

Literary Criticism (From Plato to Leavis)
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Walter Benjamin's The Work Of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction 3

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than that of the stage play to a work of art that is completely subject to or, like the film, founded in, mechanical reproduction. Experts have long recognized that in the film "the greatest effects are almost always obtained by 'acting' as little as possible. . . ." In 1932 Rudolf Arnheim saw "the latest trend... in treating the actor as a stage prop chosen for its characteristics and . . . inserted at the proper place."¹¹ With this idea something else is closely connected. The stage actor identifies himself with the character of his role. The film actor very often is denied this opportunity. His creation is by no means all of a piece; it is composed of many separate performances. Besides certain fortuitous considerations, such as cost of studio, availability of fellow players, décor, etc., there are elementary necessities of equipment that split the actor's work into a series of mountable episodes. In particular, lighting and its installation require the presentation of an event that, on the screen, unfolds as a rapid and unlinked scene, in a sequence of separate shootings which may take hours at the studio; not to mention more obvious montage. Thus a jump from the window can be shot in the studio as a jump from a scaffold, and the ensuing flight, if need be, can be shot weeks later when outdoor scenes are taken. Far more paradoxical cases can easily be construed. Let us assume that an actor is supposed to be startled by a knock at the door. If his reaction is not satisfactory, the director can resort to an expedient: when the actor happens to be at the studio again he has a shot fired behind him without his being forewarned of it. The frightened reaction can be shot now and be cut into the screen version. Nothing more strikingly shows that art has left the realm of the "beautiful semblance" which, so far, had been taken to be the only sphere where art could thrive.

X

The feeling of strangeness that overcomes the actor before the camera, as Pirandello describes it, is basically of the same kind as the estrangement felt before one's own image in the mirror. But now the reflected image has become separable, transportable. And where is it transported? Before the public.¹² Never for a moment does the screen actor cease to be conscious of this fact. While facing the camera he knows that ultimately he will face the public, the consumers who constitute the market. This market, where he offers not only his labor but also his whole self, his heart and soul, is beyond his reach. During the shooting he has as little contact with it as any article made in a factory. This may contribute to that oppression, that new anxiety which, according to Pirandello, grips the actor before the camera. The film responds to the shriveling of the aura with an artificial build-up of the "personality" outside the studio. The cult of the movie star, fostered by the money of the film industry, preserves not the unique aura of the person but the "spell of the personality,"



Hello and welcome to today's session. We continue to look at Walter Benjamin's essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction". We go straight to section 10, where he talks about the "feeling of strangeness" and he also compares this experience of art being mechanically reproduced to that of a mirror image, as you can see over here.

"The feeling of strangeness that overcomes the actor before the camera as Pirandello describes it, is basically of the same kind of the estrangement felt before one's own image in the mirror, but now the reflective image has become separable, transportable." This is something that he has been trying to, until even in the previous section about how the actor gets completely separated from the artist. And it is also about how the art form gets, how the persona of the actor in spite of this diminishing aura, there is a way in which the art form, the performance it attains a certain kind of transportability, a certain kind of separability from the personality.

And where is it transported? Before the public. "Never for a moment does the screen actor cease to be conscious of this fact." And it is also about how he had already spoken about it, about whenever the actor is facing the camera, which is his first audience. He or she is also conscious of the fact that there is an audience out there in the public to which this entire art form, this entire performance would be transported to at a later point of time.

And here is when he also makes this comparison between the objects made, manufactured within the factory and compares the actor, the performance as something which is constructed within a studio setting as well.

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modern man's legitimate claim to being reproduced. Under these circumstances the film industry is trying hard to spur the interest of the masses through illusion-promoting spectacles and dubious speculations.

XI

The shooting of a film, especially of a sound film, affords a spectacle unimaginable anywhere at any time before this. It presents a process in which 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 assistants, etc.—unless his eye were on a line parallel with the lens. This circumstance, more than any other, renders superficial and insignificant any possible similarity between a scene in the studio and one on the stage. In the theatre one is well aware of the place from which the play cannot immediately be detected as illusionary. There is no such place for the movie scene that is being shot. Its illusionary nature is that of the second degree, the result of cutting. That is to say, in the studio the mechanical equipment has penetrated so deeply into reality that its pure aspect freed from the foreign substance of equipment is the result of a special procedure, namely, the shooting by the specially adjusted camera and the mounting of the shot together with other similar ones. The equipment-free aspect of reality here has become the height of artifice; the sight of immediate reality has become an orchid in the land of technology.

Even more revealing is the comparison of these circumstances, which differ so much from those of the theatre, with the situation in painting. Here the question is: How does the cameraman compare with the painter? To answer this we take recourse to an analogy with a surgical operation. The surgeon represents the polar opposite of the magician. The magician heals a sick person by the laying on of hands; the surgeon cuts into the patient's body. The magician maintains the natural distance between the patient and himself; though he reduces it very slightly by the laying on of hands, he greatly increases it by virtue of his authority. The surgeon does exactly the reverse; he greatly diminishes the distance between himself and the patient by penetrating into the patient's body, and increases it but little by the caution with which his hand moves among the organs. In short, in contrast to the magician—who is still hidden in the medical practitioner—the surgeon at the decisive moment abstains from facing the patient man to man; rather, it is through the operation that he penetrates into him.

Magician and surgeon compare to painter and cameraman. The painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, the cameraman penetrates deeply into its web.¹¹ There is a tremendous difference between the pictures



So, having said that he moves on to the 11th section, where he talks about the power of the camera to penetrate reality. We have already seen how he talks about the camera as a mediating agency as well as the first audience and now we find that in spite of the camera being just an object, there is a way in which the camera is also able to penetrate reality in ways that other art forms have not been able to.

Here is how he begins the 11th section: ‘The shooting of a film, especially of a sound film affords spectacle unimaginable anywhere at any time before this. It presents a process in which it is impossible to assign to a spectator a viewpoint which will exclude from the actual scene, such extraneous accessories as camera equipment, lighting, machinery, staff, assistants, etc.’” Also he goes on to compare, this comparison that he had been trying to make between theater and a screen actor. And he also tells us how the props, the entire setting in a theatre is visible and there is a certain kind of an illusion which is created over there, we also realized.

But at the same time, when the setting is being shot through a movie camera and when it is being released as a film, we realized that there is more of reality over there and this penetration into reality is something that technology affords. And he goes on to make this comparison with a magician and a surgeon as well.

The magician while he is performing on stage, he is not really touching the body, he is healing that body. He seems to assemble and reassemble the body, the different body parts. But the surgeon what he does on the other hand just like the camera is, he is penetrating into the body. So, the camera has this uncanny ability to penetrate into reality, to intervene with reality in very cutting terms just like a surgeon is able to penetrate into the human body and make changes over there. There is more of a real interface when it comes to a surgeon, when it comes to a camera and its techniques than say a magician or a painter.

So, these sort of comparisons and these sort of analogies also help us to realize the impact that camera, film, all of these things have been having on the function of art, the ways in which art has been undergoing a radical change under mechanical production and reproduction.

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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. Thus, for contemporary man the representation of reality by the film is incomparably more significant than that of the painter, since it offers, precisely because of the thoroughgoing permeation of reality with mechanical equipment, an aspect of reality which is free of all equipment. And that is what one is entitled to ask from a work of art.



XII

Mechanical reproduction of art changes the reaction of the masses toward art. The reactionary attitude toward a Picasso painting changes into the progressive reaction toward a Chaplin movie. The progressive reaction is characterized by the direct, intimate fusion of visual and emotional enjoyment with the orientation of the expert. Such fusion is of great social significance. The greater the decrease in the social significance of an art form, the sharper the distinction between criticism and enjoyment by the public. The conventional is uncritically enjoyed, and the truly new is criticized with aversion. With regard to the screen, the critical and the receptive attitudes of the public coincide. The decisive reason for this is that individual reactions are predetermined by the mass audience response they are about to produce, and this is nowhere more pronounced than in the film. The moment these responses become manifest they control each other. Again, the comparison with painting is fruitful. A painting has always had an excellent chance to be viewed by one person or by a few. The simultaneous contemplation of paintings by a large public, such as developed in the nineteenth century, is an early symptom of the crisis of painting, a crisis which was by no means occasioned exclusively by photography but rather in a relatively independent manner by the appeal of art works to the masses.

Painting simply is in no position to present an object for simultaneous collective experience, as it was possible for architecture at all times, for the epic poem in the past, and for the movie today. Although this circumstance in itself should not lead one to conclusions about the social role of painting, it does constitute a serious threat as soon as painting, under special conditions and, as it were, against its nature, is confronted directly by the masses. In the churches and monasteries of the Middle Ages and at the princely courts up to the end of the eighteenth century, a collective reception of paintings did not occur simultaneously, but by graduated and hierarchized mediation. The change that has come about is an expression of the particular conflict in which painting was implicated by the mechanical reproducibility of paintings. Although paintings began to be publicly exhibited in galleries and salons, there was no way for the



And this ability to penetrate into reality, just like the ability of the surgeon to penetrate into the body of the man, is considered as something which would revolutionize all kinds of artistic notions. “Thus, for contemporary man the representation of reality by the film is incomparably more significant than that of the painter, since it offers, precisely because of the thoroughgoing permeation of reality with mechanical equipment, an aspect of reality which is free of all equipment”.

So, finally, when this art form is being produced before us, being presented before us, we find that you get a more real sort of an interface over there, which is devoid of equipment. And this kind of reality is achieved through the interface, through the intervention of equipment

and that is the greatest irony and the beautiful transformation that this performance undergoes. And this is what one is entitled to ask from a work of art, I reiterate, the second part of that sentence, 'a thoroughgoing permeation of reality with mechanical equipment, an aspect of reality which is free of all equipment'.

So, there is a way in which the human body and technology are able to interact with each other, have a dialogue with each other and still present a kind of reality or the illusion of reality which is devoid of all kinds of equipments. And this argument that Benjamin tries to pursue almost continually is that film is more significant now than painting, the art form which has a technological intervention or an interface seems to be more powerful, more potent than all kinds of art forms which are produced manually across the ages.

In section 12, he wants us to focus on how enjoyment is inseparable from criticism. And film is also a kind of an art form which tries to bring these two together quite organically, the idea of enjoyment and the idea of criticism. Mechanical reproduction of art changes the reaction of the masses towards art and this he brings out through this example of a painting and film, about the reactionary attitude towards a Picasso painting and the progressive reaction towards a Chaplin movie. And he wants us to position these two terms in dichotomous ways, the reactionary attitude and the progressive reaction.

"The progressive reaction is characterized by the direct, intimate fusion of visual and emotional enjoyment with the orientation of the expert, such fusion is of great social significance." He is also trying to show us the social significance which is invested into films. "The greater the decrease in the social significance of an art form, the sharper the distinction between criticism and enjoyment by the public". I hope you were able to see the equation that he is trying to highlight over here.

If there is the distinction between criticism and enjoyment, they seems to be lesser, they seems almost blurred when you look at an art form like film. "The conventional is uncritically enjoyed and the truly new is criticized with aversion". And this has been historically true with all kinds of art forms as and when art has been going through these evolutionary stages. "With regard to the screen, the critical and receptive attitudes of the public coincide."

There is a very thin line between enjoyment and criticism. Because one thinks that one is more equipped to critique something that is very new rather than something which is very

traditional because one feels more equipped to deal with things that are more contemporary than things which are rooted in tradition, which are related to cult value, which have ritualistic and traditional significance.

“The decisive reason for this is that individual reactions are predetermined by the mass audience response they are about to produce and this is nowhere more pronounced than in the film”. Look at the multiple ways in which Benjamin is trying to highlight the value of film as an art form and how this technical and mechanical reproduction also aids this entire process of criticism, of enjoyment, of our ideas of responding to art forms.

Again, the comparison with painting is fruitful, a painting has always had an excellent chance to be viewed by one person or by a few. The simultaneous contemplation of paintings by a large public which is what happens in the case of a film. This is simultaneously watched by a large number of audience which rarely happens with painting. “Such as developed in the nineteenth century, is an early symptom of the crisis of painting, a crisis which was by no means occasioned exclusively by photography but rather in a relatively independent manner by the appeal of artworks to the masses.”

And these minute details that Benjamin pays attention to, they also attempt to situate these art forms in a very historical and material sense. And it also showcases the multiple ways in which certain kinds of art forms are designed into certain kinds of criticisms and how there is a certain immunity which has always been there with the traditional forms of arts, such as painting.

“Painting simply is in no position to present an object for simultaneous collective experience.” So, this simultaneous collective experience which is now made available to film, he says it was possible for architecture at all times, for epic form in the past and for the movie today. Look at the trajectory that he is drawing over here, the collective experience of enjoyment, the collective experience of criticism is not entirely available to paintings except for in certain occasions in the nineteenth century which he also thinks had led to a huge crisis.

But this was always possible for architecture, the collective response, the collective viewing of something and for epic poem which was performed to a larger audience. And now it is the movie. So, there is tradition, there is something very new, very technically new, technologically new about movie. At the same time, there is a way in which it could be historically and in a chronological sense positioned as well. “Although the circumstance in

itself should not lead one to conclusions about the social role of painting, it does constitute a serious threat as soon as painting under special conditions and as it were, again its nature is confronted directly by the masses.”

So, films are seen as the art form which revolutionized the responses from the mass which radically changed the way in which art is being conceived by the masses. “In the churches and monasteries of the Middle Ages and at the princely courts up to the end of the 18th century, a collective reception of paintings did not occur simultaneously but by graduated and hierarchized mediation. The change that has come about is an expression of the particular conflict in which painting was implicated by the mechanical reproducibility of paintings.”

Look at this continuous tracing of chronology and history that we find over here. “Although paintings began to be publicly exhibited in galleries and saloons, there was no way for the masses to organize and control themselves in their reception.” And that is something which is entirely possible with today’s movie watching experience.

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masses to organize and control themselves in their reception.¹⁷ Thus the same public which responds in a progressive manner toward a grotesque film is bound to respond in a reactionary manner to surrealism.

XIII

The characteristics of the film lie not only in the manner in which man presents himself to mechanical equipment but also in the manner in which, by means of this apparatus, man can represent his environment. A glance at occupational psychology illustrates the testing capacity of the equipment. Psychoanalysis illustrates it in a different perspective. The film has enriched our field of perception with methods which can be illustrated by those of Freudian theory. Fifty years ago, a slip of the tongue passed more or less unnoticed. Only exceptionally may such a slip have revealed dimensions of depth in a conversation which had seemed to be taking its course on the surface. Since the *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* things have changed. This book isolated and made analyzable things which had heretofore floated along unnoticed in the broad stream of perception. For the entire spectrum of optical, and now also acoustical, perception the film has brought about a similar deepening of apprehension. It is only an obverse of this fact that behavior items shown in a movie can be analyzed much more precisely and from more points of view than those presented on paintings or on the stage. As compared with painting, filmed behavior lends itself more readily to analysis because of its incomparably more precise statements of the situation. In comparison with the stage scene, the filmed behavior item lends itself more readily to analysis because it can be isolated more easily. This circumstance derives its chief importance from its tendency to promote the mutual penetration of art and science. Actually, of a screened behavior item which is neatly brought out in a certain situation, like a muscle of a body, it is difficult to say which is more fascinating, its artistic value or its value for science. To demonstrate the identity of the artistic and scientific uses of photography which heretofore usually were separated will be one of the revolutionary functions of the film.¹⁸

By close-ups of the things around us, by focusing on hidden details of familiar objects, by exploring common place 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. Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously



“The same public which responds in a progressive manner toward a grotesque film is bound to respond in a reactionary manner to surrealism.” So, this fundamentally is a point that he is trying to drive home and he is comparing the audience of a painting and the audience of a film. The twin expressions, the twin responses of enjoyment and criticism can go hand in hand when it comes to film. But it does not sit together very neatly when it comes to a traditional form of art like painting.”

And more importantly, there is a progressive response, there is a progressive attitude that we find in response to movie watching. But it is more like a reactionary response when it comes to an art form like painting. In section 13, Benjamin draws our attention to how films have changed and deepened our optical perception. He is also telling us about how there is this continuous interpenetration of art and science in very mutual terms, where it becomes almost impossible to separate art from science. Because this is very technology-driven, when one is talking about movie, photography and things like that.

And we also realize that there are new aspects of reality which are being revealed to us through close-up shots, which helps us to understand movement which is extended in time, or the slow motion movements and about unconscious optics, new structural formations of the subject. There are these many new things which are being introduced to us through which we are able to also look at reality from a different perception altogether.

As he himself points out, “The circumstance derives its chief importance from its tendency to promote the mutual penetration of art and science. Actually of a screened behavior item which is neatly brought out in a certain situation, like a muscle of a body, it is difficult to say which is more fascinating, its artistic value or its value for science. To demonstrate the identity of the artistic and scientific uses of photography which heretofore usually were separated will be one of the revolutionary functions of the film.”

So, we find many things coming together which were hitherto seen as functions which were poles apart, things which were poles apart about the artistic and scientific uses of art, photography, film. These new techniques, try to forge these new kinds of relationships between art and technology, between art and science, between aesthetic experiences and scientific experiences.

He pertinently talks about how this entire process about the close-ups, focusing on hidden details, exploring commonplace milieus, all of these “they extend 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.” Even the very ordinary, will get transformed into something else under a cinematic gaze, under a photographic gaze. And it also gives us a new aspect of reality, it reveals before us a new aspect of reality which was otherwise not available for consumption to the naked eye.

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go traveling. With the close-up, space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended. The enlargement of a snapshot does not simply render more precise what in any case was visible, though unclear; it 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 "which, far from looking like retarded rapid movements, give the effect of singularly gliding, floating, supernatural motions." Evidently a different nature opens itself to the camera than opens to the naked eye—if only because an unconsciously penetrated space is substituted for a space consciously explored by man. Even if one has a general knowledge of the way people walk, one knows nothing of a person's posture during the fractional second of a stride. The act of reaching for a lighter or a spoon is familiar routine, yet we hardly know what really goes on between hand and metal, not to mention how this fluctuates with our moods. Here the camera intervenes with the resources of its lowerings and liftings, its interruptions and isolations, its extensions and accelerations, its enlargements and reductions. The camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses.

XIV

One of the foremost tasks of art has always been the creation of a demand which could be fully satisfied only later.¹⁷ The history of every art form shows critical epochs in which 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. The extravagances and credos of art which thus appear, particularly in the so-called decadent epochs, actually arise from the nucleus of its richest historical energies. In recent years, such barbarisms were abundant in Dadaism. It is only now that its impulse becomes discernible. Dadaism attempted to create by pictorial—and literary—means the effects which the public today seeks in the film.

Every fundamentally new, pioneering creation of demands will carry beyond its goal. Dadaism did so to the extent that it sacrificed the market values which are so characteristic of the film in favor of higher ambitions—though of course it was not conscious of such intentions as here described. The Dadaists attached much less importance to the sales value of their work than to its usefulness for contemplative immersion. The studied degradation of their material was not the least of their means to achieve this uselessness. Their poems are "word salad" containing obscenities and every imaginable waste product of language. The same is true of their paintings, on which they

¹⁷Rudolf Arnheim, *loc. cit.*, p. 138.



And this section ends, in section 13 he categorically states, ‘The camera introduces us to unconscious optics as the psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses.’ Looking through the lens of a camera, through different angles, through different settings of the lighting, through different processes of editing, there is the unconscious, an unconscious reality, an unconscious optics which is being revealed to us; just the way psychoanalysis had unraveled the unconscious impulses of the human mind.

So, there is always, and this also has this inherent belief that reality is not something which is there ready-made for you to consume. There are also many levels which could be unearthed through these interventions of technology. And this is something which is seen as an immense possibility that is being offered by these processes of mechanical reproduction.

Section 14 is where he talks about the influence of Dadaism. And Dadaism, he says, is a movement which had by default challenged the idea of the aura; which already had achieved the destruction of the aura by focusing on the already reproduced; and it also outraged the public in different ways. If you are familiar with the Dadaistic movement, you would also know what Benjamin means when he talks about this movement becoming very central to our understanding of mechanical reproduction of art form. And here he talks about how the Dadaists attached much less importance to the sales value of their work than to its usefulness for contemplative immersion.

“The studied degradation of their material was not the least of their means to achieve this uselessness. Their poems are “word salad” containing obscenities and every imaginable waste product of language.” Look at this focus on waste, on uselessness. I read this sentence to you

again, ‘The studied degradation of their material was not the least of their means to achieve this uselessness.’

The way in which art undergoes change is also radically challenging the usefulness of art. We have had centuries of writings which always looked at the function of art, the function of literature, what is the use value of literature. And here is a set of artists who are ready to forego the very usefulness of literature, the very usefulness of any form of art here. Uselessness is also seen as something to be achieved, something to be attained. And there is a lot of value attached to this identification of the function of art which is not entirely “useful” in anyway.

And this democratization, this complete disregard for art which is useful, that is also something very challenging that Benjamin talks about.

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mounted buttons and tickets. 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. Before a painting of Apollinaire or a poem by August Stramm it is impossible to take time for contemplation and evaluation as one would before a canvas of Derain's or a poem by Rilke. In the decline of middle-class society, contemplation became a school for social behavior; it was countered by distraction as a variant of social conduct.¹⁸ Dadaistic activities actually assured a rather vehement distraction by making works of art the centre of scandal. One requirement was foremost: to outrage the public.

From an alluring appearance or persuasive structure of sound the work of art of the Dadaists became an instrument of ballistics. It hit the spectator like a bullet, it happened to him, thus acquiring a tactile quality. It promoted a demand for the film, the distracting element of which is also primarily tactile, being based on changes of place and focus which periodically assail the spectator. Let us compare the screen on which a film unfolds with the canvas of a painting. The painting invites the spectator to contemplation; before it the spectator can abandon himself to his associations. Before the movie frame he cannot do so. No sooner has his eye grasped a scene than it is already changed. It cannot be arrested. Duhamel, who detests the film and knows nothing of its significance, though something of its structure, notes this circumstance as follows: "I can no longer think what I want to think. My thoughts have been replaced by moving images."¹⁹ The spectator's process of association in view of these images is indeed interrupted by their constant, sudden change. This constitutes the shock effect of the film, which, like all shocks, should be cushioned by heightened presence of mind.²⁰ By means of its technical structure, the film has taken the physical shock effect out of the wrappers in which Dadaism had, as it were, kept it inside the moral shock effect.²¹

XV

The mass is a matrix from which all traditional behavior toward works of art issues today in a new form. Quantity has been transmuted into quality. The greatly increased mass of participants has produced a change in the mode of participation. The fact that the new mode of participation first appeared in a disreputable form must not confuse the spectator. Yet some people have launched spirited attacks against precisely this superficial aspect. Among these, Duhamel has expressed himself in the most radical manner. What he objects to most is the kind of participation which the movie elicits from the masses. Duhamel calls the movie "a pastime for belots, a diversion for uneducated,

¹⁸ Georges Duhamel, *Œuvres de la vie future*, Paris, 1930, p. 52.



wretched, worn-out creatures who are consumed by their worries . . . a spectacle which requires no concentration and presupposes no intelligence . . . which kindles no light in the heart and awakens no hope other than the ridiculous one of someday becoming a 'star' in Los Angeles." Clearly, this is at bottom the same ancient lament that the masses seek distraction whereas art demands concentration from the spectator. That is a commonplace.

The question remains whether it provides a platform for the analysis of the film. A closer look is needed here. Distraction and concentration form polar opposites which may be stated as follows: A man who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it. He enters into this work of art the way legend tells of the Chinese painter when he viewed his finished painting. In contrast, the distracted mass absorbs the work of art. This is most obvious with regard to buildings. Architecture has always represented the prototype of a work of art the reception of which is consummated by a collectivity in a state of distraction. The laws of its reception are most instructive.

Buildings have been man's companions since primeval times. Many art forms have developed and perished. Tragedy begins with the Greeks, is extinguished with them, and after centuries its "rules" only are revived. The epic poem, which had its origin in the youth of nations, expires in Europe at the end of the Renaissance. Panel painting is a creation of the Middle Ages, and nothing guarantees its uninterrupted existence. But the human need for shelter is lasting. Architecture has never been idle. Its history is more ancient than that of any other art, and its claim to being a living force has significance in every attempt to comprehend the relationship of the masses to art. Buildings are appropriated in a twofold manner: by use and by perception - or rather, by touch and sight. Such appropriation cannot be understood in terms of the attentive concentration of a tourist before a famous building. 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. As regards architecture, habit determines to a large extent even optical reception. The latter, too, occurs much less through rapt attention than by noticing the object in incidental fashion. This mode of appropriation, developed with reference to architecture, in certain circumstances acquires canonical value. For 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.

The distracted person, too, can form habits. More, the ability to master certain tasks in a state of distraction proves that their solution has become a matter of habit. Distraction as provided by art presents a covert control of the extent to which new tasks have become soluble by apprehension. Since,

*Duhamel, *op. cit.*, p. 58.



“Dadaistic activities actually assured a rather vehement distraction by making works of art the center of scandal. One requirement was foremost: to outrage the public.” Here is a kind of art form which does not try to please its audience. On the other hand, it wants to stay useless and outrage the public. You look at the mass responses to this kind of artistic productions and how historically this has been very significantly tied up with mechanical reproduction. And he also says, in this historical process while we are trying to situate these different processes, we also realize that contemplation had become a school for asocial behavior. And this is something that he also associates with the decline of the middle class.

He is again back to this comparison, this alluring comparison between painting and movie or photography. “Let us compare the screen on which a film unfolds with the canvas of a painting. The painting invites spectator to contemplation, before it the spectator can abandon himself to his associations. Before the movie frame he cannot do so. No sooner has the eye grasped a scene than it is already changed. It cannot be arrested.” So, the movement from one frame to the other, that also does something to this perception, to this analysis, this process of enjoyment and criticism, it is quite unlike the painting where the moment is arrested over there and the audience can engage with it. But with the film there is an overall engagement, but otherwise engaging with one particular shot it is quite impossible. One needs to move on. The movement also dictates or influences this process of enjoyment and process of criticism.

“Duhamel who detests the film and knows nothing of significance, knows something of its structure, notice the circumstance as follows: ‘I can no longer think what I want to think, my thoughts have been replaced by moving images’.” So, the entire idea of comprehension, the

cognition, everything undergoes a change when technology begins to intervene with artistic production. And spectator's process of association in view of these images, is indeed interrupted by the constant sudden change. This constitutes the shock effect of the film which like all shocks should be cushioned by heightened presence of mind. By means of its technical structure the film has taken the physical shock effect out of the wrappers in which Dadaism had, as it were, kept it inside the moral shock effect.

So, this comparison with Dadaism also makes perfect sense. It is not entirely about pleasing the audience in the way that for the last many centuries that the artists and critics have been trying to do. But it is also about shocking the public, to outrage the public with a constant movement, with something very refreshing, very new, which is beyond the comprehension, which is beyond the cognition of the traditional ways in which human mind was trained to respond to art.

This final section, in section 15, Benjamin talks about how habits are formed due to conditions of distraction and dwells at length on these qualities of distraction and concentration. And how concentration is seen as the absorption of the viewer by the work and distraction is the absorption of the work into the masses. And he also brings in architecture into this discussion and says that it is rooted in practical needs, so it does not appear like say Greek tragedy. There is always a use-value, there is always a practical need, not like an epic poem which could always be replaced, which even in its absence will not perhaps make much of a change to the relation between the masses and the art.

And here he begins to talk about the significance of habit, and habit, Benjamin argues, in this final section, "is necessary to master the problems of human perception" and contemplation by itself is not sufficient in this entire process. And he talks about how film is the current means for encouraging distraction arts. Because distraction art provides a force for mobilizing the masses by molding their habits covertly, and also by making them absent-minded examiners.

There is a way in which through this process of democratization almost everyone is able to judge a film, almost everyone is able to watch and analyze a film. It becomes far more easier than to say 'look at the painting and evaluate it and assess it and respond to it!'. And there is a certain kind of a progressive reaction, as he already mentioned, which the film an art form affords as well.

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moreover, individuals are tempted to avoid such tasks, art will tackle the most difficult and most important ones where it is able to mobilize the masses. Today it does so in the film. 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 meets this mode of reception halfway. The film 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.

Epilogue

The growing proletarianization of modern man and the increasing formation of masses are two aspects of the same process. Fascism attempts to organize the newly created proletarian masses without affecting the property structure which the masses strive to eliminate. Fascism sees its salvation in giving these masses not their right, but instead a chance to express themselves.²⁷ The masses have a right to change property relations; Fascism seeks to give them an expression while preserving property. The logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life. The violation of the masses, whom Fascism, with its *Führer* cult, forces to their knees, has its counterpart in the violation of an apparatus which is pressed into the production of ritual values.

All efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war. War and war only can set a goal for mass movements on the largest scale while respecting the traditional property system. This is the political formula for the situation. The technological formula may be stated as follows: Only war makes it possible to mobilize all of today's technical resources while maintaining the property system. It goes without saying that the Fascist apotheosis of war does not employ such arguments. Still, Marinetti says in his manifesto on the Ethiopian colonial war: "For twenty-seven years we Futurists have rebelled against the branding of war as anti-aesthetic. . . . Accordingly we state: . . . War is beautiful because it establishes man's dominion over the subjugated machinery by means of gas masks, terrifying megaphones, flame throwers, and small tanks. War is beautiful because it initiates the dream-of metallization of the human body. War is beautiful because it enriches a flowering meadow with the fiery orchids of machine guns. War is beautiful because it combines the gunfire, the cannonades, the cease-fire, the seconds, and the stench of putrefaction into a symphony. War is beautiful because it creates new architecture, like that of the big tanks, the geometrical formation flights, the smoke spirals from burning villages, and many others. . . . Poets and artists of



This is how he ends the final section, section 15: ‘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 meets this mode of reception halfway, the film makes the cult value recede into the background.’” And this is something that, if you remember, Benjamin had been talking about from the beginning. This transition from the cult value towards the exhibition value which dominates the current perception of art, the current evaluation of art.

“The film makes the cult value recede into the background not only by putting the public in the position of the critic”. So, the public can also become the critic, the viewer can also become the critic. This is quite unlike the earlier times when the critic was a separate entity. Not every reader, not every viewer was equipped to become the critic. But these sort of distinctions are increasingly getting blurred, the mass could be the critic as well, which is what we see in this new age of mass media increasingly, which is how we see in this collective response in this collective viewership that a medium like film also entails. “Not only by putting the public in the position of the critic and also by the fact that at the movies this position requires no attention. The public is an examiner but an absent-minded one.”

One need not be a trained critic to respond to a movie, one could be an absent-minded viewer and still the response continues to matter. That is the kind of democratization that art has achieved in this age of mechanical reproduction.

So, the final epilogue where he talks about how fascism aesthetises politics, and the entire implication of this essay in our current understanding of art about human perception, about our responses to various forms of art, and the need to situate art in a historical sense, that is something that we shall look at in the next and final session on Benjamin's essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction". I thank you for your time and attention. I look forward to seeing you in the next class.