WALTER BENJAMIN
"THE WORK OF ART IN THE AGE OF MECHANICAL REPRODUCTION" (1939)

Benjamin begins by pointing out that Marx's "critique of the capitalistic mode of production" (217) showed that it would not only "exploit the proletariat with increasing intensity, but ultimately . . . create conditions which would make it possible to abolish capitalism itself" (217). Because changes in the ideological superstructure are slower than those in the economic base, it "has taken more than half a century to manifest in all areas of culture the change in the conditions of production. Only today can it be indicated what form this has taken" (218). Benjamin believes that it is possible to formulate "theses about the developmental tendencies of art under present conditions of production" (218). These "brush aside a number of outmoded concepts, such as creativity and genius, eternal value and mystery" (218) and introduce new ones "useful for the formulation of revolutionary demands in the politics of art" (218).

Section I:

Here, Benjamin contends that a "work of art has always been reproducible" (218) in that human artifacts "could always be imitated by men" (218). "*Mechanical* reproduction of a work of art, however, represents something new" (my emphasis; 218). In ancient Greece, there were only two ways of "technically reproducing works of art" (218): "founding and stamping" (218). "With the woodcut graphic art became mechanically reproducible" (218). Later, printing made possible the "mechanical reproduction of writing" (218-219). Even later, the woodcut was supplemented by "engraving and etching" (219) and "lithography" (219) which "enabled graphic art to illustrate everyday life" (219). This was followed by "photography " (219) and the "sound film" (219) which "freed the hand of the most important artistic functions which henceforth devolved only upon the eye looking into a lens" (219). By 1900, Benjamin argues, "technical reproduction had reached a standard that . . . permitted it to reproduce all transmitted works of art and thus to cause the most profound change in their impact upon the public" (219). Benjamin is interested in the "nature of the repercussions" (220) which the "reproduction of works of art and the art of the film" (220) have had on "art in its traditional form" (220).

Section II:

Here, Benjamin contends that even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art lacks one thing: "its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be" (220). It is precisely this "unique existence" (220) which was the most precious quality of the original work of art and which "determined the history to which it was subject through the time of its existence" (220), including changes in its "physical condition" (220) and "changes in its ownership" (220). Benjamin's contention is that the "presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity" (220) which is thus outside the sphere of and is jeopardised by "reproducibility" (220). Benjamin points out that 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). Benjamin calls what is lost in all this the work's "aura" (221):

> 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. . . . [This leads] to tremendous shattering of tradition which is the obverse of the contemporary crisis and renewal of mankind. (221)

The most "powerful agent" (221) in this regard is film whose "destructive, cathartic aspect" (221) consists n the "liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage" (221). All "legends, all mythologies and all myths, all founders of religion, and the very religions" (222) are thereby exposed and deconstructed.

Section III:
Here, Benjamin argues that the "mode of human sense perception changes with humanity's entire mode of existence" (222): the "manner in which human sense perception is organised, the medium in which it is accomplished, is determined not only by nature but by historical circumstances as well" (222). Changes of perception express, Benjamin argues, "social transformations" (222). His contention here is that "changes in the medium of contemporary perception can be comprehended as decay of the aura" (222) for which there are discernible "social causes" (222). The concept of the aura is not limited to "historical objects" (222) but are applicable to "natural ones" (222) as well. He defines the aura of natural objects as the "unique phenomenon of distance" (222): the further something is away from you, the greater its aura is. However, the "increasing significance of the masses in contemporary life" (223), especially their desire to "bring things 'closer' spatially" (223) and their desire to overcome the "uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction" (223) in "picture magazines and newsreels" (223). If "uniqueness and permanence" (223) are qualities that inhere in the "image seen by the naked eye" (*223), "transitoriness and reproducibility" (223) are the inevitable concomitants of the images reproduced in magazines and on screen. Benjamin's claim is that to "pry an object from its shell, to destroy its aura, is the mark of a perception whose 'sense of the universal equality of things' has increased to such a degree that it extracts it even from a unique object by means of reproduction" (223).

Section IV:
Here, Benjamin argues that the "uniqueness of a work of art is inseparable from its being imbedded in the fabric of tradition" (223) which is itself "thoroughly alive and extremely changeable" (223). Venus "stood in a different traditional context" (223) for the Greeks than it did for clerics in the Middle Ages. Whatever the differences in tradition, the value of the statue consisted in its uniqueness. The "earliest art works originated in the service of a ritual" (223), first, magical and, later, religious in nature. This was its "original use value" (224). Later, it was absorbed into the "secular cult of beauty" (224) which evolved during the Renaissance that culminated in the nineteenth century in 'l'art pour l'art' movement, that "theology of art" (223) which "denied any social function of art" (224). What this reveals is that "for the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual" (224). In this way, the "criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production" (224) and the "total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice – politics" (224).

Section V:
Here, Benjamin writes that works of art are "received and valued on different planes" (224). At one pole, its "cult value" (224) is emphasised, while at the other it is the "exhibition value of the work" (224) which is stressed. At first what mattered was the "existence" (225) of those "ceremonial objects destined to serve in a cult" (224), "not their being on view" (225). However, with the "emancipation of the various art practices from ritual go increasing opportunities for the exhibition of their products" (225). Indeed, with the "different methods of technical reproduction of a work of art, its fitness for exhibition increased to such an extent that the quantitative shift between its two poles turned into a qualitative transformation of its nature" (225). In other words, "by the absolute emphasis on its exhibition value the work of art becomes a creation with entirely new function " (225), the best examples of which are photography and film.

Section VI:
It is in photography, Benjamin argues here, that "exhibition value begins to displace

cult value" (225), though the latter persists in the form, for example, of the photographic portrait which is nothing less than the "cult of remembrance of loved ones" (226). However, "as man withdraws from the photographic image, the exhibition value for the first time shows its superiority to the ritual value" (226). Photographs "become standard evidence for historical occurrences, and acquire a hidden political significance" (226) which requires a "specific kind of approach; free-floating contemplation is not appropriate to them. They stir the viewer; he feels challenged by them in a new way" (226).

Section VII:

Here, Benjamin argues that the debate in the nineteenth century concerning the "artistic value of painting versus photography" (226) was a "symptom of a historical transformation" (226) which was beyond the ken of contemporaries. Benjamin's point is that when the "age of mechanical reproduction separated art from its basis in cult, the semblance of its autonomy disappeared forever" (226), an understanding of which was not available to persons at the time. What was far more important, according to Benjamin, than asking "whether photography is an art" (227) is how photography "transformed the entire nature of art" (227). Moreover, the "difficulties which photography caused traditional aesthetics were mere child's play as compared to those raised by film" (227). In an effort to classify film as an art, the earliest theoreticians of film strove to "read ritual elements into it" (227) and even "sacred" (228) or "supernatural" (228) meanings into it.

Section VIII:

There is a difference between the presentation of the "artistic performance of a stage actor" (228) and "that of the screen actor" (228). The camera involved in film-making "need not respect the performance as an integral whole" (228) and "continually changes its position with respect to the performance. The sequence of positional views which the editor composes from the material supplied him constitutes the completed film" (228). Moreover, the film actor does not present his performance to an audience directly as a result of which there develops a distance between audience and actor, the former taking up the "position of a critic" (226). The audience identifies with the camera, not the actor: this is "not the approach to which cult values may be exposed" (227).

Section IX:

Here, Benjamin points out that in film, "man has to operate with his living person, yet foregoing its aura. For aura is tied to his presence, there can be no replica of it. The aura which on stage emanates from Macbeth, cannot be separated for the spectators from that of the actor" (229). However, given the nature of film-making, the "aura that envelops the actor vanishes, and with it the aura of the figure he portrays" (229). This is because on stage, the actor "identifies himself with the character of his role" (230) which is something denied the film actor whose "creation is by no means all of a piece; it is composed of many separate performances" (230). In other words, what appears to the viewer as a "rapid and unified scene" (230) is actually the function of a "sequence of separate shootings" (230). This is why, for Benjamin, film exemplifies that "art has left the realm of the 'beautiful semblance'" (230).

Section X:

Here, Benjamin contends that the "feeling of strangeness that overcomes the actor before the camera" (230) is similar to the "estrangement felt before one's own image in the mirror" (230). The difference is that the "reflected image has become separable, transportable" (230), becoming located in the hands of the public. The actor realises that "ultimately he will face the public, the consumers who constitute the market"

(231) and this market “where he offers not only his labour but also his whole self, his heart and soul” (231) is not within his control and thus promotes anxiety on his part. The film industry “responds to this shrivelling of the aura with an artificial build-up of the ‘personality’ outside the studio” (231) in the form of the “cult of the movie star” (231) which “preserves not the unique aura of the person but the ‘spell of the personality,’ the phony spell of a commodity” (231). For this reason, though film may on occasion promote a “revolutionary criticism of social conditions” (231), given that capitalism “sets the fashion” (231), there is as a rule no other revolutionary merit” (231) to modern film than the “promotion of a revolutionary criticism of traditional concepts of art” (231). Moreover, film has blurred the boundaries between film-makers and the public, the newsreel in particular has offered “everyone the opportunity to rise from passer-by to movie extra” (231). “Any man today can lay claim to being filmed” (231). A comparable blurring boundaries is obvious recently between the writer and the reader where, through the newspaper and its opening up to the point of view the reader in the form of letters to the editor, etc. has caused the “distinction between author and public . . . to lose its basic character” (232). “At any moment the reader is ready to turn into a writer” (232) and “[l]iterary license is now founded on polytechnic rather than specialised training and thus becomes common property” (232). In the arena of film, “transitions that in literature took centuries have come about in a decade” (232).

Section XI:
In shooting a film, Benjamin argues, “it is impossible to assign to a spectator a viewpoint which would exclude from the actual scene such extraneous accessories as camera equipment. Lighting machinery, staff assistance, etc.” (232-233). This is what differentiates between a filmed scene and one on stage. The latter fosters an illusion of reality, the former’s “illusionary nature is that of the second degree, the result of cutting” (233). The opposition between film and painting is even more revealing: like the magician, the painter “maintains in his work a natural distance from reality” (233) while 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” (233-234).

Section XII:
Here, Benjamin argues that the mechanical reproduction of art “changes the reaction of the masses toward art” (234). Their reaction to a movie is characterised by the “direct intimate fusion of visual and emotional enjoyment with the orientation of the expert” (234). Conventional works of art are “uncritically enjoyed” (234) while the “truly new is criticised with aversion” (234). “With regard to the screen, the “critical and the receptive attitudes of the public coincide” (234) because “individual reactions are predetermined by the mass audience response” (234). By contrast, paintings are not intended for “simultaneous collective experience” (234), as is the case with architecture, epic poems and, later, movies. Even when paintings came in more recent years to be publicly exhibited, Benjamin argues, this still did not facilitate mass viewings.

Section XIII:
Here, Benjamin contends that the “camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses” (237). Both have changed our mode of perception, the way in which we view reality by bringing about a “deepening of apperception” (235):

> By close-ups of the things around us, by focusing on hidden details of familiar objects, by exploring commonplace milieus under the ingenious guidance of the camera, the film, on the one hand, extends our

> comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives; on the other hand, it manages to assure us of an immense and unexpected field of action. . . . With the close-up, space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended. The enlargement of a snapshot . . . 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. . . . Evidently a different nature opens itself to the camera than opens to the naked eye – if only because unconsciously penetrated space is substituted for a space consciously explored. (236)

Section XIV:
Here, Benjamin asserts that one of the “foremost tasks of art has always been the creation of a demand which could be only satisfied later” (237). In other words, a “certain art form aspires to effects which could be fully obtained only with a changed technical standard, that is to say, in a new art form” (237). Dadaism, for example, was misunderstood in its own time but “attempted to create by pictorial – and literary – means the effects which the public today seeks in the film” (237). “What they intended and achieved was a relentless destruction of the aura of their creations, which they branded as reproductions with the very means of production” (237-238), making “works of art the centre of a scandal” (238) in order to “outrage the public” (238). For them, the work of art was an “instrument of ballistics. It hit the spectator like a bullet, it happened to him” (238). A similar effect is noticeable in film in which the “changes of place and focus which periodically assail the spectator” (238) constantly interrupts his / her “process of association” (238). This constitutes the “shock effect of the film” (238): where before a painting, a spectator can abandon himself to his thoughts, this is not the case with movies: no “sooner has his eye grasped a scene than it is already changed” (238).

Section XV:
Here, Benjamin argues that the “greatly increased mass of participants has produced a change in the mode of participation” (239). Basically, Benjamin points out, the complaint has often been that the “masses seek distraction whereas art demands concentration” (239). “Distraction and concentration form polar opposites . . .: a man who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it [but] . . . the distracted mass absorbs the work of art” (239). Architecture, he argues, “has always represented the prototype of a work of art the reception of which is consummated by a collectivity in a state of distraction” (239). Art forms are not eternal but buildings are an exception in that the “human need for shelter is lasting” (240). Architecture is the most ancient art and sheds much light on “every attempt to comprehend the relationship of the masses to art” (24). Buildings are apprehended in two ways: “by use and by perception . . . by touch and sight” (240). “On the tactile side there is no counterpart to contemplation on the optical side. Tactile appropriation is accomplished not so much by attention as by habit” (240) which in turn “determines to a large extent even optical reception” (240) which “occurs much less through rapt attention than by noticing the object in incidental fashion” (240).

Benjamin’s point in this regard is that this “mode of appropriation, developed with reference to architecture, . . . acquires canonical value” (240). This is because 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” (240). He argues:

> 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 effect . . . 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. (240-241)