

Walter benjamin the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction



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This essay will start from Walter Benjamin's consideration about the impact of mechanical reproduction of art as revolutionizing its social function and will describe the noticeable validity of his theory in the contemporary world. By introducing three artworks that belong to different historical periods, namely, the ' Mechanical Head' by Raoul Hausmann, ' Furhead' by John McHale and ' Thirty Are Better Than One' by Andy Warhol, the impact of photography and of the new technologies in contributing to the development of these works will be analysed.

All of the three works represent as a main subject a human head: according to Benjamin's idea, man's countenance represented in early photography portraits was the only trace of the " aura" of a piece of art recognizable in the modern era. Benjamin describes the " aura" as the ability of an artwork to evoke a sense of authenticity and unreachability. However, the three faces represented in these artworks are each one deprived of any identity or representing a mass media icon, explicitly showing how, in the age of mechanical reproduction, even the last sign of cult value of a piece of art is replaced by a pure exhibition value.

Hausmann artwork consists in a carved wooden cranium with no pupils, which, as Jonathan Jones writes in *The Guardian*, " is given identity only by the objects stuck to it: a tape measure, a wooden ruler, a tin cup, a spectacles case and a piece of metal, which could be a plate plugging the damaged skull of a soldier" (Jones, 2003). This sculpture analyses the problematic of individuality given by the lack of uniqueness in a world of mechanical reproduction, showing how the Dada movement tries to achieve,

as Benjamin writes, “ a relentless destruction of the aura of their creations” (Benjamin, 1968: 12).

The aim of the author is to present art as a collective experience directed to the masses but at the same time to reflect on the consequences of the politicization of art as a risk for the lost of distinctiveness of the discipline itself. On the other hand, John McHale, a member of the British Independent Group, represents in ‘ Furhead’ a pair of eyes, a nose and a mouth on a composition made of different fragments of newspaper and postcards, which together constructs the shape of a head. The significance of the fragments of paper is loosened by the variety of images and by the use of foreign languages in the segments of texts.

McHale intentionally uses various forms of communication to give a sense of ambivalence that represents the overlap between art and the new mass-media culture. Finally, the third work by Andy Warhol represents an appropriation of the most famous “ head” of all times, the Mona Lisa, and shows how the new media use the reproduction of art to promote its celebrity. Being the main exponent of the Pop Art movement and using a neo-Dada strategy to attack the concept of originality, Warhol works on photographic technologies and creates the idea of the artist as a mass media “ art star”.

Essay Plan

Introduction:

Walter Benjamin considers the technological developments of the early twentieth century as a signal of the changing of art's primary function. In fact, Benjamin sustains that art, deprived of its 'cult value' that restricted the access to the art world only to the bourgeoisie class, develops its 'exhibition value' through the new technologies of reproduction and acquires a new political and social function.

The author's awareness of the importance of the relationship between art and technology, and his understanding of how the power of technology can affect collective consciousness, make Benjamin's theory a successful description of how photography and other reproduction tools changed the course of art. The three artworks described in this essay belong to different historical periods, but they all show the development of art after the impact of photography and other technology, and testify the validity of Walter Benjamin's description over time.

Raoul Hausmann, 'Mechanical Head': Benjamin defines the Dada movement as a clear example of the attempt to "create by pictorial - and literary - means the effects which public today seeks in the film" (Benjamin, 1968: 13).

The reproducibility of art eliminates its uniqueness - its "aura" - in favour of an adaptation to the tools of modernity, transforming the role of the artist in the one of the engineer and his work in a construction. Hausmann's work moves between political criticisms, as he tries to exemplify in this head the example of the modern man, and scientific approaches, as he uses new technological techniques such as montage and photomontage as a tool for

his art. John McHale, 'Furhead': This work is a representation of how mechanical reproduction of art leads to artworks that take the form of communicative gestures such as newspaper and demonstrates how art and non-art are interchangeable and how the role of the artist is not anymore defined by the art object itself.

The shape of a face created through different fragments of magazines and postcards is a symbolic image of man that, as McHale sustains " matches up the requirements of constant change, fleeting impression and a high rate of obsolence" (McHale, 2011: 33). Andy Warhol, 'Thirty Are Better Than One': The last artwork is another example of how the modern world of repetition leads to the creation of do-it-yourself paintings that attacked the concept of the original and are directed to the masses rather than on the elite.

The Mona Lisa is separated from its cult value to express its pure aesthetic value and make the figure as an icon of the past, completely detached from its original painter. However, Warhol contextualizes Benjamin's discourse on the lost of the "aura" in the modern age by revisiting its meaning: he believed that the "aura" had not diminished but rather had been defined, inverted and manufactured. For Warhol, the aura of an object is rooted in the appeal of an icon, such as the face of the Leonardo da Vinci's painting represents in his artworks.

Actuality of Walter Benjamin's essay in the contemporary world: Benjamin's description of the development of art in reaction to the new mechanical reproduction techniques can be a useful tool to describe the present era. As Margot Lovejoy sustains, " parallel to the shift towards modernism

precipitated by photography is the current shift being propelled by electronic media” (Lovejoy, 1990: 261). Therefore, technology has always had a key function in shaping the role of art as it consists in the tool of art itself and at the same time has its own independency.

The new democratic condition of the electronic era demonstrate how Benjamin’s description of the role of art is can still be useful to give art a new direction as a reaction to the postmodern era of technological development. Conclusion: The three artworks considered represent three different ways of describing how new technologies at the beginning of the twentieth century transformed the new forms of development of art and demonstrate Benjamin’s idea of the adaptation to mass-culture that art takes as a reaction to the invention of photography and other forms of reproduction.