

Literary Criticism
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Lecture: Walter Benjamin's The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical
Reproduction 4

Hello and welcome to this course titled 'Literary Criticism' and we are continuing to look at Walter Benjamin's essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'. And this is the final lecture with respect to this essay.

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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.²¹ 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



In the epilogue, he talks about the larger implications of art with respect to politics. And you as you might know, Walter Benjamin was part of the Frankfurt School. We find a certain kind of a balanced critique of the communist framework over here. And we do find him trying to articulate those within the political and socio-economic frameworks of his times.

When we talk about implications of this essay, the larger implications of this essay, we find that this has gone down in history as one of the foundational texts which help us understand the connection between art and culture, between art, culture and literature. We also realize that this is a very important text, this is a seminal text when we try to understand the politics of art, try to understand how the cultural immediacy of works of

art are extremely important in our systems of evaluation, in our systems of critical understanding.

When we look at this epilogue, we find that he begins with a very political statement ‘The growing proletarianization of modern man and the increasing formation of masses are two aspects of the same process.’ He uses very Marxist terminologies in this discussion which is largely about art. Here we find him emerging as an art critic as well as a cultural critic at the same time. And what is the far-reaching significance of this essay?

We do realize that there is a continuing fascination that Benjamin has with modern technology which has produced this new art form which is film. And his fascination with film is very evident. Many others of his times were also really fascinated by this movement of images, by these moving images which radically revolutionized our understanding of art, our conception of art. In films, he also saw the possibility of an ordinary viewer emerging as a critic. And that was a kind of democratization that he found extremely fascinating too. Unlike high art which required someone, an expert, someone with expertise as a critic.

Here we find in film that an ordinary viewer could also elevate himself as a critic and criticism in that sense becomes a more mass project. Here he talks about how this proletarianization of modern man and an increase in the formation of masses, these are two aspects of the same process. ‘Fascism attempts to organize a newly created proletarian masses without affecting the property structure which the masses strive to eliminate.’ He is also trying to locate the politics of these new forms of art in our understanding. ‘Fascism sees its salvation in giving these masses not their right but instead a chance to express themselves.’

So, that is what is more liberating, that is what is the most substantial difference that Benjamin also notices in these new forms of art—that it gives the ordinary man, the ordinary person a chance to express themselves. Masses become not just passive recipients of art but they also become active participants in terms of their critique. We

also know that with this increasingly market driven kind of art economy, the feedback, the review that one gets from an ordinary viewer, also becomes a determinant force.

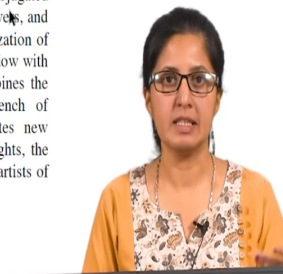
‘The masses have a right to change property relations; Fascism seeks to give them an expression while preserving property. The logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life.’ This is a very important statement that he makes in this simple sentence ‘The logical result of fascism is introduction of aesthetics in the political life.’

And now he will also take us on to another conclusion that he tries to make where he says ‘All efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war.’ And look at these connections that he is making over here where art is connected to culture and the politicization of art and the introduction of the politics into this aesthetic framework that is connected to the emergence of war. “War and war only can set a goal for mass movements on the largest scale while respecting the traditional property system.

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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 scents, 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 the political formula for the situation.” We find this essay taking an overt political tone towards the end, but still retaining its original framework which is about the

reproducibility of art in the age of increasing mechanical and technological advancement. And in these times of the increasing use and influence of social media, we also find that the digital reproducibility also has a similar kind of an effect. And we find this essay speaking to our times in multiple ways where art, culture, politics are all interlinked and these newer mass media seem to work as proper interfaces for these sort of dialogues.

And the sustenance of art, the dissemination of art and the reproducibility of art has also undergone significant changes and very radical changes with the advent of digital technologies. And this is a far-reaching impact, as we can see, and perhaps more novel, and more challenging than what Walter Benjamin had encountered during his time with photography, moving images, and with film.

We find that with newer kinds of mass media and with the kind of reach that these digital technologies has entailed for us, we find that art itself, the notion of art itself has undergone a significant change. And the democratization has become very pertinent, very eminent to such an extent that almost everyone is capable of producing art of different kinds. There is no longer a distinction between high art and low art as the postmodern tenets would also tell us. But there is also an accessibility in producing art, in reproducing art and also in disseminating art to this public, to the masses. And the masses are not just passive recipients, as we know now, they also participate in making art, in reproducing art and also in disseminating and also in the larger politics that is part of this.

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Futurism! . . . remember these principles of an aesthetics of war so that your struggle for a new literature and a new graphic art... may be illumined by them!"

This manifesto has the virtue of clarity. Its formulations deserve to be accepted by dialecticians. To the latter, the aesthetics of today's war appears as follows: If the natural utilization of productive forces is impeded by the property system, the increase in technical devices, in speed, and in the sources of energy will press for an unnatural utilization, and this is found in war. The destructiveness of war furnishes proof that society has not been mature enough to incorporate technology as its organ, that technology has not been sufficiently developed to cope with the elemental forces of society. The horrible features of imperialistic warfare are attributable to the discrepancy between the tremendous means of production and their inadequate utilization in the process of production—in other words, to unemployment and the lack of markets.



And he is also quoting Marinetti ‘War is beautiful because it combines the gunfire, the cannonades, the ceasefire, the sense and the stench of putrefaction into a symphony. War is beautiful because it creates a 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 futurism! Remember these principles of an aesthetics of war so that your struggle for a new literature and a new graphic art may be illumined by them!’

This is a very powerful way of looking at the aesthetics of war and that politics which makes it almost impossible for art to exist in a vacuum or politics to exist without the intervention of art. And this is a very cynical kind of an image that he presents before us, very satirical too, but we realize that there is a way in which even something very horrific, very gory, like war, has the capacity to produce art which we have seen in the post-war situation, the post war literature.

We have seen in the multiple kinds of art forms which got generated after violent events. So, this connection is not something which needs to be violently established, but it has always been there. And this also brings us to this important point that Walter Benjamin does not really highlight in this particular essay, but it is there throughout. And in most of his works he looks at history not as a linear progression towards betterment, but more like a chaotic seamless existence. He also believes that one need not perhaps progress in

particular ways as and when history moves ahead, as there could also be an imitation or application of past mistakes.

This sort of a chaotic character that he identifies with history, that also makes sense when he talks about these different kinds of relationships that he is beginning to identify between art and culture, between political events and literary and artistic expressions, and the almost inevitable mesh within which all of these things are intertwined.

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...the increase in technical devices, in speed, and in the sources of energy will press for an unnatural utilization, and this is found in war. The destructiveness of war furnishes proof that society has not been mature enough to incorporate technology as its organ, that technology has not been sufficiently developed to cope with the elemental forces of society. The horrible features of imperialistic warfare are attributable to the discrepancy between the tremendous means of production and their inadequate utilization in the process of production—in other words, to unemployment and the lack of markets. Imperialistic war is a rebellion of technology which collects, in the form of “human material,” the claims to which society has denied its natural material. Instead of draining rivers, society directs a human stream into a bed of trenches; instead of dropping seeds from airplanes, it drops incendiary bombs over cities; and through gas warfare the aura is abolished in a new way.

“*Fiat ars—percat mundus*,” says Fascism, and, as Marinetti admits, expects war to supply the artistic gratification of a sense perception that has been changed by technology. This is evidently the consummation of “*l’art pour l’art*.” Mankind, which in Homer’s time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order. This is the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic. Communism responds by politicizing art.



And drawing upon Marinetti even further he says ‘The horrible features of imperialistic warfare are attributable to the discrepancy between tremendous means of production and their inadequate utilization in the process of production—in other words, to unemployment and the lack of markets. Imperialistic war is a rebellion of technology which collects in the form of “human material”, the claims to which society has denied its natural material. Instead of draining rivers society directs a human stream into a bed of trenches; instead of dropping seeds from airplanes it drops incendiary bombs over cities; and through gas warfare the aura is abolished in a new way.’

And it is a very dark note towards the end of this essay, as we realize, where he is time and again trying to remind us about this intricate connection between aesthetics and

politics, between art and the cultural ethos of particular times, between art and the politics which is always almost inevitably part of it.

And let me read out to you the final passage here “*Fiat ars – pereat mundus*, says Fascism and, as Marinetti admits, expects war to supply the artistic gratification of a sense perception that has been changed by technology”. And this human sense perception which undergoes a change historically, that was the focus of the essay right from the beginning, as we could see. ‘This is evidently the consummation of “l’art pour l’art.” (which is art for art's sake.) Mankind which in Homer’s time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is one for itself.’”

Historically, the way in which we perceive art has changed. And even the way in which human mind conceives about humankind that also has undergone a significant change from Homer’s time, as he indicates. And here we see these markers as extremely important, the markers that he gives in terms of situating various historical events, various historical artistic projects, they are very significant.

‘Itself alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction for an aesthetic pleasure of the first order.’ I read to you again, ‘itself alienation has reached such a degree’, self alienation is the way in which human beings have begun to conceive about themselves. And the alienation that they feel, which he has already explicated with respect to the examples that he has been giving, where the artist, the screen actor, when he is being recorded, it is a mirror image; but it is also a separable, transportable image which was unthinkable in the earlier forms of traditional kinds of art.

“Itself alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order”. So, this kind of transportability which art affords that also has the possibility of destructing oneself, which is what we see when the politics of art, when especially the aesthetics of war that he talks about; that is what we see happening with the advancement of technology which is also perhaps something which is unavoidable in these situations.

‘This is a situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic, Communism responds by politicizing art.’ This is evidently an essay written from the perspective of the Frankfurt School which is also a prominent Marxist school. The term Communism appears for the first time in this essay towards the end, in the final statement. And here we find that he is actually responding to the fascist way of rendering politics, in an aesthetic sense.

And as he tries to tell us towards the end, time and again, with these gory images, when we try to render something aesthetic, inject something aesthetic into politics, it can inevitably result only in war. And that is what Communism is trying to resist, that is what Communism is trying to resist with the increasing democratization of art, with the increasing presence of the masses, with the increasing transformation of the masses into producers of art, into critics of art and also as active participants in this entire system of production.

To sum up, one of the lasting contributions of this essay is that, he very actively challenged and quite successfully challenged the assumption, the traditional assumption that the original artwork was more valuable to the society than perhaps the photographic and the many kinds of mechanical reproductions of that work of art, by destroying, by challenging the idea of authenticity. He is also thereby challenging the idea of the aura which is associated with the original artist, with the original artwork.

And this had a profound impact on the subsequent ways in which theories of art, aesthetic theory of literary and cultural criticism, all of these things evolved, the artistic practices. And of course this had a very foundational effect on emergence of various postmodern art movements as well. This essay was successful in promoting the new view which was also very Marxist in nature.

That reproduction of an artwork was of a higher social value than the original; and the social value is what was more important in this current age than the traditional values which were part of religious, traditional, and in terms of the cult value that it had earlier. It also succeeded in highlighting the view that the artwork which is reproduced thus had a

greater impact because it could be persistent, enjoyed in a very democratic fashion by an art lover in a time and place that suits him or her.

The transportability of art and the way in which the art could be separated from its original, the original work or the original time of production, from the original place of production, that increases the social value of art, thereby making it a more democratic. And challenging this fundamental premise that the original had more value than the other reproductions, they were also very instrumental in forming and in laying the foundations of pop art or feminist art, of conceptual art and of appropriation art.

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Instead of draining rivers, society directs a human stream into a bed of trenches; instead of dropping seeds from airplanes, it drops incendiary bombs over cities; and through gas warfare the aura is abolished in a new way.

"*Fiat ars—pereat mundus*," says Fascism, and, as Marinetti admits, expects war to supply the artistic gratification of a sense perception that has been changed by technology. This is evidently the consummation of "*l'art pour l'art*." Mankind, which in Homer's time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order. This is the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic. Communism responds by politicizing art.

Notes

1. Of course, the history of a work of art encompasses more than this. The history of the "Mona Lisa," for instance, encompasses the kind and number of its copies made in the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries.

2. Precisely because authenticity is not reproducible, the intensive penetration of certain (mechanical) processes of reproduction was instrumental in differentiating and grading authenticity. To develop such differentiations was an important function of the trade in works of art. The invention of the woodcut may be said to have struck at the



And these were considered as the lasting impacts of Walter Benjamin's essay as well. I leave you with this statement that he had made in between this essay, where he highlighted the significance of film as a very modern and very democratic art form, and where he argued that 'The greater the decrease in the social significance of an art form the sharper the distinction between criticism and enjoyment by the public.'

And this could be considered as a crux of this essay as well, 'the greater the decrease in the social significance of an art form, the sharper the distinction between criticism and enjoyment by the public'. This essay has gone down in history as an essay which had laid the foundations of literary and cultural criticism and also as one of the earliest essays that

advocated the democratization of art form by challenging the value invested in the original artwork. With this, we wrap up the discussion of Walter Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" and I thank you for your time and attention.