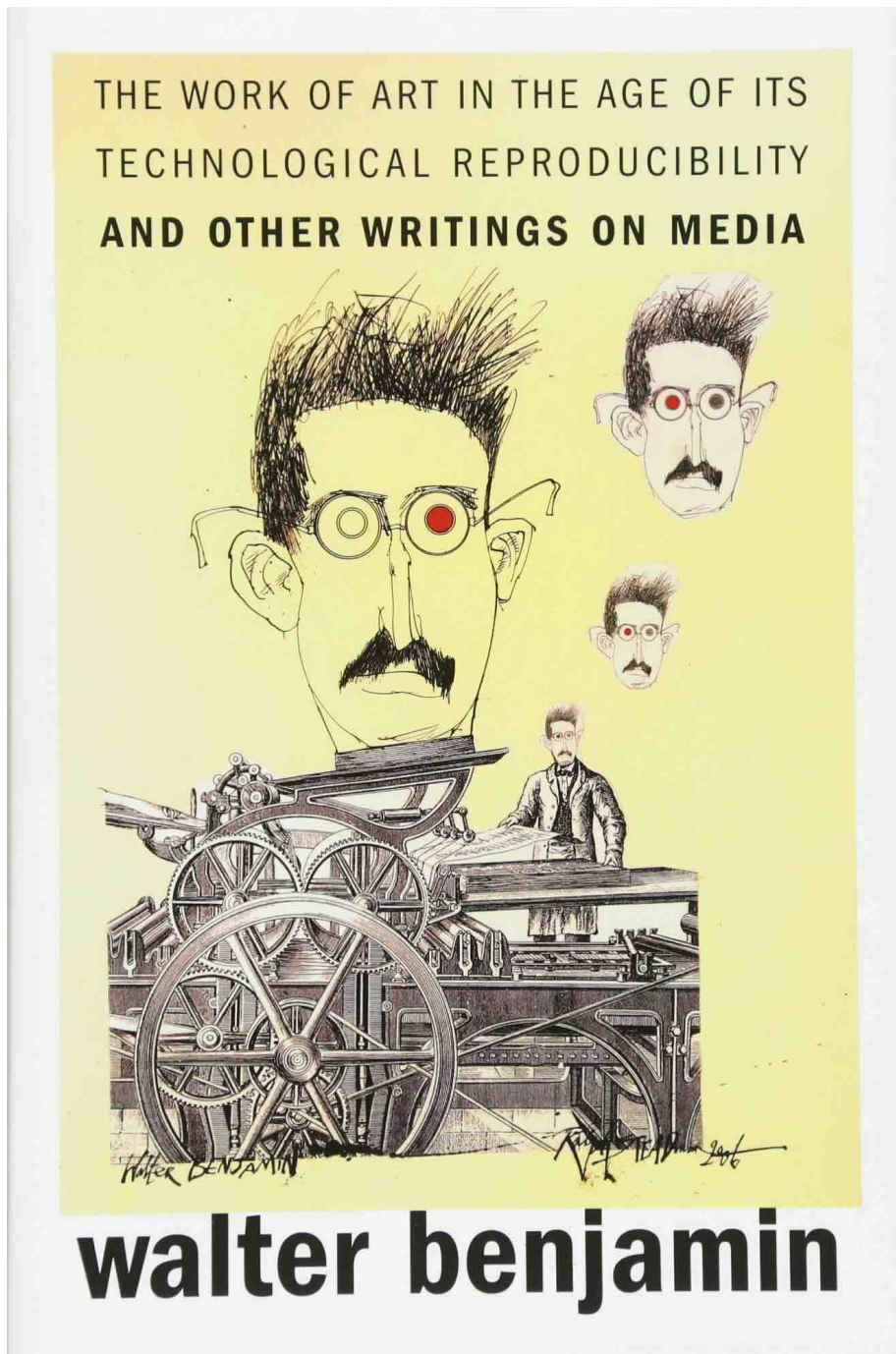


# Benjamin's The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media - Irfan Ajvazi



*First, and most generally, Benjamin links the emergence of a photograph's image-world to the way in which photographs-like film and other photo based media-make possible for us the experience of the "optical unconscious." With this term, Benjamin points toward the capacity of the camera to fix within the photographic emulsion an image of a nature-the material world before the lens, and especially the spatial and temporal relationships among its elements which is different from the one that "speaks . . . to the eye."*

*The greatest achievements of the Russian film industry can be seen more readily in Berlin than in Moscow. What one sees in Berlin has been pre-selected, while in Moscow this selection still has to be made. Nor is obtaining advice a simple matter. The Russians are fairly uncritical about their own films.*

*..At a more serious, general level, internal Russian conditions have a depressing effect on the average film. It is not easy to obtain suitable scenarios, because the choice of subject matter is governed by strict controls. Of all the arts in Russia, literature enjoys the greatest freedom from censorship. The theater is scrutinized much more closely, and*

control of the film industry is even stricter. This scale is proportional to the size of the audiences.

-Page 323, Part V, Chap 31: **On the Present Situation of Russian Film**

*According to an older conception of the term, a popular presentation—however valuable it may be—is a derivative one. This can be explained easily enough, since prior to radio there were hardly any modes of publication that really served the purposes of popular culture or popular education.*

*...What was essential to this form of popularization was omission: its layout always to some extent remained that of the textbook, with its main sections in large type and elaborations in small print. The much broader but also much more intensive popularity [Volkstümlichkeit], which radio has set as its task, cannot remain satisfied with this procedure. It requires a thorough refashioning and reconstellation of the material from the perspective of popularity [Popularität]. It is thus not enough to use some on temporary occasion to effectively stimulate interest, in order to offer to the now expectantly attentive listener nothing more than what he can hear in the first year of school. Rather, everything depends on conveying to him the certainty that his own interest has a substantive value for the material itself—that his inquiries, even if not spoken into the microphone, require new scientific findings. In the process, the prevailing superficial relationship between science and the popular [Volkstümlichkeit] is replaced by a procedure which science itself can hardly avoid. For what is at stake here is a popularity that not only orients knowledge toward the public sphere, but also simultaneously orients the public sphere toward knowledge. In a word: the truly popular interest is always active.*

-Page 403-404, Part VI, Chap 44: **Two Types of Popularity**

Benjamin begins in the preface by stating that when Marx undertook his radical critique of capitalism he explained what might be expected, which was not only that the proletariat would be increasingly exploited, but that ultimately conditions would arise that would make it possible to abolish capitalism. Hooray, I hear you say. Or perhaps not?

Benjamin recognises the absent-minded escapism of cinema but suggests that this is not mutually exclusive to notions of contemplation, pointing to architecture as a parallel habitation, equally ignored and/or examined. Benjamin suggests that politics replaces ritual as art moves away from the exclusive object, and he's scathing of traditional media's defensive 'art for art's sake' attempts to hold power.

Benjamin then went on to discuss the idea of authenticity, which the process of reproduction directly challenged (first with woodcut blocks). He mentions how reproducibility first re-contextualizes art/photography/music by being able to have it anywhere: in your home, on the go, etc. This is especially evident in memes, where mere contextualization is most of the humor. Benjamin remarks that reproduction has attacked tradition:

"One might subsume the eliminated element in the term "aura" and go on to say: that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art. This is a symptomatic process whose significance points beyond the realm of art. One might generalize by saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition."

Despite some people thinking it might be the savior of tradition: "Shakespeare, Rembrandt, Beethoven will make films . . . all legends, all mythologies and all myths, all founders of religion, and the very religions . . . await their exposed resurrection, and the heroes crowd each other at the gate."

The entirety of Chapter IV was excellent, and it expands on the tradition question:

"The uniqueness of a work of art is inseparable from its being imbedded in the fabric of tradition. This tradition itself is thoroughly alive and extremely changeable. An ancient statue of Venus, for example, stood in a different traditional context with the Greeks, who made it an object of veneration, than with the clerics of the Middle Ages, who viewed it as an ominous idol. Both of them, however, were equally confronted with its uniqueness, that is, its aura. Originally the contextual integration of art in tradition found its expression in the cult. We know that the earliest art works originated in the service of a ritual—first the magical, then the religious kind. It is significant that the existence of the work of art with reference to its aura is never entirely separated from its ritual function.<sup>5</sup> In other words, the unique value of the "authentic" work of art has its basis in ritual, the location of its original use value. This ritualistic basis, however remote, is still recognizable as secularized ritual even in the most profane forms of the cult of beauty. The secular cult of beauty, developed during the Renaissance and prevailing for three centuries, clearly showed that ritualistic basis in its decline and the first deep crisis which befell it. With the advent of the first truly revolutionary means of reproduction, photography, simultaneously with the rise of socialism, art sensed the approaching crisis which has

become evident a century later. At the time, art reacted with the doctrine of l'art pour l'art, that is, with a theology of art. This gave rise to what might be called a negative theology in the form of the idea of 'pure' art, which not only denied any social function of art but also any categorizing by subject matter."

This de-ritualization of art (secularization) has allowed politics to enter as the new god. It has also made it much easier to exhibit art, since it's often not tied to specific places. In fact the entire modern idea of art was foreign to premodernists, as they wouldn't have quibbled about the technicality of an object, but instead would have sought its orthodoxy and ritual value.

"This is comparable to the situation of the work of art in prehistoric times when, by the absolute emphasis on its cult value, it was, first and foremost, an instrument of magic. Only later did it come to be recognized as a work of art."

"In photography, exhibition value begins to displace cult value all along the line. But cult value does not give way without resistance. It retires into an ultimate retrenchment: the human countenance. It is no accident that the portrait was the focal point of early photography. The cult of remembrance of loved ones, absent or dead, offers a last refuge for the cult value of the picture. For the last time the aura emanates from the early photographs in the fleeting expression of a human face."

By using this very versatile idea of "cult value" (which is roughly analogous to my idea of "gods"), Benjamin has traced the changes from premodern to modern art in a descriptive instead of prescriptive way, which I appreciate.

It is from here that we turn from general trends in art to the specifics of film vs pre-film. I was surprised that this essay focused so much on film, but due to the time it was written it makes sense. I had first heard of this essay as one dissecting the impact of photography on painting, but it's only tangentially that. Benjamin specifically said that the arguments over photography as art pale in comparison to the arguments over the legitimacy of film (and how much more devastating film is). One early commentator said that film was like a regression to hieroglyphs, which I actually like a lot (Benjamin didn't). Benjamin points out how early critics continued to react to film as if it was ritually-based instead of being separated from that.

"The audience's identification with the actor is really an identification with the camera. Consequently the audience takes the position of the camera; its approach is that of testing. This is not the approach to which cult values may be exposed."

He first delved into the alienation of the actor when performing for film, which is cold and sterile and edited compared to the theater, which is live, in front of the real audience. The audience instead is that: "the sound film did not change anything essential. What matters is that the part is acted not for an audience but for a mechanical contrivance—in the case of the sound film, for two of them."

At one point during discussing this idea Benjamin wrote a sentence very similar in structure and content to this famous part of the "Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow" speech in Macbeth:

"Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,  
And then is heard no more."

...and later on that page he referenced Macbeth, which was either a very spooky coincidence, or I did actually catch his reference. In discussing the alienation and inhumanity of acting for film, he also called the actor a prop, which seems to be very apt. The artificiality of film is one which is artfully hidden from the audience, and the more artfully it is hidden the more egregious and inhumane it is as an art form. Benjamin remarked about how the movie is a series of partial performances stitched together, so it's many layers removed from reality (of which film's grandfather, plays, are already artificial).... Baudrillard would have a hayday with this.

Benjamin correctly anticipated the pseudo-revolutionary progressive hollywood of today who feign wokeness in an effort to distract us from their unhealthy mounds of wealth: "as a rule no other revolutionary merit can be accredited to today's film than the promotion of a revolutionary criticism of traditional concepts of art." So the only criticism which film can truly offer is criticisms of traditional representation. Benjamin continued with the prophesying by anticipating the breakdown between creator and consumer which was fully realized in social media:

"Thus, the distinction between author and public is about to lose its basic character. The difference becomes merely functional; it may vary from case to case. At any moment the reader is ready to turn into a writer."

In discussing the artist and the audience, he also remarks about how very artificial and recent the concept of painting exhibitions is (unlike the public arts of architecture, poetry, and movies):

"Again, the comparison with painting is fruitful. A painting has always had an excellent chance to be viewed by one person or by a few. The simultaneous contemplation of paintings by a large public, such as developed in the nineteenth century, is an early symptom of the crisis of painting, a crisis which was by no means occasioned exclusively by photography but rather in a relatively independent manner by the appeal of art works to the masses"

With the addition of photography and film as new art forms, the old ones have stretched in unnatural and experimental ways, like that typified in Dadaism, which Benjamin sees as a sort of decadent death throes:

"The history of every art form shows critical epochs in which a certain art form aspires to effects which could be fully obtained only with a changed technical standard, that is to say, in a new art form. The extravagances and crudities of art which thus appear, particularly in the so-called decadent epochs, actually arise from the nucleus of its richest historical energies. In recent years, such barbarisms were abundant in Dadaism. It is only now that its impulse becomes discernible: Dadaism attempted to create by pictorial—and literary—means the effects which the public today seeks in the film."

He rightly chided Dadaism (and by extension postmodernism, which is merely a tiredly political Dadaism plus financial support from the establishment:

"Dadaistic activities actually assured a rather vehement distraction by making works of art the centre of scandal. One requirement was foremost: to outrage the public"

The last topic Benjamin hits on is that of the concentrated vs distracted consumption of art, in which paintings allow one to ruminate and reflect on a single image, whereas film attacks us with one frame after another, one sound after another, one shot/take/scene after another:

"Let us compare the screen on which a film unfolds with the canvas of a painting. The painting invites the spectator to contemplation; before it the spectator can abandon himself to his associations. Before the movie frame he cannot do so. No sooner has his eye grasped a scene than it is already changed. . . . The spectator's process of association in view of these images is indeed interrupted by their constant, sudden change"

Critics of his time complained that movies were "a spectacle which requires no concentration and presupposes no intelligence" – Benjamin pointed out: "Clearly, this is at bottom the same ancient lament that the masses seek distraction whereas art demands concentration from the spectator. That is a commonplace."

Perhaps so. But is distraction a bad thing? Is disinterested art any less important? Benjamin points out how architecture is one of the most ancient of art forms, and its distracted reception (as opposed to the concentrated reception of most other art forms) is one which we take for granted. Film can be seen as the consummation of the distracted art form in the contemporary world:

"Reception in a state of distraction, which is increasing noticeably in all fields of art and is symptomatic of profound changes in apperception, finds in the film its true means of exercise. The film with its shock effect meets this mode of reception halfway. The film makes the cult value recede into the background not only by putting the public in the position of the critic, but also by the fact that at the movies this position requires no attention. The public is an examiner, but an absent-minded one."

The choice of the word "distracted" here is especially hard-hitting nowadays in our ADHD world of myriad notifications, distractions, interruptions, where none of those enrage us anymore, because we can pause things, save images, splice and cut up films/videos ourselves, and overall have unprecedented access both to editing/(re)creation tools and the raw material required.

Ultimately there was no real conclusion to the aesthetic reminiscences, which seemed more like a scattered and disjointed series of (quite penetrating) observations. So for that I deduct a star, the packaging and organization were

lackluster. But there was attempt at a political resolution in the epilogue. Benjamin claimed that Fascism is the culmination of Art for Art's sake (whereas Tolstoy saw Art for Art's sake as the culmination of the Nietzschean Übermensch infecting aesthetics, which honestly isn't that different from Benjamin's assessment). He concluded with: "This is the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic. Communism responds by politicizing art." So that's the eternal game of cat and... cat, where both think the other is the mouse who started the kerfuffle, while both (fascism and communism) are stupid frenzied cats which both need to be put down, for the safety of mankind.

For the first time in world history, the technological reproducibility of the work of art emancipates the work from its parasitic subservience to ritual. To an ever-increasing degree, the work reproduced becomes the reproduction of a work designed for reproducibility. From a photographic plate, for example, one can make any number of prints; to ask for the authentic print makes no sense. But at the moment at which 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.

[11.] In the case of 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...

\*[HB: First-person authenticity in this sense becomes important, and it would mean that the actor is authenticated as himself, rather than by his performance. (While second and third person authenticity would mean that the performance is authenticated in virtue of the performance or by the audience reception.)]

The representation of human beings by means of an apparatus has made possible a highly productive use of the human being's self-alienation.

[11.] Expert observers have long recognized that in film, "the best effects are almost always achieved by 'acting' as little as possible.... The development," according to Rudolf Arnheim, writing in 1932, has been toward "using the actor as a prop; chosen for his typicalness and... introduced at the proper place" (Rudolf Arnheim, *Film as Art*, Berlin 1932, pp. 176-177).

[11.] The typical film actor plays only himself. [HB: Reproduction-technology makes the authentic presentation more valuable.]

Second concept pair: Cult value and exhibition value

Highlights:

[6.] One could portray art history as the working out of a tension between two polarities within the artwork itself and see the course of its history in the shifts in the balance between one pole of the artwork and the other. These two poles are the artwork's cult value and its exhibition value. ...

[8.] The Greeks had only two processes for the technological reproduction of works of art: casting and stamping. Coins and terra cottas were the only artworks they could produce in large numbers. All others were unique and could not be technologically reproduced. That is why they had to be made for all eternity. The state of their technology compelled the Greeks to produce eternal values in their art. To this they owe their preeminent position in art history – the standard for subsequent generations. Undoubtedly, our position now lies at the opposite pole from that of the Greeks. Never before have artworks been technologically reproducible to such a degree and in such quantities as today.

[7.] In photography, exhibition value begins to drive back cult value on all fronts.

[8.] Film is the first art form whose artistic character is entirely determined by its reproducibility. ... In film one quality of the artwork has become crucial, a quality which would have been the last to find approval among the Greeks, or which they would have dismissed as marginal. This quality is its capacity for improvement. The finished film is the exact antithesis of a work created at a single stroke. It is assembled from a very large number of individual images and image sequences that offer an array of choices to the editor; these images, moreover, can be improved in any desired way in the process leading from the initial take to the final cut.

This volume features three of Benjamin's essays, packed with insightful critical writing that reminds me of Kaufmann (Shakespeare to Existentialism) or careful Sontag (On Photography) or my sister's writing. Here is Benjamin in the title essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, which oddly ends up discussing fascism:

Fascism seeks to organize the newly emergent proletarianized masses without touching the property relations that those masses are so urgently trying to abolish. Fascism sees its salvation in allowing the masses to find their voice

(not of course, to receive their due). The masses have a right to see the ownership structure changed: Fascism seeks to give them a voice in retaining that structure unaltered.

In the third and final essay, this time on Proust, Benjamin coins more catchy phrases than a Scalia dissent: Proust "does not hold the world up to ridicule, he hurls it down to ridicule", he has "boundless malice"; he dutifully reports the "over loud and inconceivably vacuous tittle-tattle that comes booming in our direction"; his prose is "methodical in the sense that the lines in the hand are methodical".

In "The World of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," second version, Walter Benjamin argues that in this "new stage in the technology of reproduction," (20) that the "unique existence in a particular place" is lacking in reproduction — authenticity eludes technological reproduction (21). Reproduction detaches an object from tradition and from its aura, or its "strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be" (23). Technological reproduction thus moves us from an age of ritual to an age of politics (24-25). However, mass reproduction allows for "a different kind of participation" (39). He is concerned about the "aestheticizing of political life" (41), but also sees hope in moves like Dadaism, which seek to immerse people in contemplation of art (39).

The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" is the most interesting, probably, since it offers one of the first accounts of the rationalisation that mechanical reproduction strips the "aura" away from some works of art by failing to replicate its authenticity, the one characteristic that mechanical reproduction cannot reproduce. I feel like some additional thoughts on media whose production is itself based on mechanical reproduction (i.e. photography or cinema) should have been present.

This is a provocative essay on the changing nature of art in western society. Benjamin points out that the changes in class structure from the 19th to 20th century gave birth to an art form for the masses, film (the spectator doesn't need to be literate or have access to paintings or sculptures). The essay left me wondering what Benjamin would think of our current age of digital social media and instant reproducible imagery where everyone is a filmmaker, photographer, writer, etc.

Benjamin begins his essay by briefly distinguishing his categories from traditional aesthetic values, those of "creativity and genius, eternal value and mystery" (218). In contrast, "Work of Art" relates these tendencies to bourgeois and fascist ideologies and to the conditions, inevitably generated out of capitalism itself, which provoke "revolutionary demands in the politics of art" (217-8). In order to catalogue and ultimately subvert classical and Romantic aesthetic ideals, Benjamin describes the process by which modern technological reproduction strips these institutions and their iconic artworks of their aesthetic authority. Benjamin claims that in times past the role of art has been to provide a magical foundation for the cult. Here the artwork's use value was located in its central position within ritual and religious tradition (223-4). A statue or idol conveyed a sense of detached authority, or frightening magical power, which inhered in (and only in) that particular historical artifact. The reproduction in mass of such an item would have been unthinkable because it was its unique singularity that produced the sacrality of the ritual. In order better to describe this illusive quality Benjamin introduces the concept of the "aura." As the term implies, the aura includes the atmosphere of detached and transcendent beauty and power supporting cultic societies. It also includes the legitimacy accorded to the object by a lengthy historical existence. Benjamin writes: "the authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced" (221). In order to clarify the idea he compares it to the experience of natural phenomenon: "we define the aura of the later as the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be. If, while resting on a summer afternoon, you follow with your eyes a mountain range on the horizon or a branch which casts its shadow over you, you experience the aura of those mountains, of that branch" (222-3). Benjamin's example is noteworthy because, as with the cultic artifact, the aura of the mountains seems to rest on something autonomous and free from human intervention. The statue is not like any other object produced or used within a society; it appears free from the taint of ideological control or human interference, as though its power, like that of the mountain, issues independently from within.

The coming of modernity and the disappearance of the cult only partially signal the end of auratic art. Benjamin recognizes in modern art's emphasis on autonomy a lingering cult of the aura. Specifically, the L'art pour l'art movement preserved and developed the sense of autonomy and distance native to ancient religious works (224). In fact, it could be said that Romantic and symbolist aesthetic ideals, derived partially from Kant's apotheosis of the artwork's autonomy, represent an extreme attempt to indemnify the aura. For example, Mallarmé's vision of a "pure" artwork is of something utterly detached from everyday reality or social and political influences (Melberg

100). Much of nineteenth-century art and aesthetics thus represent a conscious attempt to defend the special status of the artwork from the banality of bourgeois capitalism. More specifically, the cult of "pure" art is a response to the mechanical reproduction of artworks that threatens to strip them completely of their aura.

Benjamin acknowledges the reality of artistic reproduction throughout history, although he suggests that mechanical reproduction introduced an entirely new and revolutionary change in the experience of the artwork (218). With mechanical reproduction, which appears in its most radical forms in film and photography, millions of images of an original are circulated, all of which lack the "authentic" aura of their source. This process both affects and is the effect of changing social conditions in which all previously unique and sacred institutions have become equal (223). The general willingness to accept a reproduction in place of the original also signifies an unwillingness to participate in the ritualistic aesthetics and politics of earlier times. For example, a photograph or film of a Catholic cathedral denudes its unique aura, transforming the role of participant into that of a spectator or possibly a detached commentator.

## **Film**

Although Benjamin discusses photography briefly, his argument focuses primarily on the revolutionary potential of film as a mode of mechanical reproduction. The film actor, unlike stage performers, does not face or respond to an audience. The audience's view also becomes synonymous with the imperious perspective accorded to the camera. The net effect of these innovations is to place the viewer in the impersonal position of critic—something prior cultic experiences of art would never have allowed (229). The prevalence of film, as well as other mechanical reproductions, also creates a culture of minor experts ready to judge art rather than lose themselves in participatory ritual (231). Benjamin also notes that film relies on a series of cut and spliced images that must be assembled to form an aesthetic whole. Like Dadaist painting, film's swift juxtapositions and movements strike the viewer violently, disrupting contemplation and easy consumption of the image (238). Susan Buck-Morss develops this point further, commenting that for Benjamin art must "restore the instinctual power of the human bodily senses for the sake of humanity's self-preservation, and to do this, not by avoiding the new technologies, but by passing through them" (5).

The deep political and social significance of these reflections are developed briefly in Benjamin's epilogue, wherein he recognizes in fascism a final and terrible instantiation of the *L'art pour l'art* movement. As a form of extreme capitalism, fascism ultimately does not alter the structure of property relationships. Instead it substitutes aesthetic expression into the world of politics, thus supposedly allowing the masses the right to self-expression. The result is a reinstatement of the aura and cultic values into political life, a process which inevitably ends in war (241-2). In a chilling final paragraph Benjamin suggests that self-alienation within fascism has become so extreme that the destruction of humanity becomes an aesthetic experience. In response to this total aestheticization of politics, Benjamin writes that communism responds in a supposedly positive gesture by "politicizing art" (242).

## **Reception and Interpretation**

Numerous scholarly articles and books continue to focus on Benjamin's artwork essay, with a mixture of positive and negative responses indicative of its general readership over many years. Ian Knizek, for example, criticizes Benjamin's essay by suggesting that the aura could be transferred effectively to the reproduction (361). Adorno similarly criticized the essay by pointing to the manner in which modern modes of reproduction produce less rather than more critical citizens. He also suggested that in certain instances the autonomous work of art excludes the aura and produces greater self-rationalization (Wolin 193-4). Other more recent critical work has explored Benjamin's arguments in the context of contemporary debates about the unprecedented levels of participation in art that novel forms of electronic media offer (Ziarek 209-25). Generally speaking, the essay continues to play a significant role in understanding how technology contributes to a de-aestheticization of the artwork in modernity. However, its relatively optimistic attitude towards technology and media, one not shared by many of Benjamin's contemporaries, has been linked by Miriam Hansen to that of the avant-garde aesthetics of the 1920s (181-2).