

Walter Benjamin: *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*

Marxist theory that considers the modification of art due to economic change.

'For the masses, he forecast that reproducibility would be truly revolutionary.....photographically reproduced and widely distributed of once class-bound objects would become strategic elements in fomenting social change among the masses, who could witness at first hand the decline of privilege in their access to art reproduction' (Warner. p.309). It's interesting to consider his theory in retrospect, especially when we consider just how much digital technology has revolutionised photography.

Notes:

1. Art is valued for either its aura or exhibition value.
2. The aura is related to its 'ritualistic function' (Evans, J. & Hall, S. p.78) or cult value; religious or magical icons in places of worship, or stone age drawings in caves. 'One may assume that what mattered was their existence, not their being on view' (Evans, J. & Hall, S. p.76).
3. Mechanical reproduction takes away this aura when they are viewed out of place and context. However the cave drawings only 'became recognised as a work of art' (Evans, J. & Hall, S. p.77) long after they were created. Social change alters perception of art hence the exhibition value becomes of greater importance than its aura.
4. Mechanical reproduction liberates the work of art from its reliance on ritual.
5. Whilst art can be imitated (& has always been) mechanical reproduction 'represents something new' (Evans, J. & Hall, S. p.72).
6. It lacks the original's 'presence in time and space' (Evans, J. & Hall, S. p.73).
7. With mechanical reproduction the original and its 'process reproduction' are autonomous.
8. The distinct and unique character, or what Benjamin refers to as the 'aura' of a piece of art, is lost because of being easily and cost effectively reproduced. There is no original 'many people could own it, and, therefore, would not feel a

need to visit the original' (Warner. p.437).

9. Mary Warner Marien challenges Benjamin's theory stating 'far from destroying the aura, art reproductions served to increase it. Photographs of Leonardo Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* roused people to want to see the original' (Warner. p.309).

'Photography freed the hand of the most important artistic functions which henceforth devolves only upon looking into a lens' (Evans, J. & Hall, S. p.73).

'Technical reproduction can put the copy of the original into situations which would be out of reach for the original itself' (Evans, J. & Hall, S. p.74). This is what I've been experimenting with using my personal archival photographs and more contemporary images (see BoW in progress).

The camera reveals what can't be seen it 'captured a place of its own among the artistic processes' (Evans, J. & Hall, S. p.73)

1. Adjustable lens:angle of view alters perception.
2. Slow / long exposures capture something not visible to the eye.
3. Negatives/Raw files make unlimited reproduction possible, hence no authenticity.
4. The devalued aura of a work does not apply to a photograph.

Siegfried Kracauer:

I found it hard to find much about Kracauer, a contemporary of Benjamin, & resorted to Wikipedia.

He theorised that the role of memory was threatened by technological change, especially photography. Memory is non-linear, fragmented and not intentionally generated, the power of recall is unconscious due to the momentousness of an occasion . However, he states a photograph can only capture a specific period of time and is emotionless, it is an object and cannot generate a memory. He suggests that because of the linear nature of photographs they immortalise a person yet paradoxically an individual's character or personal qualities are lost. However, he

considers the role of photography advantageous for collective memory, such as recording the changing topography.

Whilst his theories are interesting I personally believe photographs can trigger a long forgotten memory, yet is that memory a truthful recollection? The vagaries of how a person, or event, are recalled are open to interpretation.

John Berger discuss the reproduction of art in the video below:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KQkGRg79MRs>

References/Bibliography

Chapter 6 "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" p.p 72--79 in
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