

Walter Benjamin

HUMN2001 – VIDEO LECTURE – WK10
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Context of Benjamin's Life and Work

Walter Benjamin (1892-1940)

- A German-Jewish literary critic, cultural theorist, and philosopher during the early part of the 20th century.
- Often considered one of the most profound thinkers of culture in 20th century.
- He is known for an eclectic combination of influences:
 - German Idealism
 - Romanticism
 - Western Marxism
 - Jewish mysticism



Context of Benjamin's Life and Work

Walter Benjamin (1892-1940)

- He had a tragic life and career.
- He never became an accredited academic, and thus was unable to teach to make a living.
- He made an unstable living for many years
- Until finally, in 1932, going into exile because of the Nazi regime in Germany.
- In 1940, he fled the Nazi's encroachment into Paris (where he was at the time), who had orders to arrest him.
- He and his group were stopped at the French-Spanish border and were told they would be deported the next day.
- Benjamin, fearing capture by the Nazis, took his own life by morphine tablet overdose that night.



Context of Benjamin's Life and Work

Walter Benjamin (1892-1940)

- Benjamin was one of the most profoundly *original* thinkers of all time.
- His work drew its distinctive features, not from a systematic framework, nor from rigorous analysis, but from an unparalleled sense of intuition about deep and interesting connections between seemingly unconnected cultural tendencies and fields of knowledge.



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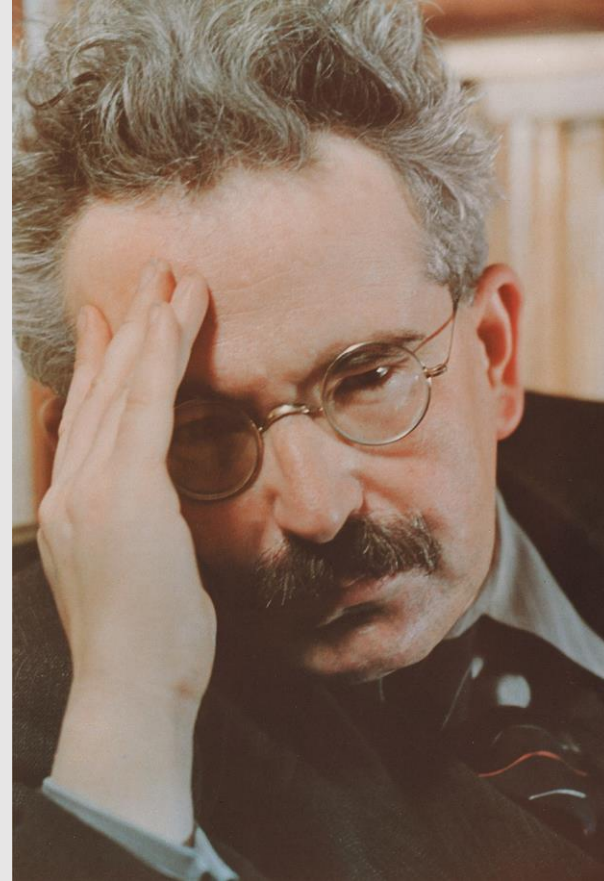
- His work often connects theological and world-historical themes up with seemingly innocuous observations about daily life and material culture.
- “The Work of Art” essay is typical in this respect.
- He is best known for his gifts at writing essays and other short texts, but he also wrote two large works, one early (*The Origin of German Tragic Drama*), and one late work that remained unfinished (*The Arcades Project*).
- While neither was published in his lifetime, both are considered deep philosophical, historical, and aesthetic achievements.



Context of Benjamin's Life and Work

Walter Benjamin (1892-1940)

- He was associated with members of the Frankfurt School of critical theory, such as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer
- He kept regular correspondence with many people, including
 - Adorno
 - Gershom Scholem (a scholar of Kabbalah)
 - Marxist playwright Bertolt Brecht



Context of Benjamin's Life and Work

Walter Benjamin (1892-1940)

- Perhaps his most elaborated and widespread contribution was his re-interpretation of Marx's concept of historical materialism, which he made thoroughly his own, and through which he mixed his other influences.
- Especially regarding:
 - transformations in modern culture and art.
 - as well as on how historical materialism affects the notions of time and history themselves.
- He was a strong critic of the idea of historical progress (e.g. that of Hegel's), which he thought had politically disastrous consequences.
- Instead preferring to view the transformations of history in a non-linear way, in which the past played an important and indirect role.



Reading Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility"

Key Ideas

- Aura
- Cult Value vs. Exhibition Value
- Semblance vs. Play
 - The field of action/space of play (Spielraum)
- First and Second Technologies
- Test Performance
- Mass art
- Aestheticization of Politics/Politicization of Art

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Key General Theses

- The historical status of the artwork is made up of a tension between two essential dimensions of the artwork, which are differentially predominant in history: these are the *cult value* and *exhibition value* of an artwork.
- Art theories which fail to take account of the revolutionary transformations which film produces in our concept of art cannot understand the function of art in current society.
- The concept of 'authenticity'—the 'aura' of the artwork—is increasingly obsolete when considering technologically reproducible media, such as film. This has dramatic consequences for our understanding of the value of culture, society, and of our modes of perception.
- Through these consequences, the (then) new artform of film contains both revolutionary possibilities for politics as well as the dangers of Fascism because of its character as a mass art.

Reading Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility"

“Theses defining the developmental tendencies of art can therefore contribute to the political struggle in ways that it would be a mistake to underestimate. They neutralize a number of traditional concepts—such as creativity and genius, eternal value and mystery—which, used in an uncontrolled way... allow factual material to be manipulated in the interests of fascism. In what follows, the concepts which are introduced into the theory of art differ from those now current in that they are completely useless for the purposes of fascism. On the other hand, they are useful for the formulation of revolutionary demands in the politics of art [*Kunstpolitik*].” (TWA, 19-20)

Reading Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility"

“Around 1900, technological reproduction not only had reached a standard that permitted it to reproduce all known works of art, profoundly modifying their effect, but it also had captured a place of its own among the artistic processes. In gauging this standard, we would do well to study the impact which its two different manifestations—the reproduction of artworks and the art of film—are having on art in its traditional form.” (21)

Reading Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility"

"What, then, is the aura? A strange tissue of space and time..." (23)

Reading Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility"

"In even the most perfect reproduction, one thing is lacking: the here and now of the work of art-its unique existence in a particular place. It is this unique existence-and nothing else-that bears the mark of the history to which the work has been subject." (21)

Reading Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility"

"...[T]echnological reproduction can place the copy of the original in situations which the original itself cannot attain. Above all, it enables the original to meet the recipient halfway, whether in the form of a photograph or in that record. The cathedral leaves its site to be received in the studio of an art lover; the choral work performed in an auditorium or in the open air is enjoyed in a private room." (21-22)

Reading Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility"

"It might be stated as a general formula that the technology of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the sphere of tradition. By replicating the work many times over, it substitutes a mass existence for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to reach the recipient in his or her own situation, it actualizes that which is reproduced. These two processes lead to a massive upheaval in the domain of objects handed down from the past—a shattering of tradition which is the reverse side of the present crisis and renewal of humanity. Both processes are intimately related to the mass movements of our day. Their most powerful agent is film. The social significance of film, even—and especially—in its most positive form, is inconceivable without its destructive, cathartic side: the liquidation of the value of tradition in the cultural heritage." (22)

Reading Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility"

"The stripping of the veil from the object, the destruction of the aura, is the signature of a perception whose 'sense for all that is the same' in the world so increased that, by means of reproduction, it extracts sameness even from what is unique. Thus is manifested in the field of perception what in the theoretical sphere is noticeable in the increasing significance statistics. The alignment of reality with the masses and of the masses with reality is a process of immeasurable importance for both thinking perception." (23-24)

Reading Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility"

“...[F]or the first time in world history, technological reproducibility emancipates the work of art from its parasitic subservience to ritual... But as soon as the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applied to artistic production, the whole social function of art is revolutionized. Instead of being founded on ritual, it is based on a different practice: politics.” (24-5)

Reading Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility"

"Art history might be seen as the working out of a tension between two polarities within the artwork itself, its course determined by shifts in the balance between the two. These two are the artwork's cult value and its exhibition value." (25)

Reading Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility"

"The primary social function of art today is to rehearse that interplay. This applies especially to film. The function of film is to train human beings in the apperceptions and reactions needed to deal with a vast apparatus whose role in their lives is expanding almost daily. Dealing with apparatus also teaches them that technology will release them from their enslavement to the powers of the apparatus only when humanity's whole constitution has adapted itself to the new productive forces which the second technology has set free" (26-7)

Reading Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility"

*"The film is therefore the artwork most capable of improvement. And this capability is linked to its radical renunciation of eternal value. This is corroborated by the fact that for the Greeks, whose art depended on the production of eternal values, the pinnacle of all the arts was the form least capable of improvement-namely sculpture, whose products are literally all of a piece. In the age of the assembled [*montierbar*] artwork, the decline of sculpture is inevitable."* (28)

Reading Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility"

“Film makes test performances capable of being exhibited, by turning that ability itself into a test. The film actor performs not in front of an audience but in front of an apparatus. The film director occupies exactly the same position as the examiner in an aptitude test. To perform in the glare of arc lamps while simultaneously meeting the demands of the microphone is a test performance of the highest order. To accomplish it is to preserve one's humanity in the face of the apparatus. Interest in this performance is widespread. For the majority of city dwellers, throughout the workday in offices and factories, have to relinquish their humanity in the face of an apparatus. In the evening these same masses fill the cinemas, to witness the film actor taking revenge on their behalf not only by asserting his humanity (or what appears to them as such) against the apparatus, but by placing that apparatus in the service of his triumph.”
(30-31)

Reading Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility"

“Nothing shows more graphically [then the process of the test performance of and the assembled nature of the film production] that art has escaped the realm of "beautiful semblance," which for so long was regarded as the only sphere in which it could thrive.” (32)

Reading Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility"

"It should not be forgotten, of course, that there can be no political advantage derived from this control until film has liberated itself from the fetters of capitalist exploitation. Film capital uses the revolutionary opportunities implied by this control for counterrevolutionary purposes. Not only does the cult of the movie star which it fosters preserve that magic of the personality which has long been no more than the putrid magic of its own commodity character, but its counterpart, the cult of the audience, reinforces the corruption by which fascism is seeking to supplant the class consciousness of the masses." (33)

Reading Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility"

“To this end [the film industry] has set in motion an immense publicity machine, in the service of which it has placed the careers and love lives of the stars; it has organized polls; it has held beauty contests. All this in order to distort and corrupt the original and justified interest of the masses in film—an interest in understanding themselves and therefore their class. Thus, the same is true of film capital in particular as of fascism in general: a compelling urge toward new social opportunities is being clandestinely exploited in the interests of a property-owning minority. For this reason alone, the expropriation of film capital is an urgent demand for the proletariat.” (34)

Reading Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility"

“The painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, whereas the cinematographer penetrates deeply into its tissue. The images obtained by each differ enormously, The painter's is a total image, whereas that of the *cinematographer is piecemeal, its manifold parts being assembled according to a new law. Hence, the presentation of reality in film is incomparably the more significant for people of today, since it provides the equipment-free aspect of reality they are entitled to demand from a work of art, and does so precisely on the basis of the most intensive interpenetration of reality with equipment.*” (35)

Reading Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility"

“Film achieves this goal not only in terms of man's presentation of himself to the camera but also in terms of his representation of his environment by means of this apparatus. On the **one** hand, film furthers insight into the necessities governing our lives by its use of close-ups, by its accentuation of hidden details in familiar objects, and by its exploration of commonplace milieux through the ingenious guidance of the camera; on the **other** hand, it manages to assure us of a vast and unsuspected field of action [*Spielraum*]” (37)

Reading Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility"

“Whereas it is a commonplace that, for example, we have some idea what is involved in the act of walking (if only in general terms), we have no idea at all what happens during the split second when a person actually takes a step. We are familiar with the movement of picking up a cigarette lighter or a spoon, but know almost nothing of what really goes on between hand and metal, and still less how this varies with different moods... It is through the camera that we first discover the optical unconscious, just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis.” (37)

Reading Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility"

"The history of every art form has critical periods in which the particular form strains after effects which can be easily achieved only with a changed technical standard—that is to say, in a new art form. The excesses and crudities of art which thus result, particularly in periods of so-called decadence, actually emerge from the core of its richest historical energies." (38)

Reading Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility"

“Contemplative immersion—which, as the bourgeoisie degenerated, became a breeding ground for asocial behavior—is here opposed by distraction [*Ablenkung*] as a variant of social behavior.” (39)

“It [Dada art] thereby fostered the demand for film, since the distracting element in film is also primarily tactile, being based on successive changes of scene and focus which have a percussive effect on the spectator. Film has freed the physical shock effect—which Dadaism had kept wrapped, as it were, inside the moral shock effect—from this wrapping.” (39)

Reading Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility"

“Under certain circumstances, this form of reception shaped by architecture acquires canonical value. *For the tasks which face the human apparatus of perception at historical turning points cannot be performed solely by optical means—that is, by way of contemplation. They are mastered gradually—taking their cue from tactile reception—through habit.*” (40)

Reading Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility"

"Film, by virtue of its shock effects, is predisposed to this form of reception. In this respect, too, it proves to be the most important subject matter, at present, for the theory of perception which the Greeks called aesthetics." (41)

Reading Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility"

“Fascism attempts to organize the newly proletarianized masses while leaving intact the property relations which they strive to abolish. It sees its salvation in granting expression to the masses—but on no account granting them rights. The masses have a right to changed property relations; fascism seeks to give them expression in keeping these relations unchanged. The logical outcome of fascism is an aestheticizing of political life.” (41)

Reading Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility"

“The question [the Futurist] poses deserves to be taken up by the dialectician. To him [sic.], the aesthetic of modern warfare appears as follows: if the natural use of productive forces is impeded by the property system, then the increase in technological means, in speed, in sources of energy will press toward an unnatural use. This is found in war, and the destruction caused by war furnishes proof that society was not mature enough to make technology its organ, that technology was not sufficiently developed to master the elemental forces of society. The most horrifying features of imperialist war are determined by the discrepancy between the enormous means of production and their inadequate use in the process of production (in other words, by unemployment and the lack of markets). *Imperialist war is an uprising on the part of technology, which demands repayment in "human material" for the natural material society has denied it*” (42)