

## Chapter Six

# Walter Benjamin's Critique of the Category of Aesthetic Form

*"The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological  
Reproducibility" from the Perspective of Benjamin's  
Early Writing*

Alison Ross

The singularity of Walter Benjamin's writings poses problems of theoretical classification. The reception of one of his most cited and admired essays—"The Artwork in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility" [*"Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit"*]<sup>1</sup>—is an exemplary case. There are three main versions of the essay. The first version was written in Paris in the autumn of 1935. The second version of the essay, which substantially expanded on and revised the first, was the version that Benjamin originally wanted published.<sup>2</sup> This second version was the source used in the first publication of the essay, which appeared in French and in shortened form in May 1936 in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*. While the French edition of the essay was in preparation in early 1936, Benjamin worked on the third version, intending it for publication in a German periodical. He modified it several times over 1937 and 1938 before allowing Gretel Adorno to copy it. Benjamin regarded this late version "as a work in progress, rather than a completed essay."<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, this version was the "source" for the essay's first publication in German in 1955 in Benjamin's *Schriften*<sup>4</sup> as well as its first English language publication in 1968 in Hannah Arendt's edited collection of Benjamin's writings. Unless otherwise noted, I will refer to this third version of the essay.

The essay is comprised of an introduction, fifteen short sections, and an epilogue. The introduction and the epilogue contain pointed comments about the political significance of Benjamin's analysis of the "work of art." In the introduction, Benjamin refers to Marx's analysis of the capitalist mode of production and argues that "[s]ince the transformation of the superstructure proceeds far more slowly than that of the base, it has taken more than half a century for the change in the conditions of production to be manifested in all areas of culture."<sup>3</sup> The changes in culture do not require a grandiose theory of the "art of the classless society," but "theses defining the tendencies of the development of art under the present conditions of production."<sup>4</sup> The superstructure, "no less than . . . the economy" manifests the "dialectic of these conditions of production." As such, the articulation of the "developmental tendencies of art can therefore contribute to the political struggle in ways that it would be a mistake to underestimate."<sup>5</sup>

In both the introduction and the epilogue, this "contribution" is specifically tailored to the struggle against fascism. According to Benjamin, the "tendencies" his essay identifies in the "superstructure" count against the continued pertinence of traditional concepts, including "creativity and genius, eternal value and mystery." In neutralizing these concepts, his essay is meant to place a block on the manipulation of "factual material . . . in the interests of fascism."<sup>6</sup> Benjamin's formulation of the concepts relevant for art under conditions of capitalist production will prove "useful for the formulation of revolutionary demands in the politics of art [*Kunstpölitik*]."<sup>7</sup> The components of this position are reiterated in Benjamin's claim in his epilogue that Marinetti's expectation that war will provide aesthetic gratification "is evidently the consummation of *l'art pour l'art*." The claim provides further rhetorical ballast for Benjamin's contention that his polemic against traditional aesthetics has political significance.<sup>8</sup>

However, the coordination of the essay's political tasks with the study of the conceptual implications of technological reproducibility for art is largely unmanageable. Benjamin concedes this point in his introduction. He identifies the problem posed by the manipulation of factual material through the use of traditional concepts "in an uncontrolled way", and acknowledges, in parentheses, that "controlling [these concepts] is difficult today."<sup>9</sup> The conceptual clarification of the "tendencies" of the superstructure under conditions of capitalist production can hardly stay the fascist tide. On the other hand, Benjamin's attempt to harness these tendencies for potential revolutionary political significance is also unconvincing, largely for the same reasons. The approach requires him to force the tendencies he uncovers into the dialectical setting and vocabulary of Marxist theory, whether they fit there or not.<sup>10</sup>

The problems of the essay are particularly pronounced when viewed through the lens of Benjamin's other writing. For instance, it is not clear that

Benjamin's use in this essay of the Marxist concepts of "dialectic," "superstructure," and "base" can be squared with his eccentric deployment of this vocabulary in other works from the same period.<sup>11</sup> Further, if we view the main themes of this essay in relation to the significant works in Benjamin's corpus, there is the crucial question of whether the features this essay identifies as the "optical unconscious" of film images and describes positively as evidence of the "revolutionary" shift in art<sup>12</sup> are not the target of critical analysis in other important works.

Within the essay, the explicitly political framing of the piece is often in conflict with the passages on the changes wrought by technological reproducibility on the experience of art. One of the central problems with Benjamin's position in the essay is that although it is the technical apparatus of film that he credits with revolutionary significance,<sup>13</sup> this political virtue seems to go beyond the mechanisms of production or the topic of medium specificity, and hence his point loses some of its force. The features of "the masses . . . progressive reaction" to film, which are supposedly aligned to the impact on art of its "technological reproducibility" are in fact largely conceptually interchangeable with the collective experience afforded by buildings. Despite the title of the essay, it is less the technical modality of works of "art" in the age of art's reproducibility than the relation of different types of technical production for "experience" that is at stake.

Benjamin seeks an effective opposition to the "fascist aestheticisation of politics" in film. The latter promises a new mass art able to inculcate a distracted, collective relation to non-auratic form. In its analysis of technological reproducibility, the essay cites as exemplary the tactile and optical relations that determine our relation to architectural forms, and the distracted, rather than contemplative, state that structures our use of buildings through these sensory and habitual modes of engagement. Benjamin sees in these relations to architectural form evidence of the type of destruction of the auratic atmosphere of authority in art that he wants to find in the technologically reproducible art form of film. In this regard, he specifically highlights the type of work of evaluation a film requires of its audience as well as its episodic mode of construction, which does not record its scenes in narrative sequence and accordingly deconstructs the mechanisms that build up the aura around the presence of the actor in theater: "For the first time—and this is the effect of film—the human being is placed in a position where he must operate with his whole living person, while forgoing its aura. For the aura is bound to his presence in the here and now. There is no facsimile of the aura. The aura surrounding Machbeth on the stage cannot be divorced from the aura which, for the living spectators, surrounds the actor who plays him."<sup>14</sup> In this respect, the inauthenticity involved in the mechanisms of representation is less significant in the case of film than it is in theater. In film, "the fact that the actor represents someone else before the audience matters much less than

the fact that he represents himself before the apparatus." "What distinguishes the shot in the film studio, however, is that the camera is substituted for the audience. As a result, the aura surrounding the actor is dispelled—and, with it, the aura of the figure he portrays."<sup>15</sup> The treatment of the topic of aura, which stands for the false authority accrued to aesthetic form, links the "Artwork" to Benjamin's polemics against the dominating effects of totalizing aesthetic form on human agency in his early essay on Goethe's *Elective Affinities*, as well as to the later version of this position in his treatment of the effects of the phantasmagoria of commodity capital in the *Arcades*.

In this chapter, I would like to reconsider Walter Benjamin's essay on the artwork in relation to the treatment of the category of aesthetic form across his corpus. My aim is to show that Benjamin's early work articulates a critique of aesthetic form that aligns aesthetic institutions and practices with myth understood pejoratively. I will argue that his "Artwork" needs to be evaluated in the light of that earlier position.

My discussion has two parts. First, I look at the points of continuity and discontinuity between the "Artwork" and Benjamin's earlier polemic against aesthetic form. Second, I consider whether and how this polemic fits with his approach to the question of collective experience. The "Artwork" approaches this question in largely positive terms in the way it attaches progressive political significance to the distracted type of reception operative in film. Other essays of Benjamin's, however, offer a different perspective on this question. In conclusion, I consider some of the implications for the politically inflected account of film in the "Artwork" of the different ways that Benjamin treats the questions of collective experience and aesthetic form across his oeuvre.

#### THE CONCEPT OF AESTHETIC FORM IN EARLY AND LATE BENJAMIN

Benjamin's work contains a number of distinct perspectives, which can sometimes undermine the coherent treatment of topics. For instance, there is some tension between the respective frameworks of the polemic against the totalizing effects of sensuous form and the analysis of modern experience [*Erlebnis*], both of which Benjamin uses to treat the topic of the artwork. In his critical analysis of sensuous form, the artwork falls on the side of semblance and phantasmagoria when deployed as a schema of existential orientation. Viewed in the context of his important 1924/1925 "Goethe's *Elective Affinities*" essay, such a pejorative classification is the result of the exclusion of sensuous form from truth. Benjamin's essay argues that the characters of Goethe's novel are prey to an anxious, guilt-ridden existence. They live in fear of transgressing unstated rules, a consequence of their submission to the

reign of myth. These characters look to the aesthetic arrangements of the landscape and the interior of the house as if these could provide existential orientation for their lives. They show a culpable disregard for tradition when they tear up the tombstones of the ancestors to "beautify" the church grounds in a clover-covered path. Their boundary-less activities of beautification are the key to the reign of fate in their lives: When human beings empower natural forces with disposition over their lives, they become trapped in the snare of fate. For Benjamin, the vital meaning sensuous forms are presumed to bear is silent, and therefore irremediably ambiguous. The fixation on the meaning such forms are presumed to communicate inevitably leads to anxiety and guilt; the ambiguity of their edicts entails that any act may be a "transgression."<sup>16</sup> The more fate unfolds in their lives, the more human beings look to ritual for atonement and security: "Nothing but strict attachment to ritual can promise these human beings a stay against the nature in which they live. Charged, as only mythic nature is, with superhuman powers, it comes menacingly into play."<sup>17</sup> The receding hold of tradition in modernity does not empower human life with new found "freedom," rather the replacement of tradition with aesthetic "choice" traps human beings in empty ritual propitiations. Against the pernicious hold of sensuous forms over human life, Benjamin places the articulate clarity of the word, which mortifies the mythic nature. In his view, "what is proper to the truly divine is the logos. The divine does not ground life without truth, nor does it ground the rite without theology."<sup>18</sup> The word embodies truth, whereas the mute sensuous form of the image, on account of its unclear communication of meaning, is excluded from it. This early critical perspective on the totalizing sensuous form that prevails over the bourgeois, aesthetic life is modified in Benjamin's *Arcades* when the vantage point of historical emancipation leads to the idea that sensuous form contains redemptive potentials. One of the consequences of this later position is that "truth" is no longer, as it had been in the early writings, entirely external to the perspective of "myth," nor to sensuous form.

In the "Artwork," the traces of Benjamin's early polemic in the essay on Goethe's novel against sensuous form can be seen in the terms he uses to describe the role of aura and ritual in traditional art forms. On the question of the aura, Benjamin aims to cut down the power of authority, which is sustained and cultivated through the imposition of distance. There is a notable difference between these essays on the topic of tradition. In the early essay, the replacement of tradition with aesthetic value is criticized; in the latter, the destruction of tradition is seen as integral to the evisceration of auratic value. The discrepancy is only apparent, however, since the latter position does not reinstate the features of aesthetic life that the early essay targets for criticism. It is clear that Benjamin's "Artwork" maintains a critical perspective on the tendency to empower aesthetic form. On this point, the connection between the essay on Goethe's novel and on the "Artwork" can be seen in the insistent

critical references each makes to ritual. The essay on Goethe's novel identifies ritual prohibition as the attempt to manage the dark forces unleashed by the ascendancy of form. The "Artwork" connects aura to ritual. Benjamin holds that "it is highly significant that the artwork's auratic mode of existence is never entirely severed from its ritual function. *The unique value of the 'authentic' work of art always has its basis in ritual.*"<sup>19</sup>

On the other hand, the position Benjamin takes in the "Artwork" also seems to pick up on an insistent thematic of his work that only becomes an explicit object of attention after 1927: namely, the concern about the modern dissipation of experience [*Erfahrung*]. The sense in which these frameworks are at odds with one another can be elucidated in relation to the different tactics Benjamin deploys to manage the difficulties each perspective reveals: the focus on detail and the putatively "insignificant," which is supposed to "mortify" sensuous totality, and the use of the sensory experience of distraction in order to undermine the aura of the artwork, respectively.

One of the consistent themes across the entirety of Benjamin's writing is his claim that the "insignificant" has epistemological significance. Hence, even though the stringent opposition in his early work between truth (the word) and myth (the sensuous form) has eroded by the time of the *Arcades Project*, the *Arcades* is arguably the most ambitious version of the claim on behalf of the marginal or exceptional. In the *Arcades*, it is the refuse of the nineteenth century that is the platform for disclosing the truth of human history *per se*. The detritus collected in the *Arcades* shows not just the vitiated wishes of the nineteenth century, but it gives these wishes contour and definition. Human beings have a creative vocation; their revolutionary energies are dedicated to achieving the non-alienated existence in which neither things nor others are opaque or alien to them. This wish takes recognizable form in the nineteenth century because this century is the first time that the human desire for emancipation becomes definable in real features. Hence the "insignificant" refuse of the century bears the truth of human history and it allows for knowledge of this truth.

One of the earliest versions of Benjamin's claim that the insignificant is the vehicle of genuine knowledge is in the preface to his *Trauerspiel* book. In this work, he argues that it is the knowledge of the extreme case alone that provides knowledge of the ordinary.<sup>20</sup> Another version still can be found in the position defended in his essay on Goethe's novel. It is the slender novella contained in *Electric Affinities* that contains the truth of the work. In this essay, Benjamin advocates a mortification of the ambiguously expressive form of the symbol, and he claims that the articulate clarity of the word opposes the ambiguous expressivity of nature's silent forms in myth. Benjamin seeks in the mortification of the symbol an effective destruction of the false totality of sensuous form. Aspects of the variants of this general position regarding the significance of the insignificant are used in the "Artwork."

For instance, this position underpins the schema of evaluation that distinguishes the different modalities of the arts of the image: painting is criticized as a mode of the total image, and film praised as a fragmentation of the components of the "total" image. To be sure, one of the anchor points here is the idea that the aura and the semblance are qualities of painting rather than film. However, the key assumption behind this classification of different media is that in film the fragmentation of the whole fractures a false totality. The aura and the semblance qualities belong to the image of totality; when this false image is fractured they also dissipate.<sup>21</sup> In the "instructional" comparison he outlines between the camera operator and the painter, Benjamin uses the analogous comparison of the surgeon and the magician. The references to authority inducing distance are intended to recall the earlier discussion of the aura, which counts for the magician-painter, but not for the surgeon-camera operator. It is significant that the surgeon's activity is based in knowledge of the body, unlike the magician's, which is a model of baseless authority. The terms of this contrast echo the stakes of Benjamin's early opposition between the truth of the Revelation and the anxiety-inducing, futile search for vital meaning in myth.

The attitude of the magician, who heals a sick person by a laying-on of hands, differs from that of the surgeon, who makes an intervention in the patient. The magician maintains the natural distance between himself and the person treated; more precisely, he reduces it slightly by laying on his hands; but increases it greatly by his authority. The surgeon does exactly the reverse; he greatly diminishes the distance from the patient by penetrating the patient's body, and increases it only slightly by the caution with which his hand moves among the organs. In short: unlike the magician (traces of whom are still found in the medical practitioner), the surgeon abstains at the decisive moment from confronting his patient person to person; instead, he penetrates the patient by operating.<sup>22</sup>

The key to the analogy is the status of the image in each practice. For Benjamin, the painter "maintains . . . a natural distance from reality, whereas the cinematographer penetrates deeply into its tissue." Just as distance contrasts with immersion, so, too, the images that each practice obtains "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."<sup>23</sup> The piecemeal quality of the cinematographer's work by definition elevates it above the semblance characteristics that Benjamin's writing consistently aligns to the "total image." The cinematographer does not just satisfy the contemporary expectation of the "equipment-free aspect of reality" that is won "on the basis of the most intensive interpenetration of reality with equipment,"<sup>24</sup> but in so doing the cinematographer provides "an object of simultaneous collective reception."<sup>25</sup> The introduction of this factor of the



quality of collective reception into the evaluation of film seems to introduce a perspective at odds with Benjamin's paradigm of the critique of totalizing sensuous form. In particular, the perspective of collective experience that Benjamin appeals to attaches a positive value to the immediacy of the experience of images that his earlier critique of totalizing sensuous form seems to align to the disempowering reign of aesthetic form. Can this contradiction be resolved?

### DISTRACTION AND COLLECTIVE EXPERIENCE

Benjamin maintains that the reception of works of art accentuates either their cult value or their exhibition value. This thesis provides a schema of ready identification for the different historical functions of what he refers to as the "construct [*Gebilde*]" of the work of art.<sup>26</sup> The contemporary situation is one in which the variety of methods for technologically reproducing art dramatically increase the "scope" for its exhibition. Further, the new functions that art attains in these conditions, such as "the artistic function . . . may subsequently be seen as incidental."<sup>27</sup> The contemporary exhibition value of art contrasts with the magical and religious service of art in ritual practice: "[t]he elk depicted by Stone Age man on the walls of his cave is an instrument of magic. He exhibits it to his fellow men, to be sure, but in the main it is meant for the spirits."<sup>28</sup> The ritual functions of art are preserved in the aura attached to the artwork in its secular age. Accordingly, Benjamin thinks that the "whole social function of art is revolutionized" when it is no longer "founded on ritual" but on "politics" (i.e., the politicization of art that his essay advocates).<sup>29</sup> This political aspiration requires a form of "exhibition" that does not embellish the "artistic function" but rather provides a pathway for simultaneous collective reception that unsettles the conceptual network attached to the artistic function (such as the figure of the contemplative spectator, etc.). The "Artwork" sees in the cinema a mass art able to reintroduce the prized value of distraction as the context for the assimilation of perceptual experience [*Erfahrung*]. More specifically, film is able to "provide an object of simultaneous collective reception, as architecture has always been able to do, as the epic poem could do at one time."<sup>30</sup> In the essay, the model of such reception is provided by the description of architecture. The tactile and optical mode of our habitual mode of engagement with architectural forms is described as that of a distracted rather than contemplative state. The use-based relation to buildings is evidence of the type of destruction of the auratic atmosphere of authority in art that Benjamin also asserts for the technologically reproducible art form of film. The claim about distraction is also made in the discussion of *mémoire involontaire* in his writing on Proust. Proustian *mémoire involontaire* is the pathway to collective experience that conscious recollection

can no longer find. These themes undergo a particular inflection in his 1936 essay on the storyteller. In this essay, Benjamin complains about the way the novel, as a work produced (by the writer) and devoured (by the reader) in isolation, has replaced the social fabric that surrounded the storyteller. The hive of activities like weaving and spinning meant that the knowledge imparted in the storyteller's tale was absorbed in a distracted mode.<sup>31</sup> However, the storyteller owed his or her experiential impact on the community of listeners in part because of the "halo," or aura, that he or she bore.<sup>32</sup> The comment reflects the status of the storyteller's authority as a total "person" with his or her "audience." The storyteller's authority contrasts with the way the camera operator deals with the actor: not in the framework of a total person but in a "piecemeal" fashion. The remaining dissonant note in the essay on the storyteller is due to the deeply nostalgic tone of Benjamin's treatment of this auratic figure, which contrasts with the effort to take a positive stance towards the destruction of tradition in the "Artwork" essay's embrace of film's shock effects.

Benjamin maintains that like the modes of existence of human collectives the mode of human perception "changes over long historical periods."<sup>33</sup> In film, the "shifts that in literature took place over centuries have occurred in a decade."<sup>34</sup> Cinema is a mass art that provides the possibility of "simultaneous collective reception."<sup>35</sup> What is crucial is that film enriches "our field of perception"<sup>36</sup>; it does so in the case of the "progressive reaction" to film "by an immediate intimate fusion of pleasure—pleasure in seeing and experiencing—with an attitude of expert appraisal."<sup>37</sup>

The key points regarding the repudiation of auratic distance and its replacement with "an immediate intimate" experience can be unpacked not just in relation to Benjamin's analogical comparison between painting and cinematography with the magician and the surgeon, which I mentioned above, but in relation to the question of the epistemological stakes of this analogy. How should we understand the relation between Benjamin's call for an immediate intimate experience of cinematic images, as if it were politically meritorious, and his earlier call for the mortification of the totalizing sweep of aesthetic form? Do the technical modalities of film and the new perspectives it uncovers possess the epistemological significance that, like the "insignificant detail" of the *Truenspiel* book and the detritus collected in the *Arcades*, would warrant Benjamin's position?

It seems to me that there is a parallel between what Benjamin's early writing describes as the intention-less status of truth and which he locates in language, and the claim about distracted reception of images as key to the progressive claims of film. As we saw, the "Artwork" prizes the immediacy attained by the surgeon, who is likened to the cinematographer, over the surface engagement of the magician, likened to the painter's interest in the confection of a "total image."<sup>38</sup> It is worth comparing the terminology at

stake here with Benjamin's formulation of language in his 1916 "Language" essay as "the 'medium' of the communication." Benjamin's formulation makes language as "medium" contiguous with "immediacy." He writes: "Mediation, which is the immediacy of all mental communication, is the fundamental problem of linguistic theory, and if one chooses to call this immediacy magic, then the primary problem of language is its magic."<sup>39</sup>

In the "Epistemo-Critical Prologue" to his *Trauerspiel*, Benjamin comments on the distinction between "truth" and "knowledge": "[u]nlike the methodology of knowledge" truth "does not derive from a coherence established in the consciousness, but from an essence."<sup>40</sup> "For the thing [that is] possessed" in knowledge, its "representation is secondary; it does not have prior existence as something representing itself. But the opposite holds good of truth."<sup>41</sup> In the case of truth, the essence "is self-representation, and is therefore immanent in it as form."<sup>42</sup> This position regarding the independence of the essence clarifies to some extent his view that unlike knowledge, "truth does not enter into relationships, particularly intentional ones."<sup>43</sup> "Truth is an intentionless state of being, made up of ideas. The proper approach to it is not therefore one of intention and knowledge, but rather a total immersion and absorption in it. Truth is the death of intention."<sup>44</sup> He goes on to define these "ideas" as "linguistic"<sup>45</sup> and to claim that they "are displayed, without intention, in the act of naming."<sup>46</sup> These comments need to be seen in the prism of his conception of the paradisiacal state in which "there is as yet no need to struggle with the communicative significance of words."<sup>47</sup> This position on truth echoes the reference in the "Language" essay to the "immanent magic" of language<sup>48</sup> and the general importance of naming language in his thinking as a release from the capture of human life by sensuous form. In the paradisiacal state of Adamic naming, words are "removed from play and caprice."<sup>49</sup> When Benjamin claims that in "philosophical contemplation" the ideas are renewed and that "in this renewal the primordial mode of apprehending words is restored,"<sup>50</sup> he refers to the truth that words bear on account of their intimate relation with the creative intention of divine revelation. The truth that is secured in this manner is replaced in later work with the truth of the human creative vocation. In the *Arcades Project*, the significance of the industrial innovations of the nineteenth century is that they show the human dexterity to mold steel and glass and the realizable wish for a life emancipated from need, "legible" in technological fears. Specifically, the truth of human history per se is recognizable in the industrial innovations of the nineteenth century.

Film offers a version of the same kind of thesis. Here, too, there is a technological innovation that promises a qualitative shift. Film alters and "enriches" our perception. It adds an optical and auditory precision to apprehension. "In contrast to what obtains in painting, filmed action lends itself more readily to analysis because it delineates situations far more precisely. In

contrast to what obtains on the stage, filmed action lends itself more readily to analysis because it can be isolated more easily."<sup>51</sup> It is this "piecemeal" quality of filmed action that makes it difficult to separate its artistic and scientific value. Like the arcades, technical ingenuity is a testament to the human vocation, which destroys the carapace of "pashness" that obscures the potentially motivating force of the wishes and dreams of past generations in the present.

In the way that it accentuates the "hidden details in familiar objects, and by its exploration of commonplace milieu through the ingenious guidance of the camera," the technical innovation of film "explodes" the "prison-world" of familiarity "so that now we can set off calmly on journeys of adventure among its far-flung debris. With the close-up, space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended."<sup>52</sup> The seemingly insignificant detail and debris play the main role in puncturing an otherwise closed totality. Once again, this refuse is charged with epistemological significance. And yet the problem of film is that the "attitude of expert appraisal" somehow coexists with the immediacy of the image. Like the idea that cinema heralds a technological innovation that is politically progressive, but that requires critical elucidation to be what it is, so, too, this "attitude" of analytic "appraisal" undercuts the "immediacy" of the image and the values it represents such as "distraction" and "heightened attention." These difficulties are all related to the uneven status of the conceptualization of the image across Benjamin's corpus.

In the early work, the perception of meaning in an image was tied to deleterious existential effects, since such meaning was irreducibly ambiguous. The situation of ambiguity fostered guilt and anxiety. This early position seems to be at odds with the orientation of the later theory of film since the epistemological clarity secured in the word is absent from the medium. The comparison between painting and film can be cited in support of this point: "The painting invites the viewer to contemplation; before it, he can give himself up to his train of associations. Before a film image, he cannot do so. No sooner has he seen it than it has already changed. It cannot be fixed on." Benjamin goes on to cite Duhamel's description of the structure of film:<sup>53</sup> "I can no longer think what I want to think. My thoughts have been replaced by moving images. Indeed," Benjamin comments, "the train of associations in the person contemplating these images is immediately interrupted by new images. This constitutes the shock effect of film, which, like all shock effects, seeks to induce heightened attention."<sup>54</sup>

The idea that thoughts are replaced by images seems similar to what Benjamin's early work objected to in myth. After all, the absorption in aesthetic form in that early writing is the object of his critical attention: such attention is disempowering in its inducement of incapacity. The attention it attracts is also problematic, since the object that commands attention does

not warrant it. The *immediacy* of the images in film, however, might also be understood as akin to the intention-less state of truth celebrated in Benjamin's prologue to his *Traverspiel* book. Film provides a medium that cuts away at what the "Language" essay had denigrated as the "play and caprice" of mere communication. The heightened attention caught by the flow of images in film is antithetical to passive absorption in one's own thoughts. And on this perspective, the contrast between the limited position of transitory intention and intention-less truth appears to be sustained across the corpus. The heightened attention won in the shock effect of film directs us to what is pertinent and stokes the motivation to act. On both counts, the shock effect in film is the counter to the depleting feeling of anxiety that takes hold in the face of forms that are marked for our attention, but whose claim on us is ambiguous and de-motivating.

## CONCLUSION

Still, odd notes between the "Artwork" and Benjamin's other significant writings persist. In the works after 1929, Benjamin refers critically to modern "lived" experience [*Erlebnis*] and postulates that the collective experience once provided by tradition was characterized by distracted activities (the "Storyteller" essay) and might be glimpsed again through the state of distraction (*mémoire involontaire* in "The Image of Proust" or the discussion of experience in "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire"). And yet the experience of distraction involved in the reception of film in the "Artwork" seems quite different from any of these examples. I have argued here that it has some of the epistemological features that align it with Benjamin's treatment of the refuse and the marginal as bearers of truth and/or knowledge across the corpus. It is noticeable that in Benjamin's major works this epistemological dimension carries an existential significance regarding the difference between a life lived under the pallid light of myth or one that is illuminated by the moral decision. There is a consistent polemic against sensuous form in Benjamin's writing. In his early writing, the pejorative status of sensuous form is connected to Benjamin's conception of myth as external to truth. Later, the polemic is tied to the features of commodity capitalism that produce phantasmagoric effects. In each case, the captivating effects of sensuous forms are seen to induce anxiety, guilt, and helplessness in their victim. The breadth of these themes is truncated in the slogans of political engagement that frame the "Artwork."

Human life ends in a fateful impotence when it is under the sway of aesthetic practices and institutions. This position is fleshed out in other early works from a slightly different angle. In Benjamin's *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, the theory of allegory mortifies the meaning communicated

in sensuous form because it looks beyond form to knowledge. These positions are all quite distinct from the later thesis in the *Arcades* that truth is "more the ruffle on a dress than some idea," which implies that truth is somehow lodged in sensuous forms.<sup>55</sup> However, in each case Benjamin uses the concept of the insignificant or the "detail" to defend the "knowledge" and/or "truth" that he sees defeating the semblance of false mythic totalization in sensuous form.

Are these features sufficient to provide the connection to the idea of the intention-less status of truth given that in the case of film the mode of this immediacy is that of the "image" rather than the "word"? How serious is the clash between the framework of "experience" and that of the "image," or "form" in Benjamin's "Artwork"? To my mind, the key factor in resolving this clash is the existential significance that Benjamin accords to the shock effect of film. The gripping force of the image in the case of film helps to clarify how the politicization of art can be reconciled both with the tenor of Benjamin's early critical position on sensuous form, and with the theme of distracted experience.

In the *Arcades*, Benjamin treats the problem of how to transform the dreamlike experience of the commodity form into the motivating experience of the lost wishes and dreams of past generations. It is the immediacy of this experience of knowledge of the past that is crucial for its motivating effect. The *Arcades* deals with detritus from the past that stimulates revolutionary motivation in the present. The historical index of the nineteenth century points forward to its redemption in the twentieth. The detritus of the nineteenth century embodies the collective past. Viewed from the perspective of the *Arcades*, the reason that the political theses of the "Artwork" seem unwieldy is that the technical apparatus of film stands in for the frustrated wishes of a century, and the distracted state in which vital meaning is experienced is tied to the process of "criticism." In the *Arcades*, revolutionary experience is direct and immediate, and the context of its formation is the exposure to detritus. As in Benjamin's early writing, so, too, in the later work, aesthetic institutions and practices are excoriated for their pacifying effects.

I have argued here that understanding Benjamin's position across his corpus on the topics of sensuous form and distracted (collective) experience can help to qualify the seemingly discrepant propositions about the politicization of art in his "Artwork" essay. This essay presents a twofold discrepancy: first, between the idea that the technological reproducibility of art has political significance and the tenor of Benjamin's early critical position on sensuous form; second, between the endorsement of collective experience in film and the position developed in the *Arcades*, which deals with the substantive issue of how the pacifying experience of commodity forms can be transformed into the motivating, collective experience of the lost wishes and

dreams of past generations. The "Artwork," in contrast, cultivates the expectation that a "progressive" experience can be had in the distracted state of film reception. In its specification of the virtues of the medium of film, the essay is unable either to explain the ways this experience is genuinely a collective experience beyond the aesthetic category of an "audience" (however involved this collective body is in the process of meaning construction), or how the peculiar link between film criticism and progressive experience can move beyond the field of the aesthetic reception of a film to action. This is a problem for the cogency of Benjamin's call for the "politicisation of art" since the shift away from "art" and towards "experience" is not only mandated in the "Artwork," it is also consistent with many of the fundamental themes across Benjamin's heterogeneous corpus.

## NOTES

1. Walter Benjamin, "The Artwork in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility" (second version), *Selected Writings: Volume 3*, eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, transl. Edmund Jephcott and Howard Eiland (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 122, Note.
2. Walter Benjamin, "The Artwork in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility" (third version), *Selected Writings: Volume 4*, eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 270, Note.
3. Benjamin, *Selected Writings: Volume 4*, 251–52.
4. Benjamin, *Selected Writings: Volume 4*, 252.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*, emphasis in original.
8. Benjamin, *Selected Writings: Volume 4*, 270.
9. Benjamin, *Selected Writings: Volume 4*, 252.
10. Miriam Hansen, "Benjamin, Cinema and Experience: the Blue Flower in the Land of Technology," *New German Critique*, No. 40 (1987): 180, argues that the "Artwork" essay evinces the influence of Brecht.
11. Benjamin gives an eccentric formulation of the Marxist base-superstructure relation in terms of the vocabulary of "expression" in his contemporaneous drafting of the *Arcades Project*: "Marx lays bare the causal connection between economy and culture. For us, what matters is the thread of expression. It is not the economic origins of culture that will be presented, but the expression of the economy in its culture. At issue, in other words, is the attempt to grasp an economic process as perceptible Ur-phenomenon, from out of which proceed all manifestations of life in the arcades (and, accordingly, in the nineteenth century)." Walter Benjamin, *Arcades Project* [N1a, 6], 460. And: "This research—which deals fundamentally with the expressive character of the earliest industrial products, the earliest industrial architecture, the earliest machines, but also the earliest department stores, advertisements, and so on—thus becomes important for Marxism in two ways. First, it will demonstrate how the milieu in which Marx's doctrine arose affected that doctrine through its expressive character (which is to say, not only through causal connections); but, second, it will also show in what respects Marxism, too, shares the expressive character of the material products contemporary with it." Walter Benjamin, *Arcades Project* [N1a, 7], 460. Indeed, the Marxist notion of the "revolutionary situation" is itself described in the *Arcades* as "inadequate."
12. Benjamin, *Selected Writings: Volume 4*, 266, 262.
13. Benjamin, *Selected Writings: Volume 4*, 264: "The technological reproducibility of the artwork changes the relation of the masses to art. The extremely backward attitude toward a

Picasso painting changes into a highly progressive reaction to a Chaplin film." Emphasis in original removed.

14. Benjamin, *Selected Writings: Volume 4*, 260.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Walter Benjamin, "The Artwork in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility" (second version), *Selected Writings: Volume 1*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 343.
17. Benjamin, *Selected Writings: Volume 1*, 303.
18. Benjamin, *Selected Writings: Volume 1*, 326.
19. Benjamin, *Selected Writings: Volume 3*, 105, second version.
20. Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, transl. John Osborne (London: Verso, 2009), 35.
21. Hence the contrast between the false totality of semblance form and Benjamin's definition of the "origin" in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* in which the "totality of its history" is the schema of revelation for an idea's truth: "On the one hand [the origin] needs to be recognized as a process of restoration and re-establishment, but, on the other hand, and precisely because of this, as something imperfect and incomplete. There takes place in every original phenomenon a determination of the form in which an idea will constantly confront the historical world, until it is revealed fulfilled, in the totality of its history. Origin is not, therefore, discovered by the examination of actual findings, but it is related to their history and their subsequent development" (*Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 45–46). The totality that reveals truth is one that is keyed to imperfection, not semblance. In the *Arcades*, the problem of "fashioning an origin" is pursued in "the origin of the forms and mutations of the Paris arcades from their beginning to their decline" (462 [N2a, 4]). If Benjamin locates "this origin in the economic facts" (462 [N2a, 4]), these facts are not themselves "primal phenomena, they become such only insular as in their own individual development—'unfolding' might be a better term—they give rise to the whole series of the arcade's concrete historical forms, just as the leaf unfolds from itself all the riches of the empirical world of plants" (462 [N2a, 4]). The reference to the "primal phenomena," which Benjamin also uses in the same convolute to refer to the primacy of the image in history, indicates that it is the "arcade's concrete historical forms" that are the sites in which an idea is lifted out of the process of becoming to become "in the totality of its history" (i.e., in its full development from beginning to decline, an experience of truth). Here, it is decay that is the key to the positive use of "totality."
22. Benjamin, *Selected Writings: Volume 4*, 263.
23. Benjamin, *Selected Writings: Volume 4*, 263–64.
24. Benjamin, *Selected Writings: Volume 4*, 264.
25. *Ibid.*
26. Benjamin, *Selected Writings: Volume 4*, 257.
27. *Ibid.*
28. *Ibid.*
29. Benjamin, *Selected Writings: Volume 4*, 257, his emphasis.
30. Benjamin, *Selected Writings: Volume 4*, 264.
31. Benjamin, *Selected Writings: Volume 3*, 149.
32. Benjamin, *Selected Writings: Volume 3*, 166, N.28.
33. Benjamin, *Selected Writings: Volume 3*, 104, second version, author's italics removed.
34. Benjamin, *Selected Writings: Volume 4*, 262.
35. Benjamin, *Selected Writings: Volume 4*, 265.
36. Benjamin, *Selected Writings: Volume 4*, 265.
37. Benjamin, *Selected Writings: Volume 4*, 264, emphasis added.
38. Benjamin, *Selected Writings: Volume 4*, 263.
39. Benjamin, *Selected Writings: Volume 1*, 64.
40. Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 30.
41. Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 29.
42. Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 30.
43. Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 35.
44. Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 36.



45. Ibid.
46. Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 37.
47. Ibid.
48. Benjamin, *Selected Writings: Volume 1*, 71.
49. Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 37.
50. Ibid.
51. Benjamin, *Selected Writings: Volume 4*, 265.
52. Ibid.
53. Duhamel, writes Benjamin, "detests the cinema and knows nothing about its significance, though he does know something about its structure" (Benjamin, *Selected Writings: Volume 4*, 267).
54. Benjamin, *Selected Writings: Volume 4*, 267.
55. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, transl. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1999), N 3, 2, 463.

## Chapter Seven

# Walter Benjamin and the "Highly Productive Use of the Human Being's Self-Alienation"

Stéphane Symons

It seems safe to say that it has by now become an altogether impossible task to add something genuinely new to the enormous mass of secondary literature that has been published about Walter Benjamin's seminal text *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility*. It remains quite stunning to see that a single text could spark discussions in, among others, the fields of philosophy, sociology, art history, psychology, literary studies, education, and technology studies alike and that, after all these decades, it is still being read as one of the foundational manifestoes of the one academic discipline that seems to borrow freely from all the other ones just mentioned: cultural studies. It is to a large extent thanks to this mass of literature and by virtue of the many brilliant analyses that it has brought forth that the subtlety of Benjamin's text and the many conceptual layers it contains have for the most part been identified and explored. When some of a single generation's sharpest cultural theorists and philosophers (Miriam Bratu Hansen, Susan Buck Morss, T. J. Clark, Samuel Weber, Beatrice Hanssen, or Eli Friedlander, to name but a few) decide to devote attention to one and the same text (or rather, to one single set of texts, if we take the different versions of the "Artwork" essay into account), the intellectual harvest this yields is as rewarding as could be expected: it seems that, at last, almost all of the most complex and far-reaching issues that run through Benjamin's essay have been accurately described and that there is hardly an argument or idea left that has not yet been adequately mapped. From all this, it has become clear that it is in the first place a set of conceptual dualities that has bestowed Benjamin's essay with the solidity and reliability of strong scaffolding, fit to