

lewis levenberg

Response Paper 1

Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility*

Benjamin describes the movement of an art-object of analysis from a singular, unified, material structure and form, whose meaning depends (as a "parasite") upon the rituals that surround its production and reception. The conditions of that artwork's meaning, in other words, at first assume magical values. Before the work of art can even be recognized as such, its structure and form supercede and subsume its content - the cultural object in question remains an ethereal, ephemeral original, almost a Platonic ideal.

Take, for example, oral literature, and the impossibility of its materializing. The work of art here, so to speak, describes a relationship between speaker(s) and listener(s); the same holds for acted performances. Even if a particular story or play can be summarized, its exact form depends on (and yet also determines) the mystical *jeitzeit*, the "here and now," of the work - that is, its haecceity in history.

Only ritual, in these (pro-filmic, so to speak) cases, can standardize a performance. And so, with the emergence of technologies of recording such as writing or drawing, the work of art can assume a more stable, if less magical, value. The written word and the visual representation do not, however, part with ritual altogether; Benjamin describes their value as cultic in this stage, rather than magical. That is, the appearance of a discrete work of art necessitates the sudden revelation of its social and economic conditions of meaning.

It is far easier, in other words, to "see" who possesses a physical artifact, than it is to determine who controls a particular story-telling. Thus, the work's historicity, its haecceity, becomes easier to establish - and so does its singularity and unity of form - and the "original" now possesses a value in and of itself. For example, a particular painting or manuscript, with its definite and measurable dimensions and medium, can be thought to occupy a particular place at any given moment. Thus, the work of art here describes a relationship between producer, object, and receiver, rather than a relation solely among humans. However, the "visibility" of these relationships soon disappears within the familiarity of the rituals used to control it: architectural spaces, religious ceremonies, economic privileges, and so on, all obscure the singularity of the analog, even while its singularity determines their own power.

Thus, Benjamin celebrates the potential that reproductive technologies hold, to reveal once more the changing cultural conditions of an artwork's meaning. As he argues, they "emancipate the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual," both by fragmenting the stability and unity of any "original" artwork, and by destabilizing the relationships and value-forms of cultic control over that "original." As copies of a given artwork proliferate, such as printed words or filmed images and actions, the ability to ascribe even meaning to an original deteriorates. Every work of art in this age becomes a reproduction, a dissemination, an exhibition to the masses - and so their value and meaning depend upon that relationship of the reproduction to the masses.

This change, then, changes the work of art from a measurable, singular, analog object into an indeterminate, variable set of conditions, radically contingent for its form and meaning upon the

similitude in content among its various versions. The most constantly perceptible content emerges as the "original" or "official" version of its eventual historicity. In other words, the very editing and revising that destroys the unity of any pro-filmic event also contributes to the received meaning of a film, modifying even while it canonizes the actions that it records.

Similarly, photography changes the possible conditions of expression for painting, leading to abstraction by destroying its ability to represent the world. As writing becomes print, the unique and irreplaceable manuscript means (and is worth) less compared to the content of a widely distributed paper; the cult value in all these objects falls in relation to their exhibition value. At the same time, the masses bring closer a version of an art-object, and with each approach, subsume and diminish its aura.

So again, the mode of production of these cultural objects begins to obscure its own conditions and relations of possibility. As the masses focus on the content of these reproductions, they forget the latter's forms. So Benjamin calls for politicized art, with all its values of exhibition and its material of copies, as the progressive solution to the distraction of the masses from their ability to take control over these new and more distributed means of production.

And yet, the very obfuscation of the conditions of meaning, the institutional and infra-structural relations that make possible the reception of mass-mediated cultural objects, this same technological reproducibility of the work of art destroys that artwork's singularity and haecceity. What objects, then, could be called for? What analysis could prescribe the content of future works? Neither the attention, nor the engagement, nor the activity of the masses to or with or in artistic praxis has stopped a further shift in the structural conditions of that praxis. For now, the work of art faces not only its technological reproducibility, but the dominance of its remix-ability.

The work of art in the age of its digital remixing calls for an extension of Benjamin's analysis. Such an extension and modification has been taken up by others, and this response offers only a schematic overview. First, the historical relationships that surround, determine, and are determined by cultural objects lead to a multiplicity of arts at work that approaches infinity: each object has no structure, yet all have a viral form. Second, the value of each work of art depends upon and determines its ability to contribute to a genealogy of remixes. Third, the haecceity of such objects describe their reproduction of themselves; all are originals with auras, since a copy copies itself and no copy needs the form of the original, only its constitutive code. Finally, the process of encoding and decoding a digitally mediated cultural object returns to the unrecorded performance.