

Chapter 3:

“Reproducibility – Distraction – Politicization”¹

In “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility”², the various avenues pursued in what is an extremely complex analysis of the radical possibilities of film culminate at the end of the essay in Benjamin’s call for communism to politicise art.³ Although Benjamin’s conjoining of politics and art in this passage may appear, at first glance, to be a straightforward comment on the role that art could play in the political struggle against fascism, a more detailed analysis reveals the extent to which Benjamin’s understanding of what it means to “politicize art” is intimately bound with the desire for a rejuvenation of the capacity for perception and imagination elaborated in his previous writings.

As Susan Buck-Morss has pointed out, it is in the “Epilogue” to the “Work of Art” essay that the stakes of Benjamin’s analysis of the complex relationship between politics and aesthetics is played out in his cri-

1. This phrase is taken from Benjamin’s notes on film in “Theory of Distraction”, in: Benjamin: Selected Writings, Vol. 3, ed. by Howard Eiland/Michael W. Jennings, Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: Harvard University Press: 2002, p. 142.

2. Although the first draft of the essay was written in 1936, Benjamin continued to work on it up until 1939. Throughout the course of this chapter I will refer predominantly to the third and final version of the essay (which was completed in 1939). See Walter Benjamin: “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility”, in: Benjamin: Selected Writings, Vol. 4, ed. by Howard Eiland/Michael W. Jennings, Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: Harvard University Press: 2003, pp. 251-283. Hereafter referred to as “Work of Art”.

3. Ibid., p. 270.

tique of the “*aestheticizing of political life*” undertaken by the Nazi government.⁴ Although Benjamin is referring specifically in this passage to the fascists’ “glorification of war”, his aim is not to provide a detailed account of fascist propaganda, but to show – in more general terms – the extent to which the aestheticisation of violence and war has (in his own time and, indeed, our own) “reached the point where [humankind] can experience its own annihilation as a supreme aesthetic pleasure”⁵ – a point which is illustrated via a quote from Tomaso Marinetti’s 1909 “Futurist Manifesto”:

For twenty-seven years we Futurists have rebelled against the idea that war is anti-aesthetic. [...] We therefore state: [...] War is beautiful because – thanks to its gas masks, its terrifying megaphones, its flame throwers, and light tanks – it establishes man’s dominion over the subjugated machine. War is beautiful because it inaugurates the dreamed-of metallization of the human body. War is beautiful because it enriches a flowering meadow with the fiery orchids of machine-guns. War is beautiful because it combines gunfire, barrages, cease-fires, scents, and the fragrance of putrefaction into a symphony. War is beautiful because it creates new architectures, like those of armored tanks, geometric squadrons of aircraft, spirals of smoke from burning villages, and much more. [...] Poets and artists of Futurism, [...] remember these principles of an aesthetic of war, that they may illuminate [...] your struggles for a new poetry and a new sculpture!⁶

Fascism, Benjamin argues, has sought to achieve something very similar: “*Fiat ars – pereat mundus*” [Let art flourish – and the world pass away], says fascism, expecting from war, as Marinetti admits, the artistic gratification of a sense perception altered by technology”. “*Such*”, Benjamin writes, “*is the aestheticizing of politics, as practiced by fascism. Communism replies by politicizing art*”.⁷

If, as Buck-Morss argues, the kind of “sensory alienation” that enables one to experience human destruction as an “aesthetic pleasure” can be seen as a symptom of the “aestheticizing of politics” (that is, an alienated mode of perception cultivated by the enlisting of art in aid of a

4. Ibid., p. 269, and Susan Buck-Morss: “Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin’s Artwork Essay Reconsidered”, *New Formations*, No. 20 (Summer, 1993), pp. 123-4. Hereafter referred to as “Aesthetics and Anaesthetics”.

5. “Work of Art”, p. 270.

6. Marinetti quoted in: Ibid., pp. 269-270.

7. “Work of Art”, p. 270. See also Walter Benjamin: “The Signatures of the Age”, in: *Selected Writings*, Vol. 3, p. 139.

particular political outcome) then Benjamin's call at the end of the essay for communism to politicise art must, she argues, extend beyond a desire for communism to employ art in the aid of its own political struggle.⁸ Rather, working closely within the parameters sketched out in the final pages of the essay, Buck-Morss claims that Benjamin is in fact "demanding of art a task far more difficult – that is, to *undo* the alienation of the corporeal sensorium, to *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*".⁹

Although what it might mean to "pass through" new technologies such as film is not rendered clear in this passage, Buck-Morss' reading of Benjamin's call for the politicisation of art as a statement on the role that art *could* play in undoing "the alienation of the corporeal sensorium" resonates with the emphasis on the desire for a rejuvenation of the capacity for perception and experience elaborated in Benjamin's writings on Proust, Baudelaire, Surrealism, and hashish. In more specific terms, Benjamin's analysis, in the "Work of Art" essay, of the role that film could play in sensually reconnecting the audience with their everyday environment could, as Miriam Hansen has argued¹⁰, be seen to mitigate against the decline in the capacity for auratic experience (and the concomitant "waning of the imaginative conception of a better nature"¹¹) that Benjamin describes as a key symptom of urban alienation in "Some Motifs in Baudelaire".¹²

What is striking about Buck-Morss' reading of the "Work of Art" essay is the extent to which she situates Benjamin's call for the politicisation of art within the broader context of both the decline in the capacity

8. "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics", p. 124. "Otherwise", Buck-Morss argues, "the two conditions, crisis and response, would turn out to be the same. Once art is drawn into politics (Communist politics no less than Fascist politics), how could it help but put itself into its service, thus to render up to politics its own artistic powers, ie., 'aestheticize politics'". See note 9, pp. 123-124.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 124.

10. Miriam Hansen: "Benjamin, Cinema and Experience: 'The Blue Flower in the Land of Technology'", *New German Critique*, No. 40 (Winter, 1987).

11. Walter Benjamin: [J76,1] in *The Arcades Project*, Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: Harvard University Press 1999, p. 362. Translation modified. See *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. VI, p. 457.

12. Walter Benjamin: "Some Motifs in Baudelaire", in: Benjamin: *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, London and New York: Verso 1997.

for auratic experience and the modern transformation that has taken place in our understanding of the term “aesthetics”. Drawing on Terry Eagleton’s critical history of the term, Buck-Morss traces its etymological roots to “*Aisthitikos*” – “the ancient Greek word for that which is ‘perceptive by feeling’”.¹³ The original field of aesthetics, Eagleton writes,

is nothing less than the whole of our sensate life together – the business of affections and aversions, of how the world strikes the body on its sensory surfaces, of that which takes root in the gaze and the guts and all that arises from our most banal, biological insertion into the world.¹⁴

For Buck-Morss, how and why our understanding of “aesthetics” has been transformed via “the course of the modern era” from connoting a close, “sensate” relationship to the world, to invoking the realm of art with which it is – and was in Benjamin’s time – predominantly associated, is “not self-evident”.¹⁵ While she refrains from charting a causal or parallel history between this shift and Benjamin’s analysis of the diminution in the capacity for perception and experience under conditions of modernity, she draws them into a constellation so that the transformation in our understanding of “aesthetics” can illuminate – and be illuminated by – what she describes as the “synaesthetic system’s” modern reorganisation as an “anaesthetic” which numbs us to such a degree that we are able to “experience [our] own annihilation” as an “aesthetic pleasure”.¹⁶

As discussed in previous chapters, Benjamin argues (via Freud and Simmel) that the decline in the capacity to integrate perception with memory and bodily sensation is a by-product of the role that consciousness plays as a stimulus shield which protects the urban dweller from excess energies characteristic of everyday life in the city. According to Simmel’s 1903 analysis of the experiential effects of urbanisation in “The Metropolis and Mental Life”¹⁷, the “sharp discontinuity” and “un-

13. “Aesthetics and Anaesthetics”, p. 125.

14. Terry Eagleton: *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, Oxford: Blackwell 1990, p. 13.

15. “Aesthetics and Anaesthetics”, p. 125.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 131. As Buck-Morss points out, her employment of the term “synaesthetic” in this context “identifies the mimetic synchrony between outer stimulus (perception) and inner stimulus (bodily sensations, including sense-memories) as the crucial element of aesthetic cognition”. See note 53, p. 132.

17. Georg Simmel: “The Metropolis and Mental Life”, in: Simmel on Culture

expectedness of onrushing impressions" characteristic of big city environments create "psychological conditions" which differ significantly from those cultivated by small town and rural environments.¹⁸ In a similar vein to Freud's analysis, in "Beyond the Pleasure Principle", of the protective function performed by consciousness, Simmel argues that it is the responsibility of the "intellect" ("that organ which is least sensitive and quite remote from the depth of the personality") to "preserve subjective life against the overwhelming power of metropolitan life".¹⁹ Faced, however, with a constant bombardment with stimuli, Simmel argues that the intellect quickly loses its capacity to respond with the amount of energy required – resulting in the "blasé", anaesthetised manner in which the "metropolitan type" relates to his or her environment.²⁰ As Buck-Morss argues, within this schema, the urban dweller's mimetic capacities serve not – as in Benjamin's writings on mimesis – as a means of "incorporating the outside world as a form of empowerment, or 'innervation'", but rather as a means of "deflection"²¹ – a process which seals the urban dweller off from the possibility of auratic experience, and stunts the capacity for imagination with which, for Benjamin, auratic experience is closely associated.

It is this crisis in the capacity for perception and imagination outlined by Buck-Morss, Simmel and Benjamin that provides the crucial background for an understanding of Benjamin's delineation of the radical possibilities of film. Although (as I will argue in the following sec-

– Selected Writings, ed. by David Frisby/Mike Featherstone, London, Thousand Oaks, and New Delhi: Sage Publications 1997, pp. 174-185.

18. Ibid., p. 175.

19. Ibid., p. 176. In "Some Motifs in Baudelaire", Benjamin states something very similar: "Moving through the traffic involves the individual in a series of shocks and collisions. At dangerous crossings, nervous impulses flow through him in rapid succession, like the energy from a battery. Baudelaire speaks of a man who plunges into the crowd as into a reservoir of electric energy. Circumscribing the experience of the shock, he calls this man "a *kaleidoscope* equipped with consciousness". p. 132.

20. "The Metropolis and Mental Life", p. 178.

21. "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics", p. 131. For a detailed account of Benjamin's use of the term "innervation" as it pertains to his analysis of the radical possibilities of film, see Miriam Hansen: "Benjamin and Cinema: Not a One-Way Street", in: Benjamin's Ghosts: Interventions in Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory, ed. by Gerhard Richter, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press 2002, pp. 41-73.

tion) Benjamin's analysis of the political significance of the medium does rest, in part, on the degree to which it undermines the "cult value" generated by the "aura" of traditional works of art, following the leads established by Buck-Morss and Hansen, this chapter will explore Benjamin's analysis of the extent to which film could be seen to rejuvenate our capacity for auratic experience, and with it, our ability to reconceive the possibilities of both the past and the present outside of the parameters of the status quo.

3.1 The Aura, Contemplation, and Distraction

Central to Benjamin's analysis, in the "Work of Art" essay, of the perceptual changes which have taken place under conditions of modernity is the withering of contemplative (auratic) experience and the rise of a distracted mode of perception. Although (as discussed in the previous chapter) the contours of Benjamin's conception of auratic experience can be traced in his delineation of the close, animistic relationship to one's environment generated by hashish intoxication, in the "Work of Art" essay, the "aura" of traditional artworks is associated with a markedly different kind of experience.

As outlined in Buck-Morss' analysis of the modern split between art and the sensory emphasis characteristic of the original realm of aesthetics, Benjamin argues that the contemplative mode of perception cultivated by traditional works of art "begins at a distance of two metres from the body"²² – a gap which, he claims, is partly sustained by the "aura" of the artwork in question. In the "Work of Art" essay, Benjamin argues that the aura of traditional artworks (and the "cult value" with which it is associated) is bound with its "unique existence in a particular place" and the concomitant sense of authority and authenticity with which this uniqueness is associated.²³ He claims that the "cult value" of a sculpture or a painting is intimately bound with its "unapproachability", and that it is the aura generated by the uniqueness of the artwork which ensures that it retains a distance from the viewer "however near it may be"²⁴ – a quality which is exacerbated when a painting, for example, is rarely

22. Benjamin: "Dream Kitsch: Gloss on Surrealism", in: Benjamin: Selected Writings, Vol. 2, ed. by Michael Jennings/Howard Eiland/Gary Smith, Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: Harvard University Press 1999, p. 4.

23. "Work of Art", p. 253.

24. Ibid., note 11, p. 272.

placed on public display, or when a sculpture is only exhibited at certain times of the year.²⁵

Within this context, what is significant about the technological reproducibility of both film and photography is the extent to which it undermines the sense of uniqueness, authority, and authenticity upon which the aura of the traditional artwork is based. "[F]or the first time in world history", Benjamin writes, "technological reproducibility emancipates the work of art from its parasitic subservience to ritual. To an ever-increasing degree, the work reproduced becomes the reproduction of a work designed for reproducibility".²⁶ While copies or reproductions of traditional artworks often function to enhance the aura and authority of the original, Benjamin claims that "to ask for the 'authentic' print" of a photograph "makes no sense". Thus, he argues, "*as soon as the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applied to artistic production, the whole social function of art is revolutionized. Instead of being founded on ritual, it is based on a different practice: politics*".²⁷

While Benjamin's analysis of the political significance of film does rest, in part, on the degree to which it both enables – and virtually necessitates – mass exhibition and distribution (and, in doing so, opens up the realm of art to circles beyond those occupied by the socially privileged)²⁸, his understanding of the political promise of the medium is intimately bound with his analysis of the distracted mode of perception cultivated by film – the significance of which lies not only in the extent to which it undermines the contemplative mode of perception cultivated by traditional works of art, but the degree to which it is imbricated in his

25. Ibid., p. 257. Benjamin claims that »[c]ult as such tends today, it would seem, to keep the artwork out of sight: certain statues of gods are accessible only to the priest in the cella; certain images of the Madonna remain covered nearly all year round; certain sculptures on medieval cathedrals are not visible to the viewer at ground level«. p. 257.

26. Ibid., p. 256.

27. Ibid., pp. 256-257.

28. "*The technological reproducibility of films*", Benjamin writes, "*not only makes possible the mass dissemination of films in the most direct way, but actually enforces it*. It does so because the process of producing a film is so costly that an individual who could afford to buy a painting, for example, could not afford to buy a [master print of a] film. It was calculated in 1927 that, in order to make a profit, a major film needed to reach an audience of nine million". See *ibid.*, note 14, p. 273.

analysis of the role that film could play in counteracting the atrophy of experience associated with modernity.

In “This Space for Rent” (a short fragment in “One-Way Street” which anticipates a number of the concerns elaborated some ten years later in the “Work of Art” essay) Benjamin draws a distinction between the distant, contemplative gaze characteristic of the art critic, and the visceral, distracted mode of perception cultivated by advertising and film.²⁹ In a damning critique of the contemplative gaze that sustains the art critic’s mode of analysis or interpretation, Benjamin states that only

[f]ools lament the decay of criticism. For its day is long past. Criticism is a matter of correct distancing. It was home in a world where perspectives and prospects counted and where it was still possible to adopt a standpoint. Now things press too urgently on human society. The ‘unclouded’, ‘innocent’ eye has become a lie, perhaps the whole naïve mode of expression sheer incompetence.³⁰

For Benjamin, the attentive, concentrated gaze of the art critic stands in stark contrast to the distracted mode of perception cultivated by film. In contrast to the contemplative manner in which one gazes at a sculpture or a painting, the shock-like organisation and sensation of film is said to create a spectatorial relationship more akin to the mode of perception cultivated by life in the city – the “distracting element” of which is “primarily tactile, being based on successive changes of scene and focus which have a percussive effect on the spectator”.³¹

For Benjamin, what is significant about the manner in which film “hurls”³² itself at the spectator is the extent to which it shatters the distance that sustains the sovereign, contemplative gaze (with all its pre-formed ideas, values, and prejudices) – opening up a space within which the film could animate thoughts and associations in the viewer which might challenge “the optical illusions” generated by one’s own “isolated

29. In his notes on film in “Theory of Distraction”, Benjamin states that “[d]istraktion, like catharsis, should be conceived as a physiological phenomenon”. p. 141.

30. “One Way Street”, in: Benjamin: Selected Writings, Vol. 1, ed. by Marcus Bullock/Michael W. Jennings, Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: Harvard University Press 1996, p. 476.

31. “Work of Art”, p. 267.

32. “One-Way Street”, p. 476.

standpoint".³³ Moreover, although the shock-like organisation of film does, to a certain extent, cultivate a mode of perception analogous to the distracted mode of perception associated with urbanisation, Benjamin argues that the camera's capacity to extend the spectator's vision beyond the realm of subjective intention means that film is ideally placed to counter the diminution in the capacity for perception and experience that both Benjamin and Simmel associate with modernity.

In Benjamin's response to an article by Oscar A.H. Schmitz published in *Die literarische Welt* in 1927, film's capacity to open up "a new realm of consciousness" is described in no uncertain terms:

To put it in a nutshell, film is the prism in which the spaces of the immediate environment – the spaces in which people live, pursue their avocations, and enjoy their leisure – are laid open before their eyes in a comprehensible, meaningful, and passionate way. In themselves these offices, furnished rooms, saloons, big-city streets, stations, and factories are ugly, incomprehensible, and hopelessly sad. Or rather, they were and seemed to be, until the advent of film. The cinema then exploded this entire prison-world with the dynamite of its fractions of a second, so that we can take extended journeys of adventure between their widely scattered ruins.³⁴

Film, in this context, thus performs a similar function to Benjamin's delineation of the effects produced by hashish. By placing a "prism" between the spectator and his or her environment, the spectator is able to gaze anew at that which "had previously floated unnoticed on the broad stream of perception".³⁵ "Clearly", Benjamin writes, "it is another nature which speaks to the camera as compared 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".³⁶ Employing examples reminiscent of those sketched out in observations he wrote while under the influence of hashish, Benjamin notes that although we are

33. Ibid., p. 453. In support of this claim, Benjamin quotes Georges Duhamel, who states of the mode of perception cultivated by film: "I can no longer think what I want to think. My thoughts have been replaced by moving images". "Work of Art", p. 267.

34. "Reply to Oscar A.H. Schmitz", in: Selected Writings, Vol. 2, p. 17. As quoted in the Introduction, this passage also appears, albeit in an altered format, in the "Work of Art" essay. See p. 265.

35. "Work of Art", p. 265.

36. Ibid., p. 266.

familiar with the movement of picking up a cigarette lighter or a spoon, [we] know almost nothing of what really goes on between hand and metal, and still less how this varies with different moods. This is where the camera comes into play, with all its resources for swooping and rising, disrupting and isolating, stretching or compressing a sequence, enlarging or reducing an object. It is through the camera that we first discover the optical unconscious, just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis.³⁷

This opening up of the “optical unconscious” enabled by the camera’s extension of the spectator’s vision beyond the realm of subjective intention results in what Benjamin describes as a “progressive” mode of spectatorship which is “characterized by an immediate, intimate fusion of pleasure – pleasure in seeing and experiencing – with an attitude of expert appraisal”.³⁸ Drawing on Bertolt Brecht’s delineation of the active, critical spectator generated by epic theatre (the details of which will be discussed later in this chapter), Benjamin argues that the audience’s familiarity with the techniques via which the film re-presents a person, scene, or object counteracts the sense of distance via which the traditional work of art is constituted as auratic – an analysis which, as we will see, is significantly complicated by Benjamin’s delineation of the role that film could play in counteracting the atrophy of experience associated with modernity.

37. Ibid. In an essay written some three years earlier, Benjamin argues that “[i]t is through photography that we first discover the existence of this optical unconscious, just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis. Details of structure, cellular tissue, with which technology and medicine are normally concerned – all this is, in its origins, more native to the camera than the atmospheric landscape or the soulful portrait”. See “Little History of Photography”, in: *Selected Writings*, Vol. 2, pp. 510-12. See also the second version of the “Work of Art” essay, in which Benjamin draws a link between the camera’s capacity in this regard, and the kind of perceptual effects generated by hallucinations. “[I]n most cases”, Benjamin states, “the diverse aspects of reality captured by the film camera lie outside only the *normal* spectrum of sense impressions. Many of the deformations and stereotypes, transformations and catastrophes which can assail the optical world in films afflict the actual world in psychoses, hallucinations, and dreams. Thanks to the camera, therefore, the individual perceptions of the psychotic or the dreamer can be appropriated by collective perception”. *Selected Writings*, Vol. 3, pp. 117-8.

38. “Work of Art”, p. 264.

3.2 Changing Film's Technical Standards

"The history of every art form", Benjamin writes in the "Work of Art" essay, "has critical periods in which the particular form strains after effects which can be easily achieved only with a changed technical standard – that is to say, in a new art form".³⁹ In both the "Work of Art" essay, and critical accounts of Benjamin's argument, this "changed technical standard" is predominantly traced at the level of the distinction he draws between traditional works of art and new imaging technologies such as film and photography. However, if we situate this passage within the period in which Benjamin was writing, it is possible to view this reference to "a changed technical standard" not as an affirmative statement about changes to art that have already taken place with the advent of new imaging technologies, but as a comment on the degree to which the "technical standards" of film would have to change in order to cultivate the kind of spectatorial effects outlined in the "Work of Art" essay. As Marcus Bullock has pointed out:

The essay is commonly read as an optimistic pronouncement on the intrinsically revolutionary and critical moment of the film medium. The conclusion which follows, that he is simply *too* optimistic, must surely be quite naïve, however. This was not written in 1920 or 1925, but in 1935. The German film industry was in the increasingly adept hands of Josef Goebbels' ministry of propaganda, France had produced a masterpiece of reactionary mythopoeic aesthetics in Abel Gance's *Napolean*, and Hollywood was developing an analgesic consumer-product to draw a veil of dreams around the reality of the Depression.⁴⁰

39. *Ibid.*, p. 266.

40. Marcus Bullock: "The Rose of Babylon: Walter Benjamin, Film Theory, and the Technology of Memory", *MLN*, 103, 5 (1988), p. 1100. Hereafter referred to as "The Rose of Babylon". Miriam Hansen also makes a similar point, stating that, when Benjamin was writing the "Work of Art" essay, "instead of advancing a revolutionary culture, the media of 'technical reproduction' were lending themselves to oppressive social and political forces – first and foremost in the fascist restoration of myth through mass spectacles and newsreels, but also in the liberal-capitalist marketplace and in Stalinist cultural politics". This fact, she claims, "only enhances the utopian modality of [Benjamin's] statements, shifting the emphasis from a definition of what film *is* to its failed opportunities and unrealized promises". See "Benjamin, Cinema, and Experience: 'The Blue Flower in the Land of Technology'", pp. 181-182.

It is certainly true that Leni Riefenstahl's highly phantasmagoric representation of the Nazis' Nuremberg Party Convention – in her 1935 film *Der Triumph des Willens* (*The Triumph of the Will*) – is a prime example of the “aestheticization of political life” undertaken by the fascists. “The violation of the masses”, Benjamin writes, “whom fascism, with its *Führer* cult, forces to their knees, has its counterpart in the violation of an apparatus which is pressed into serving the production of ritual values”⁴¹ – a statement which is echoed in his analysis of the “putrid magic” of the “cult of the movie star” cultivated by the “money of the film industry”.⁴²

In more general terms, it is also true to say that the kind of “analgesic consumer product” described by Bullock in the above passage bears little trace of either the shock-like organisation and sensation, nor the emphasis on the “exploration of commonplace milieux” characteristic of the film practice for which Benjamin argues in the “Work of Art” essay.⁴³ Indeed, if we consider the “technical standards” around which classical narrative film is predominantly organised (an emphasis on character-driven narratives, continuity in time and space, and the creation of a sense of stylistic unity and narrative closure) we can begin to get a sense of the kind of changes to the “technical standards” of film which would be required in order to produce the kind of spectatorial effects outlined in the “Work of Art” essay.⁴⁴

Foremost among these changes is the breakdown between art and reality that Benjamin describes as one of the most significant achievements of the Dadaists. “Dadaism”, he writes, “attempted to produce with the means of painting (or literature) the effects which the public today

41. “Work of Art”, p. 269.

42. Ibid., p. 261. Elaborating on this point, Benjamin states that “[s]o long as moviemakers' capital sets the fashion, as a rule the only revolutionary merit that can be ascribed to today's cinema is the promotion of a revolutionary criticism of traditional concepts of art”. p. 261.

43. Ibid., p. 265.

44. Concerning the role played by characters in the film practice for which he argues, Benjamin quotes Bertolt Brecht's 1931 “The Threepenny Lawsuit”: “Film [...] provides – or could provide – useful insight into the details of human actions. [...] Character is never used as a source of motivation; the inner life of the persons represented never supplies the principal cause of the plot and seldom is its main result”. See “Work of Art”, note 24, p. 276, and Bertolt Brecht: “The Film, the Novel and Epic Theatre (from ‘The Threepenny Lawsuit’)”, in: Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic, ed. by John Willett, New York: Hill and Wang 1998, p. 48. This book will hereafter be referred to as Brecht on Theatre.

seeks in film". The significance of artists such as Hans Arp and John Heartfield lies in the extent to which they "attached much less importance to the commercial usefulness of their artworks than to the uselessness of those works as objects of contemplative immersion".⁴⁵ While the Dadaists, as Bullock points out, start out "within the enclosed territory of art", their construction of still lifes out of cigarette butts, train tickets, buttons, and spools of cotton "break down the dividing barrier separating [art] from the material existence of reality".⁴⁶

In the "Work of Art" essay, Benjamin's analysis of the perceptual and experiential effects generated by autonomous works of art emerges most clearly in his criticism of painting which, to borrow Bullock's phrase, "does not look out with a straight gaze on the disorder of true conditions, but only through the restrictive filter of what may be admitted into the consistent, harmonious order of artistic construction".⁴⁷ Complicating his analysis of the distant, detached gaze characteristic of the art critic, Benjamin states that the "person who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it"⁴⁸ – a point which he elaborates via reference to a Chinese legend that is narrated in some detail in his childhood reminiscences. "The story", Benjamin writes,

tells of an old painter who invited friends to see his newest picture. This picture showed a park and a narrow footpath that ran along a stream and through a grove of trees, culminating at the door of a little cottage in the background. When the painter's friends, however, looked around for the painter, they saw that he had

45. "Work of Art", p. 266. He states that "[b]efore a painting by Arp or a poem by August Stramm, it is impossible to take time for concentration and evaluation, as one can before a painting by Derain or a poem by Rilke". p. 267.

46. "The Rose of Babylon", p. 1108. See also "Work of Art", pp. 266-267, and "The Author as Producer", in: Benjamin: Understanding Brecht, London and New York: Verso 1998, p. 94. This breakdown between art and reality is also manifested in Benjamin's 1929 literary portrait of Marseilles – the structure and subject matter of which resonate strongly with the kind of film practice outlined in the "Work of Art" essay. See Benjamin: "Marseille", in: Selected Writings, Vol. 2, pp. 232-236.

47. "The Rose of Babylon", p. 1108. Bullock is referring, more specifically, here to "[t]he inner coherence which we prize most highly in our established aesthetics". According to Benjamin, the image of the world presented in paintings is a "total" one, in contrast to the images obtained by the cinematographer, which are "piecemeal". "Work of Art", p. 263-4.

48. "Work of Art", p. 268.

left them – that he was in the picture. There, he followed the little path that led to the door, paused before it quite still, turned, smiled, and disappeared through the narrow opening.⁴⁹

In stark contrast to this image of the painter (who escapes into the harmonious, idyllic world which he himself has created), Benjamin argues that “the distracted masses *absorb the work of art into themselves*”⁵⁰ – a point which he elaborates via a comparison between the analogous mode of perception cultivated by film and architecture (the latter of which, he claims, is the “prototype” of a work of art which is received both “in a state of distraction and through the collective”).⁵¹

In contrast to the “concentrated” manner in which a traveller gazes at an architectural work of art,⁵² Benjamin argues that buildings are, on an everyday basis, received both “optically” (via visual perception) and “tactilely” (via use) – the latter of which, he claims, is accomplished “not so much by way of attention as by way of habit”.⁵³ In a passage in the second version of the essay which explicitly links this “tactile” mode of

49. “Berlin Childhood around 1900” (1934 Version), in: Selected Writings, Vol. 3, p. 393.

50. “Work of Art”, p. 268. My emphasis. In “Theory of Distraction”, Benjamin states that the “relation of distraction to absorption [*Einverleibung*] must be examined”. Selected Writings, Vol. 3, p. 141, and “Theorie der Zerstreuung”, in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. VII-2, p. 678. As the editors of Benjamin’s Selected Writings have pointed out, this idea of “absorption” is also discussed in Benjamin’s 1929 radio talk “Children’s Literature”, in which he claims that the child engages with a book by means of “absorption” rather than by “empathy”. See “Theory of Distraction”, note 3, p. 142, and “Children’s Literature”, in: Selected Writings, Vol. 2, p. 256.

51. “Work of Art”, p. 268.

52. Ibid. In “Paris – the Capital of the Nineteenth Century”, Benjamin provides an extreme example of this tendency in the contemplation of Hausmann’s Parisian boulevards: “Hausmann’s urbanistic ideal was one of views in perspective down long street-vistas. It corresponded to the tendency which was noticeable again and again during the nineteenth century, to ennoble technical exigencies with artistic aims. The institutions of the worldly and spiritual rule of the bourgeoisie, set in the frame of the boulevards, were to find their apotheosis. Before their completion, boulevards were covered over with tarpaulins, and unveiled like monuments”. See Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism, pp. 173-174.

53. “Work of Art”, p. 268.

reception with his analysis of the role that film could play in rejuvenating our senses, Benjamin claims that film – “by virtue of its shock effects” – is not only “predisposed to this form of reception”, but that it “proves to be the most important subject matter, at present, for the theory of perception which the Greeks call aesthetics”⁵⁴ – the tactile, bodily dimension of which is further emphasised in Benjamin’s analysis of the extent to which the spectator “absorbs” the image on screen by way of his or her own experience. Circumscribing this mode of reception, Benjamin states in a highly evocative passage which clearly distinguishes this close, tactile spectatorial relationship from contemplative immersion, that the “waves” of the audience “lap around” the film which “[t]hey encompass [...] with their tide”.⁵⁵

3.3 Autonomy and Unity in Film

What is, however, to a certain extent elided by the sharp distinction Benjamin draws between the very different modes of engagement cultivated by the autonomous, “total” image presented by painting, and the shock-like, “piece-meal” organisation of film, is a detailed discussion of the perceptual effects generated by a film practice that is organised around the creation of a sense of autonomy and unity – effects which complicate the distinction between contemplation and distraction outlined in the “Work of Art” essay.

In Siegfried Kracauer’s 1926 essay “Cult of Distraction: On Berlin’s Picture Palaces” (an essay which had a significant impact on the development of Benjamin’s conception of distraction) the spectatorial effects of such a film practice are discussed in some detail.⁵⁶ In an analysis of the distracted mode of perception cultivated by the Berlin picture palaces (in which films were screened in the 1920s and 30s as part of a broader program of visual and acoustic “attractions”) Kracauer argues that the “stimulations of the senses” (provoked by the shock-like organisation of spotlights, music, images, glass fittings, and other forms of decoration) “succeed one another with such rapidity that there is no room left be-

54. “Work of Art” (Second Version), p.120.

55. *Ibid.*, p. 119.

56. Siegfried Kracauer: “Cult of Distraction: On Berlin’s Picture Palaces”, in: Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, ed. by Thomas Y. Levin, Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: Harvard University Press 1995, pp. 323-8. Hereafter referred to as “Cult of Distraction”.

tween them for even the slightest contemplation”.⁵⁷ Such programs, Kracauer argues, fulfil an important function for the urban masses whose working hours are saturated with a “formal tension” which leaves them feeling profoundly unfulfilled. “Such a lack”, he claims, “demands to be compensated, but this need can be articulated only in terms of the same surface sphere that imposed the lack in the first place”⁵⁸, and which finds expression in the interior design of the picture palaces, the “surface glamor of the stars”, the display of “externality” characteristic of the revue programs, and the proliferation of images in newspapers and magazines.⁵⁹ “Here”, Kracauer writes,

in pure externality, the audience encounters itself; its own reality is revealed in the fragmented sequence of splendid sense impressions. Were this reality to remain hidden from the viewers, they could neither attack nor change it; its disclosure in distraction is therefore of *moral* significance.⁶⁰

Kracauer argues, however, that – far from disclosing the current state of affairs – the programs of the picture palaces actually “rob distraction of its meaning” by artistically combining the diverse attractions characteristic of such programs into the kind of “organic whole” characteristic of certain kinds of literature and theatre. “Distraction”, he writes,

which is meaningful only as improvisation, as a reflection of the uncontrolled anarchy of the world – is festooned with drapery and forced back into a unity that no longer exists. Rather than acknowledging the actual state of disintegration that such shows ought to represent, the movie theaters glue the pieces back together after the fact and present them as organic creations.⁶¹

The closest that Benjamin comes, in the “Work of Art” essay, to discussing the spectatorial ramifications of a film practice that is organised around the creation of a sense of autonomy and unity is in the relationship he draws between the captions which accompany images in illustrated magazines, and the manner in which filmic images (or shots) are pieced together in the editing process. “The directives”, he writes, “given by captions to those looking at images in illustrated magazines soon be-

57. Ibid., p. 326.

58. Ibid., p. 325.

59. Ibid., p. 326.

60. Ibid.

61. Ibid., p. 327-8.

come even more precise and commanding in films, where the way each single image is understood appears prescribed by the sequence of all the preceding images"⁶². Elaborating on this idea in an evocative comparison between the image of continuity striven for by certain filmmakers and historians, Benjamin states that, in film, the "continuous musical accompaniment" undermines the "downright jerky rhythm of the image sequence" – the latter of which "satisfies the deep-seated need of this generation to see the 'flow' of 'development' disavowed".⁶³

What is significant about these comments is not only the degree to which they furnish a link between Benjamin's writings on film and history, but the extent to which they establish his concern with the degree to which the shock-like organisation and sensation of film can, as Kra-cauer points out, be undermined when the autonomy of each fragment is subordinated to a piece of a larger picture, or a cog driving a larger narrative – a process which could be said to culminate with classical narrative film, for example, in which filmic images are shot and cut together to draw the spectator in, and lead him or her through, the world of the narrative. Indeed, within this context, it is much more likely that the audience's familiarity with the techniques via which such films represent their subject would result not in an active, "testing" audience, but rather an audience whose familiarity with classical techniques would actually facilitate their *absorption* into the world of the narrative.

3.4 Film and Epic Theatre

The roots of Benjamin's aversion to such a film practice can, in part, be traced to his friendship with, and writings on, Bertolt Brecht – whom Benjamin first met, via Asja Lacis, in 1929, and whose delineation of the mode of spectatorship cultivated by epic theatre provided Benjamin with a model for the active, "testing" spectator outlined in the "Work of Art" essay.⁶⁴ In the second version of "What is Epic Theatre?" (in which he

62. "Work of Art", p. 258.

63. [H,16], The Arcades Project, p. 845. "To root out any trace of 'development' from the image of history", Benjamin writes in this passage, "is no less the tendency of this project".

64. For a detailed account of Benjamin's relationship to Brecht, see Bernd Witte: Walter Benjamin: An Intellectual Biography, Detroit: Wayne State University Press 1997, pp. 122-126, and Walter Benjamin, 1892-1940: Marbacher Magazin,

expands on ideas elaborated in an essay of the same title written some eight years earlier in 1931) Benjamin evokes an image of epic theatre that is in keeping with his analysis of the fragmentary, shock-like organisation of film:

Epic theatre proceeds by fits and starts, in a manner comparable to the images on a film strip. Its basic form is that of the forceful impact on one another of separate, sharply distinct situations in the play. The songs, the captions, the gestural conventions differentiate the scenes. As a result, intervals occur which tend to destroy illusion. These intervals paralyse the audience's readiness for empathy.⁶⁵

Anticipating both Benjamin and Kracauer's criticism of autonomous works of art, Brecht argues that the "fusing" together of the artwork's various elements produces a "*Gesamtkunstwerk*" ("total work of art") within which each of the elements serves as "a mere 'feed' to the rest" – a process which does not exclude the spectator, who is drawn into the work of art as a "passive" participant.⁶⁶

In stark contrast to this passive mode of spectatorship, Brecht argues that the "radical *separation of the elements*"⁶⁷ characteristic of epic theatre cultivates a spectator who is actively encouraged to participate in the meaning-making process which is generated, but not circumscribed directly by, the various situations which are presented by the play. Within this schema, the audience retains a critical distance between themselves and the action on stage. The spectator is not drawn unconsciously (via character identification) into a fictional world, but is situated outside as an observer who brings his or her critical faculties to bear on the scenarios presented by the play. "The essential point", Brecht claims, is that epic theatre "appeals less to the feelings than to the spectator's reason. Instead of sharing an experience the spectator must come to grips with things".⁶⁸

In Benjamin's writings on Brecht, this coming "to grips with things"

No. 55, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann/Christoph Götde/Henri Lonitz, Marbach am Neckar: Deutsche Schillergesellschaft 1990, pp. 190-198.

65. "What is Epic Theatre?" (Second Version), in: Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, p. 21.

66. Bertolt Brecht: "The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre", in: *Brecht on Theatre*, pp. 37-38.

67. *Ibid.*, p. 37.

68. Brecht: "The Epic Theatre and its Difficulties", in: *Brecht on Theatre*, p. 23.

is framed very much within the terms employed in Benjamin's writings on history – terms which, transposed to a discussion of film, provide us with a clearer sense of the stakes of his analysis of the radical possibilities of the medium. In language remarkably reminiscent of that employed in both "Convolute N" and "On the Concept of History", Benjamin claims that the significance of epic theatre lies in its capacity to "expose the present".⁶⁹ "Epic theatre", he states, "makes life spurt up high from the bed of time and, for an instant, hover iridescent in empty space".⁷⁰ The situation it reveals (as if "by lightening") is "the dialectic at a standstill"⁷¹; a phrase which Benjamin employs in his writings on history to refer to those moments of "*Jetztzeit*" ("now time") which – in their disruption of the false image of historical continuity propagated by historicism – open up a space within which one is able to reconceive the possibilities of both the past and the present.⁷²

In Benjamin's writings on Brecht, it is the "interruption of the action" characteristic of epic theatre which encourages the audience to "treat elements of reality as if they were an experimental set-up"⁷³ – an idea which he explores via an analysis of the image of history presented by epic theatre. The epic dramatist, Benjamin writes,

will tend to emphasize not the great decisions which lie along the main line of history but the incommensurable and the singular. 'It can happen this way, but it can also happen quite a different way' – that is the fundamental attitude of one who writes for epic theatre. His relation to his story is like that of a ballet teacher to his pupil. His first aim is to loosen her joints to the very limits of the possible.⁷⁴

Transposing these ideas to film, one could say that it is the loose, fragmentary structure of a film practice that is not organised around the creation of a sense of autonomy and unity which (in a similar vein to Benjamin's delineation of the mode of spectatorship cultivated by epic theatre) prompts the viewer to draw upon his or her own experience and imagination in an attempt to engage with the materials on screen.⁷⁵ In

69. Benjamin: "The Author as Producer", p. 100.

70. Benjamin: "What is Epic Theatre?" (First Version), in: Understanding Brecht, p. 13.

71. Ibid., pp. 12-13.

72. See, for example, [N2a,3], The Arcades Project, p. 462.

73. "The Author as Producer", p. 99.

74. "What is Epic Theatre?" (First Version), pp. 7-8.

75. In "What is Epic Theatre?" (Second Version), Benjamin notes that "the

contrast, however, to the image of the distant, reasoning spectator outlined by Brecht (the contours of which resemble Benjamin's negative delineation of the art critic), the mode of spectatorship cultivated by the film practice for which Benjamin argues is more akin to the animistic, innervating mode of perception which – in Benjamin's writings on Baudelaire, hashish, and mimesis – is associated with the rejuvenation of auratic experience. Indeed, in a similar vein to his analysis of the extent to which the intoxicated gaze of the hashish eater animates face-like qualities inherent within objects and spaces, Benjamin argues that the image spaces opened up by the camera reveal to the spectator "*physiognomic* aspects, image worlds, which dwell in the smallest things"⁷⁶ – the presence of which "assure us of a vast and unsuspected field of action [*Spielraum*]"⁷⁷

As Hansen has argued, it is this emphasis on film's capacity to open up a "vast and unsuspected *Spielraum*" (or "space of play") which ties Benjamin's analysis of the possibilities of the medium to "the radical unleashing of play" cultivated by proletarian children's theatre and, more specifically, to his analysis of the connection between "receptive innervation" and creativity exhibited in the activities of children.⁷⁸ Indeed, expanding on this idea, one could say (within the terms of the framework set out by Benjamin in the "Work of Art" essay) that, in a similar vein to his analysis of the role of the children's leader, the task of the filmmaker is not to dictate, nor circumscribe the spectator's behaviour, but rather to encourage him or her to engage creatively with the images on screen.

As Kracauer states in an important passage in his 1927 essay on photography which anticipates Benjamin's analysis of the significance of the fragmented, "piecemeal" organisation of film, the basis for such a mode of spectatorship can only be realised "whenever film combines parts and segments to create strange constructs". In a passage reminiscent of the shake-up to the "natural order" of things precipitated by the damage sustained by the natural history museum, Kracauer argues that "the game film plays with the pieces of disjointed nature is reminiscent of *dreams* in which the fragments of daily life become jumbled". "This

events shown on stage [...] must be of such a kind that they may, at certain decisive points, be checked by the audience against its own experience". pp. 15-16.

76. "Little History of Photography", p. 512. My emphasis.

77. "Work of Art", p. 265.

78. Miriam Hansen: "Room-for-Play: Benjamin's Gamble with Cinema", October, No. 35 (Summer, 2004), p. 7.

game", Kracauer states, "shows that the valid organization of things remains unknown".⁷⁹

For Benjamin (and, indeed, for Kracauer), the task of a political film practice is not to provide the audience with an image of a better world. As Benjamin states in his analysis of proletarian children's theatre, "what is truly revolutionary is not the propaganda of ideas, which leads here and there to impracticable actions and which vanishes in a puff of smoke upon the first sober reflection at the theatre exit".⁸⁰ Rather, what is revolutionary is the extent to which the "unsevered connection between perception and [creative] action"⁸¹ exhibited in children's play can be rejuvenated by a film practice which actively encourages the audience to draw on their own imagination and experience in an attempt to reconceive the possibilities of the present.

In keeping with Benjamin's analysis of the significance of the breakdown between art and reality enacted by the work of the Dadaists, the role of a political film practice is to put the spectator back *in touch* with his/her everyday environment and, in doing so, to contribute to the overcoming of the diminution in the capacity for auratic experience that Benjamin associates with modernity.

79. Siegfried Kracauer: "Photography", in: *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, pp. 62-63.

80. Benjamin: "Program for a Proletarian Children's Theatre", in: *Selected Writings*, Vol. 2, p. 206.

81. Susan Buck-Morss: *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: The MIT Press 1995, p. 263.

