

## **Perception and Mediation: A Critique of Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction**

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**Abstract:** *The aim of the paper is to examine the impact of the mechanically reproduced artforms like photography and film in altering the nature of human perception. With the coming of mechanical reproduction in the early decades of twentieth century, the nature and condition of art had undergone tremendous transformation. The paper undertakes a close reading of the widely known essay of Walter Benjamin-Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction - on photography and film into account to see how the visual process has been altered with technological mediation. The essays examine in detail of how conventional art has undergone change with mechanical reproduction, how photography has altered the way we see, and how film has altered our perception of time and space. The paper argues that with the emergence technologically reproduced art forms, human perception also developed new modes of reception and sensibilities subverting the conventional categories of perception.*

**Keywords:** *aura, distraction, habit. mechanical reproduction, and mass media,*

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### **I. Introduction**

Walter Benjamin was one of the earliest theorists who have observed the influence of technology on visual arts and its impact on human perception during its development in the 1920s in Europe. His observations on modern mass media, especially film and photography focus on their effect on human perception. His involvement with Soviet and Avant-garde artists, architects, photographers and film makers have changed his understanding of technologies from the members of Frankfurt School with whom he had theoretical and ideological affiliations. Frankfurt school offered the first attempt to theorise about mass media and its impacts on society. They were in general pessimistic about the influence of mass media. Its prominent members, Adorno and Horkheimer, coined the term “culture industry” to refer to the collective operations of mass media. In their opinion the technologically mediated mass media like film and television influence human perception and makes it passive. Benjamin was particularly influenced by Moholy-Nagy’s theorization of the relationship between technological change and human perception. This paper closely examines one of his widely quoted essay on mass media and argues that along with the technological transformation human sensorium also undergoes transformation resulting in new modes of reception.

### **II. Work Of Art In The Age Of Mechanical Reproduction: A Critical Analysis**

Walter Benjamin’s essay Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction is one of the earliest attempts to theorize the effects of mass media like film on human perception. The first version of this essay was composed in 1935. One year later he revised it and composed the second version of the essay. Both the versions of the essay were published in English after his death, in the 1970s. The essay is considered as a major contribution to the development of Marxist theories on mass media. The essay looks at the effect of rapid technological change in the first half of the twentieth century on the “artistic process” (Wolin 208). Benjamin examines how technological apparatus mediate the process by which we perceive the world. It aims at rethinking the relationship between technology and human sensory apparatus. The essay was written in a period just before the Second World War. In Europe, especially in Germany, Fascism was gaining a stronghold during this period. The implications of the dangers of technology when used for war are present in the text towards the end. He foresees the threat of the Fascist regime in reorganizing the mass for the world as well as for him, being a Jew; and this is implied in the last section of the essay where he discusses the dangers of Fascism.

In Benjamin’s opinion, everyday life in a capitalist society is characterized by a series of ‘shocks’. Only the art forms that use the techniques of modern technology is able to produce an attitude appropriate to the need of surmounting shock experiences in everyday life. Benjamin’s observations of the new media, like photography and film, were based on how they have altered traditional notions of art and how its reception has changed over the periods. Works of art encode not only the characteristics of artistic production of the age but also the society that produced it. “Just as the entire mode of existence of human collectives change over long historical periods so does their perception” (Benjamin104). In the essay Benjamin concentrates on two questions: ...the capacity of the artworks to encode information about its historical period (and in so doing,

potentially to reveal to readers and viewers otherwise inapprehensible aspects of the nature of their own era); and the way in which modern media –as genres and as individual works –affect the changing human sensory apparatus. (Benjamin intro 9)

As the title of the essay implies, mechanical reproduction of artworks “represents something new” (Benjamin 102). It has shattered the traditional concept of aesthetics based on ‘contemplation’, ‘creativity’, ‘genius’, ‘eternal value’ and ‘mystery’ surrounding the works of art (ibid). In the case of pictorial art, the process of mechanical reproduction called for the demystification of the autonomous works of art. The rise of the ‘secular cult of beauty’ inaugurated a tradition of supremacy of autonomous art during the middle ages. This tradition established a distance between the unique work of art and its observer. The unique existence of a work of art is characterized by its existence in a particular time and space. The audience experience a sense of ‘aura’ of the artwork through this distance and uniqueness. The term ‘aura’ first appeared in the essay, *Little History of Photography* in 1931 and later developed in the essay *Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* where he writes

What, then, is the aura? A strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be. 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 is to breathe the aura of those mountains, of that branch. (104)

A work of art may be said to have an aura if it enjoys a unique status in the eyes of the beholder.. Reproducibility enables a different kind of reception in a different spectatorial space; it shatters the aura through simultaneous collective reception of the object. The distance between the work of art and its beholder is reduced. This is achieved through substituting the unique object with multiple copies which made accessible to a mass audience in their context. As a result the unique existence of a work of art in a particular time and space is destroyed. Similarly the distanced ritualistic viewing of work of art is replaced with the audience’s need to see them “closer” in their context. Thus what is lost in mechanical reproduction is the ‘aura’ of the work of art.

Aura alludes to a path breaking cultural shift from authenticity to replication, from uniqueness to multiplication, from original to a mechanical copy. In the essay the relationship between aura and photography are presented as opposites. What withers in mechanical reproduction is aura. Mechanical reproduction of artworks invests them with mobility and accessibility and thereby alters their mode of reception. The ritualistic contemplation characteristic of the traditional spaces of museums and gallery gives way to an eagerness for possession and control.

Even before mechanical reproduction set in, manual copying of works of art were prevalent. But authenticity and authority were attributed only to the original. The copies were, condemned as forgery. Technical reproduction ‘has freed human hands’ from the process and it is more independent of the original. In the case of photography, sometimes the camera can capture those aspects of the objects that are unattainable to the naked eye. “And photographic reproduction, with the aid of certain process, such as enlargement or slow motion, can capture images which escape natural vision” (Benjamin 117). The reproduced objects sometimes get the status of the original. Besides, technical reproduction can put the copy accessible in contexts which the original sometimes cannot reach. In the essay, Benjamin observes that what distinguishes technologically reproduced forms like cinema from traditional artworks is not only a matter of their status as copies, but their ability to be moved, exhibited and received in different places. Not only that those images or copies come to take the place of the original, but that they come to be displayed, and exhibited in a variety of locations. Withering of aura is merely an effect of the physical movement or discrimination of the image across both space and time.

With technological reproduction, Benjamin identifies the two fold developments- substitution of unique object with multiple copies and their reception by a mass audience in their context- as making tremendous impact in the production, distribution and reception of the works of art. He identifies it as a renewal of the sensibilities of mankind. Earlier it was organized by the hierarchy of the society and now with mechanical reproduction it is open for a mass distribution. From a sacred ritualistic nature, it attained exhibitionist value. Unlike the earlier ages, where its reception was mediated through churches and monasteries, with mechanical reproduction there is mass distribution mediated by technology. Consequently the nature and function of pictorial art has been questioned. Art-as-photography even questioned the nature of art when paintings are reproduced and made available to the masses through mechanical reproduction. In the essay “Letter from Paris”, Benjamin argues, “Photography’s claim to be art was contemporaneous with its emergence as a commodity. Since then, photography has made more and more segments of the field of optical perception into saleable commodities” (240). Benjamin argues that the unique value of a work of art is based on the ritual practices which became prevalent from the middle Ages. As a result of mechanical reproduction, “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” (Benjamin 106).

Introduction of the technology of lithography which enabled many copies to be printed from the same master plate increased the potential of lithograph to reach a mass audience. Illustrated newspaper was the next step. The illustrated newspaper circulated images along with news to the masses. The development of photography by the nineteenth century further accelerated the speed of reproduction. Film was the next step where exact representation in mass communication evolved into its maturity. A work of art that once could only be seen by a wealthy man in a museum or gallery could be reproduced at little cost and made accessible to many more people. Film allows an event or a performance to be available for countless audiences. Mechanical reproduction makes possible the involvement of the masses in culture and politics; it makes possible a mass culture and mass politics. The value of a work of art no longer stems from its ritualistic cult value, whether it is a magical cult, religious cult or secularized cult like the cult of beauty. Authenticity is no longer a relevant criterion for evaluating artistic production. In photography for example, it makes no sense to ask for the authentic print. The result is that, the theologizing of art is rejected for artistic production which serves a purpose that stands in direct reaction to the political struggles of the time. "This much is certain: today, photography and the film are the most serviceable exemplification of this new function" (Benjamin 107).

The traditional concept of art was first challenged by photography with its ability of mechanical reproduction. Benjamin's essay *Little History of Photography* is one of the earliest histories of the medium. He examines the development of the medium within the economic, social, technological and political practices of the times. The subject of photographs continues to interest the eyes of the beholder even after years of composition. Human eyes cannot capture the minute details of a fast motion, say for instance, the running of an athlete. Photography with its devices of enlargement and slow motion captures it successfully and reveals it to the beholder. In the essay, Benjamin examines how photography has altered our way of seeing. He says,

it is another nature which speaks to the camera rather than to the eye: "other" above all in the sense that a space informed by human consciousness gives way to a space informed by the unconscious...It is through photography that we first discover the existence of this optical unconscious, just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis. (Benjamin 510)

The term 'optical unconscious' refers to the ability of the camera shots and film to enlarge, to frame or to pick out the detail or form unknown to the naked eye. Camera makes us possible to experience 'optical unconscious'. The invention of camera changed the way men see. The visible came to mean something different to them" (Berger 18). In the light of Benjamin's notion of 'optical unconscious', photography proposes a visual language that needs another level of signification.

When it was developed in France, the state had assumed the control of the enterprise from its inventors, Daguerre and Niepce. In the early years of its development photographs retained the cult value of conventional paintings through portrait photographs. The technology was used to create long lasting images. Benjamin says, "In the fleeting expression of a human face, the aura beckons from early photographs for the last time" ( 514). Every detail of the object and the setting was carefully chosen to give 'permanence'. The cult value was later replaced by exhibitionist value with Atget's photographs of Paris streets in 1900. As Miriam Hansen says:

In his genealogy of photographic representation, Benjamin traces a dialectical movement from the early images of the human countenance, the last refuge of auratic intimations of desire and mortality, through late 19th century portrait photography, with its masquerade of social identity against the backdrop of bourgeois interiors; to Atget's photographs of Paris deserted Paris streets, courtyards and shop windows (shot "like scenes of crime") in which the human form has been displaced with serial formations of everyday objects (rows of bootlasts, hand-trucks, uncleared tables). (207)

The deserted Paris streets were photographed for the purpose of evidence and later they were used for trial. Thus they assumed political significance. "It gives free play to the politically educated eye, under whose gaze all intimacies are sacrificed to the illumination of the detail" (Benjamin 520). In the nineteenth century, the medium of photography was employed not only for the purpose of private portraits, but also in disciplinary contexts. For example August Sanders' images of people from every class and employment helped in the categorization of various classes of people whether it be social or racial, while photography is used to impose a normative identity on its bourgeois sitter, and police employed it to identify the criminals. In both the cases photographs perpetuate a process of objectification. "Whether one is of the Left or the Right, one will have to get used to being looked at in terms of one's provenance. And one will have to look at others in the same way. Sanders' work is more than a picture book. It is a training manual" (ibid). In the first part of the essay photography stands as the representative form of the emerging class of the nineteenth century. In the second part Benjamin presents it as turning back against the dominant class with the democratisation of visual experience through technological reproduction. Similarly he is also aware that "Just as photography holds the potential to open the optical unconscious to the viewer and in so doing open the door to a reform of perception that might lead to a social change, so too does it hold the potential to make 'segments of the field of optical perception into saleable commodities'". (Benjamin intro 10)

Cinema was given prominence as a progressive art because of its ability to produce shock effects characteristic of everyday life in a capitalist city. Benjamin identifies its importance in reconfiguring the human sensory apparatus. Audience for cinema is a mass united by a common space and time. Its reception is characterized by their controlled public response to a series of events shown in film. "...the individual reactions are predetermined by the mass audience response they are about to produce and this is nowhere more pronounced than in film" (Benjamin 116). Film works through a series of shocks which the discontinuous image sequence or montage produces. The shocks produced by the montage techniques have a distracting effect on the audience. "The spectator's process of association in view of these images is indeed interrupted by their constant, sudden change" (Benjamin 120). Unlike a concentrated contemplation over a work of art, these shock effects create distractions while watching the film. The shock experience has a productive dimension as well. It prepares the audience to receive such sense receptions that are very common in a late capitalist culture. "The function of film is to train human beings in the apperceptions and reactions needed to deal with a vast apparatus whose role in their lives is expanding almost daily" (Benjamin 108).

Film, as an art form which is completely the product of mechanical reproduction, changes the response of the mass towards art. When pictorial art is made available to a mass audience through mechanical reproduction, which is against its traditional nature, its nature and function in society are questioned. Film and other forms of mechanical reproduction further the possibility of such radical changes in the mindset of the people by changing the way they respond to art. Unlike paintings and sculptures which are placed in museums for the contemplation of the few, film presents an object of simultaneous collective experience. For film, everyone is an expert, enjoyment and criticism are intimately fused. The masses have the potential to know and that leads inevitably to the potential to act. During the middle ages, paintings were exhibited publicly for the masses, but only through churches and monasteries. Mechanical reproduction takes them to the context of the mass. As Berger comments: "The painting enters each viewer's house...It lends its meaning to their meaning. At the same time it enters a million other houses and in each of them, is seen in a different context. Because of the camera, the painting now travels to the spectator rather than the spectator to the painting. In its travels, its meaning is diversified" (Berger 13). Benjamin has illustrated how film has enriched our vision. With close-ups focusing on minute details, the camera extends our understanding of our environment. "With close-up space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended. The enlargement of a snapshot does not simply render more precise what in any case was visible, though are not aware unclear: it reveals entirely new structural formation of the subject." (Benjamin 117). Our movement and gestures in a fraction of second are captured in camera. Chaplin's films are an illustration of the camera's ability.

With the evolution of technologically aided new media, the way the audience responds to art has been changed. Though critics have condemned the 'distracted' mode of reception, Benjamin views this as the manifestation of experiences in a capitalist society. With the development of transport and communication, society has accelerated its mobility. "The widened range of present and future visual experiences . . . the simultaneous effects of perceptual events (big city) permit and require an entirely new level in the visual typographic sphere" (qtd in Schwartz 404). His observations on photography and film have been deeply influenced by the writings of the Hungarian photographer and Professor Moholy-Nagy. Moholy-Nagy says, "Every age has its own optical orientation. Our age: that of the film, the illuminated advertisement, the simultaneity of sensorily perceptible events" (ibid). The new media like film is able to capture its movement. The film takes us through the modern metropolis and explores the new sensory experiences it offers: unusual angles (a train seen from beneath a bridge, a city square seen from above); strange encounters; a barrage of numbers, symbols and texts; flashing lights. What is stressed most of all is the speed of these impressions.... (Schwartz 404). The disjointed image sequence of film brought new modes of apprehending space and time. The 'distracted' mass instead of contemplating over the work of art absorbs it. In *Painting, Photography, Film*, (which Benjamin knew so well), Moholy-Nagy wrote: . . . a state of increased activity in the observer, who instead of meditating upon a static image and instead of immersing himself in it . . . is forced . . . simultaneously to comprehend and to participate in the optical events. Kinetic composition . . . enables the observer . . . to participate, to seize instantly upon new moments of vital insight. (23-24). Benjamin equates this to the way in which architecture was received. "Architecture has always offered the prototype of an artwork that is received in a state of distraction and through collective" (Benjamin 119). Buildings are not received by concentrated attention of the beholder. Optical reception of architecture is characterized by spontaneous casual noticing.

Benjamin proposes a sharp distinction between contemplation and distraction. Contemplation is viewed as the studied absorption into the aura of the object which is always distant. He brings in a tone of worship to the term. On the other hand distraction refers to the type of 'flitting' and barely conscious peripheral vision and perception unleashed with great vigor by modern life at the cross roads of the city, the capitalist market and modern technology. For him distraction is the ability to register stimuli, to think, to act. In the age of mechanical reproduction, it is not the contemplative individual that responds, but a distracted collective who

gets access to various art forms through technological mediation. Benjamin proposes distraction as an alternate aesthetics in which the audience receives and experiences the new media.

The essay "Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" established Walter Benjamin's reputation in film theory and criticism. His observations on film mainly touch upon the spectatorship of the new media. During the 1920s Western intellectuals and Avant-garde artists celebrated the possibilities of the new media because of its gaining popularity and mass reception. Many leftist thinkers regarded Soviet films as an alternative for realizing its political potential due to its popularity in Russia. A decade later when Benjamin wrote the essay in 1935, conditions had changed. As Miriam Hansen puts it: "... instead of advancing a revolutionary culture, the media of technical reproduction were lending themselves to oppressive social and political forces through mass spectacles and newsreels, but also in the liberal-capitalist market place and in Stalinist cultural politics" (181). But Benjamin highlights its redemptive nature even in perverse conditions. The universal reproducibility of works of art has destroyed the conventional approach founded on the authority of the experience of art supported by social privilege. Technical reproduction has liberated art from this hierarchical reception to a mass reception and also led to a reorganization of masses. The redeeming capability is attributed to film on the grounds of its ability to shatter aura, reveal optical unconscious and shock effect. As a technology of reproduction, film has immense scope and potential. Its techniques (montage) can alter temporal and spatial relations, and thereby enhance the shock effect that it produces.

Benjamin concludes the essay by hinting at the dangers arising from the appropriation of these techniques for political means. The reference here is of the Fascist regime, "which organize the newly created proletarian masses" (Benjamin 120). The redeeming potential of technological innovations has been used for the needs of war. Not only fascism "... expects war to supply the artistic gratification of a sense perception that has been changed by technology" (Benjamin 121), but brings, "discrepancy between the tremendous means of production and their inadequate utilization in the process of production. . . . Instead of draining rivers, society directs a human stream into a bed of trenches; instead of dropping seeds from airplanes, it drops incendiary bombs over cities; and through gas warfare the aura is abolished in a new way". (ibid) In a period "when politics as spectacle (including the aesthetized spectacle of war) has become a commonplace in our televisual world" (Buck-Morss 4), Benjamin's observation on fascism becomes relevant.

Under capitalism, the mechanical reproduction of reality into film not only fails to be progressive, but is also dangerous. Before painting, "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 changed" (Benjamin 119). Because of this the propaganda value of film is great. Besides it is the only medium that can reproduce the masses and bring them face to face with themselves. Fascism introduces aesthetics into political life as a way of giving the masses a chance to express themselves. Instead of a chance to claim their right to change property relations" (Benjamin 121), Communism responds by politicizing art, by demystifying the production and distribution, the form and the content of art, in an attempt to make art serve the cause of the masses and not vice versa. The very dominance of the cinema by capital hides and subverts the revolutionary use value of film. Instead of allowing the masses to participate – to act in and upon their own historical situation – the system of film production and distribution under capitalism forces the masses back into the passive role of spectators.

### III. Conclusion

In the essay, Benjamin examines the relationship between three types of changes: in the economic mode of production, in the nature of art and in categories of perception. Industrial society is mainly based on mass production. Technological innovation allows this process to extend into the domain of art, separating off from its traditional ritual (or 'cult') value a new and distinct 'exhibition' value. The transformation also strips art of its 'aura' by which Benjamin means its authenticity, its attachment to the domain of tradition. The former basis in ritual yields to a new basis for art in politics, particularly for Benjamin, the politics of the masses and mass movements, and fascism represents its dangerous side. Mechanical reproduction makes copies of visible objects, like paintings, mountain ranges, even human beings, which until then had been thought of as unique and irreplaceable. It paves the way for seeing, and recognizing, the nature and extent of the very changes mechanical reproduction itself produces in the society. For Benjamin the only alternative is to adopt new skills: "The new habits of a sensibility trained to disassemble and reconstruct reality, of a writing style intended to relieve idlers of their convictions, of a working class trained not only to produce and reproduce the existing relations of production but to reproduce those very relations in a new, liberating form." (Nichols 26). Here the idea of distraction, optical unconscious, and habitual bodily perception become highly significant. Benjamin proposes that along with the new forms of technologically mediated art forms there emerge new modes of perception as a response to the changed conditions.

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