

WALTER BENJAMIN, 1892-1940

“THE WORK OF ART IN THE AGE OF MECHANICAL REPRODUCTION”

Walter Benjamin Research Syndicate: <http://www.wbenjamin.org/walterbenjamin.html>

On “The Work of Art”: <http://www.geneseo.edu/~bicket/panop/benjamin.htm>

Essay on “Reproducibility”: <http://www.obsolete.com/artwork/reproducibility.html>

Benjamin was often funded by the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research. However, unlike some of the key figures of the Frankfurt School, who believe that cultural productions were little more than commodities that functioned in the service of capitalism, Benjamin believes that cultural productions, and the new media technologies that produced and distributed them, had emancipatory potential.

Benjamin committed suicide in Port Bou at the Spanish-French border, while attempting to escape from the Nazis, when it appeared that his party would be denied passage across the border to freedom. The rest of the group was allowed to cross the border the next day.

Presence, Aura, Authenticity, Ritual

“Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its **presence in time and space, its unique existence** at the place where it happens to be.” (50)

“The **uniqueness** of a work of art is inseparable from its being imbedded in the fabric of **tradition**. This tradition itself is thoroughly alive and extremely changeable. An ancient statue of Venus, for example, stood in a different traditional context with the Greeks, who made it an object of veneration, than with the clerics of the Middle Ages, who viewed it as an ominous idol. Both of them, however, were equally confronted with its uniqueness, that is, its aura. Originally the contextual integration of art in tradition found its expression in **the cult**.... [T]he unique value of the ‘authentic’ work of art has its basis in ritual, the location of its original use value.” (52)

cult value vs. exhibition value: “Today the cult value would seem to demand that the work of art remain hidden.... With the emancipation of the various art practices from ritual go increasing opportunities for the exhibition of their products.” (53)

Reproduction & The Shattering of Aura

“In principle a work of **art has always been reproducible**” (49) – e.g., founding, stamping, woodcut, print, engraving, etching, lithography, photography

“In photography, exhibition value begins to displace cult value all along the line.” – but cult value did not recede quietly; **early photographs retained some measure of “aura”** by focusing on the human countenance – But as photography took on other subjects, “the exhibition value for the first time shows its superiority to the ritual value.” Photography took on new purposes -- to establish evidence, for instance – and necessitated new kind of approach; contemplation is no longer appropriate. (54)

“The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity.... Confronted with its *manual reproduction*, which was usually branded a forgery, the original preserved all its **authority**; not so *vis a vis technical reproduction*. The reason is twofold. First, process reproduction is **more independent of the original** than manual reproduction.... Secondly, technical reproduction **can put the copy of the original into situations which would be out of reach for the original itself**. Above all, it enables the original to **meet the beholder halfway**, be it in the form of a photograph or a photograph record.” (50)

“...for the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction **emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual**. To an ever greater degree the work of reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility. From a photographic negative, for example, one can make any number of prints; to ask for the ‘authentic’ print makes no sense. But the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. **Instead of being** based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice – politics.” (53) Decay of aura → democratization of art

“...what is really jeopardized...is the **authority** of the object. / One might subsume the eliminated element in the term ‘**aura**’ and go on to say: that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art.... One might generalize by saying: the technique of reproduction **detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition**. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence. And in **permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation**, it reactivates the object reproduced. These two processes lead to a tremendous **shattering of tradition** which is the observe of the contemporary crisis and the renewal of mankind.” (51)

Film & New Modes of Cultural Production

Film has transformed stage performance and audience reception of that performance.

“The **film** responds to the shriveling of aura with an artificial build-up of the ‘personality’ outside the studio. The cult of the movie star, fostered by the money of the film industry, preserves not the unique aura of the person but the ‘**spell of the personality**,’ the phony spell of a commodity.” (57)

“**The camera introduces us to unconscious optics** as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses” (61): “With the close-up, space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended. The enlargement of a snapshot does not simply render more precise what in any case was visible, though unclear: it reveals entirely new structural formations of the subject. So, too, slow motion not only presents familiar qualities of movement but reveals in them entirely unknown ones ‘which, far from looking like retarded rapid movements, give the effect of singularly gliding, floating, supernatural motions.’” (60-1)

“**Magician and surgeon** compare to **painter and cameraman**. The painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, the cameraman penetrates deeply into its web. There is a tremendous difference between the pictures they obtain. That of the painter is a total one, that of the cameraman consists of **multiple fragments** which are assembled under a new law. Thus, for contemporary man the representation of reality by the film is incomparably more significant than

that of the painter, since it offers, precisely because of the thoroughgoing permeation of reality with mechanical equipment, **an aspect of reality which is free of all equipment.**" (59)

"...in the studio the mechanical equipment has penetrated so deeply into reality that its pure aspect freed from the foreign substance of equipment is the result of a special procedure, namely, the shooting by the specially adjusted camera and the mounting of the shot together with other similar ones. **The equipment-free aspect of reality** here has become the **height of artifice...**" (58)

Mass Reception

"Painting simply is in no position to present an object for simultaneous collective experience, as it was possible for architecture at all times, for the epic poem in the past, and for the movie today... / Although paintings began to be publicly exhibited in galleries and salons, there was no way for the masses to organize and control themselves in their reception." (59-60)

Distracted Reception

"During long periods of history, the mode of human sense perception changes with humanity's entire mode of existence. The manner in which human sense perception is organized, the medium in which it is accomplished, is determined not only by nature but by historical circumstances as well." (51)

- Remind you of anyone? McLuhan, maybe?

Benjamin turns to architecture to illustrate an "active" sort of distracted reception. Architecture functions as a paradigm, not as something whose reception has been affected by new media technologies, but as "the prototype of a work of art the reception of which is consummated by a **collectivity in a state of distraction**" (62).

The architectural model allows Benjamin to **disengage perception from the exclusively visual**. Architecture, he says, can be "appropriated in a twofold manner: **by use and by perception – or rather, by touch and by sight...** Tactile appropriation is accomplished not so much by attention as by **habit**. As regards architecture, habit determines to a large extent even optical reception. The latter, too, occurs much less through rapt attention than by **noticing the object in incidental fashion**" (63). This "tactile" form of reception involves a kind of "unconscious intimacy" (Stan Allen, "Dazed and Confused," *Assemblage* 27, p. 48). Habitual use trains people to become intelligent users of a space, viewers of a film, readers of a text, etc.

"This mode of appropriation, developed with reference to architecture, in certain circumstances acquires canonical value. For **the tasks which face the human apparatus of perception at the turning points of history cannot be solved by optical means**, that is, by contemplation, alone. They are **mastered gradually by habit**, under the guidance of tactile appropriation" (63).

"[T]he ability to master certain tasks in a state of distraction proves that their solution has become a matter of habit. Distraction as provided by art presents a covert control of the extent to which new tasks have become soluble by apperception. Since, moreover, individuals are tempted to avoid such tasks, art will tackle the most difficult and most important ones where it is able to mobilize the

masses. Today it does so in the film. **Reception in a state of distraction**, which is increasing noticeably in all fields of art and is symptomatic of profound changes in apperception, **finds in the film its true means of exercise**. The film with its shock effects meets this mode of reception half-way. The film makes the cult value recede into the background not only by **putting the public in the position of the critic**, but also by the fact that at the movies **this position requires no attention**. The public is an examiner, but an absent-minded one" (63).

"Thus, the **distinction between author and public is about to lose its basic character**. The difference becomes merely functional; it may vary from case to case. At any moment the reader is ready to turn into a writer."

"The painting invites the spectator to contemplation; before it the spectator can abandon himself to his associations. Before the movie frame he cannot do so. No sooner has his eye grasped a scene than it is already changed. It cannot be arrested." This is the "**shock effect of the film**," which, Benjamin advises, should be "cushioned by heightened presence of mind" (62)

"Mechanical reproduction of art **changes the reaction of the masses toward art**. The reactionary attitude toward a Picasso painting changes into the **progressive reaction toward a Chaplin movie**. The progressive reaction is characterized by **the direct, intimate fusion of visual and emotional enjoyment with the orientation of the expert**. Such fusion is of great social significance. The greater the decrease in the social significance of an art form, the sharper the distinction between criticism and enjoyment by the public. The conventional is uncritically enjoyed, and the truly new is criticized with aversion." (59)

It is commonly believed that "the masses seek distraction whereas art demands concentration from the spectator." But does this "distracted" state provide a platform for analysis of the film? "**A man who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it**. He enters into this work of art the way legend tells me of the Chinese painter when he viewed his finished painting. In contrast, **the distracted mass absorbs the work of art**." (62)

Mechanical reproduction has stripped art of its "authenticity" (which Benjamin links to authority and history), its singularity, its "aura" (a product of "distance") – and, in the process, demystifies the process of art-making and increases art's accessibility. Ultimately, mechanical reproduction makes possible the democratization and politicization of art.