

This essay considers Walter Benjamin's concept of aura and reproduction in his essay "The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction".

Aura

As the surrealists project an uncanny animation onto the world, the world, as it were, gazes back upon them, and this gaze also oscillates between the two registers of the benevolent and the castrative, an oscillation that produces different subjective effects and spatial apprehensions. Here I want briefly to think these two types of gazes, effects, and spaces in terms of two concepts that, bound up with the uncanny, are also thought either at the time of surrealism or in its milieu: the Benjamin concept of aura and the Freudian concept of anxiety.

The connection between anxiety and the uncanny is clear: the first is one effect of the second.¹ Aura and the uncanny are also associated, for just as the uncanny involves the return of a familiar thing made strange through repression, so aura also concerns "a strange web of space and time: the unique appearance of a distance, however close at hand."² In some sense, then, aura and anxiety share a point of origin or intersection in the uncanny, a point developed in surrealism.

Freud posed at least two different conceptions of anxiety. He first saw anxiety in almost physiological terms as a discharge of sexual tension by the ego. However, in *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* (1926) he posted the ego as the source of anxiety. Here anxiety becomes a homeopathic signal of danger, a repetition of a past trauma in a mitigated mnemonic form deployed by the ego to ward away expected trauma or at last to gird for it.³

Auratic experiences are no less cultivated in surrealism. The similarity of aura as "a unique manifestation of distance" to the uncanny as a return of the repressed, a similarity that suggests in turn that this auratic distance is temporal, i.e. that it involves the perception of a "forgotten human dimension."⁴ For Benjamin this dimension seems to encompass at least three registers. One is natural: the aura of an empathic moment of human connection to material things, which Benjamin evokes through images of a hand that traces the line of a mountain range and a recumbent body that receives the shadow of a twig.⁵ The surrealists were sensitive to this aura of found natural objects, which they often exhibited. Another register is cultural and historical: the aura not only of cultic works of art but also of artisanal objects where the "traces of the practiced hand" are still evident. This aura is especially active in the surrealist interest in the outmoded. Finally, the third register, which invests the other

two with psychic intensity, is subjective: the aura of the memory of a primal relationship to the body, to the maternal body – a relationship evoked in *The Invisible Object* but also in all the childhood images that so attracted the surrealists. In surrealism as in Benjamin all three registers are allegorically interwoven. Benjamin articulates aura in relation to Marxian and Freudian conceptions of fetishism. Its definition as an empathic “transposition” of a human rapport to relationship with an object inverts the definition of commodity fetishism as a perverse confusion of the human and the thing, a reification of producers and a personification of products – as if aura were the magical antidote to such fetishism.

Reproductions

Starting with Duchamp’s experiments with the ready-mades, of which *Fountain* is the best known example, we see a consistent effort to explore the effects that mechanical reproduction has on the definition of the work of art. This work deliberately stage the challenge that the reproducibility of objects poses to the work of art, since a new work is created by reactivating the conceptual interval between the original and the reproduction.



Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain*, 1917.

Considered as a faucet, the significance of *Fountain* may be found in its active state as an artistic, erotic, and punning machine. As suggested earlier, the interest of this work is not manifest in its result – its objective character – but rather in the differences produced through the impressions or imprints of the object’s reproduction. *Fountain* is, therefore, an experiment rather than a product, whose interest is purely speculative, insofar as it explores and transforms the boundaries defining a work of art. As an art object, *Fountain* provisionally hovers at the limits of art and non-art; its existence is purely conditional. The referential meaning of art, as a copy of nature according to good taste, is here eroded through reproduction; a new concept of value emerges through circulation and consumption. The artistic value of *Fountain* in the age of mechanical reproduction is inseparable from this effort to conceive value in a dynamic, rather than static sense. The erosion of the concept of value as an inherent property of a work of art is transformed by examining the expenditure of value through its circulation and reproduction.

Considering the significance of the ready-mades, Arthur Danto reminds us that “Ducamp did not merely raise the question What is Art? but rather Why is something a work of art when something exactly like it is not?”⁶ Danto’s reformulation of the classical question “What is Art?” displaces the locus of value from a generic question about art to a specific inquiry about its meaning for the modern period. In the age of mechanical reproduction art can no longer be defined by presuming an essential relation between the uniqueness of objects and the individuality of the producers.⁷ The technological reproduction of objects disrupts the referential relation of the artist and the work, as well as a valuative inscription of objects as art objects. In doing so it redefines the notion of value as no longer inherent to the actual production of an object, but rather, as generated through its technical and social reproduction.

Walter Benjamin observes the danger that the work of art incurs in the age of mechanical reproduction.⁸ For Benjamin, the “uniqueness of a work of art is inseparable from being embedded in the fabric of tradition.”⁹ His statement affirms the cult value of art as defined by the “contextual integration of art in tradition.” By using a commercial print of a masterpiece, artist (e.g. Duchamp) does in fact remove it from the painterly tradition, since the plurality of the reproduction challenges the uniqueness and originality of the work. This gesture, however, merely reiterates the manner in which works of art are removed from their original location in order to be amassed under the institutional authority of the museum. The decontextualization that takes place through the reproduction of a work of art is but the extension of the decontextualization that the museum performs on works of art as it makes them readily accessible for viewing by a mass public.

As Benjamin points out, in the modern age the “exhibition value” of the work supersedes the “cult value” of art. Insofar as artistic production begins with ceremonial objects, the value of these objects is defined by their “existence, not their being on view.”¹⁰ The fact, however, that in a museum all objects are displayed equally tends already to destroy the specificity of particular works of art. As we observe, the act of viewing involves an interchange between the spectator and the work that is minimized by the conditions of display of the object. In the context of the museum where everything is on display, the determines the act of seeing. The regard of the public becomes “glacial,” to the extent that admiration of a work of art supplants its visibility, obviating the conventions and criteria that define it.¹¹ The eyes of the spectator become “glazed,” as “seeing” in this context means “forgetting,” Public regard is conceived of in terms of an exchange whose value is described by Duchamp through the notion of the “infrathin,” which he compares to an “allegory of forgetting”. What

is being forgotten in the popularization of art is the fact that value is neither acquired nor inherited; rather, value belongs to the possibility of an exchange between the spectator and the work.

By 1922, the success of photography as a medium of mechanical reproduction was already challenged by the emergence of other media, such as cinema. Photography's "fidelity" and "originality" as artistic reproduction, however, will eventually face the greater challenge of its mass reproduction and circulation in print¹². Thus, while photography calls into question the autonomy of painting as a medium for artistic reproduction, it may fall victim to the reproductive technology that first made it possible.

Conclusions

Walter Benjamin's essay, "The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction", tells us that art is not something unchanging. Art is not pure idea. It is closely linked with the material environment. According to Benjamin, the idea of original art is linked to reproduction by hand. When people can only make reproduction by hand, it is possible to distinguish between the original and the reproduction. But when reproduction is made by machines, the distinction becomes unclear.

More important, mechanical reproduction is now new art forms like cinema and photography works. It is meaningless to distinguish between the original and the reproduction in cinema and photography. What we see in cinema and photography are all reproduction. There is no place for original.

So mechanical reproduction has done away with the idea of original. But it is not just destructive. With mechanical reproduction we can see more of the reality. Like photography, it reveals details that we will not normally see. In cinema, reality can be turned upside down. Benjamin points out that for cinema, it is not necessary to film right at the very beginning. We can start with the end or with the middle. The final editing is all that matters. This means that art and reality can be totally different.

Art is not something unchanging. Art does not need to obey or follow reality. With art, we can freely invent. But our invention does not come out of the blue. It is closely linked with our materials situation. To understand art, we must also understand our material situation.

Notes

- ¹ Freud, "The Uncanny", in *Studies in Parapsychology*, (Philip Rieff, New York, 1963) pp.47
- ² Walter Benjamin, "A Short History of Photography", (New Haven, 1980) pp.209
- ³ Samuel Weber, "The Legend of Freud" (Minneapolis, 1982), pp.48-60
- ⁴ Hansen, "Benjamin, Cinema and Experience."
- ⁵ Walter Benjamin, "A Short History of Photography," pp.209
- ⁶ Arthur Danto, "The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art" (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp.14-15
- ⁷ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction", pp.217-242
- ⁸ That which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of work of art ... the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of the tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence.
- ⁹ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction", pp.223
- ¹⁰ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction", pp.224-225
- ¹¹ As Pierre Bourdieu points out, the consecration of art objects in the confines of the museum corresponds to both their economic and visual "neutralization"; see *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), pp.273
- ¹² The affinity between photographic and printed media, their common reliance on printing techniques as well as on the increased proliferation of photographic work in print, threatens the artistic autonomy of photography.