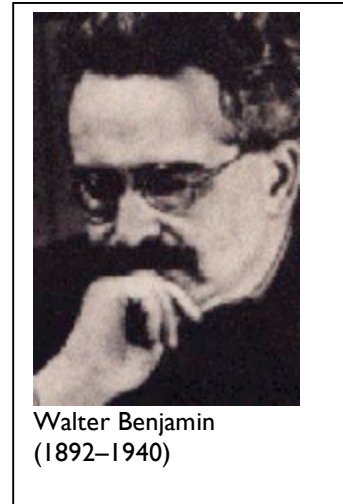


# MEVIT 2110 **POPULAR CULTURE**

Lecture 16 March 2006: Walter Benjamin's "Artwork."

## **Some concepts:**

Base  
Superstructure  
Means of production  
Proletariat  
Dialectic  
Alienation  
  
Fascism  
  
Secular  
Catharsis  
Montage (in film studies)  
Dada  
Tactile



Walter Benjamin

## **“THE MISSING HEADINGS”**

### **I. Intro: Art has caught up with industrialism**

As Capitalism has progressed as Marx thought it would, the Superstructure (culture) has been slower. "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 [...]" (101).

### **II. The Age of mechanical reproduction**

"Around 1900, mechanical 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" (102).

### **III. Authenticity; Film as liberator and threat**

"[T]he here and now of the work of art—its unique existence in a particular place" (103).

[T]he 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. [...] [A] shattering of tradition which is the reverse side of the present crisis and a renewal of humanity. [...] 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 [...]" (104).

### **IV. Aura**

"A strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition at a distance, however near it may be. [*Das Einmalige Erscheinung einer Ferne, so nah sie sein mag.*] To follow with the eye—while resting on a summer afternoon—a mountain range on the horizon or a branch that casts its shadow on the beholder [...]. [...] [T]he destruction of the aura, is the signature of a perception [...] that, by means of reproduction, [...] extracts sameness even from what is unique. [...] The alignment of reality with the masses and of the masses with reality is a process of immeasurable importance for both thinking and perception." (105)

### **V. Art and ritual**

Before the Renaissance, art was always ritual or religious. From the Renaissance on, art is increasingly secular, and for its own sake. "[A]s 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 [...] politics" (106).

## **VI. Cult value and exhibition value**

Thesis: First technology: use man to control nature: human sacrifice: final.

Antithesis: Second technology (industrial): interplay between nature and man: remote controlled aircraft: provisional, experimental. *Play*.

## **VII. Example: Photography's uncontrolled reception**

Photography has no cult, and are thus free to interpretation: a political power. Captions become necessary to control the "drift of meaning" (Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image").

## **VIII. Example: Greek art as eternal, film as provisional**

A Greek artwork was unique, and had to be made for eternity. A film is provisional, as it always may be edited.

## **IX. Film and cult: Early misunderstandings**

Film has no cult. This caused trouble to early theorists, who continued to search for it.

### **X. Film as a (mechanical) test performance**

To act in a film is like being tested for your job performance in industrial production. "Film makes test performances capable of being exhibited, by turning that ability itself into a test. [...] [A] test performance of the highest order. To accomplish it is to preserve one's humanity in front of the apparatus (111)."

### **XI. Supporting arguments: No aura, no acting, montage art**

- a. Film actors feel exiled (Pirandello).
- b. A person on film has lost his aura, for the first time in history.
- c. To act as little as possible works best on film.
- d. Film is the art of *montage*, so the actor is out of control anyway.

## **XII. Audience in/under control**

The audience, the masses, are the once who in the end controls the actor's image. To keep the masses' control at bay, the cult of the movie star is invented.

## **XIII. Film is about the masses**

In an industrialized society, every worker is a literate technical expert. Every worker can get published, and anyone could be filmed. "In western Europe today, the capitalist exploitation of film obstructs the human being's legitimate claim to being reproduced" (114). Instead, the masses are kept busy by publicity, the movie star system, polls, and ratings. "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 interest of a property-owning minority. For this reason alone, the expropriation of film capital is an urgent demand for the proletariat" (115).

## **XIV. Magician and surgeon**

The magician operates at a distance, the surgeon intervenes inside the body. "Magician is to surgeon as painter is to cinematographer." Still, film is able to mount together a "total image", an "equipment-free aspect of reality (116). A synthesis.

## **XV. Art and the masses**

Painting was never meant to be viewed by the masses. Even when they are exhibited, they are received in groups, which "gives the masses no means of organizing and regulating their response" (117), such as, e.g., spontaneous laughter at a Chaplin movie.

## **XVI. Opening the *Spielraum*; Film as dream**

"The most important social function of film is to establish equilibrium between human beings and the apparatus" (117). Film shows us aspects of reality we didn't realize before, and it shows us our dreams and anxieties as reality.

## **XVII. Dada as a harbinger of film**

Dada art is not about concentration and seriousness, and is "a ruthless annihilation of the aura in every object they produced, which they branded as reproduction through the very means of its production" (119).

## **XVIII. Concentration and distraction**

"A person who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it [...]. By contrast, the distracted masses absorb the work of art into themselves" (119).

## **XIX. Conclusion: Anti-Fascism**

Fascism [...] 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. [...] All efforts to aestheticize politics culminate in one point. That one point is war. [...] Communism replies by politicizing art.*" (121–122, emphasis in original) .