

The Unfulfillable Enlightenment: Deskilling and Creation of Spectacles

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Abstract

In “What is Enlightenment?” Foucault uses Kant’s words that we should never be guided by authority, tutelage, religion, or depend on any forms of authority. However, Foucault raises a question: Are we really enlightened? The overwhelming power of capitalism along with the declines of experience aggravates our dependence on authority. The problem has become more and more serious because of increase in deskilling which is gradually making human beings lose the significance of their existence. In postmodern society, the greater masses are deskilling while the fewer masses do the jobs which require professional knowledge. The phenomenon of deskilling derives from the concept of the assembly line in a capitalist society. That is to say, we are easily replaced by others or mechanical equipment. Heroes are no longer needed because everyone can be replaced by others or machines. Moreover, human beings are led by capitalism to believe that accumulation of commodity and spectacles will definitely pave a way to perfection. More and more commodities and spectacles seem to tell the masses that we enjoy an abundant life. The creation of spectacles aims to give rise to false blessed feelings. It is obvious that we are led by the authority-capitalism.

Keywords: Enlightenment, spectacles, capitalism.

無法實現的啟蒙運動：技能分化與奇景創造

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摘要

在“何謂啟蒙”一文當中，傅柯使用康德的話，我們應該永遠擺脫權威、教導或宗教，擺脫對任何形式權威的依賴，然而，傅柯提出一個問題：我們真的啟蒙了嗎？資本主義壓倒性的力量，伴隨著經驗傳承的消失，加重了我們對權威的依賴。問題越加嚴重，因為知識分化造成人類存在失去生存的意義性。在後現代社會，廣大群眾只做不需專業技能的機械動作，然而少數人從事專業技能工作，這現象源於資本主義的生產線概念。也就是說，人是可以簡單被其他人或機械取代。這時代不再需要英雄，因為每個人都可以被別人取代。此外，人們在資本主義引導下相信商品的累積和“奇景”的創造是邁向“完美”。奇景只是造成虛假幸福感的一種方法。很明顯的我們被一種權威領導著——就是資本主義。

關鍵詞：啟蒙運動、奇景、資本主義。

In Frederic Jameson's *The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, we observe that the fast-grabbed knowledge the great masses apply to cope with the current problems might be proved to be wrong at the next moment. To put it simply, what we consider right at this moment might prove to be wrong at the next. Because of this, what we consider the "present" is only the future's past. Jameson refers to this phenomenon as "nostalgia for the present." Our thinking pattern stagnates in the past and can not progress into the future. In "What is Enlightenment?" Foucault uses Kant's dicta that we should never be guided by authority, tutelage, religion, or depend on any form of authority. However, Foucault raises a question: Are we really enlightened? This paper aims to illustrate the fact that we are not enlightened because the decline of experience aggravates our dependence on the guidance of the authorities. In modern society, we can see that the decline of experience is brought about by refusing the accumulation of the past memory and development of machinery. In Walter Benjamin's *Illuminations*, he says that craftsmen in past went traveling everywhere with an eye to learning and exchanging their apprenticeship experience. As capitalism thrived, this tradition disappeared. There exists only the assembly line. It doesn't need experience. Experience has declined. The problem has become more and more serious because increasing deskilling is making human beings lose their significance of existence gradually. That is to say, we are easily replaced by others or by mechanical equipment. A saga or hero isn't needed in this era. In the article "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Benjamin considers that the work of art is emancipated from religious rituals. Paintings endowed with cult value give way to exhibition value, which means the public can have access to art works. That is, art is released from religion. Art does not belong to privileged figures but to the public. In the past, what mattered in the drama was that the actor presented himself directly to the audience. His sounds must be loud and his facial expression must be vivid, interactive and persuasive. But now for the film, the screen actor feels as if in exile, especially exiled not only from the stage but also from himself. The film allows them to be interrupted. If they do not perform well, they are able to do it again. If their emotions do not correspond to the scenario, they could do it again. If they risk performing some dangerous actions, they can use other actors to do it for them. We can see that human beings do not need to perform their duty of making judgment based on their

experience. In *The Society of the Spectacle*, Guy Debord shares the same idea by arguing:

The spectacle is the material reconstruction of the religious illusion. Not that its techniques have dispelled those religious mists in which human beings once located their own powers, the very powers that had been wrenched from them - but those cloud-enshrouded entities have now been brought down to earth. It is thus the most earthbound aspects of life that have become the most impenetrable and rarefied. The absolute denial of life, in the shape of a fallacious paradise, is no longer projected onto the heavens, but finds its place instead within material life itself. The spectacle is hence a technological version of the exiling of human powers in a “world beyond”- and the perfection of separation within human beings. (18)

Human beings are convinced that their humanity will be carried to perfection only if they are tolerant enough to endure ordeals or take on a burden. They are led by the religion to regard these ascetic ordeals as a kind of responsibility, for they hope they can keep company with God if they can hold back their desires. From this we know that people endure trials just for the future project. However, God usually creates a fallacious paradise, or religious illusion, and the perfection of separation within human beings. People will achieve perfection through self-denial. The future project is keeping company with God, and the way is to separate your physical desire which will lead to perfection. In *Soundproof Room*, Jean- Francois Lyotard argues that “[O]ver two millennia, from Jesus to Lenin or Mao, the modern decision has been repeated so many times that the initiatory instant has fallen into the ordinary of bygone days” (10). Debord shares the idea by suggesting that people are led to believe that accumulation of commodity and spectacles will definitely pave a way to perfection. Nowadays, we lack enough knowledge to grasp the condition of commodity production while we are still guided to believe that the endlessness myths of producing spectacles will bring gospel truth to human beings. The future project is enjoying abundant material life. Producing countless spectacles is the way to achieve the project. It might not be gospel but a disaster because the pollution or gap between the rich and the poor might result in a certain catastrophe. Guy Debord argues:

For one to whom the real world becomes real images, mere images are transformed into real beings – tangible figments which are the efficient motor of trancelike behavior. Since the spectacle’s job is to cause a world that is no longer directly

perceptible to be seen via different specialized mediations, it is inevitable that it should elevate the human sense of sight to the special place once occupied by touch . . . that the spectacle itself is perceptible to the naked eye – even if that eye is assisted by the ear. The spectacle is definition immune form human activity, inaccessible to any projected review or correction. (17)

In the postmodern world, the phenomenon of deskillling and lack of experience contributes to the multiplicity of spectacles because humans cease to judge what is beneficial or harmful for human beings. Prior to postmodern society, the decline of experience originated in modern society. As Lyotard puts it in *Soundproof Room*

There is no end without beginning. How could the end be known as end if it weren't recounted by someone? The narrative of the end of a certain time is told in a new time which retains that end - an end by which it presents itself as beginning. The relationship of our thought to succession prohibits it from immobilizing its movement on an instant without future. Although the end is naively presented as a deadline, though immediately clears that limit in order to ensure that a *beyond* breaking with the *before* is already present. (2)

He adds:

The relationship between the power to make duration modal and the mechanical succession of time units on a clock is analogous to the relationship between narrative voice and the narrated story. It is a disjunctive relationship: the two belong to different temporalities. Yet this disjunction is inclusive because in order to become a story, diegesis needs the voice. Otherwise it is forgotten . Inclusive also because the story told by a narrative voice fails to consider the instance of this voice and its narrative among episodes of history and count it in time with the universal clock . . . This inclusion nevertheless preserves the heterogeneity of the two levels – the one on which things take place and the one on which things take place and the one on which they are recounted. (4)

From the statements mentioned above, the present narrative is by no means free from the influence of the past memory. In light of this, the past memory and experience constitutes an important part in the constitution of “subject” and narration of a story. A man is overwhelmed

by his loss of past memory because the past memory and experience empower him to narrate his life story. It seems that he can not carry on his life without the past memory. As a consequence, he makes every effort to search for the past memory in order to continue his life. In light of this, the past memory and experience is rendered precious and irreplaceable because life is not complete if someone is deprived of the past memory. It is obvious that capturing the past is always the topic of the life story. In contrast, Baudelaire refashions the idea by putting emphasis on capturing the “presentness” of the moment. He argues in *The Painter of Modern Life*:

All the raw materials with which the memory has loaded itself are put in order, ranged and harmonized, and undergo that forced idealization which is the result of a childlike perceptiveness acute and magical by reason of its innocence . . . And so away he goes, hurrying, searching. But searching for what? Be very sure that this man, such as I have depicted him – this solitary, gifted with an active imagination, ceaselessly journeying across the great human desert – has an aim loftier than that of a mere *flaneur*, an aim more general, something other than the fugitive pleasure of circumstance. He is looking for that quality which you must allow me to call “modernity” . . . He makes it his business to extract from fashion whatever element it may contain of poetry within history, to distil the eternal from the transitory. Casting an eye over our exhibitions of modern pictures, we are struck by a general tendency among artists to dress all their subjects in the garments of the past. (11-12)

Everything is viable, transitory, fugitive and contingent. It is important for the masses to capture the “presentness” because it is ephemeral and mutable. On the contrary, the aristocratic or noble family put their heads and hearts into maintaining their glorious past instead of varying with the “present.” They hope that their privileges inherited from the past can be rendered eternal rather than metamorphic. The members of an aristocratic family were haunted by the memory load in which they used to have a glorious past. In “A Rose for Emily,” written by William Faulkner, the pathetic heroine was haunted by the glorious past of her noble family and the past memory pave her a way to self-destruction. The past history or memory can be

an obstruction to get a new initiation. This concept is initiated by the Enlightenment. In “What is Enlightenment?” Foucault argues:

Kant indicates right away that “way out” that characterizes Enlightenment is a process that releases us from the status of “immaturity.” And by “immaturity,” he means a certain state of our will that makes us accept someone else’s authority to lead us in areas where the use of reason is called for. Kant gives three examples: we are in a state of “immaturity” when a book takes the place of our understanding, when a spiritual director takes the place of our conscience, when a doctor decides for us what our diet to be. (34)

In light of this, Enlightenment encourages us to use our “reason” to perceive or judge instead of being led by the past “authority.” In *Postmodern Explained*, Lyotard argues:

Let us recall-in opposition to this murder of the instant and Singularity – those short pieces in Walter Benjamin’s *One Way Street* and *A Berlin Childhood*, pieces Theodor Adorno would call “micrologies.” They do not describe events from childhood; rather they capture the childhood of the event and inscribe what is uncapturable about it and what makes an encounter with a work, odor, place, book, or face into an event is not its newness when compared to other “events.” (91)

In light of this, childhood is never an unpolluted period which is independent of the guidance of the dominant authority. Moreover, the authorities are apt to dismiss children’s ideas since they are considered immature or unwise enough to make judgment. For the authorities, children’s foolish talk should not be taken seriously because they lack wisdom and experience in particular to make sense of the whole world. That is, authorities are empowered to instruct us because time duration gives them precious experience which children lack. The authorities refuse to be guided by the unwise and inexperienced children. Moreover, the authorities take pride in their past glory and encourage you to emulate them. The “past” time serves as the determiner of subjective being. Already-made morality and tradition which existed in the past constitute the existence of being. In *Critical and Clinical*, Gilles Deleuze argues:

It is an aesthetic of the Beautiful and the Sublime, in which the sensible takes on an autonomous value for itself and is deployed in a pathos beyond all logic, and which will grasp time as it bursts forth [*dans son*

jailissement], at the very origin of its thread and its vertigo. This is no longer the Affect of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, which linked the Self to the I in a relationship that was still regulated by the order of time; it is Pathos that lets them evolve freely in order to form strange combinations as source of time, “arbitrary forms of possible intuitions.” It is no longer the determination of an I, which must be joined to the determinability of the Self in order to constitute knowledge; it is now the undetermined unity of all the faculties (the Soul), which makes us enter the unknown. (34)

We observe that the continuum history is overturned by the subversive force of this new time consciousness—presentness. Modernity fights against the normalizing functions of tradition. The modern has sought to dispose the past because it does not think of history and experience as a dominant determinant in constituting one’s subjectivity. The decline of experience can be seen in Benjamin’s depiction of a storyteller. He argues that the interaction and co-ordination of the soul, the eye, and the hand which emerges in the artisan does not exist in modern society. In modern society, we seldom gain the spiritual and creative joy from our job. In *The Storyteller*, Benjamin argues:

If one wants to picture these two groups through their archaic representatives, one is embodied in the resident tiller of the soil, and the other in the trading seaman. Indeed, each sphere of life has, as it were, produced its own tribe of storytellers. Each of these tribes preserves some of its characteristics centuries later. Thus, among nineteenth-century German storytellers, writers like Hebel and Gotthelf stem from the first tribe, writers like Sealsfield and Gerstacker from the second. With these tribes, however, as stated above, it is only a matter of basic types . . . The resident master craftsman and the traveling journeymen worked together in the same rooms; and every master had been a traveling journeyman before he settled down in his home town or somewhere else. If peasants and seamen were past masters of storytelling, the artisan class was its university. In it was combined the lore of faraway places, such as a much-traveled man brings home, with the lore of the past, as it best reveals itself to natives of a place. (85)

He adds:

That old co-ordination of the soul, the eye, and the hand which emerges in Valéry's words is that of the artisan which we encounter wherever the art of storytelling is at home. In fact, one can go on and ask oneself whether the relationship of the storyteller to his material, human life, is not in itself a craftsman's relationship, whether it is not his very task to fashion the raw material of experience, his own and that of others, in a solid, useful, and unique way. It is a kind of procedure which may perhaps most adequately be exemplified by the proverb if one thinks of it as an ideogram of a story. A proverb, one might say, is a ruin which stands on the site of an old story and in which a moral twines about a happening like ivy around a wall. (108)

Based on Benjamin's statement, storytelling does not signify the decline of the artistic form. He is deeply aware that the accumulation of experience and passing of ancestors' experience is not quite significant in modern and postmodern society. Benjamin maintains that artisans in ancient times were well acquainted with their work skills and could transfer their work experience to his apprentices by telling stories. Their stories originated from their own working experience. In stark contrast to storyteller, the modernist writers commit themselves to writing experiment rather than concerning about living experience of the masses. As Benjamin puts it in *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*

He was as circumspect in his work as he was capable of seeming provocative in his personal associations. The incognito was the law of his poetry. His prosody is comparable to the map of a big city in which it is possible to move about inconspicuously, shielded by blocks of houses, gateways, courtyards. On this map the places for the words are clearly indicated, as the places are indicated for conspirators before the outbreak of a revolt. Baudelaire conspires with language itself. He calculates its effects step by step. That he always avoided revealing himself to the reader has been noticed particularly by the most competent observers. Gide noticed a very calculated disharmony between the image and the object. (98)

In light of Benjamin's perspective, the modernists are so preoccupied with language experimentation that they fail to depict the productive condition of language. They are absorbed in the language of experimentation instead of exposing the living condition of the masses to

readers. That is, they were wrapped in contriving “style” as well as “taste” with a view to showing their genius and their distance from the banal masses. Literature should have two functions. In this sense, the modernist experiment of language conducted by the modernist altogether lacks instructive function because it is just a literary renovation without any traces of living condition. In ancient times, the writers depicted their own living experience and social condition and readers are informed of the social conditions by the writers’ composition. To make it worse, writers who are distinguished in modern society tend to employ poor or obscure writers to pen for them. In *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, Benjamin argues:

It was said that Dumas employed in his basements a whole army of poor writers. As late as 1855, ten years after this commentary by the picturesque scene from the life of a successful novelist whom the author calls de Sanctis: ‘When he arrived home, Mr de Sanctis carefully locked the door . . . and opened a small door hidden behind his books. He found himself in a rather dirty, poorly lit little room in which sat a man with disheveled hair who looked sullen but obsequious and had a long goose-quill in his hand. Even from a distance one could recognize him as a born novelist, though he is only a former employee of a ministry who has learned the art of Balzac from reading the *Constitutionnel*. He is the real author of *The Chamber of Skulls*; he is the novelist. (30)

For Benjamin, writers in modern society fail to reveal the social condition and neither do they write stories based on their own experience. In *The Society of the Spectacle*, Guy Debord shares the same concern with Benjamin. He argues:

Owing to the very success of this separated system of production, whose Product is separation itself, that fundamental area of experience which was associated in earlier societies with an individual’s principle work is being transformed – at least at the leading edge of the system’s evolution – into a realm of non-work, of inactivity. Such inactivity, however, is by no means emancipated from productive activity: it remains in thrall to that activity, in an uneasy and worshipful subjection to production’s needs and results; indeed it is itself a production of the rationality of production. (21)

In *Illuminations*, Benjamin uses the contrast between stage actor and screen actor to illustrate the decline of experience in the age of reproduction.

The artistic performance of a stage actor is definitely presented to the Public by the actor in person; that of the screen actor, however, is presented by a camera, with a twofold consequence. The camera that presents the performance of the film actor to the public need not respect the performance as an integral whole. (228)

He adds:

This situation might also be characterized as follows: for the first time—And this is the effect of the film – man has to operate with his whole living person, yet forgoing its aura. For aura is tied to his presence; there can be no replica of it. The aura which, on the state emanates from Macbeth, cannot be separated for the spectators from that of the actor. However, the singularity of the shot in the studio is that the camera is substituted for the public. Consequently, the aura that envelops the actor vanishes, and with it the aura of the figure he portrays. (229)

In *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Benjamin aims to brush aside a number of outmoded concepts, such as creativity, eternal value and mystery – concepts whose uncontrolled application would lead to a processing of data in the Facist sense. We know that the earliest art works derived from the service of a ritual. It is significant that the existence of the work of art is never completely separated from its ritual function. Its aura is closely related to its cult value. With the invention of photography, the cult value gave way to the photography which stressed the exhibition value of the work of art. The cult value would seem to demand that art works remain hidden. We can observe that certain sculptures on medieval cathedrals are almost invisible to the spectator. The sculptures are precious because they are inaccessible to the masses. Photography is an amusing in contrast to the earliest works of art. In photography, exhibition value begins to take the place of cult value. The exhibition value encourages the masses to participate in the production of the work of art. To put it simply, the newsreel offers everyone the opportunity to rise from a passer-by to a movie star. We can see that actors' experience and training no more occupies an important position. An actor or an actress can become a well-known movie star of martial arts even though they have never learned martial arts. Inventiveness seems to take the place of the "experience." Stage actors used to be

experienced actors who could perform and interact with the audiences while the screen actors do not need to confront the audience and present themselves to mechanical equipment. In a sense, people can have access to the works of art because it is emancipated from the ritual function. But we also can see that the participation in producing works of art does not require a lot of experience. The masses gradually develop a sense of the replaceable because anyone can take the place of their position because experience is no longer considered significant. In *Forget Foucault*, Jean Baudrillard argues:

It makes perfect sense to me that the great masses , very snobbishly, delegated to the class of intellectuals, of politicians, this business of managing, of choosing, of knowing what one knows. They are joyously dumping all those burdensome categories that no one, deep down inside, really wants any part of it. That people want to be told what they want is certainly not true, it is not clear either that they really want to know what they want, or that they desire to want at all. (103)

In postmodern society, the greater masses are deskilling while the fewer masses do the job which requires professional knowledge. The subject is rendered a body without spirit since they are manipulated to make their choice with joy instead of raising their self awareness. The uniqueness of human beings vanishes because they have been fashioned as the one-dimensional man which cannot make their own choice or make a limited choice already produced by the authority or specialists.

Enlightenment manifests that human beings can gain growth without the instruction of authority; but the project proves to be an irony since the great masses are becoming more dependent on the instruction of the authority. We can conclude that modernity seems to bring a gospel to its believer who hopes to get rid of the manipulation of authority; but it is a future project that is never fulfilled. In *Soundproof Room*, Lyotard argues, “ [I]t is a singular, unexpected arrangement of its constituent elements: words in literature; shapes and colors in painting. It relates to no reference, history, event or perceptual reality that might have come before it” (46). Lyotard argues that the public do not participate in the production while they are ignorant of the social production and devoid of the experience to know the social production.

Human beings are considered the most intelligent beings which can determine their destiny. We ceaselessly pursue progress and seek to gain enlightenment by getting away from the thrall of the authorities. We can gain spiritual growth without the religious rituals or religious authorities. We prolong our lives by the aid of medical care. We enjoy an incredible material life. The advanced technology and medication due to the accumulation of knowledge and experiences. In the postmodern society, the development of technology gives rise to unemployment because manpower is replaced by machines. The employed workers are just like machines which repeat the same action. Few people are involved in skillful jobs. That is, they become authorities because information and skills are limitedly circulated and the masses are excluded from the circulation. In my opinion, technology is just part of human life. We should avert our eyes from the accumulation of goods that technology brings. Every way of life should be respected. Every walk of life is authoritarian.

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