

Transformations

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“Politicizing Art”: Benjamin’s Redemptive Critique of Technology in the Age of Fascism

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Benjamin’s essay on “The Work of Art in the age of Mechanical Reproduction” is a meditative exercise on the relationship of art and technology and its profound impact on the history of human perception. An exegetical reading of the “Artwork” essay, along with “A Small History of Photography,” reveals that Benjamin’s interest in the art of reproduction is not purely animated by the development of technology for its own sake, but is prompted by the given political urgency of the time in 1936 to prevent its regression into a politics of ritual.

The “amazing growth” of technology, when Benjamin wrote the essay, introduced unprecedented changes in the physical environment, which was then poised to inflict profound transformations in the perceptual and the cognitive faculties of human beings. Standing on the threshold of technological revolution, we find ourselves confronting history on the verge of changing so dramatically that everything around it, including the presence of the collective human sensorium, must respond to it in a state of *shock*. The scientific and technological innovations, especially in the field of mechanical reproduction, have brought about a crisis in the traditional perception of art, which until now was attributed to the presence of the aura in its temporality of the here and now. The art of mechanical reproduction aims at the destruction of the aura, because the aura no longer corresponds to the paradigmatic shifts in the spatio-temporal register of human perception, which, as a result, has become “estranged” from reality.

In the initial phase of the “Artwork” essay Benjamin prepares the ground for the oncoming of film. For film is not only a medium of mechanical reproduction, but it is also a *technique* of mechanical reproduction. At the outset Benjamin makes a clear cut distinction between the art of manual and mechanical reproduction. He writes:

The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity.... 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 so *vis à vis* technical reproducibility. 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. 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 sounds in the drawing room. (*Work of Art* 220-1)

Photographic reproduction is not limited to a perspective, the perspective of authenticity, or, for that matter, to a perspective of originality either, since, as Benjamin tells us, "it chooses its angle at will." The selection of camera angles and lenses, and its technical manipulations through enlargement and slow motion, does not correspond to the natural vision of the naked eye. The process of technical reproducibility introduces a crisis in perception – after standardization of natural habits by the media – that corresponds to the "changes with humanity's entire mode of existence" with a realization that *nothing* is natural about our lives, our memories, our past (Terdiman 19).

When a film camera captures a movement in slow or fast motion, it provides us with a vision which does not correspond to a standard perceptual nature but to an altered and historically more dynamic perception of nature that has already been technically interfered with. Instead of pointing inwards to human nature the technological perception directs itself to the *other* nature. As Benjamin puts it, "for it is another nature that speaks to the camera than to the eye: other in the sense that a space informed by human consciousness gives way to a space informed by the unconscious" ("A Small History" 243). And thus he formulates his enigmatic theory of photography as "optical unconscious."

In a direct reference to Freudian psychoanalysis, Benjamin observes a methodological similarity between the technical process of photographic enlargement and the Freudian dream theory. He reads it as a mimetic correspondence between the psychoanalytic practice of discovering meanings in the smallest and most secret places which remain hidden from the conscious mind, and the optical manipulations of spaces that reveal images that are beyond the grasp of normal human perception or sight. Much like the Freudian theory, the medium of film has managed to bring about, both optically and (with the advent of sound) acoustically, a "deepening of apperception" (*Work of Art* 235). Since every image in the film can easily be isolated from the other, the analysis of "filmed behavior" becomes much easier than, for instance, a stage performance, which would be almost impossible to detach from the entire production. As isolatable unit the filmic image lends itself more readily to analysis than other artistic behavior, however, that does not mean that its artistic function is completely overwhelmed or jeopardized by its scientific function. If "neatly brought out," the scientific study of a man's stride as he "steps out" in slow motion is as supernaturally beautiful, as it extends the *durée* to an infinite length, as any artistic event. "Slow motion not only presents familiar qualities of movement but reveals in them entirely unknown ones" (*Work of Art* 236). Through its mechanisms of pans and cranes and tilts and tracks, its acceleration and retardation of motions, enlargements and reductions, the camera penetrates into unconscious space, which it substitutes for the conscious space. Benjamin concludes his discussion on the film and Freudian theory by insisting that "the camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses" (*Work of Art* 237).

It becomes increasingly apparent that there can be no doubt how seriously Benjamin considers the question of the origin and the task of photography in its relation to both technology and physiology. In an emphatic way he differentiates the function of a cameraman from that of a painter: "The painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, the cameraman penetrates deeply into its web" (*Work of Art* 233). The task of the cameraman is likened to a surgeon's performance on the operating table, that is, to penetrate the surface of reality like a surgeon's knife (*Work of Art* 233). The fruitful analogy, the image of the surgeon and the cameraman succeeds in uniting the artistic and the scientific functions of art in the mechanical reproduction, but the image is not without a sense of loss, a loss of incomparable beauty, of aura, which emanated or escaped, for the last time from the melancholic countenance, from the sad faces of early photographs. The stillness of the face withdraws from the image and, in turn, it is replaced by the body, a fragmented body that only appears through fragmented motion. The technical necessity of delayed exposure of early photography demanded that the subject remained

