

# Considering Language Poetry Movement in Relation to Walter Benjamin's Work of Art Essay

Zhe Huang

College of Foreign Languages and Literature, Fudan University, Shanghai, 200433, China

**Abstract:** This essay takes Walter Benjamin's most influential essay "The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction" as the starting point of the discussion of one prominent American avant-garde literary movement - the Language poetry movement and its political aims. What Benjamin has theorized in the essay about film and photography - the decay of aura, the changed mode of perception in relation to mechanical reproduction, and the effects of shock and distraction-can be analogously applied to modernist literature in the modern condition. With new forms of sentences and literary structures, the modernist "open text" should be perceived in a different light from the realist "closed text", and the reader's participation is crucial to the process of the construction of meaning, which bears a political significance for the Language poets. The essay discusses the way that Language poetry uses fragmentation to invite reader response, meanwhile addresses the challenges that Language poetry and all avant-gardist literature face when fragmentation has become a literary device anticipated by the modern reader.

**Keywords:** Walter Benjamin; Language poetry; Participatory aesthetics; Art and politics

## 1. Introduction

Walter Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1935) remains one of the most seminal cultural criticisms on the revolutionary potential of art under the conditions of technological reproducibility. In this essay, Benjamin argues that changes in artistic techniques, artistic genres and artistic values are resulted in technological innovations, especially in the form of photography and film. The influence that mechanical reproduction and the art of film exert on the traditional form of art, Benjamin suggests, has its socio-political implications which will serve to facilitate the politicization of art, rather than its Fascist counterpart of introducing aesthetics into political life. The juxtaposition sounds alarming. What exactly is implied by politicizing art? Surely Benjamin must have seen that the tententious Soviet social realism has put art in the service of politics? Such questions will resolve themselves, as will be shown, once we put Benjamin's claim into the context of artistic perception. The aesthetic that Benjamin chose for the masses is a participatory one - with the decay of the aura, art is no longer put on a pedestal and venerated with concentration; instead, art is received in a state of distraction, which produces the shock effect in the process of aesthetic revelation [1].

Though film and photography were at the center of Benjamin's reflections in the "Work of Art" essay, it is the attempt of this study to employ an analogous approach to

respond to the political claims of one American avant-garde literary movement, namely, the Language Poetry movement, which started in the late 1960s and developed a new way for the reader to interact with their work. The Language poets argue that "the open text" will invite the reader to participate in the production of meaning and reject the authority of the author over the reader, thereby rejecting the implicit authority in other social hierarchies as well. But first, a few of Benjamin's theoretical positions need to be clarified: the decaying "aura" and the mode of perception in relation to the mode of production. Then the essay will discuss the political aspirations of the avant-garde Language poetry movement in relation to Benjamin's theory of the dialectic between shock and distraction [2].

## 2. A Participatory Aesthetic

Benjamin's attitude towards the decay of the aura in the work of art is largely affirmative. It is an acknowledgement of the mass culture and the technological development that has brought it to pass. He puts forward that the "aura" that is lost in the artworks is the unique presence and authenticity which are irreproducible in the process of technical reproduction. The unique presence of a work of art, i.e., its singular existence "at the place where it happens to be" (220), is actually affirming the value of distance and the value of an original, whose presence "is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity" (220). But it is unclear whether the presence of the original will

guarantee the presence of authenticity. The problem is, as Jan Mieszkowski comments, the viewer of the auratic art does not bask in unmediated presence (39). Rather, Benjamin traces the value of artwork to its ritualistic basis which inevitably moderates its position in the cultural heritage. The example Benjamin gives is the different attitudes the Greeks and the Romans harbor towards Venus – the former are reverent but the latter feel repellent. Thus, paradoxically, the lack of presence, and therefore [3], its uniqueness, which is also the aura, has brought the viewer closer to the object as it is, so that it permits the reproduction to “meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation” (221), thereby reactivating meaning of the object in a contemporary context.

However, there is also a drawback to the decay of the aura that is only briefly mentioned by Benjamin in this essay. With the invention of photography, there appears the withering of a means of production that relies upon the human hand. And with the new mode of technical reproduction, “to an ever greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility” (224). In Marxist term, the failure to appreciate the investment of human labor in the process of production is what leads to “commodity fetishism”, which treats the value of an object as something intrinsic. Consequently, one of the negative repercussions of mechanical reproduction is the commodification of art. Benjamin, however, does not address this issue and turns his attention to the political significance brought about by the new mode of production. He proposes as follows, “the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice – politics” (224) [4].

The way to understand Benjamin’s account of the relationship between art and politics is to understand the new mode of perception through the form of the film camera. Benjamin argues that the film viewer naturally assumes the role of a critic by identifying with the camera’s eye, which stands as a constant testing to the artistic performance. The film actor has to adjust his or her performance according to the camera’s judgment the way that a theatre actor cannot. It shapes a new form of participation in which the viewer joins the camera in the process of production and becomes a critic in his or her own right. This is especially true in the case of film because its aura, which distances the audience, is replaced by mass production and mass distribution. In addition, Benjamin specifically puts mass production in a historical context in which the boundary between filmmaker and audience, as well as between author and reader is blurred. The masses now have an opportunity to actually be a part of the production process as extras in a newsreel and as writers of their own profession. Benjamin is undoubtedly prognostic with regard to the development of blogs and self-run

media in the digital age which has made it possible for anybody to become a writer or filmmaker. Since the authority and authenticity of an auratic art disappears, Benjamin observes, everybody becomes somewhat of an expert (231).

Given these points, the fascist aestheticization of politics is precisely the contrary of politicizing art: the former alienates the human perception and turns the visual representation of politics into something utopian, while the latter contextualizes artistic expression and responds to the specifics of its own time. Therefore, the progressive form of art for Benjamin should be a participatory art, ultimately belonging to the masses. Benjamin’s favor for film indicates a favor for a representation of reality which is significantly more fragmentary than other artistic forms such as painting, sculpture, etc. The creation of the film is not by means of a whole piece, but by a composition of pieces, sometimes assembled in fragments [5], as shown in montage. With respect to literature, an analogy can be made between film and the avant-garde literary style; the employment of fragmentation an analogy to montage, or quick cuts in cinematic technique. However, the nature of the reader is an individual, which makes the reception of literature remarkably more complicated than that of film, which is the mass.

### 3. An Avant-Garde Poetry Movement

Literature, to a certain extent, is like film or photography, possessing no authenticity. Each copy of the text, if we disregard the version issue of older literature, is as authoritative as the next one. If there has ever been an aura for literature, it is destroyed with the emergence of mass production and annihilated in the age of mass media. Modern authors often find themselves conflicted about the reader’s various, sometimes eccentric interpretations of their works. J. D. Salinger once wrote to his editor about the reader’s reaction toward one of his short stories, “Franny”, telling him that even though he cringed at their misreading, he felt that it was not for him to point it out because he didn’t want to spoil the reader’s confidence. It often happens that the reader wants to know the intention of the author and the challenge, especially for contemporary writers, is how much contextual information should be revealed. It is not uncommon nowadays for writers to be asked to share their writing inspiration or writing process in interviews, on radio and on television programs, etc [6]. For poetry, however, the discussions seem to be centered around websites. For example, PennSound is one of the poetry websites which not only feature audio recordings of poets reading their own works, but also in-depth discussions of those works by the poets themselves, some of whom also work as literary scholars at different institutes. Its emphasis is on the post-modernist and the experimental, as one of the directors,

Charles Bernstein, is a leading figure of an avant-garde poetry movement known as the Language Poetry.

The name of the movement, to a certain extent, has given away its primary concern, which regards poetry as a construction of language in and of itself. They openly challenged the dominant mode of the so-called “voice poem”, in which the “voice” of a poet can be detected, and a message of the poet is “transmitted” to the reader through the medium of language which is considered to be “transparent” or “natural”. The established forms of traditional poetry, in George Hartley’s opinion, are in fact social constructions which have become conventions. In reaction to this, Ron Silliman advocates in his manifesto essay, “The New Sentence”, a new form of language to organize poetic stanzas. An example can be found in Silliman’s poem “Ketjak”:

Revolving door. Song of the garbage collectors beneath the bedroom window. How will I know when I make a mistake. Soap. The garbage barge at the bridge. The Japanese floor manager. Throb in the wrist. Terms imply domains. Earth science.

The new sentences are independent units by themselves, unable to be added up to a larger coherent paragraph. In other words, the new sentence poem is not to be understood by means of logic, but as “a unity of quantity” whose interpretations are innumerable. It is also characterized by disrupted grammar, non-standard syntax, and non-referentiality. Instead, the great emphasis is on the reader’s active participation in creating the meaning of the poem which, for Language poets such as Lyn Hijinian, Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein, has its political significance.

Marjorie Perloff, in her review “The Word as Such: L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry in the eighties”, characterizes “the Language movement” as “an essentially Marxist critique of contemporary American capitalist society”. It can be argued that the indeterminate nature of Language poetry negates the idea of commodity fetishism. It prevents literature from turning into a dictation of meaning, thereby preventing turning language into a commodity of consumption. In “The New Sentence”, Silliman juxtaposes the use of hypotaxis in expository essays which place one syntactic unit subordinate to another, with the use of parataxis in new sentences and Language poetry which place syntactic units side by side without conjunctions. He identifies hypotaxis, or the “correct grammar”, with “educated” speeches of the “refined” individual (79), which naturally leaves the new sentences to the commoner, the proletarian, the masses. It seems that the bourgeoisie, or the middle-class, have appropriated realist literature and invested it with middle-class values – for example, its idea of the family, of morality, of decency, etc. In realist literature, there are also commonly reproductions of certain plots, such as the marriage plot which, some may argue, needs to be countered

by an aesthetic of the fragment which rejects the illumination of the aura and calls for the repossession of the language by the masses.

#### 4. A Dialectic of Shock and Distraction

Such are the political aspirations of the Language poetry movement, but their political claims need to be considered with their reception, which inevitably involves the process of perception. In the “Work of Art” essay, Benjamin notes the capacity of the media to change the mode of perception in a society that has witnessed the decline of the aura. If concentration was once demanded by art, Benjamin contends, it is now possible to have a variant social behavior – distraction.

Once again, Benjamin dwells on the effect of the film: “the painting invites the spectator to contemplation; ... Before the movie frame he cannot do so” (238). What can be observed from experience is that people rarely pay full attention to a film from beginning to end, since the spectator’s process of association is constantly interrupted by the change of scenes. Thus when the shock comes, it is able to produce the desired effects on the spectator. In contrast, all the elements in a painting, which are absorbed by the spectator at one look, point to the production of a single effect, which makes it an object of immersive concentration. Benjamin argues vehemently against an aesthetic commonplace that art demands concentration. The best example, he writes, is architecture, which has long become a part of our living environment that most people have ceased paying attention to it. Nevertheless, architecture is still part of our aesthetic experience. In other words, there is more than one way to perceive art: before the age of mechanical reproduction, the spectator is obliged by contemplation; after that, the spectator’s attention is diverted as a result of mass production, and distraction is the more familiar way art is perceived. More importantly, there is a dialectical relationship between shock and distraction, meaning there can be no shock without distraction. Distraction is the kind of environment in which the shock effect takes place.

But what is the importance of shock and distraction? And what is the downside of concentration, or contemplation? Benjamin puts it as follows, “a man who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it, ... In contrast, the distracted mass absorbs the work of art” (239). It is similar to inactive reading and active reading of literature, to some extent, the former associated with what Lyn Hijinian calls “the closed text” and the latter related to “the open text”. The absorption of the open text, however, is quite different from that of the film because of the different level of attention that is involved in the reception of those two art forms. Since reading usually requires a more attentive mind than looking, it follows that the

shock effect is harder to be achieved in literature than in film.

The reader of a Chekhov or a Hemingway story may comfortably feel at ease with their neat writing style and use of everyday speech, which only reveal the tip of the iceberg. The significance of those stories cannot be brought fully to light unless the reader has an alertness to the detail. For example, in "Hills Like White Elephants", the reader may easily miss the hint that the operation in fact means an abortion and feel perplexed about the characters' argument. The shock effect in the modern short story usually comes rather belatedly and results in an epiphanic moment. In poetry, however, there lacks the building-up process; rather, it is almost imperative for the poetic genre to respond to the relationship between form and subject matter [7].

Bob Perelman's "Chronic Meanings", one exemplary Language poem, demonstrates a collaboration of form and matter that is rarely found in the new sentence poetry: The single fact is matter.

Five words can say only.

Black sky at night, reasonably.

I am, the irrational residue.

Blown up chain link fence.

Next morning stronger than ever.

Midnight the pain is almost.

The train seems practically expressive.

The poem goes on for another twenty-three stanzas, each consisting of four lines with five words in every line. Perelman wrote this poem to a friend who was dying of AIDS. The poem subverts the convention of the elegiac poetry by foregrounding the inadequacy of language to express death, the cut off sentences with a period at the end vividly mimicking a life being cut short. As the title suggests, the reader's understanding of the poem is bound to deepen in the chronic process of reading and re-reading. The formal aspect, that is, the structural patterning which functions as a distraction for the reader, paves the way for the shock effect, which can be understood in the reader's own terms – the eulogy of a young person's untimely death needs not be read in its specific context but is capable to acquire a universal relevance [8].

The effect of the new sentence is also similar to the shock effect in film. The difference is that it produces fragmentary texts without tying loose ends up. Often the reader's attention is forced to the linguistic level, the focus being the poem's self-reflexivity [9]. Perelman's "Chronic Meanings" is one fine example of the combination of form and content, but such happy union does not appear too often. When the reader lacks the necessary context for the poem, s/he inevitably fails to bring meanings to the text other than the meanings derived from his/her immediate experience. As it happens, it is sometimes difficult to tell one Language poem from the other [10]. The prerequisite for a heightened presence of the mind

means that the reader can never relax, nor be distracted, nor falls into a reverie. The piecing together of information out of heaps of fragments is an arduous task faced by the contemporary reader of avant-gardist literature and s/he must learn to recover from the constant shock. The question remains, therefore, that to what extent have the experiments conducted by the Language poets deterred the readers from active participation and undermined their political aim of the repossession of the language by the commonality.

## 5. Conclusion

In the final analysis, the challenge faced by the avant-gardist poetry can be summed up in Silliman's question in "The Chinese Notebook", "What of a poetry that lacks surprise? That lacks form, theme, development? Whose language rejects interest? That examines itself without curiosity? Will it survive?" (163). The Language poets are proponents of a kind of poetry that can offer a critique of the bourgeois society. With the liquidation of art's aura in the age of mechanical reproduction, technology has made the productions of high art accessible, approachable to the masses. But the danger is that, fragmentation as a literary device has been assimilated and expected by the reader as a feature of all avant-gardist writings. Therefore, while Language poetry has increased the potential for reader participation, it has also revealed the difficulty faced by Avant-Gardism: its political objectives have made form significant but such objectives are not necessarily realizable through form itself.

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