

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

Amresh Sinha

ABSTRACT

Walter 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. As opposed to the common belief I would argue 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 or mediation into a politics of ritual.

KEYWORDS

Walter Benjamin, Aura, Technology, Artworks, Fascism

The “amazing growth” of technology, when Benjamin wrote the essay, “The Work of Art in the age of Mechanical Reproduction,” 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. [1] 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 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.

Benjamin’s major concerns in this essay have met with considerable objections, especially from Adorno, who criticised the essay for providing a critique of mass art in historical terms, which lacked, in his own words, dialectical mediation.[2] Benjamin’s unflinching endorsement of mass art, exemplified by the cinema, was rather too positive for Adorno’s liking, whose critical model preferred the implementation of a “determined negation” for most of his dialectical operations. Adorno sensed a return of the old Lukácsian problematic of the subject-object identity in Benjamin’s redemption of the mass art in conjunction with the proletariat as the subject. Not only that the relation between the subject and object is falsely reconciled by identifying the proletariat as the subject of revolution, but also the identity and false resolution of the material conditions of the proletariat with the historical consciousness invariably excludes the crucial category of non-identity that a strictly dialectical theory ought to present. If not, then, it exposes itself to a dialectical critique; for it has resolved a historical incongruence between art and reality, a basic dichotomy and aporia of theory that illusion cannot be represented as truth unless truth also represents its own illusion. Truth remains non-identical, even to itself. For Adorno, the dialectical image of utopia revealed itself immanently within the structure of technique, in the process of unfolding which occurs at the moment of art’s categorical rejection or negation of reality in consciousness. Art as a negation of reality expresses a relationship between art and reality, where reality loses its meaning as the real as its forms are appropriated by aesthetic absorption. Benjamin’s essay also gives the impression that the work of art is now being strongly identified with the proletariat, and thus it opens itself to another attack from Adorno, for whom the relation between subject and object is mediated by non-identity.

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. The discussion of the theme of *Technik*, in the sense of technology and technique, is prominent in both Benjamin’s and Adorno’s thought. 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. (*I*, 220-1) [3]

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. [4]

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, which 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.” [5] 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” (*I*, 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” (I, 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” (I, 237).

It becomes increasingly apparent from the above discussion 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 medicine. 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” (I, 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. (I, 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 the early photography demanded that the subject remained still, a procedure which caused, in Benjamin’s words, “the subject to focus his life in the moment rather than hurrying past it; during the considerable period of exposure, the subject as it were grew into the picture.”[6] On the other hand, further developments in the technology of photographic reproduction, such as snap-shots, reveal a purpose that corresponds to the need of the changed environment, where a split second in the exposure determines, especially in sports, the winner from the loser. Such decisions become part of a new standard of perception of a world where the function of photography serves to indicate the dislocation of temporality.

Film and photography mark the crisis in the perception of temporality, by isolating the moment from the organic flow of time the crisis is also registered by the human sensorium, which reacts to these new and challenging sensations, in continual state of a shock. The state of continual shock also produces a state of emergency, which responds to the artificially changing situation with a sort of natural vigilance, as described by Benjamin in the figure of the prostitute. The figure of the whore is rather troubling. It is troubling because he makes this an example of a dialectical image, whose figure represents both the humanization of the commodity as well as the vigilance of a natural prey, who, in a constant state of alert, is simultaneously keeping a strict vigil for police’s presence while plying her trade. The image of the whore is represented through a constellation of the convergence of both the natural

and the historical in the form of commodity. But the image or metaphor also reveals a physiognomic dimension of the image as well. Here we find motives for both prehistoric, animal consciousness of the mythical force represented through the stance of the species' natural instinct, ever so conscious of the presence of danger, in the metaphor of the whore, whose nature precisely reveals its commodity character in the most primitive, anthropological expression. In short, the image of the whore is presented as a synthesis of the natural with the historical.

The function of photography has completely changed our perception of temporality. Time is no longer measured as an integrated unit of experience of lived time, of *Erlebnis*. Its transition to *Erfahrung* suggests a journey beyond time, in moments that are spatial in dimension, because here time comes to a standstill. The function of photography is to capture what is most fleeting and the most accidental. The flux of movement that has been captured by a snapshot reveals, in a split second of the exposure, a completely changed environment, which, incidentally, will also demand a completely different standard of perception. This would translate in Benjamin's thought as "liberation" of sight from its bondage to the inward contemplative gaze that belongs to the traditional spectator of a painting. Instead of the death-like stillness which, incidentally, was the most appropriate and congruent subject for photography at the time, when a whole generation was about to disappear along with the "cultic practice" of portrait photography, the historically changing constellations of new scientific and artistic criteria brought in those expectations of a radically new mode of perception in conjunction with a new mode of depiction. It is hard to say, though, whether the artistic achievement of the early photographs, which preserved the melancholic beauty of the fleeting aura, is more fascinating than the scientific precision with which the camera records such corporeal behavior as the twitching of a muscle. Therefore, in photography, according to Benjamin, "it is difficult to say which is more fascinating, its artistic value or its value for science" (*I*, 236). At last, in the revolutionary medium of film he will find these two antithetical modes hitherto separated as being reconciled and united with each other.

Benjamin traces the history of photography in the 1840s to a moment in the development of photography which becomes decisive for the separation between the painter, mostly the miniaturists, who were involved in commercial portraits, and the technician. As a victim of a new trade most of these painters later took up commercial portrait photography for a living. And one of the reasons why those early photographs retain their aura is because these artists were also consummate craftsmen, and their achievements are quite evident in those photographs. There was an aura about these pictures, "an atmospheric medium, that lent fullness and security to their gaze even as it penetrated that medium." [8]

But the aura of the photograph is not purely a matter of artistic presentation, of a creative use of light and shadow in hurriedly converted studio from painting to photography. For Benjamin aura designates a particular historical moment in the art of mechanical reproduction, because it signifies a moment when the photographic subject is directly congruent with the medium of reproduction. It is a period of congruence between the subject and the object which, Benjamin argues, will become immediately "incongruent in the period

of decline.” Thus, the “penumbral tone” of late nineteenth century photographs not only reflects a fashionable trend at the time but also marks the precipitous decline of the bourgeoisie whom it captured at the moment of its twilight. The rigidity of the posture in a highly simulated pose only betrayed, in Benjamin’s opinion, “the impotence of that generation in the face of technical progress.” [9]

In contrast to this *rigor mortis* of late nineteenth century photography that simulated its own death, by creating a twilight like atmosphere for its background, the photographs of David Octavius Hill, on the other hand, taken in the Edinburgh Greyfriars cemetery, preserves the aura of his subjects who were, according to Benjamin, very much “at home there.” In a moving elegy to Hill’s pictures, Benjamin writes, “everything about these early pictures was built to last; not only the incomparable groups in which people came together—and whose disappearance was surely one of the most telling symptoms of what was happening in society in the second half of the century—but the very creases in people’s clothes have an air of permanence.” [10]

The natural setting of early photographs revealed a similarity, indeed a congruence, between the instrument and its subject. The outdoors was essential for these early low-light sensitive plates and, therefore, it is hardly a coincidence that Hill’s subjects are so much at home in the cemetery. Again, the aura has already deserted the sad and melancholic countenance of the subject, those immensely sad eyes of Kafka that Benjamin found so appealing in one of his childhood photographs, and has “seeped in” by the “route of darkness” “into the very folds of the man’s frock coat or floppy cravat.” What Benjamin describes is not the individual, but the type, the class, the bourgeois member, who disappears, or better, is “banished” from the picture with the discovery of faster lenses that allowed a greater intensity of light to enter into the photo sensitive plate. Thus what we see in the old pictures taken around 1880 is the bourgeoisie captured in its flight from being reproduced in the photographs.

For Benjamin, photography, rather than being an improved version of painting, reveals the similarity of things to each other. He discovers uncanny similarities between technology and magic that can only come into existence because of the high sensitivity of the photographic plate as in Blossfeldt’s “astonishing plant photographs reveals the forms of ancient columns in horse willow, a bishop’s crosier in the ostrich fern.” [11] Like psychoanalysis, which tries to find meaning by uncovering the enigma of dreams, photography, too, is concerned with “the physiognomic aspects of visual worlds, which dwell in the smallest things.” [12] If we recall from the Proust essay the reference to the physiognomy of image as the intertwining of remembrance and forgetting—“the physiognomic aspects of visual worlds” that photography is supposed to reveal—can probably also indicate a desire to capture the past, the childhood memory, and forgotten things. [13] Photography essentially reveals to us what has deserted us, what has shrunk away from the auratic gaze. It is about “a discreet distance,” “an absence of relation,” between the photograph and the photographed. [14] In its telescoping urge for closer detail, Benjamin’s reflection on photography is in danger of emptying itself, of

vacating the picture. Thus his love for Eugene Atget's photographs of the deserted streets of Paris which he compares to the deserted scenes of crime.

Benjamin elaborates the concept of aura, in the "Artwork" essay, in the intersubjective mode of the return of the gaze. He describes the aura as the exchange of looks between the painting and the person who looks at it. When we look at a painting, an act which remains inexhaustible to the extent that "our eyes will never have their fill," and, when that expectation is met, when that call is answered, and our gaze has been returned, then we have experienced "the aura at its fullest extent" (I, 187, 188). This experience of the aura also coincides with a prior knowledge of the world which is also being confirmed in being returned to us by the object of our perception. "Experience of the aura," writes Benjamin, "thus rests on the transposition of a response common in human relationships to the relationship between the inanimate or natural object and man. The person we look at, or who feels he is being looked at, looks at us in turn. To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it the ability to look at us in return" (I, 188). What has to be noticed, though, in this carefully introduced interpersonal dimension of the subject to the "Artwork", is that in this exchange it is always the subject's position that is being confirmed or to put it in another way, the "Artwork" conforms to the expectation of the subject's implicit demand to see himself or herself in it. The auratic experience of the traditional aesthetics is fully permeated with the human element, whose consciousness dominates this relationship between man and nature. The coming of the photography would suspend this relationship between man and nature, of the one which is compatible to each other and in whose looks the other is recognized and respected, because a certain ethical distance is maintained between the two, between the image and the real world.

The camera interrupts the economy of the gaze; it eliminates the distance between the image and the photographed. The subject of the camera in the early photographs as in Hill seem gradually to grow into the picture because of the considerable exposure time, lose their lives outside the picture, and that certainly is the most "deadly" and "inhuman" quality of those early photographs. But the distance between life and death seems to be fixed in the nature of photography. All photography indicates a moment which exists only outside the continuum of time, as a flicker of an instant it can only be reflected as a spatial phenomenon.

Benjamin's essay on photography ends on a somber but beautiful note by being more concerned with the future of its authenticity and legibility, with a certain illiteracy of not knowing how to interpret the language of photography. But like the Atget photographs that reminded Benjamin of scenes of crime, photography deserts its own place and settles into the inscriptional, the captional. [15] In short, Benjamin is eager to demonstrate the redemptive power of photography as something that "should be free to stake a claim for ephemeral things, those that have a right 'to a place in the archives of memory,'" and here his theory bears a marked resemblance to Kracauer's overall theory of photography and film, who will pen these following lines in the "Preface" to his book, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*:

My book...rests upon the assumption that film is essentially an extension of photography and therefore shares with this medium a marked affinity for the visible world around us. Films come into their own when they record and reveal physical reality.... And since any medium is partial to the things it is uniquely equipped to render, the cinema is conceivably animated by a desire to picture transient material life, life at its most *ephemeral*. (Emphasis mine) [16]

The idea of redemption therefore lies in the hope to hold on “to the small skip or crack in the continuous catastrophe.” [17] The auratic, the mythical, and the distant vision of the world are already so remote from us that we stare at them as staring back to us vacantly. For all purposes the magic is lost. Looking into these eyes only proves the point that there is hardly anything to look for in them. With modernity, each one of us, in the cities, is weary of eye contact. [18]

The development of photography and also of the cinema must be understood as a break in the continuum of history as progress. Benjamin notes in a draft of his Baudelaire essay, “the fact that ‘everything just goes on’ *is* the catastrophe.” [19] Progress for Benjamin, as Habermas suggests, means the eternal return of catastrophe. But what, then, has catastrophe to do with images? The images of catastrophe in the continuum of history are like, and here Benjamin provides us with an analogy, his favorite device for making dialectical arguments, the images in a kaleidoscope in the hand of a child which takes the form of *deus ex machina*. As Benjamin writes:

The course of history as represented in the concept of catastrophe has no more claim on the attention of the thinking mind than the kaleidoscope in the hand of a child which, with each turn, collapses everything ordered into new order. The justness of this image is well-founded. The concept of the rulers has always been the mirror by means of whose image an ‘order’ was established. This kaleidoscope must be smashed. [20]

The kaleidoscopic image establishes, with each twist and turn of the hand, a new order, a new regime of the image, which for Benjamin, forms an “unbearable” course of history as progress, as eternal return of catastrophe.

The smashing of the kaleidoscopic image signals the destruction of the tradition in which the authenticity of the image is valued for its uniqueness which is manifested in its aura. The destruction of aura is the task of mechanical reproduction. Rather than producing a unique pattern as in a kaleidoscopic image, where no two patterns are ever alike, “the technique of reproduction,” Benjamin says, “detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition,” and thus interferes with the concept of authenticity. “The authenticity of a thing,” according to Benjamin, “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” (*I*, 221).

The displacement of the art work from its traditional historical context through technical means leads to the demise of aura. The technique of mechanical reproduction also succeeds in substituting a plurality of copies in the place of a single, unique presence that the aura of the work of art implies. Benjamin points out that the technique of reproduction accounts simultaneously for two distinct processes. This leads, in Benjamin's own words "to a tremendous shattering of the tradition" (I, 221). First, it eliminates the aura which is mediated by temporal distance as a unique existence. Secondly, by detaching the reproduced object from its traditional background and by making it meet the beholder or listener "halfway," by interfering with its spatial element, mechanical reproduction also "reactivates the object reproduced" (I, 221). "Both processes," Benjamin informs us, "are intimately connected with the contemporary mass movements. Their most powerful agent is the film. Its social significance, particularly in its positive form, is inconceivable without its destructive, cathartic aspect, that is, the liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage" (I, 221).

To Benjamin, technology offers itself as a promise of a new language. The promise of language is always already ahead of itself, delayed, deferred. For promises are always made in advance and if language is a promise, then it also signifies a promise of a promise. Adorno criticized Benjamin for displaying a "wide-eyed" curiosity for the wonders of technology, yet, it, Benjamin's affirmation of technology, far from displaying naive curiosity, is based on its redemptive potential and cannot be solely judged as a mark of fetishization. Technology's redemptive function is evoked in order to release, as Habermas puts it, "its semantic potential," by disclosing to us the secondary nature of "the thing" which is not historically produced. Habermas's project is to rescue Benjamin and carry him over to the site of hermeneutics. It is part of a process in which Benjamin's philosophy of language, the mimetic expression, is realigned with the forces of tradition and structural hermeneutics.

Habermas's reading of Benjamin is strategic at least for one very strong reason. He expresses his own philosophical position vis-à-vis Benjamin's in such a manner that it appears that Benjamin's theory of language and its mimetic capacity are fully in agreement with Habermas's theory of communicative rationality. It is this communicative aspect, privileged in Benjamin's theory of language, with which Habermas perceives an affinity. In his theory of communicative action, Habermas emphasizes the expressive, communicative side of language. He finds in Benjamin's philosophy of language a potential for uniting the communicative aspect of language with the hermeneutic tradition. But even this brief gesture toward hermeneutics will soon withdraw, if it is not dialectically abolished, and make room for intersubjective communication. To be sure, hermeneutics involves an encounter between historical horizons—a continuous dialogue with one's own surroundings and this is an expressive moment that is communicated in language. Language communicates *something*. And that is already *enough* ground for its redemption. Through language the entire human organism is linked to the world that surrounds it.

Both the strength and weakness of Habermas's critique of Benjamin's theory of language are most visible in his attempt to secure and ground Benjamin's redemptive critique to the anthropological and hermeneutical discourse in

order to deflect it from the unwholesome influence of both Marxist and mystical thoughts. He transforms the mimetic element of Benjamin's language into a semantic principle for generating new structures of interpretative needs. He downplays the materialistic foundation of Benjamin's philosophy by arguing that "Benjamin's fundamental (non-Marxist) convictions that meaning cannot be produced like value, by labor, but that perhaps, dependent upon on the production process, it can be transformed." [21]

Critics have often pointed out an ambiguity, verging on a discrepancy, between Adorno and Benjamin in the use of the German word *Technik*, which means both technique and technology. The "confusion of technique and technology," as Miriam Hansen perceives it, hinges on the "assumption that its [cinema's] aesthetic techniques are secondary to its technology, the means of reproduction." [22] In Adorno's work, this confusion is even further aggravated, according to Hansen, because of his idiosyncratic usage of the word *Technologie* for technique, and *Technik* for technology. [23]

Adorno somewhat circumvently confines his criticism of Benjamin's essay to what Benjamin had "originally intended" to be a "dialectical construction of the relationship between myth and history." [24] "Liquidation of art" claims Adorno has been the main thrust of his argument for a long time, and he formulates the "primacy of technology" in that sense. There is a correlation between what Adorno terms the primacy of technology which he espouses in his Wagner essay and what he terms for Benjamin a "second technique." It is at this point that we find ourselves perched on the threshold of confusion regarding the usage of the terms, technology and technique. One of the major points of contention between Adorno and Benjamin had to do with the concept of autonomous art. Adorno felt that Benjamin under Brecht's influence has "casually" transferred the reactionary concept of the "magical aura" over to the "autonomous work of art," or, in other words, he lumped them together. This amounted to undermining Adorno's entire project of his lifetime which has been devoted to the subject of the liquidation of art. Adorno writes, "In your earlier writings, of which your present essay is a continuation, you differentiated the idea of the work of art as a structure from the symbol of theology and from the taboo of magic. I find it disquieting—and here I see a sublimated remnant of certain Brechtian motifs—that you now casually transfer the concept of magical aura to the 'autonomous work of art' and flatly assign to the latter a counter-revolutionary function." [25]

For Adorno maintains that the autonomous work of art does not belong to the mythical sphere of the bourgeois art, because the former is "inherently dialectical." Despite reluctantly conceding that the essay might be dialectical, Adorno still would not accept the undialectical treatment of the autonomous work of art. Adorno also objects to Benjamin's definition of the dialectical image as a configuration of myth and modernism in "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century." He alleges that Benjamin has sacrificed the theological motif of the dialectical image by making it, that is, commodity a fact of consciousness. By withdrawing the theological motif, the original force of the concept of dialectical image, from the immanent truth content of the consciousness, which remains uncompromisingly negative in the revelation of its immanent nature—the dialectical mediation of the non-identical—Benjamin has effectively withdrawn the mediation of the theological from the

modern. The theological concept preserves the contradictory nature of commodity fetishism. By making commodity fetishism “a fact of consciousness,” Benjamin has, in Adorno’s view, inadvertently “subjectivized” the process of consciousness that can only be objectively mediated. [26]

In Benjamin scholarship there, too, is often a tendency to ignore, or even erase, the palpable difference between the meaning of “technical reproduction” of the “Artwork” and the meaning of “mechanical reproduction.” For the meaning of the “technical,” to be sure, is not the same as the meaning of the “mechanical;” the former is a historical category, the latter is a scientific one. In his essay on Eduard Fuchs, Benjamin categorically states that “technology is obviously not a purely scientific phenomenon. It is also an historical one.” [27] He presents his notion of technology in the form of “a significant criticism of historicism,” especially of its positivistic conception, which sees “the progress of natural science in the development of technology, but fail(s) to recognize the concomitant retrogression of society.” [28] A correct approach to the question of technology will reveal its historical nature as intimately tied to the level of production and not separated from it, as scientism would have us believe, as a category of “science *per se*.”

In a different context, Samuel Weber argues that although Benjamin does not explicitly specify the meaning of the technical, access to its meaning is given, “not to the empirical fact of ‘reproduction,’ but to the possibility of *being reproduced*, to reproducibility as a mode of being. However clumsy even in German the noun *Reproduzierbarkeit* may be; it has the virtue of distinguishing between a structural attribute and an empirical fact.” [29] As Benjamin, right from the beginning of his essay on the “Artwork”, claims that “in principle a work of art has always been reproducible,” it should, therefore, not come as a surprise to know that the technical ability to reproduce a work of art is not entirely an empirical phenomenon of modernity. The ability to reproduce is inherent to the technology of reproduction. Benjamin writes:

Manmade artifacts could always be imitated by men. Replicas were made by pupils in their craft, by master 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 in long intervals, but with accelerated intensity. The Greeks knew only two procedures of technically reproducing works of art: founding and stamping. Bronzes, terracottas, and coins were the only art works which could produce in quantity. All others were unique and could not be mechanically reproduced. (Emphasis mine) (I, 218)

But the conditions of mechanical reproduction change in the Middle Ages. Woodcut, etching, and graving made reproduction of graphic art possible. Soon printing joined in the mechanical reproduction of writing and “at the beginning of the nineteenth century lithography made its appearance” (I, 219). These important inventions set a new historical stage in which photography would supersede lithography. With photography, according to Benjamin, “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 process.*” (Emphasis mine) (I, 218)

Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to read Benjamin's statements as a wholehearted endorsement of technology that ignores its menacing quality. He is particularly sensitive to the implications of technology as an instrument of social and psychological repression. A passage from *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet* reads:

Technical measures had to come to the aid of the administrative control process. In the early days of the process of identification, whose present standard derives from the Bertillon method, the identity of a person was established through his signature. The invention of photography was a turning point in the history of this process. It is no less significant for criminology than the invention of the printing press is for literature. Photography made it possible for the first time to preserve a permanent and unmistakable traces of a human being. The detective story came into being when this most decisive of all conquests of a person's incognito had been accomplished. Since then the end of efforts to capture a man in his speech and actions has not been in sight. [30]

Benjamin acknowledges the element of repression in the technological process. *Technik* as technology is a representation of a piece of machinery, but as technique it also refers to the methods and organizations that exploit that machinery. In *Charles Baudelaire*, he specifically addresses the question of the administrative control to which photography has been subjected by the forces of social power.

In a discussion of Heidegger, Joseph Kockelmans points out: "In the German language, there are two different words for the English word *technology*, namely, *Technik* and *Technologie*. Heidegger is in these lectures [a series of four lectures delivered in Bremen, entitled *Insight into What Is*, in 1949] primarily concerned with *Technik*, not with *Technologie*. In order to be able to distinguish these two in English, I am following William J. Richardson in translating *Technik* as "technicity" reserving 'technology' for *Technologie*." [31] Heidegger's lectures on "technicity" will eventually lead into a discourse of language as the essence of technology. It is only by means of a greater mediation of language that the ultimate relation with "technicity" and *Dasein* would be revealed as a necessity of freedom that surmounts the relationship that is unfree and chained to technology. Two concepts are brought in: technology that makes us unfree and bound; technicity that eventually sets in the relation to freedom, to human *ek-sistence*. There are two simple definitions of technicity, according to Kockelmans, 1) technicity is a means to an end, and 2) it is a human activity. Both these categories would be absent in Benjamin's meditation on technology. What also will be missing from the technological schema of Benjamin is, however, the heavy emphasis on the word "essence."

But going back to those two "simple statements" above, we can surmise with Kockelmans that in these two definitions the instrumental and the anthropological views of technicity coincide. Yet, we can still make an attempt towards establishing even, if possible, a very slight affinity in the two thinkers' common property of reflection, i.e., technology, because it seems highly unlikely that all their ideas regarding the same subject matter were always radically opposed to each other, were founded on some basic eternal principle

of mutual exclusion. In fact, it seems appropriate rather than a complete misreading if one can possibly hear faintly the echo of interlocution between Benjamin and Heidegger about technicity/technology, which both of them ascribe to a certain uncanniness (*unheimlich*).

According to Kockelmans, “the instrumental definition is even ‘uncannily’ correct; for the more technicity reveals itself as something inhuman, the more one tries to define and pursue it as a means or an instrument that is to be controlled.” [32] Though, Heidegger and Benjamin both reflect on the inhuman, uncanny character of technicity and technology respectively, their affinity stops right then and there. For Heidegger would now move in the direction of an essence of technicity that could neither be manipulated nor controlled as a means to an end. For Benjamin, on the contrary, the manipulation of technology heightens the perception of the revolutionary masses.

In the “Artwork” essay, Benjamin also considers rhetorically the technology’s own “depravity” and the haunting spell of disaster it has inflicted on the voiceless nature. “Deeply imbued with its own depravity, technology gave shape to apocalyptic face of nature and reduced nature to silence—even though this technology had the power to give nature its voice.” [33] These words written in 1930 are closer to the Frankfurt School critique of technology than his draft on technology in the “Artwork” essay, where cinema is hailed as the breakthrough of this wonderful technological medium and its interpenetration to the human sensorium. A technology whose purpose was to give nature its voice efficiently silences it by wracking unheard of violence on it, has appeared once again, in the “Artwork” essay, intact, in its capacity to redeem nature from its second nature, from its own illusion, as something that is still present, at least on the level of discourse, as an *extension*, a prosthetic, that frees our sight from the bondage of appearance.

If nature cannot speak out of its traumatic silence, then sight will reveal a process of seeing in which the actual *Technik* of nature unfolds. But technology is not only “imbued with its depravity,” it has redemptive potential as well. The “Artwork” essay is an appeal to that face of technology which is supposed to lend sight to apperception. If it cannot give voice to what it has actually silenced, then at least we expect to see, through it, that which the voice could have only given us in a traditional manner, through *Erzählen*, by storytelling. Technology has lost the power of storytelling, because it has shattered the community of listener by reproducing the storyteller and not the listener, but in cinema it forms a community of people who are united by a common sight to a distracted medium. If nature’s voice cannot be heard or reproduced by technology, then, at least, its secret and fascinating movements can be observed, through every manipulative means, by restoring to us a sight that only technology can provide. Seeing itself is no longer a domain of human perception; the technological sight is far more interesting and advanced. By 1936 Benjamin would drop the part of “human schema” from his plans on technology.

It has often been pointed out that a certain amount of tension is present in Benjamin’s dialectic of the secular and the messianic, but it has not often been discussed as to why Benjamin’s thought always appears to be preceded by the

one that he is about to disclose. The chemistry of his thinking reacts upon the matter in a way that the object loses its immediate ground and is simultaneously released from the captivity of its own being. Thus a peculiar logic apprehends the phenomenon in which the stasis is made to move, concurrently, in the same instant, the movement is abruptly arrested. The iconic image not only moves from its “fixed” place—in economic terms it specifies the original value; in mythic terms it represents the cult and or ritual value—from its static location to a flux of movement in the cinema; on the other hand, the movement itself is brought to a “standstill” in the flash of the dialectical image. A movement is extracted from stillness; an instant is dislocated from eternity. The infinite movement of thought in Benjamin faces the materialistic challenge of the givenness of nature, whose transcendence is not yet possible due to its unredeemed status. The thought cannot leave its object of contemplation behind in the metaphysical maze for an eternal languish. The object not only awakens the thought, it precedes it. Movement is extracted from a static being—it is displaced both bodily and technically. That which has been moving, that which has been released from its captivity, that which has burst the auratic shell, and that which is being brought to violent rest are always intertwined in his paradoxical logic—an element of thinking that Adorno was first to recognize its revolutionary potential.

Some critics have concentrated mainly upon the materialistic and the historical aspects of Benjamin, which lends his thought an easier access to the Marxist tradition. His arguments regarding the change of perception as historically determined have attracted various interpretations from a Marxian perspective. Mostly, the art criticism restricts itself to a criticism of the formal aspect of the “Artwork”; it seldom determines the development of the art form as socially necessary. Each “Artwork” stands in a contextual relation with the tradition in which it is embedded, and the changes in those traditions, brought about by historical transformation of the social relations of production, causes a change in the mode of perception as well. Therefore, the “Artwork”, which is held in extreme veneration for the tradition, like the ancient statue of Venus, of the Greeks, acquires an “ominous” status for the “clerics of the Middle Ages” (*I*, 223). This mode of perception is not an aesthetical response to a naturally cultivated sense experience in the Kantian sense.

Benjamin’s effort to distinguish the organization of the sense perception of the human faculty from its natural and biological determination to a materialistically and historically determined value has immense critical significance. Especially the arguments he made in the third theses of the “Artwork” essay about the changes in perception to be determined as a socio-historical phenomenon. He writes, “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” (*I*, 222).

In the “Epilogue,” Benjamin once again reverts to what in his opinion is the most devastating effect of technology which one experiences in the form of war. The fascists are waging a war against those who want to change the property-relation by means of technological revolution. For Fascism employs the means of war by giving the masses an expression, which does not change

property relations; instead, it introduces aesthetics into politics. The glorification of war has an aesthetic component that leads to “the production of ritual value” in violation of the technological apparatus, which has been precisely organized as the displacement of art from its dependence on both ritual and cult value (I, 241). Technology as a destructive agent, of which the Film is the most powerful medium, has a positive function, i.e., “the liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage” (I, 221).

Instead of locating the use value of the “Artwork” in the process of labor, Benjamin, in rather an uncharacteristically Marxist move, places it in the service of the ritual aspect. The exhibition value, which sustains both types of the auratic and the non-auratic artworks, has its original function already anticipated in its ritual value. Both in ritual as well as in exhibition value the accentuation of value is on the receptive side of it and not on its productive side. Benjamin’s criticism shows a high degree of latent affinity with the production and reception of the “product” than on the nature of “work” itself. And it is at this point that Adorno intervenes with his “devastating” criticism of Benjamin’s analyses of the mechanical reproduction of art, and claims that Benjamin has abandoned the dialectical mediation of the immanent technique of the art work in favor of some Brechtian motifs that find in advance technology a promise for *immediate* change in the status quo.

Although it cannot be disputed that Benjamin’s conception of the revolutionary nature of technology of mass reproducibility has its origin in the Brechtian critique of the art, yet, there is a crucial difference between Benjamin and Brecht in terms of the latter’s theory of distancing (*Entfremdung*). Despite the fact that in the “Artwork” essay Benjamin whole heartedly endorses the Brechtian principle of distancing as a model for the actors on the screen, but, then, at the same time, he wants to scrutinize the objects of his reflection from a very close perspective. This is also evident in his critique of aura, which he maintains keeps an “unapproachable” distance from its viewer. The audience is exhorted to maintain a critical distance from the actor on the stage, so that it can maintain its self-consciousness as a viewing subject, while the natural or traditional distance of the traditional representation of theater from its audience is also being deprecated. That is the double irony of distance. That at one stage the distance must be refuted in order to bring the object to a close contact with its revolutionary potential which can only be released at the moment of dialectical configuration between what it is and what it has become in the light of its own condition of possibility, and, on the other hand, the distance between the audience and the spectacle must not forego its basic disunity.

The two distances are not complimentary, but they arise in the act of interpretation whose function is the overall destruction of all that is represented by traditional values. Where there is no distance between the actor and the audience, the cathartic spell is broken by the element of criticism, a kind of *distracted* mediation of historical insights into the problematic nature of the discourse of theater that has so far given the audience a false resolution to the contradictory nature of art. But destroying the distance between the “Artwork” and the audience presupposes an act of unveiling of the distance that preexisted but is no longer so.

The “Artwork” essay might also be viewed as an attempt to rescue (*Rettung*) technology from its own destructive and depraved instincts. The instrumental nature of violence, which technology lends to the mythic understanding of history, still worships the most outmoded concepts of technological usage. It seems that Benjamin is involved in a desperate struggle to redeem technology from its fascistic subjugation to ritualized norms.

If fascism, by rendering the political sphere into the aesthetic realm, is using aesthetics for its own political end, then the political necessity of the time makes it imperative for the arts to be organized at a political level. The function of art is crucial both to the preservation and the destruction of society. One must also ask what the instrumental power of art and technology as expressed in the fascist appropriation of culture as a means of political propaganda can achieve? The concept of usefulness becomes the mediating factor between the aestheticization of politics and politicization of aesthetics.

Benjamin has always endeavored to show his affinity for the discarded and useless productions of art, and it is not surprising that he finds them “useful,” especially at the time of extreme danger, when life itself cannot be salvaged unless a useful opposition is mounted against the increasing threat to life by fascist forces. The technological redemption does not lie in its usage, in its functional aspect, but in its discarded and unrecognized potentials, in its uselessness. Despite a positive affirmation of the technological process in mass reproduction, conceived primarily upon the assumptions that the moment of criticism and the act of becoming a critic is historically the same moment, Benjamin remains close to his redemptive mode of historical analysis, for he clearly demonstrates that his empathy for the useless and discarded elements in human history extends to his considerations of technology as well. A careful reading of the “Artwork” essay shows that Benjamin wants to employ only those elements of the artistic processes, which, in his mind, would not be of any use to fascism (*I*, 218). Their usefulness to communism and also their efficacy as a force of political opposition to fascism are determined by their uselessness. The proletariat has no *use* for bourgeois culture. [34]

Finally, the history of the cinema itself could have been redeemed if one had really understood the implications of its mimetic relation to the audience. Benjamin’s radical reading of the “Artwork” essay, in the light of its unrealized and failed potential, directs us to think in terms of a mimetic relation between the spectator and the medium, the former “in a state of distraction” and the latter as a principle of shock mediated through technology, which could have averted the civilized masses from becoming mesmerized participants of the gigantic Nazi artifice. [35] Even in its technicality, mimesis remains a mode of reproducibility. Mimesis breaks; it ruptures the rapture of the captivated spectator. If only it had interrupted the *rhythm*—the rhythm of participation—of the masses in the aestheticized politics of the Nazis. This is the political urgency (of which I spoke earlier) to which Benjamin’s “Artwork” essay “responds by politicizing art” (*I*, 242).

I shall conclude on a tragic note that does not belie the significance of the utopian language of critical theory, but merely wishes that history could have been different, if the mimetic principle as distraction, as forgetfulness, which is the nature of cinematic technology, as a mode of shock, were only

reproduced in the subjectivity of the masses in order to disengage it from the fatalistic identification with the image of the (Nazi) world outside the theater. If, and how else can one speak of a lost opportunity, people could have only managed to reproduce (to mimic) the process of cinematic technique by adhering to its principle of montage and shock, then, there might have been a slight chance to avoid the fate awaiting them as active participants in Nazi politics.

Endnotes

[1] Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." *Illuminations*, 217-251. All subsequent references from this article will be provided in the text in parenthesis as *I* followed by the page numbers.

[2] Adorno, Theodore, "Letters to Walter Benjamin," *Aesthetics and Politics*. 128.

[3] A careful interrogation of Benjamin's philosophy yields a preference, an uncanny predisposition, for "technique," whose virtue is always measured in higher regards to the "technical." Technique is the setting off of a practice that is well captured by the essence of what technicality misses in the vista of the mode of production. One probable reason why technique assumes a higher form of existence for Benjamin is that in it he always finds a possibility for improvisation. It is only by improving the technique of, if you will, reproducibility or copying, that we will find better originals. The improvement of technology owes its existence to the improvement in the technique, in the means of production. To the so-called original product, a case of the bourgeois obsession with meaning, with the end product, one may oppose the principle of reproduction, because it emphasizes the very mediation of what is concealed in the application of technology.

[4] Terdiman, Richard. "Deconstructing Memory: On Representing the Past and Theorizing Culture in France Since the Revolution," 19.

[5] Benjamin. "A Small History of Photography." 243. All subsequent reference from this article will be provided in the text in parenthesis as "Photography" followed by the page numbers.

[6] Benjamin. "A Small History of Photography." 245.

[7] See Joel Snyder for an excellent reading on the standard of perception in "Benjamin on Reproducibility and Aura: A Reading of 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technical Reproducibility,'" 158-174.

[8] Benjamin. "Photography." 247.

[9] Benjamin. "Photography." 248.

[10] Benjamin, "Photography." 245.

[11] Benjamin. "Photography." 244.

[12] Benjamin. "Photography." 243.

[13] See Benjamin. "The Image of Proust." *Illuminations*. 201-215.

[14] See Cadava's sensitive reading of Benjamin's photography essay, "Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History," 89.

[15] See Cadava for photography as pictorial script in "Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History," 94.

[16] Kracauer, Siegfried. *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*, ix.

[17] Cited by Habermas, "Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Criticism," 38.

[18] Reference to eyes, to human eyes particularly, have always had an allegorical significance for Benjamin. This is marked in his interpretation of Baudelaire's theory of correspondences. In Baudelaire's poetry, Benjamin discovers a profound expression in the realm of experience in which the auratic mode is transformed from its mythical substance into an allegorical stance. Especially in those aspects of Baudelaire's poetry, which are closest to his theory of correspondences, and which are expressed through the metaphor of eyes: eyes that no longer can see, eyes with "mirror- like blankness" in which remoteness is complete, eyes that no longer return our gaze, in short, the unauratic eyes. With the advent of photographic reproduction, these eyes are now being fitted with technical prosthetics, visual aids, in order to restore a technically oriented vision or spectacle, whose technological origin is beyond their natural perception.

[19] Cited by Habermas in "Consciousness-Raising," 38.

[20] Benjamin. "Central Park," 34.

[21] Habermas, "Consciousness-Raising," 49. How to read Benjamin as a historical materialist without usurping the notion of history, which his theory most forcefully implies, becomes the operative mechanism behind the logic of Habermas, who has defined Benjamin's work into two neat compartments, "consciousness-raising" and "redemptive critique." For Habermas world is a language game. For Benjamin, on the contrary, language is the world. In history Habermas recognizes the vicinities of struggled hope that come across through mediated traditions of the past. The world uses the instrument of language in order to communicate with the other. In Benjamin, the other does not use the language to communicate but is communicated by and in the language.

[22] Hansen, Miriam "Introduction to Adorno," 187.

[23] When Benjamin says *Technik*, he means 'technology' at least as much as he means 'technique.'" The "deliberate ambivalence" of the word *Technik*, as Roberts suggests, is employed by Benjamin in order to dialectically unite the

human relations of production ("technique") with the means of reproduction ("technology"). "This dichotomy," Roberts expounds, "corresponds in a general sense to other Marxists polarities, such as variable and fixed capital, superstructure and base, or even consciousness and matter. The term *Technik*'s deliberate ambivalence captures...the dialectical unity which all these opposing elements enter in any concrete instance." Roberts, Julian. *Walter Benjamin*, 157-59. For a brilliant analysis of Benjamin's *Technik* in his "Artwork" essay, see Leslie, Esther. *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism*, 155-162.

[24] Adorno, *Aesthetics and Politics*, 121.

[25] *Aesthetics and Politics*. 121.

[26] *Aesthetics and Politics*. 110-120.

[27] Benjamin. "Eduard Fuchs." *One-Way Street*. 357.

[28] Benjamin. "Eduard Fuchs." 357.

[29] Weber, Samuel. "Theater, Technics, and Writing." *1-800* (Fall 1989), 17. I am indebted to Eduardo Cadava for this reference.

[30] Benjamin. *Charles Baudelaire - A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*. 46.

[31] Kockelmans, Joseph J. *On the Truth of Being: Reflections on Heidegger's Later Philosophy*. 230.

[32] When Heidegger writes, in relation to Hölderlin's hymn, "The Rhine," "What is pregiven to the poet, and how is it given, so that it can then be regiven in the poem," he is probably thinking in terms of causality, in the name of the Greek word *aition*, which for the Greeks meant cause, and it carries with it the notion of indebtedness. Heidegger, "The Origin of Work of Art," 37. See also Kockelmans. 231. According to Derrida, "in the context of The Origin, reliability (*Verlässlichkeit*) comes back to [*revient a*] a commitment (debt, duty, restitution, truth) whose concept cannot but precede all the notions which make a system with those of matter/form: the symbolic, the semio-linguistic, etc." Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, 351. What sort of indebtedness is implied by *aition* for the Greeks? Is it some sort of moral indebtedness in the sense of being responsible, or should it be referred to the four different forms of causes that Aristotle mentions, namely, the material, the formal, the efficient, and the final cause, which would form a unity of indebtedness? The question of instrumentality or equipmentality is inextricably connected with the questions of causality and origin. The correct way to proceed in this manner would be to put the question of essence of technicity together with the question of origin.

[33] Benjamin. "Theories of German Fascism: On the Collection of Essays War and Warrior, edited by Ernst Junger." 126.

[34] How this *uselessness* will compare to Heidegger's conception of the "usefulness of equipmentality" remains to be explored.

[35] Just prior to the “Epilogue” of the “Artwork” essay, Benjamin, following Kracauer’s analyses of the Mass Ornament, reflects upon the mimetic correspondence between the distracted mode of production and reception of the cinema. He writes, “Reception in a state of distraction, which is increasingly noticeable in all fields of art and is symptomatic of the 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” (*I*, 240). See also Kracauer. *The Mass Ornament: Weimer Essays* and Eiland, “Reception in Distraction,” 51-66.

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