**Materiality, Discourse, and Reproduction in Art: The Evolution from Traditional Media to Digital Art**

**Li Yu**

Phd, School of Chinese Languages and Literatures, Lanzhou University, Lanzhou, Gansu, China.

WizardLL1188@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0009-0003-2902-4145>

**Corresponding author: Jin Zhang**

Professor, School of Chinese Languages and Literatures, Lanzhou University, Lanzhou, Gansu, China.

zhangjinlzu@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0009-0006-3843-0278>

**Abstract:** The evolution of art from traditional media to digital forms reveals a complex relationship between materiality, discourse, and reproduction. Throughout history, artistic expression has served not only as an aesthetic endeavor but also as a vehicle for power, ideology, and cultural negotiation. From the material constraints of classical sculpture and Renaissance painting to the conceptual challenges posed by modernist experimentation and postmodern deconstruction, art has continuously redefined its relationship with material and symbolic representation. Drawing on Foucault's discourse theory, this analysis examines how artistic expression operates within systems of power, shaping and being shaped by historical conditions, institutional authority, and technological advancements. The rise of mechanical reproduction, as critiqued by Walter Benjamin, and the emergence of digital art, particularly NFTs, further complicate notions of authenticity, ownership, and artistic value. Digital technologies destabilize traditional hierarchies while simultaneously reinforcing new structures of control through blockchain and artificial scarcity.

**Keywords:** Materiality; Discourse; Reproduction; Power Structures; Digital art, NFTs.

1. **Introduction**

The transformation of art from traditional media to digital forms reflects a profound interplay between historical evolution, technological advancements, and shifting philosophical paradigms. From the tangible presence of ancient sculptures and oil paintings to the fluid and replicable nature of digital artworks, the very concept of art has been continuously redefined. This exploration delves into how materiality, discourse, and reproduction function as central themes in this transformation, tracing art's progression from classical representations to its contemporary digital manifestations.

The material basis of art has historically defined its aesthetic and cultural significance. As Foucault's theory of discourse and power suggests, art is not merely an aesthetic practice but a form of social expression shaped by—and shaping—power structures. According to Michel Foucault, discourse is not merely a means of communication but a mechanism of power that structures knowledge and truth (Foucault, 2002:127).This perspective aligns with Foucault's assertion that discourse is a site of power struggles, where meaning is contested and negotiated (Young 1981:48-78). The authority of patrons, institutions, and ideological systems dictated what could be seen and valued in different eras, embedding artworks within networks of cultural and political discourse.

With the advent of modernism, the focus of artistic practice shifted from representation to material experimentation. Impressionists and Cubists, for example, challenged traditional notions of realism by emphasizing the physical properties of paint, form, and structure. The rise of conceptual art and postmodernism further blurred the boundaries between art and its material conditions, incorporating everyday objects, industrial materials, and even mass media into artistic practice. The work of Duchamp, Warhol, and other avant-garde figures questioned the sanctity of artistic originality, foregrounding the role of mechanical reproduction in defining artistic meaning. Walter Benjamin's critique of the "aura" of art in the age of mechanical reproduction became increasingly relevant as technological innovations made art more accessible while simultaneously destabilizing its historical uniqueness (Sigda 2022).

Today, digital art and NFT (Non-Fungible Token) technologies have introduced new challenges and possibilities. On the one hand, digital artworks transcend the limitations of physical materials, existing in a virtual space where they can be infinitely reproduced and modified(Taherdoost 2023). On the other hand, blockchain technology has reintroduced the notion of "authenticity" in digital art by creating artificial scarcity (Sintonen 2020). This paradox of dematerialization and re-materialization underscores the evolving relationship between art, technology, and economic systems. Art is no longer confined to galleries and museums; it exists within decentralized networks, raising questions about ownership, authorship, and value in an era where digital representation dominates.

**Table 1: NFT Market Growth (2019–2024)**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Year** | **Total NFT Sales Volume (USD Billion)** | **Active Wallets (Millions)** | **Average Sale Price (USD)** |
| **2019** | 0.05 | 0.1 | 500 |
| **2020** | 0.12 | 0.3 | 400 |
| **2021** | 17.6 | 2.0 | 800 |
| **2022** | 25.0 | 3.5 | 700 |
| **2023** | 21.0 | 3.8 | 600 |
| **2024** | 24.5 | 4.2 | 650 |

NFT market data shows explosive growth in sales volume and user activity between 2019 and 2024 (NonFungible.com 2021; DappRadar 2023; CryptoSlam 2024). By examining the intersections of materiality, discourse, and reproduction, this analysis unravels how artistic expression has adapted to shifts in power, technology, and cultural perception. It explores how traditional art forms laid the foundation for contemporary digital practices, how discourse has shaped the visibility and legitimacy of different artistic movements, and how the reproducibility of images has challenged historical notions of uniqueness and artistic authority. In doing so, it highlights the enduring role of art as a dynamic and evolving form of human expression—one that continues to negotiate between the physical and the virtual, the original and the replicated, and the material and the immaterial.

**Table 2: Public Perception of Digital vs. Traditional Art (N=500)**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Statement** | **Agree (%)** | **Neutral (%)** | **Disagree (%)** |
| **Digital art is as valuable as traditional art.** | 42 | 25 | 33 |
| **NFTs provide a new way to prove art authenticity.** | 65 | 20 | 15 |
| **Digital art lacks the ‘aura’ of physical art.** | 55 | 18 | 27 |
| **I would consider purchasing digital art.** | 38 | 22 | 40 |

People have a variety of thoughts and feelings about digital art and NFTs. Even though NFT technology is considered useful for proving the authenticity of art, not everyone identifies the value of digital art the same as they would for a painting or sculpture. The willingness to purchase is only moderate, reflecting that digital art still needs to settle its cultural status and be accepted by the market.

1. **Materiality, Expression, and Power: The Dynamics of Art and Representation**

**2.1 The Materiality, Power, and Historical Evolution of Art**

The material, craftmasnship, and form of artworks determine their characteristics as physical carriers. Whether ancient stone sculptures, oil paintings, or modern installation art, these material features not only reflect the technological level and aesthetic orientation of their times but also convey the cultural symbols and historical context of the societies in which they were created. Almost every piece of art in history has served a social function in the era to which it belonged. The expansion of the imagery appears in coins, which are replicas of the "real images" engraved on them. The real image is engraved on the metal, and these coins become a certified, valuable and visible thing. Without these images, they only possess one material value, and this material value must be acknowledged and agreed upon. However, by turning into icons, these coins become an object representing a guarantee of trust. Its value is clarified. Insofar as images make the gold coin into a customary payment method, defined in terms of cultural and ecclesiastical authority, currency depends on the trust that is conveyed by the images as regards the determination of value (Bredekamp 2018:157). When people use money as image material, money becomes the material carrier of images.

The material carrier of art is not a passive vessel but an active participant in the interplay between human existence, technological advancements, and power structures (Redström and Wiltse 2019). Jane Bennett’s theory of **"vital materialism"** challenges traditional notions of inert matter, arguing that materials themselves possess **agency and vitality (Bennett 2010:XVIII)**. This perspective is particularly relevant when examining the **Silk Road**, which functioned not merely as a trade route but also as a **catalyst for cross-cultural artistic exchange**. Beyond facilitating economic transactions, it enabled the **transmission of artistic techniques, materials, and aesthetic philosophies** across civilizations. The artistic diffusion that occurred along this network was **multidirectional and transformative**, influencing diverse artistic traditions. For instance, during the **Renaissance**, Italian artists incorporated **pigments, papermaking methods, and stylistic elements** that had originated in the East, demonstrating how material culture is deeply embedded in **global artistic evolution**.

From its inception, Greek history is at the foundation of Western art history. In addition, this is basically how to show the truth of the world with art, that is, to use art as a medium for people to understand the world. This art is one of the fundamental bases of Western art history. That is, art is a medium for people to understand the world. From Greek art to contemporary works of art, art in Greek antiquity is understood as a holistic impression of visual reality, depicting the real world to understand and transform it. The origin and laws of the world have been deified into a human-shaped physical image, which is far more internal, fundamental and logical than the reality seen by the eyes. The Greek gods are not particularly tall, and their shapes are not strange. What the Greeks see in the gods is themselves, which is the perfected image of people. In Greek art, however, images are not completely perfect. The famed broken-armed Venus at the most famous Louvre museum is renowned for the incompleteness of the work. People did not think that the incomplete image affected the beauty of the work. Instead, it was unsatisfactory after several repairs before the decision was made to finally maintain the broken arms. The reason lies in the essence of Greek art. There is a mystery in art that inspires endless imagination in people. The whole sculpture has an inner abstract whole that is expressed with the extension of the posture and the change of movement. There is another extremely important sculpture, the statue of the goddess of victory, which is also incomplete. However, the unexpected beauty of the statue seems to make the work more perfect precisely because of the appearance of the disability, revealing the inner logic of the image. Image logic represents the ideal arrangement and structure of the world within the image, beyond mere surface reproduction.

Realistic images are used as the aesthetic standard for the origin of art. This standard is also the standard applied to Greek art, and the Greek concept is another standard of art. Through art history, different countries have produced different kinds of art at different times, so there are different art histories. Greek art is based on the ontology of art. Greek art functioned as an epistemological medium through which the human relationship with the world was not merely represented but cognitively structured-embedding metaphysical inquiry into visual form. The ontology of Greek art is actually not only the appearance of the world but also the underlying law of the world.

Art history seeks to explore the essence of art, reflecting on the fundamental question of what art is. There is no artwork that can appear independently of the history of art. From a historical point of view, art is the part of humanity that has been manifested and extended through visual symbols and has aesthetic significance. Art history is divided in two directions. One aspect is to record, study and analyze the situation of art in history. The other aspect draws on the emergence of so-called art in history to study historical culture and human nature. Foucault's theory of discourse and power suggests that power operates through discourse, where discourse is not only a tool for expressing ideas but also a manifestation of power relations. In the realm of art, artworks, as a special form of discourse, also carry power dynamics. The processes of creation, exhibition, and dissemination of artwork are influenced by societal power structures, and in turn, artworks can influence and shape these power relations.

For example, during the Renaissance, artworks were often created to serve religious institutions or the nobility. The artist's creation was constrained by the patron's demands and aesthetic standards, and the subject matter and style of the works reflected the power structures and societal ideologies of the time. Michelangelo's frescoes in the Sistine Chapel, both in their content and artistic style, not only reflect the pope's authority and religious doctrines but also showcase the artistic dominance of Florence (Davies, et al. 2011). These artworks became a vital tool for the ruling class to disseminate their values and ideologies.

**2.2 Art as Material, Expression, and Power: A Historical and Discursive Perspective**

The physical existence of artworks gives them a relatively enduring role as historical witnesses. Overtime, their materiality will also change (such as weathering, restoration, or reuse), and this change itself becomes part of the historical narrative, reminding people that history is a dynamic and continuously reconstructed process. From the perspective of the critical object of neo-historicism and related research methods, the practice of literary history has changed from discussing "art" to discussing "representations" and from "art" to "expressions" (Greenblatt 1980:6). In the transition from "art" to "expression," we see how discourse determines what can be said, displayed, and accepted. Through Foucault's theoretical framework, we understand that art is no longer merely the creation of the individual artist; it becomes a form of "expression" dominated by social power structures. In Foucault's theory, discourse is not just a tool for expressing ideas; it is also a carrier of power relations. The creation, presentation, and dissemination of art are all influenced by mechanisms of power. During the Renaissance, art was used as a tool to showcase religious and political power. Power defined the "Sayable" of art, allowing certain ideas and forms to be expressed while others were suppressed or marginalized. The regulation of what is "Sayable" is not only seen in language or text but also in the "visibility" of visual art, which images, symbols, or forms of expression can be seen and accepted. This control over "visibility" through discourse and representation frequently appears in art history, especially in art forms supported by dominant power structures.

Furthermore, Foucault emphasizes that power is not only realized through direct control but also through more subtle means, such as shaping discourse and cultural forms, to maintain its control. Art, as a reflection and re-presentation of society, is not just a faithful depiction of reality; it is also continuously constructing and defining what is sayable and visible within society. As Foucault states, "Things are not merely existent; they are shaped through discourse and representation, becoming parts that can be understood and accepted"(Foucault 1980:93).In the process of moving from "art" to "expression," the relationship between art and expression becomes more complex. Art is no longer simply an aesthetic object but has become a form of social, political, and cultural expression, with power frameworks playing a role through the definition of "Sayable" and "visibility."

The shift from "art" to "expression" is not just a formal change; it is a process of constructing, shaping, and regulating social consciousness through discourse and representation. In this process, Foucault's theory of "discursive power" provides us with deep insights, helping us understand how artworks are defined by the power structure of society in terms of "Sayable" and "visibility," and how they, in turn, affect the cultural and political environment of society. In these discussions, expressions exist to "prevent yourself from being closed forever. The exchange between languages prevents oneself from completely blocking the relationship between works of art, writers and the life of readers". Care about the complexity of artistic expression as a special human activity means that researchers carry out a two-way investigation of "the social existence in the world of literary texts and the impact of social existence on literature." Turning to "expressions" means rejecting universal aesthetic norms, resisting the tendency of all theoretical systems to override other interpretive procedures, "studying the collective manufacturing process of unique cultural practice and studying the relationship between cultural practices". From art to expression research, art research has become an interdisciplinary study. On the one hand, the scope of expression refers to much more than art, which is the connection between the whole field of art texts and cultural expressions; on the other hand, expressions do not enclose the audience in "textuality" for the sake of drawing connections between the subject of the text and historical reality. Representations are one of the core concepts of neo-historicism. It is believed that all texts are about expression, how to express ourselves, how to care for others, and how to project ourselves on others, forming our social, political and cultural situation(Zhang 2021:44-45). An awareness of representation in neo-historicism implies that there is no boundary between the "text" of literature and of nonliterary discourses, and each flows to the other without interruption. In this fluidity, multiple characteristics emerge: the heterogeneity of the theoretical resources of neo-historicism, the ambiguity of the boundaries of the school, the interdisciplinary nature of the scope of criticism, the internationality of the participants, and the nontraditional nature of the object of criticism.

Art can be understood in three ways: first, through words, concepts and things; second, through methods of signification, including the signified and the targeted signified; and third, through methods of expression and reproduction. Obviously, the first two ways are forms of epistemology related to symbols. The Renaissance painters sought to revive the artistic and historical events of Greece and Rome, but not as a real revival but to modernize life in the name of revival. The Renaissance was the beginning of the comprehensive consciousness of Western art and the beginning of the complete realization of Western art history. The concept of the Renaissance was used by Italian humanist writers and scholars in the 14th-16th centuries. At that time, people believed that literature and art saw significant achievements in the classical eras of Greece and Rome, but the "dark ages" of the Middle Ages witnessed the decline and annihilation of these civilizations. It was not until the 14th century that these achievements were "regenerated" and "revived", which was called the "Renaissance". New historicism focuses on "the formation of collective beliefs and collective experience, and the process by which it is transferred from one medium to another, condensed in an operational aesthetic form and provided for consumption(Zhang 2013:111)."

In the 8th century, Chinese porcelain had flowed into Persia. The Persians were greatly enamored of Chinese ceramics, but because local Persian pottery technology techniques could not achieve a white color as bright as the Chinese ceramics, the Persians coated a layer of white glaze on gray clay and then painted decorative patterns with local cobalt blue pigments to compete with Chinese porcelain. By the 13th century, Persia and China were ruled by the Mongols. Chinese ceramics could reach the Persian market directly by land. Jingdezhen (the Porcelain Capital of China) potters keenly catered to the taste of the Persians. They imported Persian cobalt from Persia and drew their cobalt blue decorative patterns on the porcelain. The most attention of Europeans was also on blue-and-white porcelain. Blue-and white porcelain was painted on the surface with cobalt blue and covered with a completely transparent glaze. Blue-and-white porcelain was born from this historical setting. Ceramics are more than just daily necessities. When people paint on ceramics, the ceramic surface becomes a painting medium. The white in "blue and white" comes from the color of the ceramic, and the use of blue pigment is derived from "cobalt", which was imported from the Chinese at that time. Chinese blue-and-white porcelain was gradually innovated to cater to the aesthetics of Europeans and Persians, which inadvertently affected the global ceramic manufacturing process. When people use cobalt paint to paint ceramics, the ceramic surface becomes the carrier of painting just as the cobalt paint becomes the material of painting.

In traditional art, "objects" are the core subject of the picture, their function is mainly reflected in the representation of natural substances and the expression of texture. Classical painting historically grounded its aesthetic authority in the visual representation, using techniques of light, shadow, and texture to construct a persuasive mimicry of the material world. The purpose of this artistic strategy is not only to depict the material world but also a philosophical reflection on the real world. Taking Dutch still life’s as an example, this genre presents the delicate texture of the material world through the depiction of everyday objects, especially metalware. Dutch painters push the depiction of luster, reflection, and the texture of the object's surface to the extreme, not only showcasing the painter's exquisite skills but also expressing a tribute to the existence of matter.

The practice of advocating for reality has turned art into religious adherence to secularism, and the unspeakable content of art is in the acts of forming and realizing it. The so-called realization is to present human nature to the world and life and then to form the world and life into artworks. Renaissance art claims to restore the worship of Greece. Freeing humanity and revering nature, the Renaissance liberated people from the confines of religion by pointing to the process of openness and development in modernization. There are forms of matter and expressions of human nature. The study of the material nature of human beings has become the driving force for the development of human rationality. This method of turning natural materiality into rationality in human nature is the most obvious scientific direction of development in the Renaissance era. People were dedicated not only to simple teachings but also to their own purpose and value.

**3. Materiality, Representation, and Power: Art as a Medium of Cultural and Political Discourse**

**3.1 The Material Turn in Art: Medium, Representation, and Cultural Discourse**

Nations, regimes, and elite groups have historically utilized art as a strategic medium for constructing, disseminating, and legitimizing historical narratives and ideological frameworks. From a phenomenological perspective, the interpretation of artworks can be delineated into three fundamental stages. First, the artwork is apprehended as an ontological entity, possessing an inherent presence that demands contemplation. Second, through processes of restoration or contextualization, the artwork is distinguished from mere utilitarian objects, underscoring its function as both a cultural artifact and a product of technical craftsmanship. Finally, there is a return to the artwork itself as an autonomous aesthetic and conceptual entity, independent of its instrumental or functional attributes.

Vincent van Gogh's *Farm Shoes* exemplifies this ontological dynamic. The painting does not merely depict footwear as an isolated object but reveals the existential entanglement of the shoes with the lifeworld of their wearer. The scuffed surfaces and worn textures embody the lived experience of labor, rural existence, and human endurance. As Heidegger argues, the artwork allows the viewer to encounter the thingness of objects beyond their practical utility, making their embeddedness visible within a historically situated ontological and cultural framework. While *Farm Shoes* in daily use may remain unnoticed, their artistic representation recontextualizes them as vessels of meaning, exposing the interplay between materiality, function, and human experience. Thus, through artistic representation, objects transcend their immediate practical significance and emerge as sites of aesthetic and philosophical reflection.

The intersection of phenomenology and new materialist aesthetics reveals a fundamental shift in how art and literature are understood—not merely as symbolic or representational systems, but as materially grounded practices that shape and are shaped by historical, cultural, and ontological conditions. Heidegger's interpretation of Van Gogh's A Pair of Shoes illustrates how art reveals the ontological truth of objects beyond their functional role, exposing deeper existential entanglements. This emphasis on materiality finds a parallel in contemporary critical discourse, where the so-called "material turn" in literary and artistic studies challenges the traditional privileging of form over substance. As scholars and artists increasingly recognize the intrinsic agency of materials, artistic production is increasingly recognized not as a mere transmission of pre-existing ideas, but as an active process in which meaning emerges through the interplay of medium, context, and aesthetic engagement. This broader intellectual trajectory not only reconfigures the relationship between objects and representation but also calls for a reassessment of the ways in which art, literature, and material culture intersect in constructing knowledge and experience.

For more than 20 years, literary criticism around the world has quietly launched a turn toward materiality. The concept of textual materiality extends to the field of art, triggering the "re-evaluation of the value of material" by artists and critics, making the "aesthetic system refocus on matter" and exploring possible forms from a new direction. Matter is no longer only the "carrier" of the work but also the "purpose" of the work (Zhang, 2015). Exploring the materials of art and discovering the beauty hidden in them, contemporary artists have moved from "abstract forms" to the exploration of "depth of matter". Williams does not believe that culture has a self-sufficient identity independent of the material world but recognizes the materiality of culture itself and the material characteristics of the production of cultural order(Williams 1977, p,128). He promoted the "rematerialization" of art and culture and advocated that "the inescapable materiality of works of art is the irreplaceable materialization of various experiences." In other words, the concept of materiality spreads from language and gradually penetrates into elements such as literary forms, text, media, material and context. The appearance, color, attribute, orientation and other unique material details of the object are endowed with cultural and aesthetic connotations and then with other material dimensions of literary activities, which are integrated.

With the rise of modernism from the late 19th to early 20th century, artists began to break through the traditional painting's single representation of matter, shifting their focus to the medium itself. Impressionism, as one of the pioneers in modern art, moved away from the realistic depiction of natural objects and instead sought to capture the sensory experience of the moment. Impressionist painters, such as Monet, emphasized the expressive qualities of pigments and brushstrokes. They revealed the texture and granular feel of pigments through rough brushstrokes and the stacking of colors, abandoning the pursuit of smoothness and fine detail in the representation of objects, a hallmark of traditional painting. This transformation marked the weakening of the representational function of "things," as artists began to prioritize their expressive potential as carriers of the medium.

From the consensus dimension, objects of art are no longer limited to "elite art" and "elegant art" in the study of art history but gradually expanded to "popular art" and "popular cultural images". Historian Guddy argued in his book The Theft of History that the West "stole" the history of the world to show that history was taken over by the West when history was conceptualized. The cultures of the European continent have always held that they have created a series of highly valuable systems. The scope of research in art history is no longer limited to Western art but extends to Asian, African, Latin American and other artistic images worldwide. The research methods are no longer limited to the theoretical methods of this discipline but select and absorb some methods and theoretical systems of other related disciplines, such as semiotics, phenomenology, hermeneutics, sociology, psychology, deconstructionism and other methodological theories. This scholastic phenomenon means that there is an intersection and integration of interdisciplinary studies and pluralism. These attributes do not describe just physical things but their existence in the whole structural relationship of study, which is reflected in the language used in painting. For example, everything used historically in the production of art has words to describe these methodologies, e.g., "paint", "canvas", "turpentine", and "picture frame". These words can be used to express various actions used in painting, and "drawing", "outlining", "sketching", "working up", "finishing", and "translating" can express different action words.

**3.2 Metapicture, Space, and Power: The Intertextuality of Images Across Time and Culture**

A metapicture must explain a painting both as an image-bearing object and as an image. In other words, a metapicture's 'self-knowledge of traditional Chinese painting must be twofold, in terms of both medium and representation. To stage such knowledge, a metapicture must be reflective, either reflecting on other pictures or reflecting on itself. The former is inter-referential; the latter, self-referential (Wu 1996:241).Through the combination of these two perspectives, a metapicture is explained not only through the analysis of words but also through the discussion of specific paintings. In the words of W.J.T. Mitchell, the purpose of metapainting is to "explain what a picture is, which can be said to be a display of its self-knowledge." In reality, a painting is always a specific thing, and it is always a material product of culture, that is, the material needed for works of art. In Wu Hong's book "The Double Screen: Medium and Representation in Chinese Painting", traditional Chinese painting includes a hand roll that is gradually unfolded on the table or a fan that can be folded and unfolded at will; the form of screen is both a painting medium and a construction with another purpose. A screen always has a clear material boundary and a quasiarchitectural form and always divides the space, so the painting plane is transformed into an image with an independent space for painting.

An independent screen can be in the form of a single screen standing on the ground or a folding screen that surrounds the seat. In Chinese, these are called screens or barriers, which have the meaning of a "covering object", so the screen is a partition that divides the space. The screen converts an abstract space into a specific location, which can be defined, controlled and acquired. Space is thus a political concept. For the emperor, the screen is not only an external object but also an extension of his own body. In ceremonies, the emperor faces others behind a screen, and the two penetrate each other to form a whole to exert control over others. When a series of historical screen images are connected into a mutually referenced network, the material boundaries of the images disappear, and their connection demonstrates intertextuality (Wu 1996:239). Foucault points out that the division of space and the control of space are important ways in which power is exercised. The emperor's position behind the screen reflects the relationship between "gaze" and control. The screen, as an extension of power, makes the emperor's authority more implicit and internalizes it into the spatial structure, thereby influencing the behavior of others through the layout of space(Foucault 1995:255).The intertextuality of the metapicture is precisely the embodiment of how power is reproduced through the transmission of knowledge across different historical and spatial contexts, as Foucault described. As a cultural symbol, the meaning and symbolism of the screen image are continuously reinterpreted over time, forming new interpretations and understandings in different historical periods. Through this intertextuality across time and space, the screen image not only conveys the historical power structure but also allows the audience, in different historical contexts, to continue receiving the same power messages through various social practices and cultural environments. The screen images in Dunhuang murals not only present the beauty of division and layering in composition, but also, through the orderly arrangement of space, implicitly embody the aesthetic concept of "order and harmony" in court etiquette. The hierarchical relationships of various figures, flowers, and decorative patterns in the images are a visual representation of the positions, identities, and authority in court rituals. The image of the ruler and their authority can exist for a long time and continuously in public spaces and memory, thus achieving the continuity and legitimation of power.

**4. The Transformation of Art: From Materiality to Power and Reproduction**

**4.1 From Materiality to Virtuality: The Evolution of Art, Media, and Cultural Symbolism**

A fundamental question regarding the origin of the work of art concerns its essence. The work of art is also a thing, and the concept of the thing can answer the question of the thing factor in works of art. Focusing on the thing factor in realistic works of art (Das Dinghafte), the thing itself must be maintained independently through self-sustenance (Insichruhen). The thing should be placed in its own characteristics; color, sound, hardness, and size are the qualities of the thing. Things are materials with forms. Artworks, such as artifacts, are composed of material. The essence of art may be that the truth of existence is set into the artwork by itself; in the original German, "Das Sich-ins-Werk-Setzen der Wahrheit des Seienden (Heidegger 1977:25)." Heidegger's assertion that "truth happens in art through poetic revealing" becomes particularly resonant in the context of NFT art, where the 'thingness' of the artwork is not grounded in physical presence but in coded uniqueness. This poetic unveiling does not emerge through material substance, but through blockchain inscription-a form of ontological grounding that exists in symbolic, not tactile, form. Art is historical, and historical art is the creative preservation of truth in artworks. A work of art shows the existence of the act of creation. As a work of art, an artwork is placed in a museum or exhibition hall. We will thus say that the work is established. As a self-designed work of truth, art is poetry. Not only is the creation of artworks poetic, but the preservation of artworks is also poetic in a unique way. The essence of art is poetry.

From the perspective of "Ereignis," artworks are not merely the ultimate manifestation of "material"; they are a dynamic process, a continuous reconstruction of the relationship between beings. Artworks evolve dynamically through audience interaction and shifting cultural contexts. The concept of "Ereignis" suggests that art is not a static material but a dynamic existence, constantly unfolding between history, truth, and human experience. This process of dynamic reconstruction transcends the limitations of linear understanding, making artworks no longer fixed "things" but active participants in an ongoing, nonlinear generation and interpretation of meaning.

The medium is no longer just the carrier and purpose of works. It appears in the art works of the 20th century in an unexpected way. Avant-garde artists make beautiful and unique use of media. The well-known painting style of "informal" artists is defined by a prevalence of splashing, cracking, piling, dripping and other techniques. The artist allows the material to develop freely, sprinkles colors and works of art onto the canvas as if he or she is not in pursuit of any form, making the canvas or sculpture a natural object (Eco 2004:164). Artists incorporate newspapers, hemp rope, and other non-art materials into artistic media, creating cubist collages that challenge conventional vision. Cubism's attention to painting forms is accompanied by an awareness of painting media. Picasso's "Still Life with Rattan Chairs" created in 1912 is a mixed-media painting. He mixes nonpainted materials with traditional painting canvases (oil cloth printed with rattan chair patterns is directly stitched onto the canvas and framed with a hemp rope). In contrast with gorgeous and exquisite picture frames, new painting media are thus created. Picasso told us clearly that he was playing with space and hallucination in art. What does the word "JOU" at the back of the picture mean? We may make a bold guess that "jouer" means "joking" in French, which is an expression of Picasso's joke about space. George Black made the same attempt. He was a collaborator of Picasso who worked in Cubism. Pablo Ruiz Picasso "Nature morte à la chaise canée" he introduced mechanically copied images and collages printed with woodgrain into painting instead of hand-drawn woodgrain patterns. An artist generally chooses art materials-consciously and/or unconsciously based on the medium's material characteristics, which are embedded in its specificity. The performance of materials in an artwork sets the stage on a number of levels for the success of a work; materials used are crucial carriers of meaning and evoke specific responses. as well as lay the foundation for an artwork's longevity, which may or may not be a consideration for a piece. The material performativity of paint has played an important part in creative strategies from its earliest applications; today, with its expanded meanings, it possesses new possibilities for creative strategies and conceptual discourse(Lawrence 2013:72).

It was not until 1917 when Marcel Duchamp called the artificial urinal "Fountain" that an anti-art work was made. After Duchamp's "ready-made" concept art, Andy Warhol began to paint cans from supermarkets. Warhol was an advocate and leader of pop art and the artist who had the greatest influence on pop art. He boldly tried letterpress printing, rubber or wood rubbing, gold foil technology, and photo projection, etc., among his various reproduction techniques. Robert Rauschenberg began to stick garbage on the wall; Marina Abramović even began to exhibit herself (performance art). In the world of art, the phenomenon of cultural recycling and recontextualization occurs repeatedly. Marcel Duchamp is famous for his early twentieth-century series of 'readymade' or 'already made' sculptures, which included a snow shovel, a urinal, a bicycle wheel and a comb, amongst other things. Duchamp's interventions using material culture led to new ways of conceiving art, of negating art, and of understanding objects. Marcel Duchamp formed a new perspective of conceiving art by negating art and understanding things with an intervention from material culture(Woodward 2007:105).

In the second half of the 20th century, the concept of materiality in postmodern art underwent further transformation. Andy Warhol's Brillo Boxes are a classic example of this shift. By converting everyday items produced through industrial production (such as detergent boxes) into works of art, Warhol dissolved the sanctity of the "original" in traditional art. During this period, the material medium shifted from "the represented" to "the act of representation" itself, and art was no longer merely a depiction of objects. Instead, through the existence and replication of these items, Warhol's work raised profound questions about art, consumption, and culture.

The materiality and symbolism of postmodern art have undergone profound changes. Artists no longer focus solely on the physical characteristics of objects; instead, they turn to the symbolic attributes of these items. Objects are no longer mere representations of the real world; they become manifestations of cultural and social phenomena through processes of replication, consumption, and commercialization. This shift highlights that, in a consumer society, the uniqueness and originality of objects are challenged by technical replication and standardized production. The boundary between art and objects becomes blurred: the meaning of an object is derived not only from its physical existence but also from its position in cultural and historical narratives. Postmodern artworks such as Warhol's Brillo Boxes transform mass-produced commodities into signifiers of consumer ideology, where the artwork no longer represents a symbol but becomes a critique of symbolization itself. These pieces do not merely carry metaphors-they interrogate the very machinery that produces metaphorical meaning in late-capitalist culture. This transformation provides the theoretical foundation for later art forms, such as NFT art, allowing digital works to transcend traditional art's dependence on uniqueness and materiality and enter a new category of symbolization and virtuality. Modernization made it possible to distinguish between the laws of external nature and the conventions of society. To be sure, the moderns have always recognized that they too had blended objects and societies, cosmologies and sociologies(Latour 1993:130).

NFT (Non-Fungible Token) is a digital asset based on blockchain technology that endows virtual artworks (such as digital images, videos, music, etc.) with uniqueness. In the traditional art world, uniqueness is often associated with physical works, such as paintings on canvases or sculptures, because they are tangible and unique. However, digital art is inherently reproducible, as digital images can be copied and shared without any loss of quality. NFT solves this problem through blockchain technology, giving digital artworks a unique identity and a verifiable ownership record based on an immutable blockchain system, allowing the owner of a virtual image to prove their exclusive ownership. This "uniqueness" challenges the reproducibility of traditional digital works, imbuing each NFT artwork with a "genuine" attribute, like traditional art pieces. The emergence of NFT art reveals the "dematerialization" paradox in digital art: virtual artworks seem to be freed from the constraints of matter, but they require vast material resources to support their existence (Bollmer 2018:179). By giving virtual artwork "uniqueness" to virtual artworks through blockchain technology, these works simultaneously expose their complex entanglement with the material world. This paradox challenges the boundaries of traditional theories regarding the materiality of art, prompting us to reconsider the relationship between art, matter, and the virtual in the digital age. Similarly, the rise of the internet has brought about new art media and forms of expression, such as NFT digital art forms based on blockchain technology—that result from the interaction between technology and material carriers.

**4.2 Art, Power, and Reproduction: The Shifting Boundaries of Meaning and Authority**

Artworks can also be seen as products where knowledge and power are intertwined. To reveal in all its purity the space in which discursive events are deployed not to attempt to re-establish it in isolation that nothing could overcome; it is not to close it upon itself; rather, it is to allow oneself the freedom to describe the interplay of relations within it and beyond it (Foucault 2002:32).At the same time, artworks can challenge and subvert established power structures. Some avant-garde artworks break traditional aesthetic norms and artistic concepts, prompting societal reflection and change. These works often express critiques and doubts about existing power structures through innovative material use or by breaking with conventional artistic techniques.

When image scientists start to study portraits, they usually compare the images they want to explain with text or other images. Some of the texts are to be found on images themselves, in the form of labels or inscriptions turning the image into what the art historian Peter Wagner calls an "iconotext" which may be "read" by the viewer literally as well as metaphorically. Other texts are selected by the historian to clarify the meaning of the image (Burke 2001:39). Progress in technical means has an impact on art production, the way art exists and art acceptance. Since the 20th century, the reproduction of art has occurred through technical means as noted by Benjamin. Film is a typical artform of mechanical reproduction, and there are new political and revolutionary functions of art in the era of mechanical reproduction. The disappearance of the aura around art in the era of mechanical replication occurs because the production and reproduction of art through technology have dispelled the uniqueness, mystery and distance of art (Benjamin 1936:II). After the invention of photography, a series of mechanical image technologies were developed, and the advent of the image era increased the scope of images and vision.

The significance of mechanical reproduction to the theory of mass culture is to find a basis for the legalization of mass culture as art. There is less elitism and more civilian color. The public is regarded as a consumer in the commercial sense and an admirer in the aesthetic sense. When John Carey tried to answer the question "what's the use of art?" He concluded, "It must be admitted that an object may be a work of art for one person, but not for another person. If you think it is, it is." Arthur C. Danto's "Art Final Conclusion" "Transformation of Ordinary Items" and "After the End of Art" were three essays that argued art is a certain historical stage. With the help of theoretical elaboration, artists are no longer the leaders of society but the embodiment of society. No one is an artist, and no one is not an artist (Danto 1997:67).

**5. Conclusion**

The historical trajectory of art, from its material origins to its contemporary digital manifestations, reveals a historically contingent interplay between materiality, discourse, and reproduction. Art has never been a static entity; rather, it has functioned as an epistemological apparatus, shaping and being shaped by evolving technological, ideological, and institutional frameworks. The interplay between representation and materiality—once grounded in tangible media such as sculpture, painting, and architecture—has been radically redefined in an era where digital technologies destabilize traditional hierarchies of authenticity and authorship. The destabilization of traditional artistic hierarchies in the digital era is not merely a form of liberation but unfolds alongside new regimes of control. While Walter Benjamin's discourse on mechanical reproduction critiques the erosion of artistic authenticity, blockchain-based NFT economies paradoxically reinstate scarcity through artificial means.

From a Foucauldian perspective, art is not merely an aesthetic pursuit but operates as a discursive formation where power is exercised through institutional frameworks, visibility, and cultural legitimization. The Renaissance atelier, the modernist avant-garde, and contemporary digital platforms each exemplify how artistic production is structured by economic, political, and cultural forces. The transformation of art in the digital age does not imply a complete dematerialization but rather reconfiguration within an expanding matrix of algorithmic regulation, blockchain infrastructures, and financial commodification. The digital turn in art does not eradicate the aura of the artwork but redistributes it across blockchain networks, where authenticity, ownership, and artistic intent are continuously negotiated within decentralized marketplaces.

Ultimately, the transformation of art is not merely a shift in medium but a fundamental redefinition of its ontological framework, encompassing questions of presence, originality, and reproduction. As art transitions from a physical object to a virtual construct, from a unique artifact to an infinitely reproducible entity, it challenges not only the boundaries of artistic practice but also the epistemological foundations upon which art history itself is built. The negotiation between materiality and immateriality, presence and absence, originality and replication remains at the core of artistic discourse, ensuring that art, as both a cultural artifact and a site of critical interrogation, continues to redefine itself in response to shifting technological and ideological landscapes.

1. **References**

ArtTactic. (2022). *Digital art and NFT collector survey*. Retrieved from https://arttactic.com/reports/digital-art-survey-2022

Benjamin, Walter. *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Translated by Harry Zohn, New York: Schocken Books, 1968.

Bennett, Jane.*Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.

Bollmer, Grant. *Theorizing Digital Cultures*. London:Sage, 2018.

Bredekamp, Horst. *Image acts: a systematic approach to visual agency*. Translated by Elizabeth Clegg, Berlin: De gruyter, 2018.

Burke, Peter. *Eyewitnessing The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence*. London: Reaktion Books, 2001.

Danto, Arthur Clement. *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997.

Davies, Penelope J. E., et al. *Janson's history of art: the western tradition Eighth Edition*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2011.

Eco, Umberto. *Storia della bellezza*. Milano: Giunti, 2004.

Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan, New York:Vintage Books, 1995.

Foucault, Michel. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*. Edited and translated by Colin Gordon, New York: Harvester Press, 1980.

Foucault, Michel. *The* *Archaeology of Knowledge*. Translated by A. M. Sheridan Smith, New York: Routledge, 2002.

Greenblatt, Stephen. *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980.

Heidegger, Martin. *Holzwege*. Frankfurt am main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1977.

Hiscox Online Art Trade Report. (2022). *Consumer attitudes towards online and digital art*. Retrieved from https://www.hiscox.co.uk/online-art-trade-report-2022

Latour, Bruno.*We Have Never Been Modern*. Translated by Catherine Porter, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993.

Lawrence, Sharon Orleans. *How the materiality of paint is intrinsic to the work of art*. New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2013.

NonFungible.com. (2021). *NFT market report 2021*. Retrieved from NonFungible.com database.
DappRadar. (2023). *NFT market overview 2023*. Retrieved from DappRadar analytics platform.
CryptoSlam. (2024). *NFT sales and statistics report*. Retrieved from CryptoSlam data repository.

Redström, Johan and Wiltse, Heather, eds. *Changing Things: The Future of Objects in a Digital World*. London: Bloomsbury, 2019.

Sigda, Lauren. “The Work of Art in the Age of Reproduction: In the Age of NFTs”. *The Macksey Journal*, Vol.3, No.81, 2022.

Sintonen, Sara. “From an experimental paper to a playful screen: How the essence of materiality modulates the process of creation”. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, Vol.51, No.4, pp.867-1435, 2020.

Taherdoost, Hamed. “Non-Fungible Tokens (NFT): A Systematic Review”.*Information*, Vol.14, No.1, p.26, 2023.

Williams, Raymond. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977.

Woodward, Ian. *Understanding Material Culture*. London: Sage Publications, 2007.

Wu, Hung. *The Double Screen Medium and Representation in Chinese* *Painting*. London: Reaktion Books, 1996.

Young, Robert, ed. *Untying the Text:A Post-Structuralist Reader.* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981.

Zhang, Jin. “On the relevance of literary objectivity criticism”. *Studies in Literary Theory* , No.3, 2015.

Zhang, Jin. *General Theory of Historical Poetics*. Guangzhou: Jinan University Press, 2013.

Zhang, Jin. *New historicism and historical poetics*. Beijing: People's Publishing House, 2021.

**Acknowledgement**

This research was supported by the Major Project of the National Social Science Foundation of China, "Sino-Foreign Interexchange of the Aesthetic Culture on Silk Road" (Project No.17ZDA272), granted to Professor Jin Zhang.