The Understanding of the Digital Image Through T.W. Adorno's notion of Mimesis

I. Traditional Images as representation

Representation has been used to describe the main characteristic of the image in Western tradition. An image is evaluated by analogy with the object being represented. Its origin started from ancient Greek naturalism which emphasized facsimile; the more an artwork looks like the object being represented, the closer it is to the standard of its aesthetics. The naturalistic character of image was revived during the Renaissance and continued to this century. In this historical tradition, the image was generally defined as the copy of the external appearance of things or as illusion or replicas of reality.

Contemporary scholar Christopher Prendergast in his book *The Triangle of Representation* elaborates the definition of representation in terms of "making present again and standing for" (5). First, "making present again" implies interrelated spatial and temporal present; the spatial present means a sense of putting before or there, and the temporal present has a sense of presenting there and now. This meaning of representation traces back in part from Latin *Repraesentare* which means "bringing to presence again," as the literal reappearance of an absent person or object and as a simulacrum or illusion as well. Second, "standing for" implies a principle of substitution. For instance, a present term "b" stands in for an absent term "a." This case of representation is exemplified in the linguistic sign as a phonic or graphic representation that stands for something else. According to Prendergast, while the first meaning of representation has only one kind of simulacrum that shows the illusion of presence, the second meaning of representation can produce many kinds of substitution that indicate another. Based on the second meaning,

the concept of representation can be extended and as a theory, even cover the whole culture (5).

The value of the represented image has been approached differently. Based on his ontological thought of the unique and unvarying realm of Forms, Plato in *The Republic* treated painting as far as possible from the realm of Forms:

> The work of the artist at the third remove from the essential nature of the things? Exactly. The tragic poet, too, is an artist who represents things; so this will apply to him: he and all other artists are, as it were, third in succession from the throne of truth. … Does painting aim at reproducing any actual object as it is, or the appearance of it as it looks? In other words, is it a representation of the truth or of a semblance? Of a semblance (Plato 65).

In Plato's perspective that an ontological value of a thing is determined by the closeness of Forms, a work of art is an image, representing only a small part of an object with no knowledge of the truth and furthermore, is a dangerous illusion in terms of deceiving people. However, Plato's assertive hierarchy between an origin and its copies has been criticized by postmodern philosophers Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze. Analyzing surrealist Rene Magritte's works, Foucault distinguishes "resemblance" and "similitude":

> Magritte dissociated similitude from resemblance, and brought the former into play against the latter. Resemblance has a "model," an original element that orders and hierarchizes the increasingly less faithful copies that can be struck from it. Resemblance presupposes a primary reference that prescribes and classes. The similar develops in series that have neither beginning nor end, that can be followed in one direction as easily as in another, that obey no hierarchy, but propagate

themselves from small differences among small differences. Resemblance serves

representation, which rules over it; similitude serves repetition, which ranges

across it. Resemblance predicates itself upon a model it must return to and reveal;

similitude circulates the simulacrum as an indefinite and reversible relation of the

similar to the similar. (Foucault 44)

Deleuze's concept of "simulacra" puts it in the same vein. He argues that while "the copy

is an image endowed with resemblance, the simulacrum is an image without

resemblance" (*The Logic of Sense* 257). "If it is true that representation has identity as its

element and similarity as its unit of measure, then pure presence such as it appears in the

simulacrum has the 'disparate' as its unit of measure-in other words, always a difference

of difference as its immediate element" (Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* 69). For

these two philosophers, a new mode of image, "copies without an original" or "the play

of copies" subverts the hierarchical relation between an origin and its copies,

emphasizing difference instead of similarity.

Aristotle, in his book *Poetics*, advocated a cognitive value in representation in that

recognizing likenesses in pictures gave intellectual pleasure and was involved in learning

something new about the object represented (69). The epistemological aspect of image is

re-evaluated by Michel Foucault. In his book *The Order of Things,* Foucault mentions

that image is branched from various specific similitude's (analogy) and holds the world

together with "figure of knowledge" (Mitchell 11). In the same position, art historian

E.H. Gombrich in his book *Art and illusion* emphasizes the epistemic function of image

since images look at the world and interpret it. According to him, images are a result of

the long process of diagrammatic representation and correction instead of representing an

actual representation of reality. To make images is not to produce visual experiences, but to re-composite a model of construction. In addition, this epistemic function of image is closely related to the aesthetical function of image which evokes a unique sense to the viewer. The close relationship between the visual representation and the aesthetical field of image gives it a unique position in expression and communication.

Based on the delineation above, an image exists in an analogical relation to an external object, and through representation, evokes to others instead of itself. Beyond what Plato defined as phantasm, the illusion of presence, the image in the contemporary era emphasizes discursive function, which used to be an area of literature, to understand a way of interpreting the world.

When the quality of the image in traditional Western aesthetics is understood as representation, it implies the split between subject looking at an image and an object represented on the image. This point is adjusted to different visual media, painting, photography, video, and film as well. In contrast, the digital image, what is called information stored in computers, is defined by its qualities as ease of access, manipulation, and reproduction, instead of representation. In addition, the digital image in new media art aims at interactivity which makes the participant immerse in it. In this process of immersion, the boundary between the participant and digital images collapses. These characteristics of the digital image seem to challenge the traditional criterion of images and need a new hermeneutic frame.

Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright in their book *Practice of looking* attempt to define the digital image in the perspective of representation. According to them, the digital image is an example of an icon in the context of Charles Sanders Pierce's notion of

semiotics (141). Pierce divides various kinds of representations into three categories; icon, index, and symbol. The icon is representation based on resemblance; the index is casual representation; and the symbol is conventional-based representation. The indexical representation is not based on similarity between an object and its represented image. Rather, it is interpreted through such as metonymy in which a part represents the whole. The symbolical representation is understood in relation to social conventions or rules. Since the digital image resembles real-life subjects, it is iconic representation.

This dissertation points out that to understand the digital image from the view of representation overlooks its unique characteristics. Furthermore, it limits our view to examine interdisciplinary relations among art, society and technology. Instead of placing the digital image in the traditional structure, this dissertation applies T.W. Adorno's notion of mimesis in order to develop the aesthetic qualities of the digital image.

II. T.W. The Adorno's notion of Mimesis

The defining of the origin and role of mimesis is an ongoing issue. The concept of mimesis in Western history doesn't have a core to understand it, but rather, it is in a transition influenced by philosophical thoughts and social movements in each period. The origin of mimesis came from the verb *mimeisthai* which indicates "either a recitation composed of several parts and delivered by one person, or a dramatic performance by two or more persons," and mimesis was received as a representational aspect and came to mean the representation of "something animate and concrete with characteristics that are similar to the characteristics of other phenomena" (Gebauer and Wulf, *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* 233). Plato defined mimesis as imitation, representation, and expression, and the production of appearances or illusions. As he criticized works of art in terms of

deceiving people with their illusionary skills, Plato considered how mimesis affects the attitude and behavior of people. He concludes that since mimesis permeates into people like an epidemic, it is dangerous and needs to be quarantined. In contrast, Aristotle's understanding of mimesis is to recreate existing objects and accept changes resulting from the process. For him, mimesis includes the possibility to beautify, improve, and generalize individual quality (Gebauer and Wulf, *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* 234-5). The Renaissance historicized mimesis instead of representation. The authors from the Renaissance saw themselves as successors to the ancient authors in a mimetic relationship and struggled to create their own form of personal expression. During the seventeenth century, mimesis returned its attributes to representation by being a constitutive element to express the supreme power of the state. In the nineteen century, the content of mimesis focused on the world of the bourgeois' life and emotion instead of a world of the political ideal. In the twentieth century, as modern art showed, the mimetic concept of mimesis became obsolete. Instead, mimesis regained its meaning through anthropological aspects in studying of human action, which focuses on social practice and interpersonal relations (Gebauer and Wulf, *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* 236-7).

Adorno in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* defines mimesis as "a trend which is deep-rooted in the living, and whose elimination is a sign of all development: the trend to lose oneself in the environment … the tendency to let oneself go and sink back into nature" (227). Instead of discussing mimesis in the traditional category of representation or imitation, Adorno regards it as a process of assimilating oneself to the environment. Michael Cahn in his article *Subversive mimesis* refines Adonro's notion of mimesis through the way Adorno uses the words, "anschmiegen" and "anbilden." According to

Chan, as "an" (anschmiegen and anbilden) shows, Adorno's notion of mimesis implies "onto" as a relationship of contiguity. Thus, Adorno's notion of mimesis does mean not mimesis of something as imitation, but the subject's adaptive and correlating behavior to objects (63). Cahn argues that "for him mimesis is a behavior which reaches towards the object, stands in a reflected immediacy to it, and thus it implies the archaic affinity between subject and object" (45). In addition, he emphasizes that mimesis in Adorno is understood as "identification with," not "identification of" in a behavioral and sensual level. "Identifying with" indicates "guided by the logic of the object," and "an attitude toward reality prior to the fixed opposition of subject and object" (Dialectic of Enlightenment 30, Aesthetic Theory 110). In the process of "identifying with," the demarcation between subject and object or inner and outer is dissolved.

Understanding history through the dialect between mimesis and rationality, Adorno in his book *Dialectic of Enlightenment* diagnoses the symptom of rationalistic mimesis, already begun in Homer's Odysseus: "The ratio which supplants mimesis is not simply its counterpart. The ratio is itself mimesis: mimesis unto death" (57). As a result of the reflection of ratioanlity, mimesis practices a fixed and identified identity.

> Mimesis imitates the environment, but false projection makes the environment like itself. For mimesis the outside world is a model which the inner world must try to conform to: the alien must become familiar: but false projection confuses the inner and outer world and defines the most intimate experiences as hostile. (187)

In front of rationalistic mimesis, objects of imitation once alive were no longer changeable or animated, but they became unified and dead.

In the dialect relation between instrumental rationality and mimesis, the subject, a conscious ego based on reason, turns its sight on the self and renders empowerment over domination. According to Adorno, it causes the reification of human relationships.

> Man's domination over himself, which grounds his selfhood, is almost always the destruction of the subject whose service it is undertaken; for the substance which is dominated, suppressed, and dissolved by virtue of self-preservation is none other than that very life as functions of which the achievements of self-preservation find their sole definition and determination: it is, in fact, what is to preserved (Adono *Dialectic of Enlightenment* 54-55).

Observing that the subject objectifies and abstracts objects, separating itself from them, Adorno mentions that "the subject, in fact, is object as well, but in the process of claming autonomy it has forgotten what constitutes it" (qtd. in Schultz 6).

According to Adonro, art assumes a mimetic attitude in terms of relating to its objects. Like mimesis, art is "an attitude toward reality distinct from the fixed antithesis of subject and object," and "nothing but makes itself like itself" (Adorno, Aesthetic Theory 109, 110). Artworks follow the logic of objects, do not imitate impulses of individuals nor those of the their authors because they, then, are determined as copies. For him, all works of art insist that "It out to be different" (qut. in Schultz 47).

In terms of interpreting Adorno's concept of mimesis, Gebauer and Wulf in their book *Mimesis* defines as a chance to undergo "vital experience" in that mimesis resists being reified and secures the "primacy of object" against the subject's claim to domination (286). Based on their interpretation, mimesis is a human impulse in terms of assimilating or accessing to the world and the Other, and in this process, the subject experiences the

ultimate indeterminacy of principles and the enigmatic character of thing. In other words, mimesis, as a sensuous access to the world and the Other, is the starting point for vital experiences and implies the possibility of producing difference by the subject's manifold and heterogeneous experiences.

III. The Digital Image as Adorno's notion of Mimesis

Adorno's notion of mimesis illuminates the aesthetic role of the digital image in new media art. Jill Scott's work, *Frontier of Utopia* (1995) (See Fig 1), is based on interactivity supported by a large archive of sounds, images, films, and personal objects from the lives of eight women. These eight women are all political idealists and came from different time zones in the past century. In as specially established octagonal environment, there are four computer terminals where suitcases and interactive touch screens are located and a dinner table where a large photo of all the eight women can be seen. The participant interacts with a single character through the four computer terminals or two characters through selecting them on the photo. The two selected characters meet across time and converse with each other by answering questions appearing on another screen. In this interactive environment, the participant enjoys nomadic visual choices and experiences desiring and designing various modes of utopia, by crossing time zones. As the aim of this work, Scott expects the participant "to integrate, to lose themselves, to become both an intimate subjective and an objective observer, as well as to become a player in the unlimited landscape of crossed and collapsed time" (Scott). The immersion of the subject to the flow of the digital image in Scott's work embodies what Adorno affirms through mimesis. Scott's attempt to dissolve the participant's body and her work together, exploring the participant's ideological

identification and levels of immersion simultaneously, is understood through Adorno's mimetic process. By assimilating to the world or Others, the subject has a chance to undergo the process of a non-identity of identity which opens the possibility of various experiences and as result, allows differences.

Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin in their book *Remediation* explain the characteristic of the digital media from the context of subjective presence. According to these two authors, to increase immediacy in digital media, the creator of digital media combines the two principles of romanticism and modernism; romanticism changed the emphasis on the world as object (mimesis) to the viewer as subject (expression), and modernism exposed "endless presence of the self" (234-5). To achieve self-presence, the distance between the objects of representation and the subject is erased in two ways; the viewer walks into a represented world, or the represented object comes up and surrounds the viewer. They assert that the technique of virtual reality makes the two ways possible, and furthermore, the subject experiences various points of view by contacting the multiple and mediated characters of the objects in a virtual space. Instead of following a single point of view, the subject understands itself by adapting to continuously changing points of view.

Beyond virtual reality, the new media artist has introduced "augmented reality." Virtual reality, coined by Jaron Lanier, is an artificial reality intended to immerse the users in a three-dimensional world generated by a computer and to allow them to interact with the virtual objects in that world. For full immersion, the users put on glasses, gloves or a head-mounted set. Using this equipment, the users can perceive the screen right in front of their eyes; as a result, VR is recognized as the most radical form of inserting the

users in a virtual environment. On the other hand, augmented reality, as well as immersive VR, appears on a more conventional flat screen, instead of creating a virtual environment. As a strategy, the augmented reality converges our perception in a conjoined space and time of real, surrogate, and virtual formation. This construct, simulating our synaesthesia, conjoins the real world and its inhabitants and augments the real world. According to Christiane Paul, the author of *The Digital Art*, virtual reality may become second nature in challenging "the basis of our concepts of perception and the dualism of flesh and spirit"; while VR constructs a seamless alternate world, the augmented reality clashes with the realities of physical location and perception (132).

American media artist Tamiko Thiel and Iranian-American media artist Zara Houshman's work *Beyond Manzanar* (2000) (See Fig. 2) is a projection of an interactive 3D world based on the actual location of Manzanar, the first internment camp built to incarcerate Japanese-Americans during World War II. The 3-D life-size image is projected on a wall in a dark space, and the participants are located inside the Manzanar Internment Camp. As they are navigating the camp using a joystick on a pedestal, they sense confinement emotionally. Their eyes see the passes from the valley, but they stand behind the fence and can go no further. At the heart of the piece lies a garden as an ancient form of virtual reality, an image of depicting the sacred islands and ponds of the Buddhist Western Paradise. In a constantly shifting environment, documental photographs from the camp are juxtaposed with Japanese scrolls and paintings, which contrasts a memory of cultural heritage with the reality of political injustice.

In order to explore the aesthetic value of the digital image embodying the augmented reality, this dissertation stirs up Adorno' intention of redeeming mimesis. Conceiving the

illusionary characteristic of artworks, Adorno attempts to find truth through art works. For him "the question of the truth of something made is one other than the question of semblance and the rescue of semblance as the semblance of the true" (*Aesthetic Theory* 113). Distinguishing aesthetic truth from discursive judgment, Adorno argues that "The definition of art is not fully encompassed by aesthetic semblance: Art has truth as the semblance of the illusionless" (132). He emphasizes that the experience of artwork as its true content is not void. Immersion in a three dimensional kinetic and architectonic space of *Manzanar* allows the bodies of the participants to become a part of the archival environment. The experience of changing points of view modulates the shifting deformations of the projected digital image. Adorno's term "semblance of illusionless," as a way of revealing truth, is sensed by the dematerialized conjugation of the participant's actuality and the immersive space.

Adotno's notion of mimesis indicates the assimilation of the subject to the Other. As the container of truth, artworks want the Other, and the elements of the Other are present in reality and enter a new constellation displacing themselves to find their right position (ibid). According to Adorno, artworks demonstrate this displacement to reality instead of imitating reality. Therefore, for him, in a sublimated sense, reality should imitate the artworks (ibid).

This dissertation understands that Adorner's notion of mimesis seeks individual idiosyncrasy to be free from the repression of identity and suggests a way to appreciate artworks as the hermeneutics of being, not the hermeneutics of text. As he anchors hope in imitating the being of nature to recover damaged society by rational instrumentality, the characteristics of the digital image, interactivity, immersion, and immediacy allow the

viewers to be aware of themselves through experiencing various points of view in an

augmented reality and to recognize difference derived from the experience.

Works citied

Adorno, Theodor W. <u>Aesthetic Theory</u>. Trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor. Minneapolis:

   University of Minnesota Press, 1997.

--- and Horkheimer, Max. <u>Dialectic Of Enlightenment</u>. Trans. John Cumming. New

   York: Continuum, 2000.

Bolter, Jay David and Grusin, Richard. <u>Remediation: Understanding New Media</u>.

   Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1999.

Cahn, Michael. "Subversive Mimesis: Adorno and the Modern Impasses of Critique."

   <u>Mimesis in Contemporary Theory: An Interdisciplinary Approach</u>. Ed. Mihai

   Sparious. Philadepphia, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1984.

Foucault, Michel. <u>THIS IS NOT A PIPE</u>. Trans. James Harkness. Berkely: University of

   California Press, 1983.

Gebauer, Gunter and Wulf, Christoph. <u>Mimesis: Culture-Art-Society</u>. Trans. Don

   Reneau. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992.

---. "Mimesis." <u>Encyclopedia of Aesthetics</u>. Ed. Kelly, Michael. New York: Oxford

   University Press, 1998.

Gilles Deleuze. The Logic of Sense. Trans. Mark Lester with Charles Stivale. New York:

   Columbia University Press, 1990.

---. <u>Difference and Repetition</u>. Trans. Paul Patton. New York: Columbia University Press,

   1994.

Gombrich, E.H. "Truth and the Stereotype: An Illusion Theory of Representation." <u>The</u>

   <u>Philosophy of the Visual Arts</u>. Ed. Philop Alperson. New York: Oxford University

   Press, 1992.

Halliwell, Stephe. <u>Artistotle's Poetics</u>. Chapel Hill : University of North Carolina Press,

    1986.

Jameson, Fredric. <u>Late Marxism: Adorno, or, The Persistence of the Dialectic</u>. New

    York: Verso, 1990.

Jay, Martin. "Mimesis and Mimetoloty: Adorno and Lacoue-Labarthe." <u>The Semblance</u>

    <u>of Subjectivity</u>, ed. Tom Huhn and Lambert Zuidervaart. Massachusetts: The MIT

    Press, 1997.

Mitchell, W.J.T. <u>Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology</u>. Chicago: The University of Chicago

    Press, 1986.

Plato. "Copy of Representation." <u>The Philosophy of the Visual Arts</u>. Ed. Philop

    Alperson. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.

Schultz, Karla L. <u>Mimesis on the Move: Theodor W. Adorno's Concept of Imitation</u>.

    New York: P. Lang, 1990.

Scott, Gill. "Crossing and Collapsing Time" <u>New Screen Media: Cinema/Art/ Narrative.</u>

    CD-ROM. Ed. Martin Rieser and Andrea Zapp. London: BFI Pub., 2002

Sinha, Amresh. "Adorno on Mimesis in Aesthetic Theory." <u>In Practice: Adorno, Critical</u>

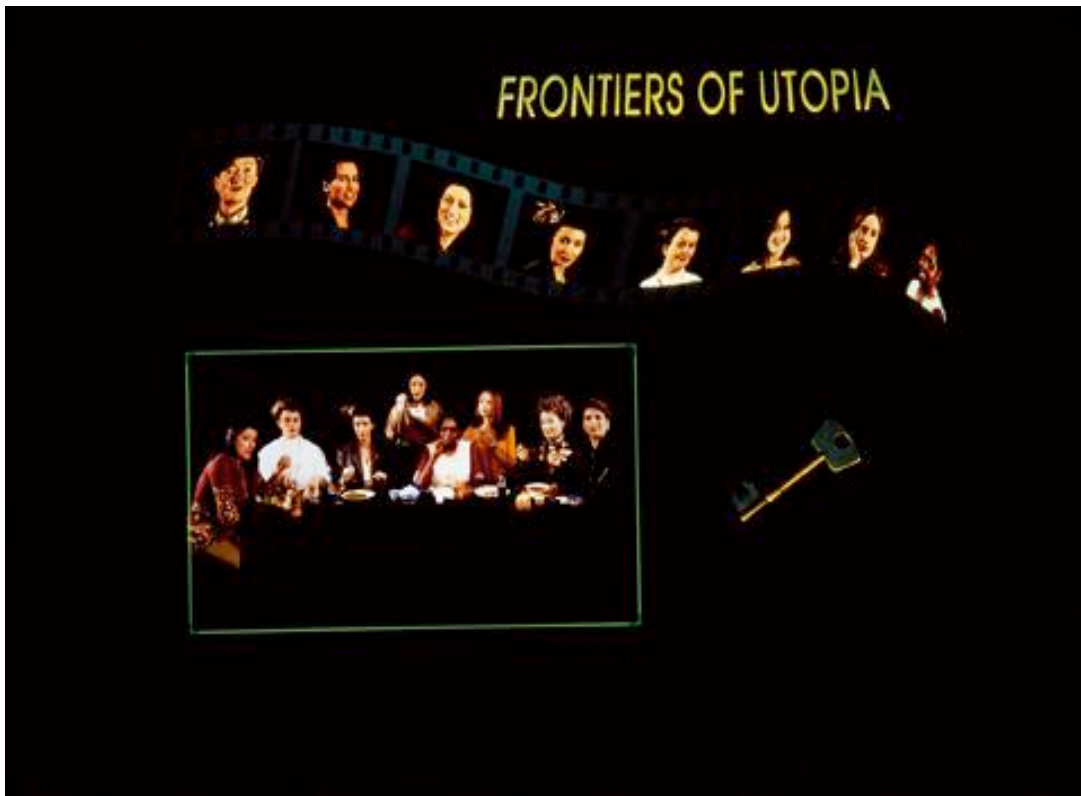   <u>Theory and Cultural Studies</u>. 145-159.

Fig. 1) Jill Scott. *Frontier of Utopia,* 1995.

Fig. 2) Tamiko Thiel and Zara Houshman. *Beyond Manzanar,* 2000.