

Benjamin's aesthetics

- Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility' (1936)
- Around 1900, technological reproduction not only had reached a standard that permitted it to reproduce all known works of art, profoundly modifying their effect, but it also had captured a place of its own among the artistic processes. In gauging this standard, we would do well to study the impact which its two different manifestations – the reproduction of artworks and the art of film – are having on art in its traditional form. (§2¶2/§1¶2)
- By replicating the work many times over, it substitutes a mass existence for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to reach the recipient in his or her own situation, it actualizes that which is reproduced. (§3¶4/§2¶4)
- These two processes lead to a massive upheaval in the domain of objects handed down from the past – a shattering of tradition which is the reverse side of the present crisis and renewal of humanity. (§3¶4/§2¶4)
- only a redeemed mankind is granted the fullness of its past – which is to say, only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its moments ('On the Concept of History', #3)
- what withers in the technical reproducibility of the work of art is the latter's aura (§3¶4/§2¶4)
- What, then, is the aura? A strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition [*Erscheinung*] 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.' (§4¶2/§3¶2)
- The uniqueness of the work of art is identical to its embeddedness in the context of tradition. Of course, this tradition itself is thoroughly alive and extremely changeable. An ancient statue of Venus, for instance, existed in a traditional context for the Greeks (who made it an object of worship) that was different from the context in which it existed for medieval clerics (who viewed it as a sinister idol). But what was equally evident to both was its uniqueness – that is, its aura. Originally, the embeddedness of an artwork in the context of tradition found expression in a cult. As we know, the earliest artworks originated in the service of rituals – first magical, then religious. And it is highly significant that the artwork's auratic mode of existence is never entirely severed from its ritual function. In other words: the unique value of the "authentic" work of art always has its basis in ritual. This ritualistic basis, however mediated it may be, is still recognizable as secularized ritual in even the most profane forms of the cult of beauty. The secular worship of beauty, which developed during the Renaissance and prevailed for three centuries, clearly displayed that ritualistic basis in its subsequent decline and in the first severe crisis which befell it. For when, with the advent of the first truly revolutionary means of reproduction (namely photography, which emerged at the same time as socialism), art felt the approach of that crisis which a century later has become unmistakable, it reacted with the doctrine of *l'art pour l'art* – that is, with a theology of art. (§5¶1/§4¶1)
- for the first time in world history, technological reproducibility emancipates the work of art from its parasitic subservience to ritual [...] 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 (§5¶2/§4¶2)
- in the case of the masses, the artwork is seen as a means of entertainment (§18¶1s5/ - [but cf. §15¶1 quoting Duhamel])
- The logical outcome of fascism is an aestheticizing of political life. (§19¶1/E¶1)

- Such is the aestheticizing of politics as practiced by fascism. Communism replies by politicizing art. (§19¶4/E¶4)
- Nothing shows more graphically that art has escaped the realm of “beautiful semblance”, which for so long was regarded as the only sphere in which it could thrive (§11¶2/§9¶2)
- The significance of beautiful semblance [*schönen Scheins*] is rooted in the age of auratic perception that is now coming to an end. The aesthetic theory of that era was most fully articulated by Hegel, for whom beauty is “the appearance of spirit in its immediate ... sensuous form, created by the spirit as the form adequate to itself” [...] Goethe’s work is still imbued with beautiful semblance as an auratic reality. [...] “The beautiful is neither the veil nor the veiled object but rather the object in its veil”; this is the quintessence of Goethe’s view of art, and that of antiquity. The decline of this view makes it doubly urgent that we look back at its origin. This lies in mimesis as the primal phenomenon of all artistic activity. The mime presents what he mimes merely as semblance. And the oldest form of imitation had only a single material to work with: the body of the mime himself. Dance and language, gestures of body and lips, are the earliest manifestations of mimesis. – The mime presents his subject as a semblance. One could also say that he plays his subject. Thus we encounter the polarity informing mimesis. In mimesis, tightly interfolded like cotyledons [*Keimblätter*], slumber the two aspects of art: semblance [*Schein*] and play [*Spiel*]. Of course, this polarity can interest the dialectician only if it has a historical role. And that is, in fact, the case. This role is determined by the world-historical conflict between the first and second technologies. Semblance is the most abstract – but therefore the most ubiquitous – schema of all the magic procedures of the first technology, whereas play is the inexhaustible reservoir of all the experimenting of the second. Neither the concept of semblance nor that of play is foreign to traditional aesthetics; and to the extent that the two concepts of cult value and exhibition value are latent in the other pair of concepts at issue here, they say nothing new. But this abruptly changes as soon as these latter concepts lose their indifference toward history. They then lead to a practical insight – namely, that what is lost in the withering of semblance and the decay of the aura in works of art is matched by a huge gain in the scope for play [*Spiel-Raum*]. This space for play is widest in film. (§11¶2n2/-)
- Elements of play in modern art: futurism, atonal music, poesie pure, detective novel, film (from Benjamin’s drafts)
- On the one hand, film furthers insight into the necessities governing our lives by its use of close-ups, by its accentuation of hidden details in familiar objects, and by its exploration of commonplace milieux through the ingenious guidance of the camera; on the other hand, it manages to assure us of a vast and unsuspected space for play [*Spielraum*]. (§16¶1/§13¶2, tr. amended)
- Our bars and city streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories seemed to close relentlessly around us. Then came film and exploded this prison-world with the dynamite of the split second, so that now we can set off calmly on journeys of adventure among its far-flung debris. With the close-up, space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended. And just as enlargement not merely clarifies what we see indistinctly “in any case”, but brings to light entirely new structures of matter, slow motion not only reveals familiar aspects of movements, but discloses quite unknown aspects within them - aspects “which do not appear as the retarding of natural movements but have a curious gliding, floating character of their own” [Rudolf Arnheim]. [...] We are familiar with the movement of picking up a cigarette lighter or a spoon, but 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. (§16¶2/§13¶3)