Notes on Benjamin:  
“The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility”¹

Analogy Between Economic and Artistic (Cultural) Production

19f Benjamin opens with a call for “theses defining the tendencies of the development of art under the present conditions of production”. These “theses defining the developmental tendencies of art”, according to Benjamin, “can therefore contribute to the political struggle in ways that it would be a mistake to underestimate”.

20 Benjamin proposes new concepts in the theory of art that are “useless for the purposes of fascism” but “useful for the formulation of revolutionary demands in the politics of art”.

Traditional Concepts:
- creativity
- genius
- eternal value
- mystery

Benjamin’s Concepts:
- reproducibility
- presence (“here and now”)
- aura (authenticity and authority)
- distraction

20f History of reproducibility by hand (replicas) and technological reproducibility in art (relief printing, typographic printing press, engraving, etching, lithography). This made possible production for the masses and the circulation of art in everyday life. But the most dramatic shift occurred with the invention of photography and film, which freed the hand from the demands of pictorial reproduction.

The Reproduction of Artworks and the Decay of Aura

21 What’s lacking in the best reproduction of a work of art is the work’s “unique existence in a particular place” — its “here and now” (presence) — and the inevitable traces of its history. This “here and now” is the basis of the work’s authenticity. “The whole sphere of authenticity eludes technological—and of course not only technological—reproduction. But whereas the authentic work retains its full authority in the face of a reproduction made by hand, which it generally brands a forgery, this in not the case with technological reproduction.”

Benjamin gives two reasons for making this claim:
1. “[T]echnological reproduction is more independent of the original than is manual reproduction.” The technology is sensitive to phenomena that is beyond the range of the human eye, ear, etc. And the reproduction can be magnified or slowed down to reveal otherwise hidden aspects of the object.
2. “[T]echnological reproduction can place the copy of the original in situations which the original itself cannot attain.” It can be brought out of its original context to the recipient, e.g. as the photo of a cathedral, or the recording of a concert.

22 Thus, technological reproduction jeopardizes the authenticity of the object and the authority derived from the tradition to which it belongs. And this is what constitutes the aura of the work of art.

“It might be stated as a general formula that the technology of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the sphere of tradition. By replicating the work many times over, it substitutes a mass existence for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to reach the recipient in his or her own situation, it actualizes that which is reproduced.”

The Social and Historical Function of Art — From Ritual to Politics

23 Benjamin draws on Riegl and Wickhoff in claiming that **modes of existence** determine **modes of perception** and can account for the decay of the aura in the (modern technological) works of art. [This relation is structurally similar that of base and superstructure in Marxist theory.]

Aura is characterized as “a strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be”. [emphasis added]

The social basis of the decay of aura is due to two factors, both of which are linked to “the increasing emergence of the masses and the growing intensity of their movements”. The two factors are

1. the desire of people to get closer to things, and
2. to have them available as reproductions.

Thus, **uniqueness**—“identical to its embeddedness in the context of tradition” [24]— and **permanence** are replaced by **transitoriness** and **repeatability**.

24f The work of art arose from **ritual**—first **magical** and then **religious**—and from which it has never been entirely separated. “In other words: the unique value of the ‘authentic’ work of art always has its basis in ritual.” This vestigial element persists in the profane **cult of beauty** and the modern reaction to this cult of beauty in “art for art’s sake”—a **theology of art**. This gave rise to a “negative theology” in the autonomy of abstract art and its “purity”.

But with the reproducibility of art comes a liberation from ritual. “[F]or the first time in world history, technological reproducibility emancipates the work of art from its parasitic subservience to ritual.

To an ever increasing degree, the work reproduced becomes the reproduction of a work designed for reproducibility…. [And] as soon as the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applied to artistic production, the whole social function of art is revolutionized. Instead of being founded on ritual, it is based on a different practice: politics.”

25 The tension between the two poles of **cult value** and **exhibition value** of the work of art is a defining feature of the history of western art. “With the emancipation of specific artistic practices from the service of ritual, the opportunities for exhibiting their products increase.”

“Just as the work of art in prehistoric times, through the exclusive emphasis placed on its cult value, became first and foremost an instrument of magic which only later came to be recognized as a work of art, so today, through the exclusive emphasis placed on its exhibition value, the work of art becomes a construct [**Gebilde**] with quite new functions. Among them, the one we are conscious of—the artistic function—may subsequently be seen as incidental. This much is certain: today, film is the most serviceable vehicle of this new understanding.”

The Play of Nature and Humanity

26 “**The function of film is to train human beings in the apperceptions and reactions needed to deal with a vast apparatus whose role in their lives is expanding almost daily.** Dealing with this apparatus also teaches them that technology will release them from their enslavement to the powers of the apparatus only when humanity’s whole constitution has adapted itself to the new productive forces which the second technology has set free.”

27 Cult value hangs on through the portrait photography and “the cult of remembrance” of loved ones. Once this recedes, as in the work of Atget, exhibition value is seen as superior to cult value.
27f Argument for the flexibility of film as susceptible to endless “improvement” (editing and revision). In contrast with Greek art which is dependent on a production process that encourages “eternal value” of the work of art, the artistic character of film is entirely determined by its reproducibility.

28f Film theorists made the same mistake as photography theorists before them—they tried to explain the new art forms in traditional terms, rather than starting from the radically new nature of the art form.

Reproduction, “Test Performance”, and Apparatus

29ff The film production process has a very different relation to the performance than theater. The actor does not respond directly to the audience. The actor must assert his humanity and “challenge the apparatus”. The actor is thus called upon to “operate with his whole living person, while foregoing its aura.” [31]

32 “The representation of human beings by means of an apparatus has made possible a highly productive use of the human being’s self-alienation.” The film actor knows that it’s the invisible masses who will control him [the process?]. But this does not happen under current conditions of capitalist film production controlled by the bourgeoisie.

33f In literature (and journalism), the distinction between author and public has broken down. The same thing could happen with film, if the proletariat took control of the means of production, with the inherent desire for self-understanding.

35 The magician is to the surgeon as the painter is to the cinematographer. The painter maintains a distance from reality, while the cinematographer penetrates directly into it. The result is that the “presentation of reality in cinema is incomparably the more significant for people of today, since it provides the equipment-free aspect of reality they are entitled to demand from a work of art, and does so precisely on the basis of the most intensive interpenetration of reality with equipment”.

36 “The technological reproducibility of the artwork changes the relation of the masses to art. The extremely backward attitude toward a Picasso painting changes into a highly progressive reaction to a Chaplin film.” (Cf. the role of art and architecture in the Middle Ages.)

37 Film techniques allow for scientific uses that open up a kind of “optical unconscious” analogous to the “instinctual unconscious” of psychoanalysis. This opens up the possibility of catharsis for the viewing masses.

38f Dada, with its “shock effects” anticipated film’s “ruthless annihilation of the aura”, which renders artworks useless as objects of mere contemplation. Aesthetic contemplation was replaced by distraction.

39ff Absorption and concentration demanded by painting is replaced in film experience by distraction. “Reception in distraction—the sort of reception which is increasingly noticeable in all areas of art and is a symptom of profound changes in apperception—finds in film its true training ground.” [41]

41f Fascism aestheticizes political life without altering property relations (means of production), which inevitably gives rise to war. “Communism replies by politicizing art.”

Timothy Quigley, 21 Feb 09, last revised 18 Apr 10