

The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction

by Erik Larsen

Introduction and Historical Information:

Despite its relative brevity, Walter Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," continues to inspire significant scholarly attention as a major work in the history of modern aesthetic and political criticism. The essay is credited with developing an insightful interpretation of the role technological reproduction plays in shaping aesthetic experience; more specifically, Benjamin catalogues the significant effects of film and photography on the decline of autonomous aesthetic experience. After fleeing the Nazi government in 1933, Benjamin moved to Paris, from where he published the first edition of "Work of Art" in 1936 (Brodersen XV). This publication appeared in French translation under the direction of Raymond Aron in volume 5, no. 1 of the Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung. Benjamin subsequently rewrote the essay and after editorial work by Theodore and Margarethe Adorno it was posthumously published in its commonly recognized form in his Schriften of 1955 (Wolin 183-4).

Basic Themes and Arguments:

Benjamin begins his essay by briefly distinguishing his categories from traditional aesthetic values, those of "creativity and genius, eternal value and mystery" (218). In contrast, "Work of Art" relates these tendencies to bourgeois and fascist ideologies and to the conditions, inevitably generated out of capitalism itself, which provoke "revolutionary demands in the politics of art" (217-8). In order to catalogue and ultimately subvert classical and Romantic aesthetic ideals, Benjamin describes the process by which modern technological reproduction strips these institutions and their iconic artworks of their aesthetic authority. Benjamin claims that in times past the role of art has been to provide a magical foundation for the cult. Here the artwork's use value was located in its central position within ritual and religious tradition (223-4). A statue or idol conveyed a sense of detached authority, or frightening magical power, which inhered in (and only in) that particular historical artifact. The reproduction in mass of such an item would have been unthinkable because it was its unique singularity that produced the sacrality of the ritual.

In order better to describe this illusive quality Benjamin introduces the concept of the "aura." As the term implies, the aura includes the atmosphere of detached and transcendent beauty and power supporting cultic societies. It also includes the legitimacy accorded to the object by a lengthy historical existence. Benjamin writes: "the authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced" (221). In order to clarify the idea he compares it to the experience of natural phenomenon: "we define the aura of the later as the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be. If, while resting on a summer afternoon, you follow with your eyes a mountain range on the horizon or a branch which casts its shadow over you, you experience the aura of those mountains, of that branch" (222-3). Benjamin's example is noteworthy because, as with the cultic artifact, the aura of the mountains seems

to rest on something autonomous and free from human intervention. The statue is not like any other object produced or used within a society; it appears free from the taint of ideological control or human interference, as though its power, like that of the mountain, issues independently from within.

The coming of modernity and the disappearance of the cult only partially signal the end of auratic art. Benjamin recognizes in modern art's emphasis on autonomy a lingering cult of the aura. Specifically, the *L'art pour l'art* movement preserved and developed the sense of autonomy and distance native to ancient religious works (224). In fact, it could be said that Romantic and symbolist aesthetic ideals, derived partially from Kant's apotheosis of the artwork's autonomy, represent an extreme attempt to indemnify the aura. For example, Mallarmé's vision of a "pure" artwork is of something utterly detached from everyday reality or social and political influences (Melberg 100). Much of nineteenth-century art and aesthetics thus represent a conscious attempt to defend the special status of the artwork from the banality of bourgeois capitalism. More specifically, the cult of "pure" art is a response to the mechanical reproduction of artworks that threatens to strip them completely of their aura.

Benjamin acknowledges the reality of artistic reproduction throughout history, although he suggests that mechanical reproduction introduced an entirely new and revolutionary change in the experience of the artwork (218). With mechanical reproduction, which appears in its most radical forms in film and photography, millions of images of an original are circulated, all of which lack the "authentic" aura of their source. This process both affects and is the effect of changing social conditions in which all previously unique and sacred institutions have become equal (223). The general willingness to accept a reproduction in place of the original also signifies an unwillingness to participate in the ritualistic aesthetics and politics of earlier times. For example, a photograph or film of a Catholic cathedral denudes its unique aura, transforming the role of participant into that of a spectator or possibly a detached commentator.

Film

Although Benjamin discusses photography briefly, his argument focuses primarily on the revolutionary potential of film as a mode of mechanical reproduction. The film actor, unlike stage performers, does not face or respond to an audience. The audience's view also becomes synonymous with the imperious perspective accorded to the camera. The net effect of these innovations is to place the viewer in the impersonal position of critic—something prior cultic experiences of art would never have allowed (229). The prevalence of film, as well as other mechanical reproductions, also creates a culture of minor experts ready to judge art rather than lose themselves in participatory ritual (231). Benjamin also notes that film relies on a series of cut and spliced images that must be assembled to form an aesthetic whole. Like Dadaist painting, film's swift juxtapositions and movements strike the viewer violently, disrupting contemplation and easy consumption of the image (238). Susan Buck-Morss develops this point further, commenting that for Benjamin art must "restore the instinctual power of the human bodily senses for the sake of humanity's self-preservation, and to do this, not by avoiding the new technologies, but by passing through them" (5).

The deep political and social significance of these reflections are developed briefly in Benjamin's epilogue, wherein he recognizes in fascism a final and terrible instantiation of the *L'art pour l'art* movement. As a form of extreme capitalism, fascism ultimately does not alter the structure of property relationships. Instead it substitutes aesthetic expression into the world of politics, thus supposedly allowing the masses the right to self-expression. The result is a reinstatement of the aura and cultic values into political life, a process which inevitably ends in war (241-2). In a chilling final paragraph Benjamin suggests that self-alienation within fascism has become so extreme that the destruction of humanity becomes an aesthetic experience. In response to this total aestheticization of politics, Benjamin writes that communism responds in a supposedly positive gesture by "politicizing art" (242).

Reception and Interpretation

Numerous scholarly articles and books continue to focus on Benjamin's artwork essay, with a mixture of positive and negative responses indicative of its general readership over many years. Ian Knizek, for example, criticizes Benjamin's essay by suggesting that the aura could be transferred effectively to the reproduction (361). Adorno similarly criticized the essay by pointing to the manner in which modern modes of reproduction produce less rather than more critical citizens. He also suggested that in certain instances the autonomous work of art excludes the aura and produces greater self-rationalization (Wolin 193-4). Other more recent critical work has explored Benjamin's arguments in the context of contemporary debates about the unprecedented levels of participation in art that novel forms of electronic media offer (Ziarek 209-25). Generally speaking, the essay continues to play a significant role in understanding how technology contributes to a de-aestheticization of the artwork in modernity. However, its relatively optimistic attitude towards technology and media, one not shared by many of Benjamin's contemporaries, has been linked by Miriam Hansen to that of the avant-garde aesthetics of the 1920s (181-2).

Works Cited:

Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. Ed. Hannah Arendt. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1968.

Brodersen, Momme. *Walter Benjamin: A Biography*. Ed. Martin Derviş. Trans. Malcom R. Green and Ingrida Ligers. New York: Verso, 1996.

Buck-Morss, Susan. "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered." *October* 62 (1992): 3-41.

Hansen, Miriam. "Benjamin, Cinema, and Experience: 'The Blue Flower in the Land of Technology.'" *New German Critique* 40 (1987): 179-224.

Knizek, Ian. "Walter Benjamin and the Mechanical Reproducibility of Art Works Revisited." *British Journal of Aesthetics* 33 (1993): 357-66.

Melberg, Arne. "The Work of Art in the Age of Ontological Speculation: Walter Benjamin Revisited." Walter Benjamin and Art. Ed. Andrew Benjamin. New York: Continuum, 2005. 93-107.

Wolin, Richard. Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption. New York: Columbia UP, 1982.

Ziarek, Krzysztof. "The Work of Art in the Age of its Electronic Mutability." Walter Benjamin and Art. Ed. Andrew Benjamin. New York: Continuum, 2005. 209-25.