



Content Creation as Performance in Metamodern Society

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Abstract

During the early twentieth century, or late modernity, the Frankfurt School alumnus Walter Benjamin observed a marked difference in what he termed test performances versus final performances in his seminal collection of essays, “The Work of Art in its Age of Technological Reproducibility”. Benjamin gives special regard to film and the cinema versus the stage as the site of said performance's exhibition and consumption in this essay. The attention he gives film over other media formats of the day is justifiable and valid given its position as the best example of media convergence of Benjamin's era. In contemporary terms, however, modernity's optimistic outlook has given way to a more balanced and critical era called metamodernity. In a metamodern context, film has thus been supplanted by online content as the prime example of convergence at work within society, and the digital domain (in the form of the mobile internet) as the substituted site for the cinema. By examining metamodernity as both era and mindset, as well as how the polymediated self is performed within social media content, this paper will establish the practice of content creation as a cultural artefact that demonstrates an exhibition value comparable with that of other immaterial artistic formats, including performance art.

Keywords: metamodernity, digital media, media convergence, performance, content creation

1. Introduction

Performance extends far beyond art, theatre and entertainment. The resilience of Goffman's (1959) *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* within the Humanities stands as testament to this statement: performance to a perceived audience is an inevitable aspect of embodied human existence. Across history, the stages upon which these performances are enacted has changed: from the literal within the theatre to the screen via cinema, television and mobile internet; or through any number of different social environments and settings, ranging from informal to workplace to, once again, digital internet-based environments. In the paradigm of the digital domain, however, that audience becomes even larger than previously encountered: the performed ‘self’ is enacted across any number of platforms and networks to exponentially greater numbers of viewers, all of whom must be considered when crafting said performance. This fragmentation of the self across multiple media channels, or polymediation, thus becomes

an active, cognitive process with its own embedded volition when creating content for these audiences.

This paper will outline and explore these phenomena as a contextual framework against which content creation (and its implied performative aspect) can be evaluated as a contemporary cultural artefact. Perhaps this artefact may not have the affective potential of performance art, but it should nevertheless be judged to determine whether or not it is worthy of the far-reaching exhibition value it already enjoys. As such, the research objective is to explore and inform: by engaging with the phenomenon through a theoretical lens, insights can be generated that provide a guideline for a more critical interface with digital platforms. A close reading of relevant scholarship can be aligned with observation of the digital domain in enacting a primarily phenomenological approach, employed as an interpretative, qualitative methodology. And while a hermeneutic interpretation process à la Ihde (2010) remains subjective, prone to bias and difficult to replicate, by positioning the research within day-to-day interactions with the digital domain, a balanced dialectic between interpretation, application and outcome (McCaffrey et al, 2022) generates a more robust set of insights, even in a conceptual space that does not lend itself to empirical rigour.

2. Benjamin's Performance

In his seminal set of nineteen essays collectively dubbed 'The Artwork Essay' (originally *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*) the Frankfurt school alumnus and early cultural critic Walter Benjamin discussed performance at length, delineating several typologies at work within his milieu, the early twentieth century, or late modernism. When stating, for example, that "the cameraman's performance with the lens no more creates an artwork than a conductor's with the baton; at most, it creates an artistic performance" (Benjamin, 2006, p. 110) he made a pertinent distinction between the work of art and its production as two entirely separate entities, each with its own merits and faults. Until film's advent, that is.

Benjamin distinguishes the film actor's performance from that of the stage actor in terms of its eventual audience: the latter is played live to a human audience, while the former is put together piecemeal, across multiple takes and angles, in front of an apparatus. In light of this, Benjamin (2006, pp. 111-112) rather pejoratively dubs the film actor's performance a "test", or even, a "mechanized test". Nevertheless, with film, the production, despite the occlusion of the specialist crew involved in its creation (producers, directors, cinematographers, et cetera) from the final product was finally able to be stitched together – or montaged – into a format that exhibited more than the performance itself. As counterpoint to this, and in support of Benjamin's lifelong correspondent, critic and friend Theodor Adorno, (in Berret, 2017, pp. 349-367) suggests that artistic processes cannot be excluded from demonstrating artistic value in their own right, and as such, categorises artistic production under two distinct labels: autographic and allographic.

The first, autographic, refers to autonomous (for a given value of autonomy, of course) artworks possessing their own unique histories and, subsequently, auratic presence. The second, allographic, covers a broad range of artworks that can be considered legitimate instances of the original because their very design considers reproduction integral to the creative process. These include, for example, printed works. Books, even when typeset or bound differently – or even translated into a different language – for revised editions, still carry the same creative content and ultimate outcome. As Deleuze and Guattari (1987, pp. 4-5) describe, these imitations and interpretations of the world's truth set to language remain constant in their content and message, with no discernible 'difference between what a book talks about and how it is made'. The same argument rings true for music: the notation on paper

is meaningless to unschooled audiences, but each time it is played, it translates the composer's intent, whether live or in a recorded format, regardless of the place where reception happens, in a concert auditorium or a listener's earbuds.

As such, Benjamin's insistence on the term 'performance' becomes ambiguous: a performance, whether 'test' or 'mechanized' is nevertheless an allographic artwork in its own right, a realisation of the original artist's vision that still inspires reciprocity of recognition between performer and audience. Whether the perceptive experience is live or recorded is immaterial – its very existence as an allographic replication labels it "complimentary rather than substitutional" (Cochrane, 2020, p. 176) in its reciprocal value. However, that type of reciprocity remains variable in form and intensity. When Benjamin (2006, p. 110) interrogates the very processes behind these 'montage' reproductions, asking, "What, then, are these processes reproduced in film, since they are certainly not works of art?" we must perforce overlook the film product itself, as it is evidently still an allographic artwork. Can we safely assume that the processes Benjamin rails against – editing, cinematography, framing, colour grading, transitions and so forth – are merely apparatuses we can liken to a painting's frame? Or should we look to Adorno (in Fuchs, 2016) and move past the illusory processes creating the *Gesamtkunstwerk* at work, accepting that the 'illusions and fictitious reality' on display is indeed reality in and of itself? After all, Benjamin himself considers the effective realisation of natural mimesis, what film essentially seeks to achieve, a human directive towards what Nathan Ross (2021, pp. 37-38) calls 'reproduction of the similar' or 'similitude'. In short, the human animal recreates the familiar in an expression of docile acceptance, but it remains the province of art to carry the viewer outside of that comfort zone by imparting authenticity of experience through the reproduction of the similar, but interpreting these in unexpected ways.

As a result, performance – before an audience or apparatus – is endemic to human existence. We recreate the familiar to fit in, rebuilding our performance of self à la Goffman (1959, p. 253) in that it becomes a 'performed character, is not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, to mature, and to die; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented'. Just as Goffman here argues that any concept of 'self' is not fixed or intrinsic, but a social construct in flux that is constantly re-aligned with norms and situations to meet the needs and expectations of others, Benjamin (2006, p. 111) emphasises how, in the factory-powered age of modernity 'the majority of citydwellers, throughout the workday in offices and factories, have to relinquish their humanity in the face of an apparatus' as they strive against the machinery – both literal and figurative – of capitalism to survive.

3. A Question of Time

So far, much has been said of modernity, the era in which Walter Benjamin both lived and worked. A more contemporary classification for the digital domain we now occupy could easily be Görtz' (2021) concept of metamodernity as the successor to the modern and post-modern eras. To recall: modernism's episteme was one of objectivism grounded in experience and reason, while its successor, post-modernism, found its basis in subjectivism, driven by suspicion and opposition to the naivete of the past (Pipere & Mārtinsonsone, 2022, p. 4) Metamodernism thus describes a contemporary era where convergence in media, technology and ideologies predicates a more holistic viewpoint regarding the world we live in, balancing the optimistic belief in progress, change and structure that typified modernity with the scepticism, self-awareness and irony of post-modernism.

In brief, metamodernity can be better understood through engagement with its prefix: meta. When examined in this light, 'meta-' denotes change, succession and transcendence,

suggesting a phoenix-from-the-ashes evolution from both modernity and post-modernity, but it can also be examined as the stand-alone adjective, 'meta'. The Merriam-Webster (n.d.) definition provides two informal uses; one, as "showing or suggesting an explicit awareness of itself or oneself as a member of its category: cleverly self-referential"; and two, as 'concerning or providing information about members of its own category'. In the context of metamodernity this demonstrates a generational attitude of self-reflection and even empathy, even when couching those demonstrations in the absurdity of contemporary digital artefacts, from vines to memes and beyond. As a result, "in place of modernism's pathos, metamodernism employs scepticism through irony, and in place of postmodernism's cynicism and rationality, metamodernism employs a sense of hope through sincerity" (Stoev, 2022, p. 22).

More so than attitudes, however, we can also look to media, and specifically media convergence, as a more tangible manifestation of the artistic processes (and performances) across these two eras. Joseph Turow (2020, p. 166) defines the phenomenon of media convergence as 'the presentation across several media of content traditionally associated with one medium'. Traditionally speaking, communication media (before the term was even adopted) were designed for one purpose, one position, one form of consumption: the telephone, as a prime example, was made to allow two individuals to speak to one another across a distance. Today, the smartphone is a creative tool, a social portal, a messaging service and a source of information long before its use as a mere telephone is considered.

It is conceivable that Benjamin's focus on film as medium of choice in the Artwork Essay stems from film (and the cinema experience overall) being emblematic of media convergence in Benjamin's era; news, entertainment, culture and advertising all came together in one place, on one screen. The McLuhan perspective on communication media as part of the interconnected global village may have only been coined some forty years after the first publishing of the Artwork Essay, but Benjamin and his contemporaries no doubt saw the same phenomenon at work within film. Instead of media convergence, however, Wagner's previously mentioned ideal of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* would have provided an equally meaningful description of multiple creative streams coming together in a compelling simulation of reality (Buck-Morss, 1992, p. 85).

Each screening, regardless of where the cinema was physically located, took on the context of its screening environment making it "a singular event, fundamentally conditioned by the malleable dynamics of its specific time and place" (Uroskie, 2014, p. 38) effectively elevating the accepted theatre paradigm to new heights of experience. Culturally speaking, there may have been some elitist notion of a diminishment in quality similar to Benjamin's own concerns regarding stage versus test performances, but the popularity of cinema spoke to (and of) a public hungry for this escapist immersion. Berrett's (2017) denigration, as mentioned earlier, of the Artwork Essay in how it discarded other artistic processes in favour of film may indeed be forgiven if viewed from this perspective:

Film was, quite simply, more present than other media formats during Benjamin's modern epoch. Incidentally, the same argument rings true in a contemporary setting, where younger audiences are drawn towards social media platforms like TikTok, calling the more established platforms like Facebook or X (née Twitter) 'old person media', with research 33% of showing surveyed teenagers never use the app or site of the former, and 20% never engage with the latter (Anderson et al, 2023).

Just as the cinema gave ground to the ubiquity of television and television in turn retreated from the challenge of streaming media, we see how film gives way to digital content as a contemporary consequence of convergence. Content is described as 'covering a multitude of sins': from educational or informative right through to entertaining or merely distracting,

depending on the author's agency and the platform affordances. Even video content, as film's closest equivalent, is only one typology within an ever-expanding realm of content and data, and the essential outcome must be the parallel drawn between film in Benjamin's modern era and content in today's metamodern era. Film was (and is) an experiential paradigm, balancing haptic and optical experiences of the image. The multisensory stimulus of film as an emerging technology presented a challenge to both the isolated opticality of aesthetics in the early twentieth century as well as the concept of embodiment, as the spectator or cinema audience placed themselves within the experience instead of positioning themselves at a respectful, reflective distance. The reception of film thus becomes an example of anthropological materialism at work, an experimental space wherein a material superstructure can be employed to shape cultural behaviours by altering the conditions of both production and reception.

The same is true for digital content in terms of the disruptions it presents to the value chains of legacy media. It alters not only the conditions, but also the context, as the site of creation is also the site of consumption, just as the creator is also the consumer. Not only are the boundaries between public and private blurred, if not entirely erased (Bigo et al, 2019) a material *Aktualität* is replaced by an immediate *Aktualität* (Weigel, 1996), one where access trumps quality. If 'art' – or other cultural artefacts – can be characteristic of quality, then the words of Thijs Lijster (2019, p. 114) ring especially true: "as 'aesthetic' permeates daily life, plurality of mass media dissolves art within a complex visual and sensuous tapestry".

4. The Self as Content

Digital content, as described above, enforces a dissolution of the boundaries between public and private as performances traditionally intended for intimate audiences become open to wholesale consumption across social media. It is no stretch of the imagination to conceive that the detritus of our society, or even civilization itself, will one day be marked, not by Ozymandias' 'two vast and trunkless legs of stone', but by billions of images of plates of food and those ubiquitous paeans to Narcissus, the selfie.

These auto-amputative expressions of an endlessly cycling search for validation are far more than a decay of the corporeal, but an entire revisiting of the *Leib / Körper* (or body versus embodied) duality. As selfie-takers embody themselves in the digital domain they willingly substitute their physical presence for a prosthetic sense of corporeality, or of being embodied – and importantly, recognised as such – within that digital space. Koukouti and Malafouris (2020, p. 131) call this space a 'a digital Plato's cave of the twenty-first century' wherein reality itself has become illusory shadowplay on screens, open to the subjective interpretation of seven and a half billion souls – a sentiment shared by Siobhan Kattago (2014, p. 65) who values the steep price we pay for the freedom to interact with digital platforms as nothing less than the "loss of our freedom and individuality".

Consequently, when faced with the overwhelming glut of selfies (and other such unreasoned content, like photographs of meals) we see the 'self' subsumed by the swarm, losing its individual identity. As with any mob, its component parts exhibit no sense of 'we', fusing into a greater gestalt being. With the physical crowds of modernity, however, a greater sense of common spirit drove the collective; the swarm (or online mob mentality) "demonstrates no internal coherence" (Han, 2017, p. 10) as it devolves into meaningless digital noise. Even when online gatherings are built around common purpose and shared interests the emergence is temporary and volatile, tending to problematic behaviours and eventual dissolution (Massanari, 2017, p. 341).

Similarly, while individualism fades away in the face of these media-led swarms, Ibrahim (2016, pp. 109-111) argues that specular re-representation of self is detrimental to the value of that self's authenticity. Self-actualisation in these digital spaces, while still possible, is far less likely in a communicative continuum built on shared interests as it does not serve the greater good of a prevailing common identity.

Achieving continuity through the act of spreading one's enacted identity across multiple media streams and platforms (a process dubbed 'polymediation') is not only encouraged, but unavoidable in the digital domain: there is even a sense of social requirement to actively entertain and perpetuate mediated identities in our day-to-day interactions. That said, it is argued that the self, by being voluntarily fragmented and represented across a plethora of digital platforms loses authenticity in much the same way that the artwork does when it is flagrantly copied (Ibrahim, 2016, pp. 104-105). Baudrillard (2005, p. 27) echoes this sentiment, stating that as a result of our not being able to "conceive that identity has never existed and that it is merely something we play-act, we fuel this subjective illusion to the point of exhaustion [...] we wear ourselves out feeding this ghost of a representation of ourselves". It should come as no surprise that Baudrillard categorises this type of identity performance as an example of the simulacrum at work: identities thus realized, like reproduced artworks, are a mere "residue of the original [...] having the appearance but not the substance or proper qualities of something" (Cochrane, 2020, pp. 182-183).

5. The Self as Commodity

Chris Rojek (2001, pp. 14-15) reminds us how, when crafting a digital identity we are essentially crafting a personal brand; and how when doing so, we perforce must lead double lives. As soon as a digital identity, the 'prosthetic personality' described above, is enacted in the public domain its owner is not only promoting a person, but a marketable commodity. Walter Benjamin (2006, p. 113) may not have expressly written about celebrity – especially not internet celebrity – but he did consider fame and its implications when, for example, stating that "the cult of the movie star ... fosters preserve that magic of the personality which has long been no more than the putrid magic of its own commodity character" as an opening for insidious agendas to subvert to their own social programming needs. It can thus be inferred that Benjamin anticipated the dynamics informing the creation of public personas, the detachment of these personas from authentic lived experience, and the rise of individuals 'wearing' these personas as consumable cultural commodities. And commodity, like celebrity, is not without its cost: "the meaning of the commodity is its price; it has, as commodity, no other meaning" (Benjamin, 1999, p. 369). The last time human lives were commodified to the extent that the current influencer phenomenon demonstrates, America went to war with itself, resulting in the deaths of two percent of the population; it must be asked if that is a cost the artistic community or creator economy is able – let alone willing – to bear in defining its ongoing value.

To return to artistic value, however, we must consider that within the digital domain, everything – regardless of age, cost, fame or provenance – is globally accessible, but "whatever you do outside of the museum, also in contemporary art, has cultural value only if it is afterwards represented in the museum in the form of documentation" (Groys, 2019, p. 139). The secular liberation thus described does however carry its own pitfalls; one of these being the negation of Adorno's concept of a mass culture of consumers: when "everybody is an artist, everybody is a writer, and a philosopher [...] we no longer need writers, philosophers, or artists" (Groys, 2019, p. 127) and the very act of creation loses all meaning. We can only hope that Théophile Gautier's (2006, p. 99) assertion – that only the useless is beautiful as it does not

express an underlying need – is true, and that there is still some place for beauty in the digital domain.

We need only look at what constitutes ‘popularity’ (or digital exhibition value) within the aesthetic media available in the digital domain to see how banal and meaningless creativity and art have become for the average user. TikTok’s most viewed categories are, for the most part, voyeuristic windows into daily routines: dances, pranks, fitness, home renovation and beauty (Ceci, 2024) rank among the highest. Theatre, art, poetry and the more traditional forms of creativity do not even feature. What the average user employs to fuel their scrolling addiction “clogs conversations and minds so that both truth and considered opinion become irrelevant” (Lanier, 2018) to the point where the content matters less than the creator. And the fluidity and fickleness of what constitutes ‘celebrity’ within the realm of the influencer makes authentic representation of self a near-impossibility. As Crystal Abidin (2018, 4) “contemporary celebrity culture has shifted to focus on people and things that are usually constructed, can be transient, are usually sensational, and often visually based, in tandem with tabloid culture”.

Tabloid culture is, in this case, representative of Ferdinand Tönnies’ (2001) concept of *Gesellschaft*: a society based on economic relationships which, as a result, is characterized by weak social bonds and a focus on material gain. In light of the social constructivist nature of the emerging metaverse and juxtaposed with the rampant commodification of the art object in the digital domain, the label ‘tabloid’ seems apt.

6. But is it Art?

So far, the prevailing tone is undeniably negative. The performance of self becomes a combative, even promethean struggle for recognition in day-to-day interaction. In the context of digitalization, that struggle takes on even greater significance given the sheer overwhelming numbers of users involved. As a result, the digital domain is flooded with meaningless and banal content as users become locked into a cycle of auto-exploitative performances of identity where the act of performance is so ephemeral that it surpasses the result being produced in terms of engagement value. Persona becomes prosthesis by which users navigate and even survive digital interactions.

However, to judge these digital performances in terms of artistic value, if one examines the mediation process that the majority of these performances undergo, to describe them as mere casual photographic recordings is erroneous: the selection of backdrop, the poses, the lighting, the makeup, not to mention the panoply of digital editors and filters which can entirely remake the image being recorded set performances like the selfie apart from most other photographic endeavours. It can be argued that a ‘good’ selfie is a work of digital art in itself, or, at the very least, an expression of contemporary folk art (du Preez, 2022, 121). Like the digital domain it occupies, the selfie is hardly a replacement for reality, but what Michael Heim (1998) calls a ‘transubstantiation’ thereof – a purposive alteration, and a virtual opiate to counter the tedium of real life. Viewed in this light, the selfie qualifies as an artwork according to Danto’s (1964, 571) assertion that an artwork is an extraordinary representation, representative of itself, its subject and the means by which it achieves this representation.

Digital content also, like performance art, is representative of the post-materialist turn in art. In this regard, Kelomees (2016) raises five concerns (artist's authorship; absence of the art object; imparted information; artwork as a process; and uniqueness of a work of art) when discussing immateriality or even purposeful dematerialisation. Of these, two are most pertinent. First, uniqueness; in the digital realm, few (if any barriers) exist regarding the copying, editing, sharing and exhibition of digital art once it has been publicly published. This fluidity, an

inherent trait of the digital domain, lends itself to new forms of distribution, including performative, implicit or even accidental distribution. Despite this, the artwork itself remains a celebrated feature. Second, the absence of an art object is addressed. This is not a new concept within the art world: performance art as a genre relies on the act itself and the affective impressions received at the reception site rather than any artefact to speak of. Art as both action and as an idea has consequently been canonised within art studies since the late 1960s. Consider, for instance, Lippard and Chandler's (1971) assertion that art as an object could well become obsolete. Digital content does not require any physical manifestation to validate its existence and may be discussed in similar terms to more 'established' forms of immaterial art.

Furthermore, the public nature of digital content makes it truly accessible and therefore an inherently political format: co-presence of the screened image and its audience is not only a default requirement on which display is predicated, but the only position in which an artefact realises any exhibition value (Cochrane, 2020). Taking this exhibition a step further and inviting the social participation of the audience (via comments, likes, shares and so forth) into the artwork – and its display – itself fundamentally changes, and continues to change, the creative potential too. As Akiem Helmling (2019, pp. 145-146) notes, the greatest pitfall art faces in the metamodern paradigm is that a significant proportion of art is inadequately exhibited (and thus inadequately observed) as the most important, progressive and meaningful examples are hidden from public view: occluded behind elitism, underground movements or simply algorithms. Performance art is just one area where this can be observed: regardless of the typology of performance on display, be it aesthetic, political or biological (Valentini, 2019, pp. 43-44), access to these performances is tightly controlled, and recorded versions are treated with almost the same care as illicit contraband.

7. Conclusion

The research objective of this paper was twofold: first, to explore, and second, to inform. The exploration aspect of the paper began with the premise that 'performance' extends far beyond art, theatre and entertainment. By examining Walter Benjamin's concept of 'performance' – first within his own milieu, film and modernity, and subsequently within that of digital content and metamodernity, this statement has been adequately justified. The 'self' as a performance has summarily been explored, via a close reading of extant scholarship and engagement with relevant media phenomena, both in terms of generalised content creation within digital media as well as in terms of the implied commodification that brings.

That said, digital content as an everyday performance nevertheless exhibits artistic value. Despite Benjamin's (2006, p. 111) Benjamin's assertion that test performances "under the glare of arc lamps while simultaneously meeting the demands of the microphone" are to be celebrated for their powerful achievement in terms of process, the reality is that today's creators perform for algorithms almost intuitively, instilling their makeup tutorials, musicianship or even mundane activities like opening packages with an effortlessness that borders on the banal. Even so, viewers lose themselves wholesale in the passive reception of these, with the average American Gen Z smartphone user spending five hours a week scrolling through Instagram and over double that on TikTok (Dixon, 2023). In this light, content is less of an individual endeavour than a creative social process (Burgess & Green, 2009, pp. 94-95) within a dynamic, constantly evolving cultural environment. And that is where Benjamin's (2006, p. 111) description of the actor aligns with that of the content creator, converging on a shared conclusion: both are described as 'taking revenge on the apparatus [by] asserting their humanity' when they complete a performance, either for a camera and production crew or a

smartphone and ring light. They exercise fully their own human ingenuity and ability, leveraging the apparatus merely as a tool in the pursuit of their own goals.

And thus the informative aspect of the paper is brought to bear. While the findings and examples should not be read as a cautionary tale, it is nevertheless essential that the ongoing dangers of the digital domain be kept in mind. While polymediation and the commodification of the digital identity may indeed hold pitfalls, they still present very real opportunities, too, and as such, maintaining a critical attitude when interfacing with any platform is always good advice.

A digital performance's existence – its *Kunstwollen*, to use the Viennese term of Riegl and Wickhoff – is not predicated on a physical manifestation but on the response of the viewing audience. In this light, both the contemporary cultural artefacts of digital content creation and performance art align in purpose and exhibition. Understanding the eventual recipients of said exhibition guides the intention of the content performed, rendering creative and commercial objectives equally possible.

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