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Virtual Comic Relay: the Prospect and Limitations of Comics Regarded as Cultural Heritage

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I. Popular culture under multiple gazes

The autonomy of art, that is creation of art or works of art without being dominated by any external principle, is unassailable value to defend by many people. Especially, the slogan "Art for Art's Sake" used by Avant-Guard makes art viewed as an elitist form of expression. Perhaps, it is exactly the reason why comics as a kind of paintings is hardly categorized as art. Although some people try to claim graffiti to be a form of Avant-Guard, what between comics and art somewhat is just alike a square peg in a round hole. After all, if someone shouts "Comics for Comics' Sake", this sentence itself would seem to be more like a figure of ironic comic instead of a powerful slogan. Comparing to art, comics seems to be closer to the dialectic viewpoint of the German sociologist, Theodor W. Adorno, who said:

> The aesthetic force of production is the same as that of productive labor and has the same teleology; and what may be called aesthetic relations of production—all that in which the productive force is embedded and in which it is active—are sedimentations or imprintings of social relations of production. Art's double character as both autonomous and fait social is incessantly reproduced on the level of its autonomy. (Adorno, 1997: 5)

Art has both an autonomous character and a social character, and art's autonomy is developed and maintained by the support of social fact. More precisely speaking, comics itself is socially characterized. No matter the content of comics is regularity or bizarreness, its form exhibits toward the common public.

Moreover, comics is criticized by contemporary art critics for its popularity and vulgarity. If Avant Guard presents the rebellious sprite of creation, and thereafter its opposite can be called "Rear Guard" or *kitsch*. Just as the famous American essayist Clement Greenberg said:

> Where there is an avant-garde, generally we also find a rear-guard. True enough--

simultaneously with the entrance of the avant-garde, a second new cultural phenomenon appeared in the industrial West: that thing to which the Germans give the wonderful name of *Kitsch*: popular, commercial art and literature with their chromeotypes, magazine covers, illustrations, ads, slick and pulp fiction, comics, Tin Pan Alley music, tap dancing, Hollywood movies, etc., etc. For some reason this gigantic apparition has always been taken for granted. It is time we looked into its whys and wherefores. (Greenberg, 1971:9)

This kind of critic aims at mass consumption led by commercial profit in kitsch culture. It would make creators devote themselves or be submissive to entertainment, sensation effects and commercial interests. Furthermore, the autonomy of creativity would lose its dynamics. The critic above is worthy to be considered to some extent, however, there also exists aesthetic prejudice underlying this critic. In the perspective of serious art, popular culture is usually regarded monotonous and flat. Creators of popular culture seem to "produce" only for profits, and the audiences seem to consume for satisfaction of desire. That is why Greenberg said as following:

To fill the demand of the new market, a new commodity was devised: ersatz culture, kitsch, destined for those who, insensible to the values of genuine culture, are hungry nevertheless for the diversion that only culture of some sort can provide. Kitsch, using for raw material the debased and academicized simulacra of genuine culture, welcomes and cultivates this insensibility. It is the source of its profits. Kitsch is mechanical and operates by formulas. Kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensations. Kitsch changes according to style, but remains always the same. Kitsch is the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times. Kitsch pretends to demand nothing of its customers except their money-not even their time. (Greenberg, 1971:10)

However, on the other hand, it is the precondition of an aesthetic "pure gaze" that takes modern art or Avant-Guard as a very standard. Popular culture is thus measured and criticized as "rear guard". The "pure gaze" presupposes a capacity or gesture of appreciation, and the capacity is needed to cultivate with certain cultural capital between social classes. (Bourdieu, 1987) There also another gaze call "gaze of surveillance". political authorities, patriarchy and religious institutes utilize different means of censorship to defend their moral value or belief based from ideologies.

These two kinds of gazes regard audience as negative consumers rather than active and potential creators. These gazes would also neglect or even deny the possibilities that creators of popular culture could find any tactics to present their creativity by subtle, tremendous ways.

II. The Comic Relay: an almost obsolete heritage

Taiwanese comics met its prosperities during 1950s' to 1960's. It was also the Cold War period when the White Terror violence arrived at the peak. Why the development of Taiwanese comics did not affected by the highly political oppression while the government asserting its power of surveillance on all kind of publications? The answer relies on genres of comics. There are two kinds of comic genres got their popularity during the period: the anti-communist comic and the comic for children and teenagers. Apparently, the anti-communist comic was created by obeying the ideological disciplines. Strictly speaking, it's a kind of propaganda rather than comic. How about the comic for children and teenagers? Of course, it is very easy to interfere the reason that the contents of the comic for children and teenagers are so innocent and pure that they are irrelevant with political ideology. From my perspective, on the contrary, it's a kind of creative tactic to "respond" to the ideological requirement. During the Cold War period, antagonist blocs extremely stigmatized each other as evil. The we-justice and they-evil framework provides the referential context for the comic creators to fabricate the scenario of the comic. That's reason why almost all popular comics during this period of time depicted heroic topics. In other words, contrary to the submission of anti-communist comic, the comic for children and teenagers find a subtle space to express their unrealistic imagination by adapting the political reality.

There was also another tactic made by the comic creators: The Comic Relay. The Comic Relay was series which accomplished by six famous Taiwanese comic creators. It was a half-blinded creativity. All the creators only knew the leading character, the background. The following creator did not know what plots and ending task would be after the previous creator making his comic published on the magazine. By this way, the audience could enjoy different drawing stylish, different imaginations from these six comic creators. Besides, these creators could also have made "hidden dialogue" by irony, fantasy to express their subtle reflections on the political reality.

III. Comic heritage and fans community

Since entering the era of consumer society in Taiwan 1980s, nostalgia has become an emerging field of the cultural industry in the post-industrial age and also the cultural force for a nation state to form the local identity. Taiwanese comic has shifted from popular culture into cultural assets, so that its rude impression in the past has had been suddenly upgraded. Thereafter, it gradually has had been appreciated by government and academia. Particularly in the age of emerging digital technology such as virtual reality or augmented reality, it is possible to transform from the traditional visual-processing of reading comics into somatosensory-processing. Walter Benjamin suggested that technology would produce special experience in modern society. (Benjamin, 1968; Kim, 2006)

As Taiwanese comics becomes digitalized, there have been lots of advises from the aspects of the digital industry development. (Yu, 2012) The commercial strategic deployment of comic market is an important policy consideration for sure. Nevertheless, besides to commercial competition and interests, how to "preserve" the 1950's comic heritage and re-open up its potentiality and popularity by encouraging the creativity of fans community rather than by commercial manipulation may be more basic and critical. Even though "Relay Comic" has become a historical material and rarely known, it still has heuristic meaning for contemporary Taiwanese comics.

As one kind of popular culture, The Comics Relay tries to inspire comic fans with fresh audient interest through experimental relay creation, instead of goes all the way to ingratiate itself with Consumers. Thinking from another perspective, famous comic artist in those days, usually gathered and organized together for aspiring each other, which was similar to the "Otaku" or comic party nowadays. In this point of view, "Relay Comic" is the doujinshi for comic lovers. A derivative work is not imagination with no limits. Just alike in the Relay Comic, the following creators have to manage the obscure boundaries of characters, drawing styles, spatial and temporal background, and narrative plot in the original. Then a derivative work could be make along the ambiguity of the boundaries. Even some situation may deviate from the obscure border, but there must be the reason and extent of excess. It has to be emphasized that the management

of the obscure boundaries should not be judged by politically or morally conceptual monitor, but maintained with the autonomy of derivative work creator or fans group. The reason why that well-known Movie Star-Trek could continue shooting series and extend its value of popular culture is not only relying on the consumption of original movie or peripheral commercial product, but also the participatory culture formed by its fans. They share the interpretation and comment on the original and the derivative work, and thereafter organize a huge and royal fans community. (Jenkins, 1992a) We should never forget what Jenkins had advised when we are trying to preserve and re-crate the comic heritage:

> Media fans are consumers who also produce, readers who also write, spectators who also participate. (Jenkins, 1992b: 208)

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