

Literary Criticism (From Plato to Leavis)
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Walter Benjamin's The Work Of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction 1

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In: *Illuminations*,
edited by Hannah Arendt,
translated by Harry Zohn, from the 1935 essay
New York: Schocken Books, 1969



The Work of Art
in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction

WALTER BENJAMIN

"Our fine arts were developed, their types and uses were established, in times very different from the present, by men whose power of action upon things was insignificant in comparison with ours. But the amazing growth of our techniques, the adaptability and precision they have attained, the ideas and habits they are creating, make it a certainty that profound changes are impending in the ancient craft of the Beautiful. In all the arts there is a physical component which can no longer be considered or treated as it used to be, which cannot remain unaffected by our modern knowledge and power. For the last twenty years neither matter nor space nor time has been what it was from time immemorial. We must expect great innovations to transform the entire technique of the arts, thereby affecting artistic invention itself and perhaps even bringing about an amazing change in our very notion of art."

Paul Valéry, PIÈCES SUR L'ART
"Le Conquête de l'ubiquité," Paris.



Hello, and welcome to yet another session of the course on Literary Criticism. Today, we are looking at this particular essay, "The Work Of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" by Walter Benjamin, who was a Marxist theorist. This is a 1935 essay, and this is a translated version that we are accessing.

Walter Benjamin is considered as one of the foremost Marxist critics, and he also had influenced our understanding of culture and the literary in very significant ways. This is a very seminal essay where he talks about how art had undergone significant changes under the culture of mechanical reproduction, how industrialization and this mass production of goods had changed the way in which we look at the idea of aesthetics, had changed the way in which we look at many artifacts, many works of art.

This work also has a prefatory remark by Paul Valéry which has been commended very well by many. And in this preface, Paul Valéry talks about the self-abolition of capital and how the self-abolishment of capital which Marx also believed in, how that requires non-fascist concepts of art.

So, the preface also tries to bring in a balance in this changing scenario, when art also changes, when art also tends to become more democratic in a very ideal sense. So, this essay need not be seen in a dichotomous sense where mechanical reproduction and art are placed in two ends of the spectrum.

On the other hand, there is also a certain dialogue which is being made possible, which is what Paul Valery highlights in this preface: “Our fine arts were developed, their types and users were established in times very different from the present, by men whose power of action upon things was insignificant in comparison with ours.” He is talking about the changes which have come about in the past decades.

“But the amazing growth of our techniques, the adaptability and precision they have attained, the ideas and habits they are creating, make it a certainty that profound changes are impending in the ancient craft of the Beautiful.” He is very evidently talking about the changes that would come about within the realm of the aesthetic, and how the age of mechanical reproduction when looked at through the lens of Marxism, how there is the possibility of a dialogue emerging.

In all the arts there is a physical component, which can no longer be treated or considered as it used to be, which cannot remain unaffected by our modern knowledge and power. And here is when the modern aspect of this essay also gets highlighted, the modernity of this essay getting highlighted over here when Paul Valery is also alerting us to the fact that art cannot remain unaffected. Art is not something which will remain as a static force irrespective of the change in political, economic conditions. It is something continuously undergoes a change depending on the emergence of new kinds of knowledges and power systems.

“For the last 20 years neither matter nor space nor time has been what it was from time immemorial. We must expect great innovations to transform the entire technique of the arts.” That is what this essay will be focusing on-- how the technique of the arts, how our understanding of the aesthetic has undergone a profound change, a very significant change due to the changes which have come about in the political and economic systems, due to the various ways in which world views have been undergoing a change, “thereby affecting artistic invention itself and perhaps even bringing about an amazing change in our very notion of art.”

This preface is extremely helpful in that sense-- to set the stage for the discussion that Walter Benjamin has had for us. So, the preface in a nutshell, it talks about the changes which would begin to become visible in the superstructure. The superstructure, if you know your Marxist criticism, now you would know that there is a base and the superstructure that Marx and later critics spoke about.

The changes which come about in the superstructure, it might take time for it to be visible. For instance, in this case where we are talking about art, it could be about genius, creativity, about mystery, about eternal works. And it is also about highlighting the many other changes which are not essentially part of production, many other changes which are not essentially part of an economic or political system, but an offshoot of all these changes.

And, what Valery also intends to tell us perhaps is that there is a need to replace some of the old, conservative notions about art, which were also essentially perhaps very fascist as some of the critics say that he also implied. One of the things perhaps Valery is also trying to do over here is to highlight the need for bringing in a non-conservative, more progressive notions of art which are also democratic, which are also in alignment with the many things that Marx spoke about.

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PREFACE

When Marx undertook his critique of the capitalistic mode of production, this mode was in its infancy. Marx directed his efforts in such a way as to give them prognostic value. He went back to the basic conditions underlying capitalistic production and through his presentation showed what could be expected of capitalism in the future. The result was that one could expect it not only to exploit the proletariat with increasing intensity, but ultimately to create conditions which would make it possible to abolish capitalism itself.

The transformation of the superstructure, which takes place far more slowly than that of the substructure, 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. Certain prognostic requirements should be met by these statements. However, these about the art of the proletariat after its assumption of power or about the art of a classless society would have less

* Quoted from Paul Valéry, *Aesthetics, "The Conquest of Ubiquity,"* translated by Ralph Manheim, p. 225. Pantheon Books, Bollingen Series, New York, 1964.



As Paul Valery further exemplifies, "The transformation of the superstructure, which takes place far more slowly than that of the substructure, 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." This is also about the time which passes before changes become visible, and it is also implying that art and culture are perhaps the places

where these changes could manifest in a slower pace than does in the economic and political systems.

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application would lead to a processing of data in the Fascist sense. The concepts which are introduced into the theory of art in what follows differ from the more familiar terms in that they are completely useless for the purposes of Fascism. They are, on the other hand, useful for the formulation of revolutionary demands in the politics of art.



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In principle a work of art has always been reproducible. Man-made artifacts could always be imitated by men. Replicas were made by pupils in practice of their craft, by masters for diffusing their works, and, finally, by third parties in the pursuit of gain. Mechanical reproduction of a work of art, however, represents something new. Historically, it advanced intermittently and in leaps at long intervals, but with accelerated intensity. The Greeks knew only two procedures of technically reproducing works of art: founding and stamping. Bronzes, terra cottas, and coins were the only art works which they could produce in quantity. All others were unique and could not be mechanically reproduced. With the woodcut graphic art became mechanically reproducible for the first time, long before script became reproducible by print. The enormous changes which printing, the mechanical reproduction of writing, has brought about in literature are a familiar story. However, within the phenomenon which we are here examining from the perspective of world history, print is merely a special, though particularly important, case. During the Middle Ages engraving and etching were added to the woodcut; at the beginning of the nineteenth century lithography made its appearance.

With lithography the technique of reproduction reached an essentially new stage. This much more direct process was distinguished by the tracing of the design on a stone rather than its incision on a block of wood or its etching on a copperplate and permitted graphic art for the first time to put its products on the market, not only in large numbers as hitherto, but also in daily changing forms. Lithography enabled graphic art to illustrate everyday life, and it began to keep



And the final statement in Paul Valery's preface he says, "The concepts which are introduced into the theory of art and what follows differ from the more familiar terms in that they are completely useless for the purposes of Fascism. They are, on the other hand, useful for the formulation of revolutionary demands in the politics of art".

Having said that, Walter Benjamin engages with this essay by beginning to tell us about how mechanical reproduction of art is not something entirely new. In principle, a work of art has always been reproducible, that is what Walter Benjamin says at the outset, that there was nothing irreproducible about art at any point of time, in one form or the other. With the aid of the modern kinds of technology or not, art has always been reproducible.

Man-made artifacts could always be imitated by men. And here he is also underlying, underscoring the fact that art by virtue of it being man-made is also something which can be reproduced by other men and women.

"Replicas were made by pupils in practice of their craft, by masters for diffusing their works, and, finally, by third parties in the pursuit of gain. Mechanical reproduction of art, however, represents something new." So he begins by highlighting this distinction that the discussion is not about art being reproducible. This is something which has always been happening, the reproducibility of art, it is certainly undeniable.

But the core of this essay is about how mechanical reproduction has entirely changed this grammar of reproduction, and how art has undergone a change, how the techniques of art,

techniques of reproduction have undergone a change in the wake of this increased technological interference.

“Historically, it advanced intermittently and in leaps at long intervals, but with accelerated intensity. The Greeks knew only two procedures of technically reproducing works of art: founding and stamping. Bronzes, terra cottas, and coins were the only artworks which they could produce in quantity.” So, there was always this distinction of what kind of art could be reproduced. There were always certain kinds of work which could be reproduced effortlessly, and there were certain kinds which could not be.

All others were unique and could not be mechanically reproduced. So if you look at these things that are being mentioned over here, about founding and stamping, bronzes, terra cottas and coins, those are things which are also used for multiple other purposes. Their value is not intrinsically artistic; they are used for other purposes.

For trade, it is used as a form of a currency; it is used as a form of money for trade. So we understand that certain things which were needed for mass consumption were always reproduced with much ease. And perhaps the original form of production also was in such a way that it would cater the reproduction.

“But there were others which were unique and could not be mechanically reproduced. With a woodcut graphic art became mechanically reproducible for the first time, long before script became reproducible by print, the enormous changes which printing, the mechanical reproduction of writing, has brought about in literature are a familiar story.”

He is drawing our attention to this historical trajectory of words and letters being reproducible, about art forms becoming reproducible. So there is a history about which we need to be aware of, that also helps us to very finely distinguish between the kinds of mechanical interventions which have brought about a change in the artistic ethos, in our understanding of the techniques of art, in our understanding of the notion of art itself.

“However, within the phenomenon which we are here examining from the perspective of world history, print is merely a special though particularly important case. During the Middle Ages engraving and etching were added to the woodcut; at the beginning of the nineteenth century lithography made its appearance.”

He is trying to situate printing not as this major mega event, but as the continuation of this reproduction of art, as a continuation of this process of art being reproduced which was there from time immemorial.

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phenomenon which we are here examining from the perspective of world history, print is merely a special, though particularly important, case. During the Middle Ages engraving and etching were added to the woodcut; at the beginning of the nineteenth century lithography made its appearance.

With lithography the technique of reproduction reached an essentially new stage. This much more direct process was distinguished by the tracing of the design on a stone rather than its incision on a block of wood or its etching on a copperplate and permitted graphic art for the first time to put its products on the market, not only in large numbers as hitherto, but also in daily changing forms. Lithography enabled graphic art to illustrate everyday life, and it began to keep pace with printing. But only a few decades after its invention, lithography was surpassed by photography. For the first time in the process of pictorial reproduction, photography freed the hand of the most important artistic functions which henceforth devolved only upon the eye looking into a lens.

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And, having stated this in the first paragraph-- that mechanical reproduction of art is not something new, he goes on to focus a bit on lithography. And lithography made it possible, as we know, to make more copies faster and also made daily changes possible, and it became very easy to depict daily life and preserve it for posterity.

“With lithography the technique of production reached an essentially new stage. This much more direct process was distinguished by the tracing of the design on a stone rather than its incision on a block of wood or its etching on a copperplate and permitted graphic art for the first time to put its products on the market.”

Look at this amazing way in which he is tracing the historical trajectory. There is also an indication of how art gets reproduced for the market. And he does not really romanticize art over here, as we can see. Right from the outset, he is talking about the use value purely within the Marxist frameworks. And he talks about how the market becomes a very significant determinant in deciding what kind of art gets reproduced and to what end.

“Lithography enabled graphic art to illustrate everyday life, and it began to keep pace with printing. But only a few decades after its invention, lithography was surpassed by photography. And he is noting down the significant changes with the aid of technology, and

how that has entirely changed our understanding of art and also the grammar of artistic production.

“For the first time in the process of pictorial reproduction, photography freed the hand of the most important artistic functions, which henceforth devolved only upon the eye looking into a lens.” And this is the mode that Walter Benjamin wants us to get into when he is trying to engage in this dialogue with us about artistic production.

The moment the technology interferes, we realize that hands which were an important component in making art, in producing these scripts, in producing these engravings, they become suddenly less important. It is only about the eye looking through a mechanical device, a lens.

So, we find that with the aid of technology there is a kind of replacement also that happens. The grammar of this artistic production, it changes. It becomes less of a manual function and more of a function of the faculty of the mind. And this sort of dialogue, this sort of a change in the embodiment of art in the way in which man positions himself with relation to technology, all of these begin to affect the way in which we understand art, the way in which art reformulates itself.

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Since the eye perceives more swiftly than the hand can draw, the process of pictorial reproduction was accelerated so enormously that it could keep pace with speech. A film operator shooting a scene in the studio captures the images at the speed of an actor's speech. Just as lithography virtually implied the illustrated newspaper, so did photography foreshadow the sound film. The technical reproduction of sound was tackled at the end of the last century. These convergent endeavors made predictable a situation which Paul Valéry pointed up in this sentence: "Just as water, gas, and electricity are brought into our houses from far off to satisfy our needs in response to a minimal effort, so we shall be supplied with visual or auditory images, which will appear and disappear at a simple movement of the hand, hardly more than a sign." (*op. cit.*, p. 226) Around 1900 technical reproduction had reached a standard that not only permitted it to reproduce all transmitted works of art and thus to cause the most profound change in their impact upon the public; it also had captured a place of its own among the artistic processes. For the study of this standard nothing is more revealing than the nature of the repercussions that these two different manifestations—the reproduction of works of art and the art of the film—have had on art in its traditional form.



“Since the eye perceives more swiftly than the hand can draw, this is entirely an undeniable fact, the process of pictorial reproduction was accelerated so enormously that it could keep pace with speech.” Here we are not talking about substituting the human faculty with technology. On the other hand, it is showcasing how, with the aid of technology, human

faculty which is otherwise quite taken for granted, gets accentuated. The power of the eye over the hand in producing, rather in reproducing, what it perceives either as a reality or in the mind that gets accentuated over here.

“A film operator shooting a scene in the studio captures the images in the speed of an actor's speech. Just as lithography virtually implied the illustrated newspaper, so did photography foreshadow the sound film.” And this positioning in terms of its evolution, in terms of its historical trajectory, it is very interesting.

“The technical reproduction of sound was tackled at the end of the last century.” This is history we all too well know. “These convergent endeavors made predictable a situation which Paul Valery pointed up in this sentence: ‘Just as water, gas and electricity are brought into our houses from far off to satisfy our needs in response to a minimal effort, so we shall be supplied with visual or auditory images, which will appear and disappear at a simple movement of the hand, hardly more than a sign.’ So this is what technology has done to art.

“Around 1,900 technical reproduction had reached a standard that not only permitted it to reproduce all transmitted works of art and thus to cause the most profound change in their impact upon the public, it also had captured a place of its own among the artistic processes. For the study of this standard nothing is more revealing than the nature of the repercussions that these two different manifestations”-- Which are the two?—“Reproduction of works of art and the art or film-- have had on its traditional form.”

So, there is a traditional form of art, and what has technology done to reformulate it, to refigure it and also to revolutionize it in multiple ways, that remains the core of the discussion of this essay throughout.

If you were to summarize this first section, it would perhaps suffice to say that mechanical reproduction of images increased speed and distribution. And that is something very positive that Walter Benjamin also identifies with the mechanical reproduction of art. There is an accentuated presence of speed and distribution which was not there when human beings were trying to do it entirely on their own with their hands, with manual labor.

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it happens to be. This unique existence of the work of art determined the history to which it was subject throughout the time of its existence. This includes the changes which it may have suffered in physical condition over the years as well as the various changes in its ownership.¹ The traces of the first can be revealed only by chemical or physical analyzes which it is impossible to perform on a reproduction; changes of ownership are subject to a tradition which must be traced from the situation of the original.

The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity. Chemical analyzes of the patina of a bronze can help to establish this, as does the proof that a given manuscript of the Middle Ages stems from an archive of the fifteenth century. The whole sphere of authenticity is outside technical—and, of course, not only technical—reproducibility.² Confronted with its manual reproduction, which was usually branded as a forgery, the original preserved all its authority; not so *vis à vis* technical reproduction. The reason is twofold. First, process reproduction is more independent of the original than manual reproduction. For example, in photography, process reproduction can bring out those aspects of the original that are unattainable to the naked eye yet accessible to the lens, which is adjustable and chooses its



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So, moving on to the second segment, that is where Walter Benjamin talks about the aura of art. Aura could be summarized in this context as the authenticity of art, which in many ways, which also made art very different from reality. It was about originality, it was about authenticity, which is why the original and the duplicates also existed until the time when mechanical reproduction took over.

Let us see how he begins to present it: Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element, its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be. If you take the case of printing for instance, when only manuscripts were available, when the writer himself had to write it down himself or herself or with the help of another person who was assisting in this script, it was possible to locate its existence in time and space, it was very unique too.

But when printing takes over, it becomes immaterial when the original manuscript was produced because it is also about making this work of art, the piece of writing, available across time and space. There are a lot of things with respect to time and space which underwent a radical change with the intervention of mechanical reproduction.

“This unique existence of the work of art determined the history to which it was subject through the time of its existence. This includes the changes which it may have suffered in physical condition over the years as well as various changes in its ownership.” It is easier to explain this with the example of a manuscript. How it underwent wear and tear, how certain pages were lost.

And we all know too well when we do the history of English language and literature or any kind of literary history how certain manuscripts always suffered losses when it was handed over from one generation to the other or due to certain difficulties in preserving it; and how certain other kinds of interventions were always needed to complete the text, make the text available in its complete form.

“The traces of the first can be revealed only by chemical or physical analysis, which it is impossible to perform on reproduction; changes of ownership are subject to a tradition which must be traced from the situation of the original.” So, the idea of the original undergoes a radical change with the intervention of mechanical reproduction. For instance, he will also soon talk about photography where it becomes difficult to delineate the original from the reproduced works of art. And he is talking about the idea of authenticity over here.

“The whole sphere of authenticity is outside technical—and, of course not only technical—reproducibility. Confronted with its manual reproduction, which was usually branded as a forgery, the original preserved all its authority, not vis-a-vis technical reproduction.” So, with the interference of technical reproduction, the idea of the original has undergone a change, so much so that there is no original that one could identify anymore.

“The reason is twofold. First, process reproduction is more independent of the original than manual reproduction. For example, in photography, process reproduction can bring out those aspects of the original that are unattainable to the naked eye yet accessible to the lens, which is adjustable and chooses its angle at will.

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angle at will. And photographic reproduction, with the aid of certain processes, such as enlargement or slow motion, can capture images which escape natural vision. Secondly, technical reproduction can put the copy of the original into situations which would be out of reach for the original itself. Above all, it enables the original to meet the beholder halfway, be it in the form of a photograph or a phonograph record. The cathedral leaves its locale to be received in the studio of a lover of art] the choral production, performed in an auditorium or in the open air, resounds in the drawing room.

The situations into which the product of mechanical reproduction can be brought may not touch the actual work of art, yet the quality of its presence is always depreciated. This holds not only for the art work but also, for instance, for a landscape which passes in review before the spectator in a movie. In the case of the art object, a most sensitive nucleus—namely, its authenticity—is interfered with whereas no natural object is vulnerable on that score. 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. Since the historical testimony rests on the authenticity, the former, too, is jeopardized by reproduction when substantive duration ceases to matter. And what is really jeopardized when the historical testimony is affected is the authority of the object.³

One might subsume the eliminated element in the term “aura” and go on to say: that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art. This is a symptomatic process whose significance points beyond



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Look at this travel that is made possible in time and space. The cathedral which is being photographed or a choral performance which is being recorded, both while it is being recorded (the original is being recorded); but it is possible for the audience, it is possible for the one who is at the receiving end to meet the beholder halfway, as Benjamin puts it.

Because the cathedral can be received in the studio of a lover of art or it can be hung as a painting, it can be hung as a photograph in your drawing room. And in the same way, the choral performance which was being performed in an auditorium or in the open air, once it is recorded it is possible to bring it to your own private space.

So this sort of movement aided by technological reproduction, Benjamin also tells us, also completely challenges the idea of the original and the reproduced form. There was a time from the Middle Ages onwards when the reproduced form was seen as a forgery, the original was more authentic. The original was more valuable. And accordingly, whatever was its imitation, whatever was its reproduction was always given a secondary status, but not anymore with technical reproduction.

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Here, we realize that Walter Benjamin is also a bit skeptical of this process of reproduction which takes away the authenticity. The original conditions cannot be retained, the original experience that the photographer had while adjusting the camera angle or trying to capture a moment which was part of a larger movement in time, those sort of original experiences or

the experience of witnessing a choral reproduction out in the open air, those sort of experiences become very limited, Walter Benjamin is perhaps arguing over here.

“And what is really jeopardized when the historical testimony is affected is the authority of the object.” Here, he is also telling us the ways in which the authenticity or authority of art was always linked to its original from the Middle Ages. The original form of art also had an authority because that was seen as *the* form of art, *the* first one.

Of course, it is difficult to delineate which is the copy when it comes to photography, it is difficult to delineate and also a bit pointless to delineate the original copy from the many duplicates which were made of it.

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One might subsume the eliminated element in the term “aura” and go on to say: that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art. This is a symptomatic process whose significance points beyond the realm of art. One might generalize by saying: 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. And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced. These two processes lead to a tremendous shattering of tradition which is the obverse of the contemporary crisis and renewal of mankind. Both processes are intimately connected with the contemporary mass movements. Their most powerful agent is the film. Its social significance, particularly in its most positive form, is inconceivable without its destructive, cathartic aspect, that is, the liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage. This phenomenon is most palpable in the great historical films. It extends to ever new positions. In 1927 Abel Gance exclaimed enthusiastically: “Shakespeare, Rembrandt, Beethoven will make films . . . all legends, all mythologies and all myths, all founders of



Having said that, he goes on to talk about the idea of the aura, the term which could be loosely understood as authenticity, as originality and this is also about the essence. It is a very abstract thing as well when we talk about it in today’s terms. The aura of a work of art, the authenticity, the originality, the essence of a work of art also in today's terms would be very subjective. It is also very abstract.

Having said that, coming back to this essay, “One might subsume the eliminated element in the term “aura” and go on to say that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art.” So how does one situate such an argument? Of course, reproduction has always been happening. But it was always easy to find out the original one which had the essence, the authentic one which had the essence.

And also, the original one could always be traced to its owner, with the one who had produced it in the first place. That becomes increasingly compromised. And Walter Benjamin here, in the second part of this essay, he begins to argue that aura gets eliminated. It withers, aura withers in the age of mechanical reproduction.

“And he says one might generalize by saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced subject from the domain of tradition.” And of course, that has been a very valid argument too, that because it is aided by technological reproduction, it is no longer possible to keep the object, the original artistic object within the shackles of tradition. And it becomes very liberating in that sense.

“By making many reproductions, it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence”—which is also something very postmodern, about imitation, about pastiche. It is a postmodern idea which had not yet begun to be celebrated when Walter Benjamin was writing this essay.

“And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situations, it reactivates the object reproduced. These two processes lead to tremendous shattering of tradition”, which is also good in a certain way, “which is the obverse of contemporary crisis and renewal of mankind. Both processes are intimately connected with contemporary mass movements. Their most powerful agent is the film.”

I want you to see the way in which he is locating the trajectory of artistic production in a historical sense, and also linking it to his contemporary times, and talking about the implications of various forms of art vis-a-vis the society, vis-a-vis the responses that these forms of art receive. And film being the most pertinent one that he comes back to discuss quite often.

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One might subsume the eliminated element in the term “aura” and go on to say: that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art. This is a symptomatic process whose significance points beyond the realm of art. One might generalize by saying: 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. And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced. These two processes lead to a tremendous shattering of tradition which is the obverse of the contemporary crisis and renewal of mankind. Both processes are intimately connected with the contemporary mass movements. Their most powerful agent is the film. Its social significance, particularly in its most positive form, is inconceivable without its destructive, cathartic aspect, that is, the liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage. This phenomenon is most palpable in the great historical films. It extends to ever new positions. In 1927 Abel Gance exclaimed enthusiastically: “Shakespeare, Rembrandt, Beethoven will make films . . . all legends, all mythologies and all myths, all founders of religion, and the very religions . . . await their exposed resurrection, and the heroes crowd each other at the gate.”²

¹ Abel Gance, “Le Temps de l’image est venu,” *L’Art cinématographique*, Vol 2, pp. 94F, Paris, 1927.



He talks about the value of great historical films, and he also leads us to think about the liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage. And we may have to stay a bit longer with the essay to figure out on what side exactly Walter Benjamin is, and in what sense he talks about the tradition associated with art, and when he talks about the aura withering what exactly he has in mind.

So let us read this quote which he also uses: “Shakespeare, Rembrandt, Beethoven will make films.....all legends, all mythologies, all myths, all founders of religion, and the very religions.... await their exposed resurrection, and the heroes crowd each other at the gate.”

He talks about a very palpable way in which history can come together. How a work of art can cut across time and space with the aid of mechanical reproduction?

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4



I

Presumably without intending it, he issued an invitation to a far-reaching liquidation.

III

During long periods of history, the mode of human sense perception changes with humanity’s entire mode of existence. The manner in which human sense perception is organized, the medium in which it is accomplished, is determined not only by nature but by historical circumstances as well. The fifth century, with its great shifts of population, saw the birth of the late Roman art industry and the Vienna Genesis, and there developed not only an art different from that of antiquity but also a new kind of perception. The scholars of the Viennese school, Riegl and Wickhoff, who resisted the weight of classical tradition under



“Presumably without intending it, he issued an invitation to a far-reaching liquidation.” So, there are two concerns that he raises over here. One is that authenticity or the essence, as he puts it, begins to wither in the age of mechanical reproduction. And though inadvertently, as a perhaps more or less collateral damage, there is an invitation to a far-reaching liquidation.

These two arguments—the lack of aura, the withering of aura, and the increasing liquidation of the essence of art are being cited as problematics, but not necessarily an adverse argument against the mechanical reproduction as such. Having spoken about film being a powerful media and how this dialogue with the masses, dialogue with the society is always important to situate the value of art in the historical sense, in the next couple of sessions, he will also talk about how mass perception is grounded in social causes.

So, in the third section which we shall take a look at in the next session, we will begin by discussing how mass perception is grounded in social causes and then go on to talk about how mechanical reproduction frees art from ritual cults. And how it is also liberating in spite of this lack of aura, the withering of aura and the liquidation that artists are generally subjected to.

With this we wrap up for today, and I also strongly encourage you to go through the essay and read this in original so that it would make more sense to you when we continue to discuss this work. Thank you for your time, and I look forward to seeing you in the next session.