

# Mechanical Reproduction, “Wise One,” Aura, Politics

Walter Cummins

*Distraction and concentration form polar opposites which may be stated as follows:  
A man who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it. ... In contrast,  
the distracted mass absorbs the work of art.*

— Walter Benjamin, as translated by Harry Zohn

The other day when I asked Alexa on an Amazon Echo to play John Coltrane’s “Wise One” and, a split second later, when McCoy Tyner’s piano chords filled the room, two references came to mind—Walter Benjamin’s 1935 essay on the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction (“Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit”) and a 1999 TV commercial for Quest broadband services now tagged on YouTube as “Every Movie.” In that thirty-second scene, a bedraggled traveler appears in the front office of Roy’s Motel, seemingly in the middle of nowhere. When he asks about in-room entertainment, the bored young woman behind the counter looks up from her book and says, “We’ve got every movie ever made in every language, day and night.”

What would Walter Benjamin say about such phenomena more than eight-five years after he wrote his essay? In 1999 the every-movie concept sounded like a futuristic fantasy. Today I can access, if not every, millions of songs and pieces of music with a spoken request to a round black disk. And via Wi-Fi, my iPad or iPhone can bring up, if not every, thousands of movies and TV shows in many languages. Quest, by the way, no longer exists. After steep financial losses, it merged with a company called Century Link in 2011. Quest is gone and forgotten. Meanwhile, more and more reproduced music and video are added to cyberspace every hour, including obsolete TV commercials.

In contrast, Benjamin’s then-modern examples of mechanical reproduction were movies, photographs, and photograph recordings. His brief historical overview of techniques to reproduce art started with founding and stamping for objects such as bronzes and coins, followed by woodblocks for graphic art, and then print and lithography. Nothing immediately accessible at the press of a key or a voice command. No instant gratification in 1935. Now we live in an age of digital immediacy.

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**A**t the heart of the reproduction problem for Benjamin is loss of the art object's authenticity. He writes (in Harry Zohn's translation):

One might generalize by saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced. These two processes lead to a tremendous shattering of tradition which is the obverse of the contemporary crisis and renewal of mankind.<sup>1</sup>

The tradition shattered in the 1930s was shattered by the mass movements of Nazism and Soviet Communism, leading to "the liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage." He singles out film as the "most powerful agent" of this destructiveness, probably because it was the most prevalent form of mass art at the time of his essay.

A generation of American intellectuals was profoundly influenced by what Benjamin—and John Berger, Susan Sontag, et al., after him—had to say about art in the age of mechanical reproduction. Berger, for example, argued that modern reproduction destroyed the aesthetic, cultural, and political authority of art. Because images "have become ephemeral, ubiquitous, insubstantial, available, valueless, free," they lack the aura of the original work of art.

At stake for Benjamin, beyond the loss of artistic authority, is the role of reproduced art in the social and political destruction of his time. In his pre-World War II linking of politics and the manipulation of reproduced art, Benjamin concludes his essay by lamenting that the aesthetics of war supply "the artistic gratification of a sense perception that has been changed by technology." In his pessimism, he argues that mankind's "self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order."

I'd like to think that today's simulations of violent computer games, dystopian fiction, and apocalyptic videos satisfy the masses' inclinations to be entertained by the glamorous thrill of warfare. And thus, for the great majority, there's no entertainment value in, say, the news footage of bombings and chemical warfare in Syria.

While not violent, current political movements in much of the world glorify another form of destructiveness. Eight decades after Benjamin we face mass movements—arising both from the spontaneous anger of the disaffected and from their manipulations by some with authoritarian agendas of power and greed—that threaten the tradition of liberal democracy and the related notions of truth and social justice. Any information, no matter

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<sup>1</sup> That is, the devaluing of tradition bodes cultural and political ruin.

how authenticated, that conflicts with the delusions and goals of those in power is dismissed as “fake” news.

Of course, those in power have always tried to control news and information, and gullibility to propaganda seems a fact of human nature. What’s different in the twentieth-first century is the exponential growth in the scale of disrupted and corrupted information because of the massive reproduction made possible by digital outlets. Thus, for example, the Russian hacking of the 2016 U.S. election and Cambridge Analytica stealing the Facebook data of millions. Never before have people publicly exposed so much of their personal lives in their seduction by the instant gratifications of digital reproduction, and never before have forces that wish to control them been able to undermine their beliefs and choices so easily.

Benjamin claims that there is a fundamental distinction between the times before and after mechanical reproduction. Before, he argues, art realized its “authentic” value through association with ritual, whether magic, spiritual, or secular (as in the art for art’s sake cult of “beauty”). Mechanical reproduction, however, divorces art from ritual and moves it to the sphere of politics, a sphere Benjamin finds threatening: “But the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice—politics.”

What lies behind this differentiation of ritual and politics and, by implication, of the authentic and the inauthentic? How could a work like Beethoven’s Eroica symphony, which was dedicated to Napoleon, not be political and still be an authentic work of art? One could argue that all artistic messages have socio-political overtones, as a magnificent cathedral goes beyond architectural beauty by supporting a set of religious beliefs. Benjamin, however, would consider the cathedral, as a unique, ritual-based work of art, much more worthy and more authentic than the then-current movies he attacks in his essay. And perhaps the politics of Beethoven’s symphony can be skipped over on the grounds that he was more interested in the aesthetic integrity of the work than in winning favor with a powerful leader or manipulating the masses? Or because of the work’s artistic complexity, which demands engagement and commitment from the listener.

It seems Benjamin is conflating the political with the commercial; for him the problem is art produced primary to appeal to and be bought by a mass audience though the marketing of its many reproductions. Such art must be easy to grasp. “The mass is a matrix from which all traditional behavior toward works of art issues today in a new form. Quantity has been transmuted into quality. The greatly increased mass of participants has produced a change in the mode of participation.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere he writes: “During long periods of history, the mode of human sense perception changes with humanity’s entire mode of existence. The manner in which human sense perception is organized, the medium in which it is accomplished, is determined not only by nature but by historical circumstances as well.”

The simplified appeal to a wide audience allows for political manipulation because the participation of the audience in such art is radically different from that called for by “authentic” art. While the Beethoven symphony demands concentration, reproduced art offers distraction. “Distraction and concentration form polar opposites . . . A man who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it. . . . In contrast, the distracted mass absorbs the work of art.”

**B**enjamin’s argument in his essay also leads me to think of the critic Dwight MacDonald and his essay, “A Theory of Mass Culture,” written in 1953, almost two decades after Benjamin. MacDonald makes distinctions between High Culture, Mass Culture, and Middlebrow Culture.

High Culture would be typified by a Beethoven symphony. Mass culture, in contrast, he writes, “is imposed from above. It is fabricated by technicians hired by business; its audiences are passive consumers, their participation limited to the choice between buying and not buying. The Lords of *kitsch*, in short, exploit the cultural needs of the masses in order to make a profit and/or to maintain their class rule—in Communist countries, only the second purpose obtains.” His passive consumers are the distracted mass. Middlebrow Culture waters down the High with a touch of the Mass: “There is nothing more vulgar than sophisticated kitsch.”

Although MacDonald does not mention the Benjamin essay, he attributes the rise of Mass Culture to the technology behind mechanical reproduction: “Business enterprise found a profitable market in the cultural demands of the newly awakened [since the early 1800s] masses, and the advance of technology made possible the cheap production of books, periodicals, pictures, music, and furniture, in sufficient quantities to satisfy this market. Modern technology also created new media such as the movies and television which are specially well adapted to mass manufacture and distribution.”

MacDonald would share Benjamin’s diagnosis that the result of massive reproduction is “the contemporary decay of the aura.” According to Benjamin, this is a product of

two circumstances, both of which are related to the increasing significance of the masses in contemporary life. Namely, the desire of contemporary masses to bring things “closer” spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction.

Inseparable from the abandonment of aura is the “sense of the universal equality of things.” Here, Benjamin is anticipating postmodernism and its undermining of the notion of the real, as in the French social critic Jean Baudrillard’s theory of simulacrum, in which there is no longer any distinction between reality and its representation. Baudrillard, however, would consider Benjamin’s analysis obsolete because it relies on what he calls the second

order of simulacra, which took place with the industrial revolution of the nineteenth century, when mass production and the ability to create copies broke down the distinctions between the image and the representation. We now, Baudrillard claims, live in the third order of simulacra, where the representation *precedes* and *determines* the real; it becomes a substitute rather than a copy.

When I was a boy going to Saturday matinee Westerns, my cartoon watching was limited to one a week—Bugs or Porky or Donald. It was a special treat for my prepubescent self. Now, if I chose (and I don't), I could turn on the Cartoon Network and find myself glutted with animation 24/7.

And in 1960, when, instead of talking to Alexa, I was sitting at a table in the smoke-filled Five Spot as John Coltrane performed “Wise One” live, I was enveloped by a unique event—seeing the tensions in Coltrane’s face, the angle of his horn, the movements of his fingers. Not just being in the Five Spot; experiencing a version of “Wise One” unlike any performance before and after. Alexa brings up just one performance of many and locks it in an unchanging digital code. Yet, all I have to do is ask, any time, day or night. Convenience at the price of aura? Beyond that, does the relentless availability invite distraction?

Ultimately, I find myself less convinced by Benjamin’s—and MacDonald’s—arguments that reproductions undermine and ultimately debase the integrity of art than I do by the political aspects of Benjamin’s analysis.

MacDonald today comes across as a snob, the firm distinctions he makes are obsolete in an age in which the best products of so-called popular culture are considered works of art; where jazz is played at New York’s home for classical music, Lincoln Center; where artists themselves have taken over the technology of mechanical reproduction for their own creative purposes. And, while I can hear a contemporary performance of Beethoven’s Eroica in a concert hall, my only access to the music of the late John Coltrane is through a recording.

What I consider more political than artistic is the blurring of entertainment, news, and politics that is exacerbated by the plethora of digital reproduction techniques. The sad epitome of this trend in 2018 may be found in the U.S. President, a one-time TV personality who is obsessed with the simulacra of “Fox and Friends,” who confuses governing with contesting in a game show, who measures success by audience size, and who appears to value applause over substance. Rather than a unique phenomenon, Trump may be considered the epitome of a society that values celebrity and entertainment, i.e., distraction, over substance.

Benjamin’s analysis does explain how Trump is abetted by our immersion in a realm of reproduction. For Benjamin, those representations are apprehended according to current ideology rather than an independent aesthetic or intellectual standard.

He considers politics the source of such ideology: As a result, the relationship to a work of art for those he calls “the masses”—you and me—is transformed from one of concentration to distraction. Such distraction is a form of “covert control.” When the masses face a “task” they would rather avoid, reproduced art will provide an escape. Writing in 1935, Benjamin put his emphasis on movies as the art form that caters to our need for distraction. Today he might accuse the panoply of digital outlets in front of our eyes or plugged into our ears.

For those today who have not fallen prey to political propaganda, the ease of indulging in such distractions may make them accomplices in the undermining of liberal democracy, humanism, and evidence-based decision-making. The ubiquitous replications of video, music, and the visual provide seductive distractions. Some ignore all but the most blatant headlines. Others lose themselves consuming media that parrots what they already believe.

Our mechanical-digital technology makes it easier than ever for wealthy governments, corporations, and individuals to control masses of people. News of Russian hacking and of Cambridge Analytica’s manipulations have made many want to fight back. But are we indeed able to resist the power of methods and forces we may not even know exist and that seek to distract us into obliviousness?

John Coltrane’s “Wise One” is a work of beauty. Would that a simple request would produce wise ones to save us from the manipulating despots and would-be despots.

## Sources

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