



Sociology of Art: A Theoretical Exploration

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ABSTRACT

The current paper examines some of the theoretical approaches employed in researches in the field of sociology of art. Sociological study of art basically addresses the ways in which social relations and institutions impact upon the creation, distribution and appreciation of art works.

Theorizing about the relationship between art and society has expanded to diverse approaches such as Dialectical and Marxist approaches, cultural rationalization, phenomenological approach, and social production approach.

There is no single theoretical framework, which dominates the field of Sociology of art in the recent times. Researches in the field of sociology of art focus on social production, social context, reception of art, social processes that influence art. It is important to focus on the indigenous development of such a study and to have an interdisciplinary focus instead of building boundaries around specialized fields of study such as sociology of art.

Keywords : Art world, Sociology of art, Theoretical approach

Introduction

The current paper examines some of the theoretical approaches employed in researches in the field of sociology of art. Sociological study of art basically addresses the ways in which social relations and institutions impact upon the creation, distribution and appreciation of art works. Sociology of art is an area of sociological analysis, which includes within its compass a concern with exploring the visual arts, music, theater, literature and cinema. Such analysis can focus on artists and their socialization, the patrons of art-rulers, museums, publishers, dealers and their particular values and interests; also the broad publics or audiences, any of the class values, broad cultural themes or the changing socio-economic conditions that in various ways support or influence the forms of artistic expressions.

The relationship between society and the various art forms has been of pedagogic interest in the past but sociological perspective in the study of art is relatively recent. It may be because sociology as a discipline is also recent. Early art-historical writing had a strong sociological character. Theorizing about the relationship between art and society has expanded to diverse approaches such as Dialectical and Marxist approaches, cultural rationalization, phenomenological approach, and social production approach. The following discussion focuses on the various approaches employed by researchers in understanding and examining the art-society relationship.

Dialectical Approach

Herbert Read's contribution to the field of sociology of art is his exemplary work, *Art and Society* (1956), in which he has employed the dialectical approach and explored the link between society at a given period and its various art forms. He examined art in relation to magic, mysticism, religion and the transitions in society. According to him there is a necessity to distinguish between art satisfying practical needs (economic factor) and the ideological aspects (ideas) of art. In another comprehensive work, *The meaning of Art* (1968) Read has elaborated on various art forms of the world from the early cave drawings to the action painter Jackson Pollock and examines the various art movements. Read while defining art states that all artists have the desire to please which means they have the same intention, and hence art can simply be

defined as an attempt to create pleasing forms (Read 1968).

Another noteworthy proponent of the dialectical approach is Arnold Hauser. His initial work is inclined towards Marxism. Hauser's *The Social History of Art* (1951) interprets art as an expression of class interests and ideals. However, his contribution to the field of sociology of art needs special mention as he advocates applying sociological method in interpreting art-society relationship. In his works, *The Philosophy of Art History* (1959) he has questioned the role of scientific history of art and put forward with conviction the indispensable role of sociological method in understanding proper history of art. In his other important publication, *The Sociology of Art* (1982), Hauser articulated the pertinent questions that arose in the field of sociology of art. While examining the interaction between art and society he aptly enumerates that 'art both influences and is influenced by social changes, that it initiates social changes while itself changing with them' (1982). However his analysis observes that art does not influence society as much as the societal influences get reflected in art. People can indulge in art or any other cultural form only when there is economic surplus and they have leisure time to pursue artistic activities. Consecutively, societal influences on the art are more, as the art and the artists are influenced by society and therefore it is natural that they draw inspirations for their art from their surrounding environment.

Marxist Approach to art

There is a long tradition within the *Social History of Art* of interpreting art as an expression of class interests or ideals. In the nineteenth century, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels (1976) arrived at the interpretation of man from the standpoint of his active nature. According to them art like all other social phenomenon is determined by economic conditions. Thus art is one of the various 'superstructures', which is dependent on the independent and changing economic structure (base). According to Marx the economic production system determines the content of art as well as the art styles. Art from such an interpretation is viewed as an expression of specific class ideals and interests, which replace the traditional ideas of art as an expression of national or period spirit.

Louis Harap (1949) has also attempted to present certain principles of Marxist aesthetics in his '*Social Roots of Art*'.

According to Harap, mysticism, magic, totemism were the elements related to creativity and art in the primitive society. Further he states that, these elements result from the intricate interplay of forces both within and outside of art. For him, the source of all this complex activity lies in economic production (1949). Thus Harap emphasized on the production activity which echoes the ideas of Marxist aesthetics. Ernst Fischer also used the Marxist approach in his work, *The Necessity of Art* (1963). He advocates that art was and will always be necessary to human existence.

The Marxian analysis of the interrelations of art and society was of value because it specified the particular aspect of a society that might affect its art and insisted on a continuous, dynamic interchange among all parts of that society. A host of scholars, representing a wide range of intellectual commitments to Marxist sociology, have adopted this point of view in studying art, and their views have been influential if not conclusive (Barnett 1970). Analytically, in dialectical approach there is a mutual interdependence between art, artist and society, whereas according to the Marxian approach the relation is based on the independent economic factors.

Cultural Rationalization and art

Max Weber tried to understand the uniqueness of western rationalism and capitalism. *The Rational and Social Foundations of Music* (1912) was Weber's only major work in the area of art. 'Weber's primary concern was to discover why it was only in the west that rational calculable systems of harmonic and polyphonic music developed out of polyvocal music which characterized not only the west but other cultures such as ancient Greece and medieval Japan' (Tanner 2003). In the process of understanding this he explored 'the role of systems of notations in musical rationalization, the role of religion in stereotyping and thus formalizing certain tone series associated with particular gods, the influence of the structure of guild organizations of musicians and the standardization of musical instruments' (ibid.). Although Weber never gave the same extended consideration to the visual arts, his research in the area of sociology of religion does briefly mention the social and cultural dynamics of artistic rationalization. Weber states that art or any other cultural phenomena has to be created and viewed pragmatically and rationally.

Social-Psychological Approach to art

Ernst Gombrich in his *Art and Illusion* (1960) puts forth a theory of the psychology of perception in art relating it to social aspects of learning. The socio-psychological view of aesthetic experience is explained through use of a case study. His earlier work, *The Story of Art*, discusses the representational styles of art in history. In both works his focus is on individuals and he emphatically dismisses any influence of groups or group identities on art. The approach used by Gombrich gives us an important dimension especially with the attention on the artists and his art. However, this approach undermines the expansive role that society plays in the very genesis of art. Another concept of linking, psychology with art and society is that of Robert Witkin. His study, 'Art and Social Structure' (1995) tries to integrate aesthetic concepts of the critical idealist tradition in art history with the perceptual psychology, cognitive psychology of Piaget and elements of evolutionary theory of development. He argues that there is a correspondence between the 'level of abstraction' of artistic style systems and the level of abstraction of primary productive relations from society. However it is contemporary art forms oscillate between simple to highly complex, figurative to abstract forms, and therefore there is coexistence of multiple art forms in contemporary society.

Phenomenology and art

Another approach in theorizing sociology of art is phenomenological sociology and the method of 'verstehen'. Janet Wolff in *Hermeneutic Philosophy and the Sociology of Art* used this approach for understanding sociology of knowledge, sociology of art and literature. In spite of advocating phenomenological sociology, she accepts that there are certain inadequacies

in it, which she has supplemented by hermeneutic philosophy and ideology-critique. She emphasized the need of sociology of art at the level of meaning that should enable discussions about the works of art and their place in social life. Wolff states that 'Like society, art is a creation of individual members, who are in many ways formed by society' (1975). This approach is more suitable for unearthing the meaning which underlies in art works and their linkages with the broader society. The present study requires a macro view of the art world and hence this approach is insufficient.

Postmodernism

Postmodernism is a movement in painting, literature, television, films and the arts in general. It emphasizes on the importance of the unconscious, on free floating signs and images and a plurality of viewpoints. Post modernity is viewed as involving an end of the dominance of an overarching belief in 'scientific' rationality and a unitary theory of progress. Postmodernism is often opposed to modernism but both are best seen as artistic avant-gardes which have to separate themselves off from conventional artistic practice only to become conventional in time. Theorists of post modernity, Jean Baudrillard and Jean-Francois Lyotard claim that technologies such as computers, media, new forms of knowledge and changes in socio-economic systems are producing a post modern social formation. Post modern theory provides a critique of representation and the modern belief that theory mirrors reality (Ritzer 1996).

The Social Conditions of Artistic Production

Pierre Bourdieu (1993) proposed a model of artistic fields. The concept of artistic fields is similar to other institutions such as economic, political, religious, intellectual that constitute society. The key to Bourdieu's sociology of art is that the process of modernization has created increasing differentiation in societies and has transformed societies into networks of specialist fields of action such as economic, political, intellectual, art and so on. Thus modern society refers to a web of interconnected spaces or areas which together form a field of power.

According to Bourdieu some of the fields (institutions) are more autonomous than others and have their own set of rules and rewards without the interference from outside influence. He suggests that artistic fields are divided into different sectors for instance varied art forms, the networks revolving around these art forms and other such micro level groups within the field. The particular divisions of artistic fields in a given society are conditioned by the nature of class relationships there; they are historically constructed, as are the ideologies, which are constituted in them. (Alexander 2003). This indicates that the nature of class relationships, history constructed so far and the ideologies constructed in history becomes the stimulating force on the artistic field.

Bourdieu also discusses about art which reflects the social origins and personal trajectory of a given artist. For Bourdieu, a work of art is not a solitary expression of an artists' genius neither is it only a reflection of that artist's social origins. Works of art, according to him are the result of the meeting of a habitus. Habitus basically means the mental construct, which enables the artist to perceive and evaluate the social world. It basically refers to the socio-cultural context in which the artist lives, and therefore adapts similar dispositions like that of the society. This in turn influences the artists and their art.

Social Production Approach

Howard Becker (1982) in *Art Worlds* put forth the production approach. His production approach examines the factors of creation, production and distribution of art. It tries to understand the relationships among creators, distribution networks, art works and society. According to him, 'All artistic work, like all human activity, involves the joint activity of a number, often a large number of people' (1982). Becker has also emphasized on support activities which some people must carry on

such as art education, training, criticism, appreciation and responding to art works. His approach has similarities with that of Bourdieu. Sociologists like Bourdieu and Howard Becker analyze the social construction of aesthetic ideas and values. Both have focused on processes of creation or production, institutions and organizations (Zolberg 1990). The Production of Culture perspective apparently advocates that isolated artists, such as contemporary easel-painters, are deeply embedded in systems of social relationships.

Conclusion

A sociological analysis of art should account not only for the historical genesis of an autonomous field of production, but also for the historical genesis of contemporary modes of artistic reception, explaining how and when the art –appreciating public first became predisposed to interpret art works as autonomous objects, things of beauty in and of themselves.

There is no single theoretical framework, which dominates the field of Sociology of art in the recent times. Researches in the field of sociology of art focus on the issues related to social production, social context of this production, reception of art, social processes that in several ways influence art and the approach that explains the society and art relationship. It is important not to forgo the indigenous development of such a study which would provide insights that may otherwise remain elusive to researches of this nature. However the need of the hour is to open up the disciplines and have an interdisciplinary focus instead of building boundaries around specialized fields of study such as sociology of art.

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