

Benjamin's theory that
the 'aura' of art
decays in the age of
mechanical
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Walter Benjamin published his interpretation of Marxism in relation to aesthetics in his essay 'The work of art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'. Although it was first available in 1936, in the Frankfurt Institution Journal, it was not until 1973 that the influential essay was translated in *Illuminations*, edited by H. Arendt. Therefore, there was a delay in Benjamin's recognition as a significant developer of late modernism and postmodern thought.

The very fact that Benjamin's ideas laid untouched for over a generation prove that he was in every sense ahead of his time; in the 1930s, Benjamin was hypothesising, with no knowledge of today's technological advances - such as digital cameras, how technological reproductions would alter not only our appraisal of arts but also our concept of 'reality'. Unlike his Frankfurt school contemporaries, Theodor Adorno and Georg Lukacs, Benjamin did not equate the 'Age of Mechanical Reproduction' with negative implications for the art world.

Instead, he argued new technologies would have a liberating and democratising effect on society thus politicising art. His theory supposed that such consequences would free people from the 'Capitalist Culture Industry'. Today, Benjamin can be credited with laying down the foundations for modern theorists, such as Marshall McLuhan, Jean Baudrillard and Paul Virilio. In short, Benjamin's essay first attempts to define the 'aura' surrounding art until 20th Century and then analyse how this 'aura' crumbles due to new technologies.

Alongside this, he believed the 20th Century had turned culture into an industry and therefore art had become a commodity. He declares each stage of art reproduction equates to another stage in its loss of aura. Since mechanical reproduction allows art to be criticised and interpreted by diverse cultures Benjamin concludes that mass reproduction results in changing attitudes towards art. “ That which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art.

This is a symptomatic process whose significance point beyond the realm of art. ¹ Although Benjamin wrote in other works that the loss of aura was not necessarily a good thing, he only concentrates on its positive aspects in ‘ The Work of Art’. “ The social basis of the decay of aura was in Benjamin's view the ‘ sense of the universal equality of things’ which imbued the contemporary masses. “ ² Benjamin's definition of art's ‘ aura’ is explained as “ the phenomena of distance, however close (an object) may be”. ³ In other words, the aura of an artwork enables one to stand in front of it, yet at the same time feel distance due to its uniqueness and splendour.

He uses an example of distant mountains as keeping their ‘ aura’, since they have not been mechanically reproduced. Benjamin associates art's ‘ aura’ with both its ‘ authenticity’ and ‘ authority’. Pre-20th Century artworks' aura, authenticity and authority stemmed from the lack of technology for reproduction. Such artworks were one-offs produced for a wealthy patron, royalty or the church, therefore art's production was dominated by the rich and powerful – a system entirely lacking democracy. New technologies and reproductions allow this tradition of artistic control to be turned on its head.

Benjamin holds historic and religious 'ritual', which once surrounded art, partly responsible for its 'aura'. He claims this is fundamental in analysing art of reproduction since the work of art has been removed from its parasitical dependence on tradition. The development of new technologies, especially film and photography, allow the mass public to realise that there is little mystification in creating art; Benjamin appears to draw on Weber's concept of the inevitable 'Entzuberung' or 'demagification' of the technological world.

He metaphorically explains this in terms of a magician and surgeon: a painter is to a cameraman what a magician is to a surgeon. The painter/magician keeps their distance from reality/the patient maintaining their 'aura' by virtue of their authority; on the other hand, cameraman/surgeon reduces any distance with mechanical equipment and therefore removes any 'auratic authority'. In light of this, he argues mechanical reproduction destroys art's previous auratic characteristic of uniqueness.

Therefore the manner of reception of art changes too - the 'distance', once defined by a work's 'aura' is removed. Mechanical reproduction changes a work of art from a unique distant object surrounded by 'aura' and 'authority' to an 'agent of collective self-emancipation'. Previously, art's value was 'cult', its existence was more important than its viewing (certain statues of gods are only accessible to a priest). With the age of mechanical reproduction, this has become its political or 'exhibition value'.

Therefore, the crumbling of arts 'cult value' echoes the crumbling of its 'aura'. Benjamin holds photography and film as 'the most serviceable exemplifications of this new function'. In today's terms art on the Internet is an even better example of arts accessibility or 'exhibition value'. Although reproductions did occur before 'the age of mechanical reproduction', manual reproductions were dubbed as forgery and consequently the original defended its 'aura'. "Confronted with its manual reproduction... the original preserved all its authority; not so 'Vis a Vis' technical reproduction. "

Benjamin's explanation for mechanical reproductions' superiority is that it enables the reproduced to be entirely independent and create new features from the original; for example, photography can obtain aspects of an artwork, which cannot be seen by the naked eye. Secondly, mechanical reproduction allows the original to be viewed anywhere thus bringing artworks closer to the public masses, "the cathedral leaves its locale to be received in the studio of a lover of art. 5 One can liken its superiority to the paragone argument between sculpture and painting during the Renaissance - painting allowed sculptural images to be painted into new situations as technology enables the copy to be put into new situations unavailable to the original.

Lechte explains it as "the fact, for instance, that the photographic negative enables a veritable multiplication of 'originals'. With the photograph, therefore, the spectre of the simulacrum emerges, although Benjamin never names it as such. The photograph as simulacrum by-passes the simple difference between original and copy. 6 How Benjamin differs from previous

theorists is in his attempt to explain how changes in perception of the arts may echo social transformations.

He considers other factors are at work in the decay of 'aura' unequivocally the social advance of the masses. " The desire of contemporary masses to bring things ' closer' spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction. " 7 However, Benjamin never regards the masses emancipation in negative light throughout his essay.

He concludes that it must not be overlooked that whilst art is made accessible to the masses, the very issue of reproduction, which brought it to this stage, overtakes art itself. " To an ever greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility. " 8 Within the sphere of how mechanical reproduction affects art ' technik', Benjamin predicts the postmodern style of montage. He uses Gregory Ulmer's theory that with the era of reproduction the ' signifier' becomes re-motivated in a new context.

Moreover, in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced. " 9 Benjamin uses the masses gathering at Salons towards the end of 19th Century and their influence upon the art world as an example of how simultaneous experiences might affect contemporary art. Today this is evident with cinema which evokes a response controlled by the collective experience and " the individual reactions are predetermined by the mass audience response they are about to produce. "

A large proportion of Benjamin's essay concentrates on film, which he credits as a new realm of art. He claims cinema ultimately destroyed any 'auratic' traces left in art. In this context he emphasises the "positive value of the less concentrated and more distracted state of mind with which the mass audiences viewed cinema,"¹¹ compared with the individual experience of viewing a painting. According to Benjamin, the age of mechanical reproduction transforms the spectator into a participant, since they take part in deciding the meaning of the 'work of art'.

He claims art can only be deemed 'successful' if it allows critical contemplation by the spectator or participant. He believes that this allows the masses to form a critical perception or 'expertise' of film. Benjamin names "the public an examiner, but an absent-minded one"¹² in respect to film culture. Benjamin was perhaps ahead of his time in predicting today's rise of film stars! He believed that the aura of a fictional character also decays with the emergence of film and holds commodity responsible for the inevitable rise of the film star. Film responds to the shrivelling of the aura with an artificial build-up of the 'personality' outside the studio. The cult of the movie star... preserves not the unique aura of the person but the 'spell of the personality' the phoney spell of a commodity. "

According to Benjamin, who was opposed to fascism, "the logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life." He continues, "all efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war."¹⁴ He was therefore very aware of what he alleged to be political attempts to undermine mass emancipation. He believed the very existence of war

proved society was not mature enough to aestheticise politics or develop
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technology further. He cynically concludes, " Mankind, which in Homer's time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order.

This is the situation of politics which fascism is rendering aesthetic.

Communism responds by politicising art. " 15 Thus, he develops his notion of ' the cult of death in modern capitalist culture'. Therefore, his thesis appears to go full circle: mechanical reproduction firstly creates emancipation for the masses and yet this is later curbed by the very forces of capitalism and commodification that enabled mechanical reproduction in the first place. Benjamin's essay was possibly too ahead of its time for his Frankfurt contemporaries who did not agree with his outlook.

Theodore Adorno responded to Benjamin's ' Work of Art' in March 1936 defending the critical function of the autonomous work of art and questioning whether technical reproduction would create progressive popular art. Benjamin was at odds with his contemporaries in not perceiving the course of mechanical reproduction in art to be negative. Adorno's criticism concentrates on " the self-dissolution of myth, which is here viewed as the disenchantment of art. "

Adorno also points out that Benjamin has changed his train of thought from his previous writings. I agree with you that the aural element of the work of art is declining - not only because of its technical reproducibility, incidentally, but above all because of the fulfilment of its own ' autonomous' formal laws. " 17 In the 1930s, it would seem Benjamin was alone in his

positive outlook of mechanical reproduction's responsibility in destroying art's aura and emancipating the masses. 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', appears to have no central themes other than (obviously) reproduction.

Instead, Benjamin culminates his ideas on culture, reproduction and commodity and applies them within the broader context of mass media in contemporary capitalist society. Therefore, much of what was written in the 1930s can be applied to this day and it cannot be denied that Benjamin was correct in predicting the decay of art's aura. Today mechanical reproduction allows great works of art to be everywhere, whether it is billboards, computer screens, prints or postcards, this availability has totally eclipsed the aura that had previously surrounded art before the 20th Century.

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