

The de-deification of art

Walter Benjamin and the mechanical reproducibility of the artwork

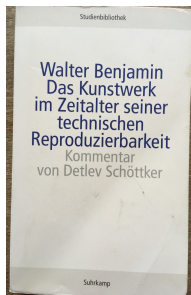
Walter Benjamin
1892 - 1940



In this little video, we will talk about a work by the German philosopher Walter Benjamin. Benjamin, who was associated with the Frankfurter Schule, was a marxist and a Jew. So naturally, he fled to France when the Nazis gained power.

In 1940, at the age of 48, he committed suicide at the French–Spanish border while attempting to escape from the invading Wehrmacht. He never got popular acclaim during his life, the decades following his death won his work posthumous renown.

Walter Benjamin
1892 - 1940



1935



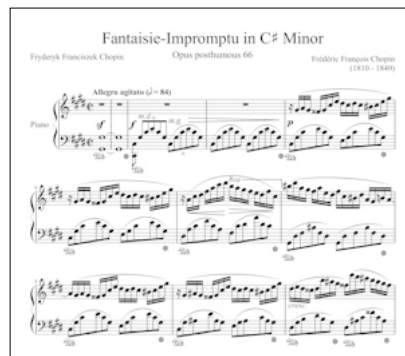
We will specifically talk about Benjamin's essay. Written around 1935/6. Benjamin has a very positive attitude towards modern art, popular art (in contrast with Heidegger, Spengler and even Adorno).

1. the art work has always been reproducible



Art students reproducing the work of the master

He starts out by saying that in principle every artwork always has been reproducible. Everything man has made, man can or course re-make. So here we have art students copying work of their master.



In the case of music, especially classical music, there is a certain value in a good reproduction



The Greek mass-reproduced bronzes or terracotta statues, using the technique of molding and smelting.



And of course coins had been minted from ancient times as well.



On the other hand, you have reproductions that are done by hand, but which need to be as much the same as possible. So for example if you want to make seats and furniture fitting in a particular place, you need to have techniques to re-make a lot of the same stuff with relatively little variation.



Engraving lead to print, using different technologies...

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_engravings_by_Albrecht_Dürer

A famous example is the work by Albrecht Dürer, who made intensive use of the technique of engraving..



None of these was, however, able to mass-reproduce in a technological meaning of the word, in such a way that the technology becomes the main thing. By modern technological reproduction he really means photography, in which the camera is used to make a picture of a painting (museum without walls). The camera makes it possible to rapidly remove the paintings from the walls of the museum and puts them into your lap.



The recording is brought to the dark room and only there made explicit / brought into being; as many copies as you want, so you can bring the outside world inside.



The same structure is seen with (grammaphone) recordings: it removes the performance from the concert hall and makes it available in your home.



Even the best reproduction is missing one thing: the here and now of the artwork – its one-time existence on a specific place. The here and now of the artwork is part of its realness.

What withers away in the time of mechanical reproduction is the *aura* of the artwork – the sense of awe it inspires.

2. the aura of the art work



Benjamin calls this the authenticity of the work of art. The fact that it has an aura about it, which comes about from the fact that historically, in a particular place at a particular time, it has an historical air of authenticity about it, which the reproduction cannot capture. Traditional art works have a unique here and now.

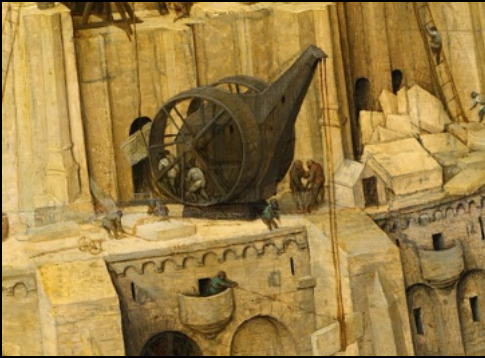
In order to see *Il Dittico dei duchi di Urbino*, you need to go to the Galleria. However, to know what it looks like, a simple online query suffices.



The mass reproduction has a tendency to decay and diminish the aura of their originals.

Film and photography diminish the originals that they reproduce. So it becomes less awe-some and more mundane, something you can play with, put on shirts are remake in a joyfull manner.

From this comes Benjamin's famous statement: "Die technologische Reproduzierbarkeit des Kunstwerkes emanzipiert dieses zum ersten Mal in der Weltgeschichte von seinem parasitären Dasein am Ritual (§IV, p.19).", or "The technological reproducibility emancipates the artwork for the first time in history from its parasitic embedding in the ritual.'

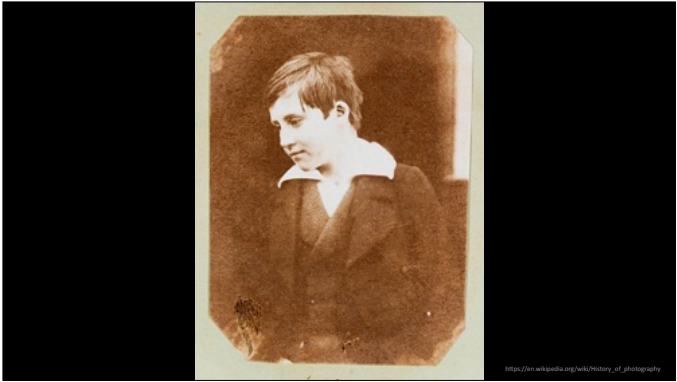


https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Treadwheel_crane



https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Assembly_line





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https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_photography



<https://mashable.com/2015/07/21/eugene-atget-paris/europe-true>



4. the role of film

In his essay, Benjamin is mostly concerned about film.



Traditionally, theater had the same kind of aura as paintings or sculptures. Even if you were to go to the same piece twice, you would not have an *identical* performance. Small differences, slips of tongues, different interpretations would give you different performances. Some better, some worse.



Also, the actors react to the public. Especially in contemporary theatre, the public never just watches: it also takes a role in the come into being of the performance. However, already in ancient times the performers are able (and willing) to take the reactions of the public into account, changing their performance along the way.



In the case of film, this situation is different. The actors , such as Jamie Foxx here, are not performing in front of the audience, but in front of technological artifacts, such as cameras, microphones, lighting-installations, etcetera.



Also, the director of the film, such as Quentin Tarantino, is able at all times to intervene in the play.

This is different from theatre. In that case, the director is able to intervene only before and after the performance. Having the director shout 'Cut' in the middle of a theater-performance would be strange – to say the least.



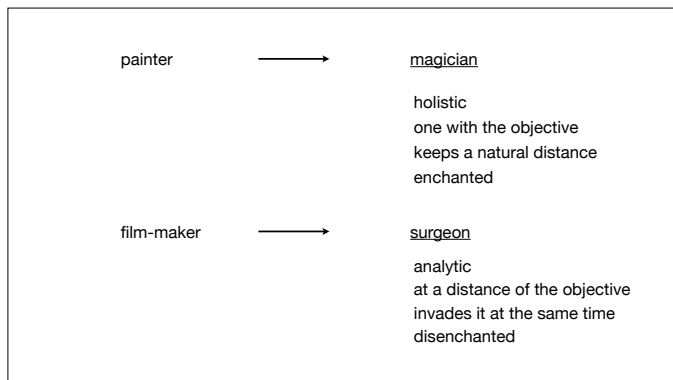
After the recording, a lot of time and effort is put into enhancing the film using lots of technological equipment, such as postproduction or perhaps CGI.



All this work is done by experts, people who know about their respective fields and are experts in their workings with the technologies.



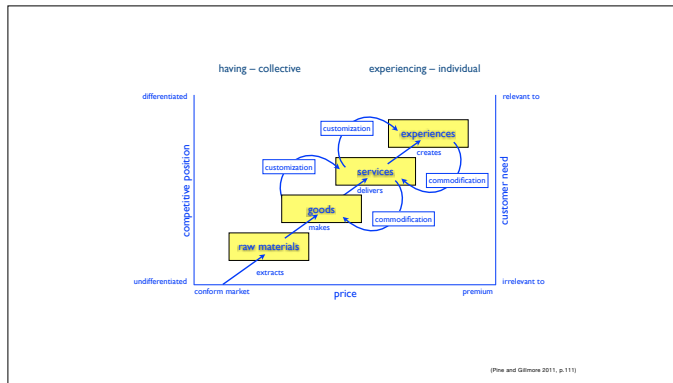
As a result, the audience is always given the *best possible performance* of the film. And every time they see the film, it is exactly the same as the film they saw previously (even though the setting can differ, of course).



This leads Benjamin to create this overview of the differences between painters and film-maker.



Also, using film it becomes possible to, as Benjamin states, open up the factories and offices with the speed of a tenth of a second. You can play with time and space, as is witnessed by this little excerpt of Eisenstein's *October*, in which you see the firing machine gun up close, or the collapse of the poor horse several times from several perspectives.



The motivation of this process is what we would call 'art' (even though that term is not really applicable to any artefact before the sixteenth century). Its driving force is technology.





So we see that film has changed our perception of art and the very definition of an artwork. This resonates with what Marshall McLuhan states when he talks about new technologies and new forms of communication:

"Every time new technology comes along it throws the sense-ratios out of whack, and disturbs everyone. The role of the artists is to create a counter environment to this new environment that will make visible what goes on beneath the surface and it will re-adjust and re-calibrate. "

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— Marshall McLuhan, 1963