is suggestive of art's shift away from the ritual toward a reliance on capitalism that coincides with disenchantment's reliance on rational means. Though movies may offer magical effects, Adorno dismisses this argument. He notes the increasing tendency of movies to parallel reality due to the commodification of the film industry. He writes: "the culture industry has become so successful that 'art' and 'life' are no longer wholly separable,"⁹ and "real life is becoming indistinguishable from the movies."¹⁰ Because many films cater to the masses, they strive to depict reality in many ways by adhering to common norms, which Adorno argues creates a sameness of art product. This can be seen most obviously in the commonality of plot lines among many films. Thus, the nature of the culture industry of film, driven by capitalism, overshadows the magical experience movies may offer.

Martha Rosler also discusses the capitalist market's mediating effect between artist and audience focusing on photography as an

art form. Parallel to Benjamin and Adorno's arguments above on film, Rosler similarly considers the phenomenon of stardom and spectacle as an effort to infuse photography with a sense of magic. In considering the rise of electronic media and "stardom," Rosler describes the, "restructuring of culture in this period of advanced capitalism into a more homogenous version of the 'society of the spectacle.'"¹¹ The entrance of photography into the realm of high art has called for efforts to impose magic and mystery on its interpretation so that photography might become some kind of spectacle and thus be effective as an art form. Rosler argues that this is to combat photography's prevailing utilitarian purpose. She predicts: "the firmer the hold photography gains in the art world, the more regular will be the attack on photography's truth-telling ability and on its instrumentality."¹² Rosler thus argues that in order for photography to be considered art, the magical aspect of it needs to be enhanced and the utilitarian aspect diminished.

Susan Sontag also considers the extent that photographs may be regarded as truth. She, however, contrasts them with more conventional art:

artists 'make' drawings and paintings while photographers 'take' photographs. But the photographic image...cannot be simply a transparency of something that happened. It is always the image that someone chose; to photograph is to frame, and to frame is to exclude."¹³

But because photographs are 'taken,' and not created, they are used in modern society for establishing truth, such as for court evidence and in the news. Despite Sontag's argument that photographs do not contain whole truths, they do have a utilitarian purpose, making their review more of a rational experience than a magical one. Rosler points out the tenuous effort of the art world to give photographs a magical

significance. She writes, “[i]t requires quite a lot of audience training to transform the relation between a viewer and a photograph to one primarily of mysteriousness...This cultural disjunction, made possible by commodity fetishism...”¹⁴ Thus, like in film, the capitalist market drives the effort to bring photography into the art world and instill it with an artificial spectacular magic.

Another example of disenchantment’s capitalistic and bureaucratic hold on art under the guise of ritual is corporate sponsorship of art’s creation of myth and image-building. Amy Ninetto’s article, “Culture Sells: Cezanne and Corporate Identity,” explores the increasing occurrence of corporate sponsorships of art exhibits and focuses on the Advanta Corporation’s endorsement of a Cezanne exhibit in Philadelphia as a case study. The bringing together of corporation and museum is described as a new kind of mutually beneficial “partnership,” resulting in, “the combination of corporate money with corporate labor and knowledge applied to the marketing of the exhibition.”¹⁵ This clearly links the properties of disenchantment, capitalism and rationalism with the art world. Ninetto also describes how many aspects of the art show become profit-motivated, and critics call it hypercommercial and overcommodified. In addition to the profit motive of selling products related to the exhibition, the corporation fulfills another purpose in sponsoring art: the development of its corporate identity. Referring specifically to the case of Advanta’s sponsorship of Cezanne, the corporation puts forth an image of the artist in order to associate it with the image of the company, thus enacting the ritual of myth. Ninetto describes it as the, “deployment of Cezanne, imagined as the epitome of artistic genius, to sell credit cards.”¹⁶ Advanta ensures that the exhibition presents only certain key attributes of the artist, glorifying him as an innovator and vanguard in order to advertise and enhance Advanta’s corporate identity.

Advanta's ulterior motive causes visitors to the exhibit to indulge in this myth of identity. For the designs of the company, Ninetto explains, "corporate identity discourse posits the corporation, like the nation, as a collective individual, with its own personality."¹⁷ While visitors experience this myth of identity as an elevated and magical ideal, art is in reality acting as an agent for the profit motivations of the corporation.

Correspondingly, Lauren Berlant argues how the commodification of culture, and how television in particular, contributes to the creation of the myth of national identity. As Ninetto relates the phenomenon of corporate identity to nationalistic campaigns aimed at constructing identity, Berlant argues that the commodification of culture in the 1920s to the 1950s, exemplified by the rise of Hollywood and popular literature, started a crucial construction of the notion of the "national" in the United States. In "The Theory of Infantine Citizenship," Berlant considers an episode of the television show, *The Simpsons*, as well as television's role in the centrality of mass entertainment cultures in constructing a sense of national desire and identification. Berlant writes, "television promotes the annihilation of memory and, in particular, of historical knowledge and political self-understanding."¹⁸ This brings about the question of whether national identity, which Berlant argues is obtained through culture, is a constructed fantasy and a myth. Berlant asserts that television and mass culture depict fictions that are taken for reality by the masses. In the episode, Lisa writes a patriotic essay and wins a trip to Washington D.C. Upon arrival she becomes disillusioned by its apparent corruptness. The corruptness, however, is swiftly dealt with by the system, and Lisa resigns in the end stating, "the system works!"¹⁹ Berlant points out Lisa's loss of consciousness, similar to that which she argues is brought on by television and people's reception of myths of

national identity. She writes, “when cinematic, literary, and televisual texts fictively represent ‘Washington’ as ‘America,’ they thus both theorize the conditions of political subjectivity in the United States and reflect on the popular media’s ways of constructing political knowledge.”²⁰ Much like the sense of magic that is infused in film and photography, the experiences of myth of corporate identity in exhibitions and national identity in television are all driven by the commodification of culture. Thus, the seemingly magical experience of art and culture has a rational and calculated basis.

Another form of art that seems entirely ritualistic and magical at first is dance. Whether traditional, modern or pop, repetitive motions and ancient origins give both dancer and audience a feeling of ritual magic. The magic is dispelled, however, when considering Howard Becker’s description of the modern “art world,” a term to, “denote the network of people whose cooperative activity, organized via their joint knowledge of conventional means of doing things, produces the kind of art works that art world is noted for.”²¹ From coordination of costumes, venue, performance and audience appreciation, many actors become involved in the production of any artwork. Producing art requires time, money, a support system of individuals and, as Becker notes, “to do all this supposes conditions of civic order such that people engaged in making art can count on a certain stability, can feel that there are some rules to the game they are playing.”²² Such a civic order is reminiscent of Weber’s description of the rise of bureaucracy and disenchantment akin to the advent of capitalism. Exacerbating the loss of magic in dance and other art forms are the conventions upon which an artist depends, which, as defined by Becker, are generally accepted means of producing and understanding art. He writes, “[c]onventions place strong constraints on the artist,” and they “come in complexly interdependent systems.”²³ Through consider-

ation of the complicated systems of convention and networks of an art world, art's magical experience is greatly limited and its reliance on rationalism becomes apparent.

Even when the content of the artwork and its key selling point is magical, such as in J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* novels, capitalist systems still undermine a magical experience. Much of the appeal of these best-selling books is their focus on magic, allowing the reader to enter a world much different from our own. However, Alan Jacobs lends a perspective that shows Harry Potter's world, in actuality, is not significantly different from the reader's. He points out, using Weber's phrase, that before the world became disenchanted, science and magic both shared the similar characteristic of a means of controlling our natural environment. Jacobs writes that the "'secondary world,' that Rowling creates is one in which magic simply works, and works as reliably, in the hands of a trained wizard, as the technology that makes airplanes fly," and then he notes, "[a]s Arthur C. Clarke once wrote, 'Any smoothly functioning technology gives the appearance of magic.'"²⁴ Regardless of the argument that magic is just another form of science and technology, the magic of *Harry Potter* is still lost when considering the extent of its commodification in a capitalist economy. Jacobs describes the books' Amazon.com sales as creating a "miniature trade war, as lawyers on both sides of the pond tried to figure out which country a book is purchased in when it's ordered *from* a British company but *on* a computer in America."²⁵ *Harry Potter's* links to corporate capitalism are also apparent on the "official" Harry Potter/Warner Bros. website, as a disclaimer on the bottom reads, "Harry Potter and all related characters and elements are trademarks and copyrights of Warner Bros. Entertainment, Inc." The increased bureaucratization and commodification of a capitalist economy stands in perfect juxtaposition to the ritualized magic *Harry*

Potter is supposed to represent.

One last point of consideration is that the experience of entering a venue for art viewing can itself be related to a ritual experience. The J. Paul Getty Center in Los Angeles, the largest private endowment for the arts in history, sits atop the city in the affluent intersection of Bel Air and Brentwood. As visitors can only access it by ascending 800 feet on an electro-magnetic tram, this experience of rising above the city is reminiscent of the ritual experience of the masses paying homage to the ancient Temple of Jerusalem. The Temple, also situated on top of a hill, played the role of patron to the people and was a symbol of elite political and economic power. While the Getty Center does not require political support or taxes from its visitors like the Temple of Jerusalem did, its location above the city creates a similar awe as the public ascends into its rich cultural experience. The ancient social structure of patronage is evoked here, and has been described as follows, “[p]atrons are elite persons (male or female) who can provide benefits to others on a personal basis, due to a combination of superior power, influence, reputation, position, and wealth.”²⁶ The Getty Center, much like the Temple, enjoys this role of cultural patron of the city. This strong connection to the ancient ritual experience of visiting a temple lends to the argument that visiting an art museum can provide some kind of ritual or magical experience. A counter-argument of the Getty’s purpose in the city, however, breaks down this notion. Mike Davis posits the argument that the increase of lavish art institutions in Los Angeles is spurred by a desire to allure international investment. He writes, “a wealthy institutional matrix has coalesced—integrating elite university faculties, museums, the arts press and foundations—single-mindedly directed toward the creation of a cultural monumentality to support the sale of the city to overseas investors.”²⁷ This interesting theory could be applied to the

aims of the Getty Center and why this privately funded art museum with its elevated views of the city creates such a unique experience for the visitor. Perhaps it is all a pop-culture advertisement for Los Angeles? Despite the feeling of magic provided by art's experience to the viewer, underpinnings of capitalism still form a solid base behind this front.

Whether art seems to provide its audience an experience of ritual or magic through a development of spectacle, myth of identity, or by its mere content or venue, overshadowing this magic is art's adherence to the logic of capitalism described by Max Weber as the "disenchantment of the world." Benjamin, Adorno, and Rosler have shown that aspects of film and photography may seem magical in their use of creating a "spectacle," but in actuality it is commodity fetishism that drives only an artificial creation of such magic. Ninetto shows, similarly, that corporate sponsorship of art can lead the viewer into an elevated sense of myth regarding the artist, and the corporation as a result of profit-motives. Berlant argues the same with regards to television and myth-building of national identity. Even art forms that seem clearly ritualistic, such as dance, lose their excitement upon consideration of Becker's description of complex art worlds directed and constrained by conventions and social networks. When the appeal of a cultural product lies in its magical content, such as with *Harry Potter*, this magical experience is still cheapened by commodification. And when going to an art museum itself is reminiscent of a ritual experience, questions of profit motivations still haunt the back of the mind. Many spaces where art can offer an escape from the disenchantment of the world need yet to be explored, as the question remains whether art can distance itself from the complex capitalist system into which it is interwoven.

Notes

¹ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 223.

² Benjamin, 221.

³ Max Weber, "The Tensions Between Ethical Religion and Art," in Guenther Roth and Claude Widdich, eds., *Max Weber, Economy and Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978, p. 607-10), 609.

⁴ Benjamin, 225.

⁵ Theodor Adorno, *The Culture Industry* (London: Routledge Classics, 1991), pp. 98-9.

⁶ Max Weber, "The Esthetic Sphere," in H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, eds., *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958, p.343-9), 342.

⁷ Benjamin, 231.

⁸ Benjamin, 101.

⁹ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," in Simon During, ed., *The Cultural Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 1993, p.31-41), 29.

¹⁰ Adorno and Horkheimer, 34.

¹¹ Martha Rosler, "Lookers, Buyers, Dealers and Makers: Thoughts on Audience," in Brian Wallis, ed., *Art After Modernism, Rethinking Representation* (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), 328.

¹² Rosler, 332.

¹³ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 2003), 46.

¹⁴ Rosler, 333.

¹⁵ Amy Ninetto, "Culture Sells: Cezanne and Corporate Identity," *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 13(2), p.256-90, 261.

- ¹⁶ Ninetto, 261.
- ¹⁷ Ninetto, 269.
- ¹⁸ Lauren Berlant, "The Theory of Infantile Citizenship" in *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship*, Series Q (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997, pp. 25-54), 30.
- ¹⁹ Berlant, 28.
- ²⁰ Berlant, 29.
- ²¹ Howard Becker, "Preface," in *Art Worlds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), x.
- ²² Becker, 5.
- ²³ Becker, 32.
- ²⁴ Alan Jacobs, "Harry Potter's Magic," in *First Things, Journal of Religion, Culture, and Public Life*, January, 2000, 38.
- ²⁵ Jacobs, 35.
- ²⁶ K.C. Hanson and Douglas E. Oakman, *Palestine in the Time of Jesus, Social Structures and Social Conflicts* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), pp. 70-1.
- ²⁷ Mike Davis, *City of Quartz* (New York: Vintage Press, 1992), 22.