



ART IN THE AGE OF MECHANICAL REPRODUCTION

Walter Benjamin

TECHNOLOGY CHANGES PERCEPTION

Benjamin is considering the changes in human sensory perception enacted by the development of photography and film – the effects of photomechanical reproduction on us and on society as a whole

“During long periods of history, the mode of human sense perception changes with humanity’s entire mode of existence.” (III)

THE CAMERA AND PERCEPTION

“As compared with painting, filmed behavior lends itself more readily to analysis because of its incomparably more precise statements of the situation.” (XIII)

In the way writing fixed thought (as in made it more precise, analytical), the camera fixes our perception of nature.

“With the close-up, space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended. The enlargement of a snapshot does not simply render more precise what in any case was visible, though unclear: it reveals entirely new structural formations of the subject... Evidently a *different nature* opens itself to the camera than opens to the naked eye—if only because unconsciously penetrated space is substituted for a space consciously explored by man.” (XIII)

The camera makes the unconsciously experienced aspects of our environment conscious—it brings them into focus. Our view of reality becomes more analytical and scientific.

ART - RITUAL VALUE VS EXHIBITION VALUE

Historically, Benjamin points out that there are two fundamental modes by which a work of art is received -

Cult/Ritual value: like cave paintings, these images are not necessarily created to be seen by others, they serve a function for an individual (often magical, as if painting a bison would yield a more fruitful hunt)

Exhibition value: an image that has its value in its potential for mass consumption, for its ability to be seen by as many people as possible

Private images vs. images that are destined for a specific medium of exhibition (taking pictures for the sole purpose of putting them on Instagram, for instance)

THE AURA

“That which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art” (II): the aura is not transmittable or reproducible

“The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity” (II): it follows that with an absence of the original comes a kind of inauthenticity

Photography, by making copies, detaches the object from its tradition/history (its presence in a particular place/time)

The potential for broad circulation turns the object into a market commodity.

When everything becomes an image, the meaning of each image changes; it is now prescribed by the new images and objects which surround it

THE ACTOR

The film actor, unlike the stage actor, is detached from her audience, she performs in front of an apparatus (the camera): “the part is acted not for an audience but for a mechanical contrivance” (IX).

In turn, the audience’s identification with the actor is really an identification with *the camera*—we see only what the camera sees

“This situation might be characterized as follows: for the first time—and this is the effect of the film—man has to operate with his whole living person, yet foregoing its aura. For aura is tied to his presence; there can be no replica of it.”

The “aura” of the person is lost when they are transmitted, reproduced by the camera

THE ACTOR CONT'D

“The feeling of strangeness that overcomes the actor before the camera is basically of the same kind as the estrangement felt before one’s own image in a mirror. But now the reflected image has become separable, transportable. And where is it transported? Before the public.” (X)

The film tries to replace the “shriveling of the aura” of the actor by artificially building up the “personality” of the actor, by turning them into a celebrity: “the cult of the movie star preserves not the unique aura of the person but the phony spell of a commodity.” (X)

FILM AND THE “MASSES”

Benjamin states that “the distinction between author and public is about to lose its basic character.” (X) This has essentially proven true through technological means: now anyone can have a blog/vlog and publish to the wider world.

However, we can also apply this to the actor: the distinction between actor and audience has lost its basic character. Now everyone can become their own kind of “actor,” using social media such as Youtube, Instagram, Snapchat, etc.

With the development of technological reproducibility, a new human desire comes into play—the *desire to be reproduced*, to be made into an image.

PAINTING VS. FILM RECEPTION

“Painting simply is in no position to present an object for simultaneous collective experience...” To view a painting is usually a solitary act. You can look at a painting as a group, but you might have to take turns approaching it and getting a look at it from the best angle. A film, on the other hand, is built for collective experience from the get-go.

Painting, Benjamin says, invites the viewer to *contemplation*—“the spectator can abandon himself to his associations” and thoughts. The film, however, has a more coercive effect and resists contemplation: “No sooner has his eye grasped a scene than it is already changed. It cannot be arrested.” Duhamel says: “I can no longer think what I want to think. My thoughts have been replaced by moving images.” (XIV)

Film, viewed in this way, can have totalitarian effects: it usurps your own thought and replaces it with a barrage of images on the screen. Fascism manipulates the masses through art forms—it aestheticizes politics.

THE “DISTRACTED” SOCIETY

Benjamin states that the medium of art has shifted from a mode of contemplation to a mode of *distraction*.

“Auratic perception” could be defined as an atmosphere of awe and reverence enveloping the object. The viewer’s position is one of contemplation or repose, a mental absorption in the object. But with the possibilities of reproductive technology, art was displaced from its position of distance and reverence—it is captured and owned by mechanical reproduction. The contemplative gaze becomes a quick and casual look—a look characteristic of a distracted mentality.

“The public is an examiner, but an absent-minded one.” (XV)

The danger: an absent-minded society is all the more easily controlled and manipulated. The very medium of film itself both distracts and renders the audience absent-minded, allowing the manipulation of thought on a mass scale.

TECHNOLOGY AND 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... 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.”