



Post-Colonialism Eats Itself Alive: Artistic Self-Consumption in the New Dark Age

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Abstract

Here we are, somehow, electronically linked together over the world wide internet system to meet as if in person to discuss the issue at hand, post-colonialism. Twenty years into the 21st century, we are poised on the edges of multiple razors, each keen enough to kill us should we made even the slightest misstep. Culturally, politically, socially, spiritually, morally, economically, ecologically, artistically, publicly, and privately, we are here poised and trembling, each of us seeking the path that takes us down this mountain of blades to safety. What we have is fast disappearing. What will come fills us all with dread. The forces that shape our destinies seem out of our control, and we grasp at what we can for even the illusion of self-determination. But where do we go when our road dead ends? Nowhere. What do we eat when our bowls are empty? Ourselves and each other. The 21st century can be characterized by its dearth of creativity. Ours is the age of the reboot, the rewrite, the reinterpretation, and the rerun. Our societies look, not to a future of innovation and invention, but to a past of romanticized and nostalgic reverie.

Keywords: Autophagy, Self-Consumption, Post-Colonialism, cellular process.

“Autophagy” is the cellular process through which the cells within the body consume themselves. In a healthy, nutritionally satisfied body, autophagy is a necessary and beneficial process, sweeping away dead cells, dying cells, and cell debris, utilizing them to nourish and replenish the body’s store of healthy cells. However, during periods when proper nutrition from outside sources is unavailable, autophagy becomes a last-ditch effort in the body’s efforts to survive. Quite literally, the body begins to eat healthy cells, to eat itself.

Here we are now, somehow, electronically linked together over the world wide internet system to meet as if in person to discuss the issue at hand, post-colonialism. Twenty years into the 21st century, we are poised on the edges of multiple razors, each keen enough to kill through even the slightest misstep. Culturally, politically, socially, spiritually, morally, economically, ecologically, artistically, publicly, and privately, the culture is poised and trembling, seeking the path to take safely down this mountain of blades. What the culture has is fast disappearing. What will come seems likely to be dreadful. The forces that shape destiny seem out of control, and culture grasps for even the illusion of self-determination. But where does it go when the road dead ends? Nowhere. What can be eaten when the bowls are empty? Itself.

The 21st century can, in many ways, be characterized by its dearth of creativity. This is the age of the reboot, the rewrite, the reinterpretation, and the rerun. Society looks, not to a future of innovation and invention, but to a past of romanticized and nostalgic reverie.

Empires depend upon their colonies for unregulated streams of resources. The plunder from colonies, the raw materials stripped from colonial territories, produced the material and opportunity for innovation and invention. The riches of India and other British colonies enabled the English to turn their small island into an international power and a center for scientific, medical, artistic, and cultural advancement. The United States of America, the first colony to break away from the British empire, developed a network of influence and domination that functioned in an identical fashion.

I would take this opportunity to examine two areas of art that characterize the autophagy of our time, the self-consumption that characterizes the end of empire. Painting and popular music are especially suited for this purpose as each, in its own way, depends upon inventiveness and originality to claim the currency of attention used to measure success or failure. Paintings which catch the public eye and meet with public approval, sale, and reproduction are deemed successful. Songs which capture the public ear receive the mass media distribution and sales which define a “hit.” While we might imagine that it is originality and innovation which lead to such success, even a cursory examination of both painting and music show the opposite. It is the familiar, the repetitive, and the easily recognizable which satisfies culture’s hunger for “nutrition” while masking the autophagy actually taking place. “[I]t was thought that the brain was largely resistant to autophagy under these conditions...At least one part of the brain, however, now appears to self-cannibalize” (*Smithsonian*).

First, let us look at creativity as a measurable quantity. In 1958, psychologist E. Paul Torrance directed a series of individual tasks within a 90-minute time span to around 400 children in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in the United States of America, designed to assess their ability to think creatively, to produce “something original and useful.” The test asked the children to suggest improvements to toys which would make them “better and more fun to play with.” Torrance was looking for “divergent thinking (generating many unique ideas) and then convergent thinking (combining those ideas into the best result).” In the decades following the administration of that first series of tests, Torrance and his colleague, Garnet Millar, have tracked the subsequent evidence of creativity among those tested as the children grew into adults, “recording every patent earned, every business founded, every research paper published, and every grant awarded...[t]hey tallied the books, dances, radio shows, art exhibitions, software programs, advertising campaigns, hardware innovations, music compositions, public policies (written or implemented), leadership positions, invited lectures, and buildings designed” by those now-adult children. Not too terribly surprisingly, Torrance’s test results “predicted those kids’ creative accomplishments as adults.” The children who came up with good ideas to improve their toys have grown up to become successful adults in a wide range of fields in which creativity and innovation are rewarded. They became artists, authors, inventors, doctors, diplomats, and business leaders, their ability to bring “something original and useful” to their chosen fields an obvious asset to their personal success.

And, in the subsequent decades, as almost 300,000 children took the Torrance test, a pattern emerged. Their scores, similar to the standard IQ scores used to measure overall intelligence, have been rising steadily. It seemed to validate the idea that people were getting more creative and smarter. This trend continued until 1990. In 2010, researcher Kyong Hee Kim, working at the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia, USA, analyzed the cumulative data of the Torrance test results to discover that, for the previous decade and for the first time in history, scores began to fall. Those scores continue to fall with each

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passing year (Newsweek).

The question, then, becomes not only what happens to the individuals who are less creative and less productive than their predecessors, but what happens to a culture as creativity and innovation are in steady decline? And, perhaps, more importantly, to what may that decline be attributed?

Empire

em·pire /'em,pī(ə)r/
noun

1. an extensive group of states or countries under a single supreme authority, formerly especially an emperor or empress.
2. a large commercial organization owned or controlled by one person or group.

Colony

col·o·ny
/'kälənē/
noun

1. a country or area under the full or partial political control of another country, typically a distant one, and occupied by settlers from that country. (*Oxford Languages*)

It has been established that empire draws sustenance from its colonies or satellite states. That is the very real purpose of a colony. Wealth and resources are drawn from the colony to feed and enrich the empire. However, in the last half of the 20th century, empires were recalculated and colonies became independent countries. While the flow of raw materials continued, that flow was no longer unabated, no longer of unregulated benefit to empire. And, as in the body, autophagy began.

The American artist Andy Warhol delivered the most succinct, concise address of artistic autophagy in 1962. His now iconic “Campbell’s Soup Cans” was a direct address of the state of painting in the post-colonial world.



(Fig. 1. Museum of Modern Art)

This silk-screen print in all its variations was a direct address of the dearth of creativity and innovation in contemporary society and the overall move toward self-consumption, toward autophagy on increasing display throughout our culture. These mass-produced prints were both insightful and controversial, confronting as they did the culture’s decreasing ability supplant itself with the wealth derived from colonization. Without the “raw materials” and resources supplied by colonial exploitation, even the world of painting was forced to become self-consuming. And, it is not a particularly remarkable jump from Warhol’s mechanical reproduction of factory-produced commodities to the “painting” produced by artificial intelligence now insinuating itself into the world. Computers, devoid of

emotion, attachment, and self-criticism, manipulate robotic painting devices to produce a simulation of human creativity to fill the vacuum.



(Fig. 2. ART AI)

Apers, held and sold by ART AI, is just one of a gallery full of images created without creativity. Produced by a computer program, *Apers* is a logical extension of Warhol's soup cans; it is machine-generated mimicry, a machine aping the outcome of human inventiveness without using creativity at all. Presented and sold as "fine art," such work defines autophagy in action in a culture increasingly starved of the intellectual and practical resources previously provided by colonialism.

Such "art" can be seen intruding into almost every level of visual expression. The film industry has come to depend upon computer-generated imagery (CGI) not only for expensive, impractical or impossible special effects, but for an overall "smoothing" or enhancement of the most prosaic scenes. With mind-numbing frequency, the images we see in entertainment, advertising, and art are not in any sense "real." They are fabrications substituting for authentic, imaginative depiction, and they have clouded our ability to perceive reality. Our expectations of both reality and artistic representation are wholly clouded by the result of this lack of creativity and substitution of artifice for authenticity. And, the more our vision is saturated by these ersatz images, the more we reject the real to consume illusion. It is a vicious cycle fueled by culture's increasing appetite for itself. We are, literally, eating ourselves, the apex of autophagy.

Even more than painting, pop music is an almost constant presence in our common experience. Pop music blares from a multitude of sources, from radios and televisions and telephones and iPods and iPads, from passing cars and other rooms, from restaurants and markets and elevators and the agora, and this cacophony is the modern soundtrack to life. Pop music is a \$43.5 billion dollar a year industry dedicated to generating income from the dissemination of commodified creativity (Statista).

"Songwriting today is not the romantic notion of one kid with a guitar...it's an impersonal, assembly-line-driven process that would make Henry Ford proud" (*New York Post*). The process of creating hit songs for the popular music market has been streamlined into an assembly-line process that serves nothing and no one so much as itself, a mirror reflecting a mirror to both shape and satisfy consumers' tastes.



(Fig. 3. Film Noir Board)

When a music factory team is in place and working, beats, hooks, and tracks are manufactured, traded, overlapped, and combined to construct up to 12 songs a day. Presented to the vocal “artist,” songs are manipulated, altered, accepted, and rejected to suit the market needs of the corporation investing in their fabrication. Lyrics are contrived and fed to singers whose voices are recorded and “improved” with synthetic devices such as Auto-Tune...”widely used in the studio and at concerts to make artists' sound pitch-perfect” (Live Science). The music itself is comprised of computer-enhanced performances by human musicians or completely synthesized by innumerable computing devices.

As a colleague of mine is perhaps overly fond of declaring, creativity is irrelevant and, instead, “it’s all about the mash-up.” In this context, a mash-up is “a creative work, usually in a form of a song, created by blending two or more pre-recorded songs, usually by superimposing the vocal track of one song seamlessly over the instrumental track of another, increasing the tempo and pitch while adding or reducing gaps to make it flow” (Wikipedia).

One of the most common examples of the mash-up is the musical sample, a process in which a musical phrase is removed from its original context and inserted into another song, usually as a repeated element.



(Fig. 4. Purple Clover)

Before his death, the American Godfather of Soul, James Brown, found himself the most “sampled” artist of all time, a use of his creative talents for which he received no payment. It was only after lengthy and expensive legal contests was he awarded ownership of

his own music and the right to compensation. The mash-ups constructed out of the shards of his music had to be extracted, identified, and counted before his creative genius could be recognized.

Either unrestricted or bound by copyright law, popular music has, again, literally consumed itself. No matter the genre (hip-hop, R&B, rock, Country Western, K-Pop, J-Pop), that idealized vision of an artist and an instrument venturing together in a creative process to make real a measured sequence of sounds heretofore unheard has been systematically erased and replaced by a bank of electronic devices endlessly snipping and stitching the bits and pieces of existing music into supposedly new forms that, in reality, are merely iterations of existing songs. Pop music is no longer the province of the new, challenging, and intriguing, but is, instead, just a mash-up of a mash-up of a mash-up.



(Fig. 5. Feel Numb)

Not to harp upon the way things were always better in the past, it is more than relevant to note that what is almost universally considered to be the best pop album in music history, The Beatles' "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band," was, indeed, the product of four young men's imaginative use of words and instruments to create songs that their audience had never heard before, that their audience had never heard anything similar before. Even those songs on the album that utilized studio manipulation of audio recordings did so in an often imitated, never equaled, and utterly ground-breaking fashion (*Rolling Stone*).

"When I first started in the music business, the ultimate aim for everybody was to try and recreate, on record, a live performance as accurately as possible. Without being too pompous, we decided to go into another kind of art form, where we are devising something that couldn't be done any other way. We were putting something down on tape that could only be done on tape," said the album's producer, the late George Martin. The Beatles created a unique, distinct form of music using new, innovative techniques (*Entrepreneur*).

Starved of the influences, inspirations, and materials acquired through colonialism, Western culture is already deep in the process of autophagy. From Cubism's roots in African imagery to popular music's absorption of world-wide musical styles, types, and instrumentation, culture has, in the past, been able to reflect genuine creativity and innovation. In a post-colonial world, however, art in all its forms have become increasingly "meta," art about art, music about music. This disastrous autophagy is chilling in its implications not the least of which is the death of the body.

Notes:

Autophagy

au·toph·a·gy | \ 0- 'tä-fə-jē

: the biological process that involves the enzymatic breakdown of a cell's cytoplasm or cytoplasmic components (such as damaged or unneeded organelles or proteins) within the lysosomes, a saclike cellular organelle that contains various hydrolytic enzymes, of the same cell (*Miriam Webster Dictionary*).

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Bio-note

Mostly reared in the American Southwest at the confluence of the atomic age and the Neolithic era, Robert Masterson began writing. As he grew and now finds himself living in a confusing suburb of New York City a stone's throw from the Bronx, when Masterson looks back in time at his influences, his teachers who helped him mature and find a poetic voice, he credits Rick Thalman of Los Alamos, New Mexico, and Lee Bartlett of Albuquerque, New Mexico, (now sequestered somewhere in Sicily) and William Burroughs, once seasonally residing in Boulder, Colorado, at the Naropa Institute from which Masterson graduated with a Master of Fine Arts degree. Other important influences include Richard Brautigan, H.P. Lovecraft, Robert E. Howard, Bobbie Louise Hawkins, Frank O'Hara, John McArthur, Jean Nicolas Arthur Rimbaud, Carl Petersen, Jayne Anne Phillips, Yukio Mishima, Anne Waldman, Maxine Hong Kingston, Tom Waits, Patti Smith, Jack Kerouac, Susie Bright, Helios Creed, Charles Olson, Tim Schellenbaum, that one one-and-a-half-page sentence in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*, and James Ellroy. He is beat, he is Beat, but he is not yet broken.