Patricia Anne EMISON

University of New Hampshire, Durham, New Hampshire, United States

ART, AURA, AND ADMIRATION IN THE AGE OF DIGITAL REPRODUCTION

Summary. Walter Benjamin famously argued that the mass public of the twentieth century would necessarily correlate with a newly politicized art. But the world has changed considerably since Benjamin's article was written, as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer already were assessing less than a decade later. It is the purpose of this article to examine how the aesthetics of the Frankfurt school, though frequently still invoked, have lost some of their immediate relevance. The anti-establishment phase of the 60s, compounded by a pronounced taste for irony, rendered aura and exhibition outmoded values, while on the other hand, more recently, price escalation in the art market and digitization have made certain of the Frankfurt school arguments more pertinent than ever. Taking as examples Goldsworthy and Kentridge, this essay argues that a deliberate loosening of the artist's control over both medium and reception displaces the warmed-over religious responses endorsed by Benjamin, positing instead increased intellectual agency on the part of viewers, whose identity as a mass public has become newly complicated.

Keywords: Benjamin, Horkheimer, Adorno, authenticity, aura, advertising, mass public, museums, film, Chaplin, Picasso, Goldsworthy, Kentridge, technology, irreverence.

*It is difficult
to get the news from poems
yet men die miserably every day
for lack
of what is found there.¹*

Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" ("Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit," 1936) is not only often cited, but remains central to thought about art in an industrialized world.² The present essay is an effort to describe ways in which that essay now belongs to history, for it suited the politics and technologies of its own time.

Benjamin treated photography as though that were the first major replicable art, long a sore point for those who care about the history of prints, not to mention the history of sculptural replicas, both relief and in the round. Admittedly his role was that of critic, not art historian, and he did make a brief reference to the pre-eminently German art of woodcut. But the lack of consideration for prints as mechanically reproduced (or, more precisely,

reproduced by mechanical means) was always a problem; indeed, as a modernist, he tended to be a bit blinkered when it came to the accomplishments of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century art. Hans Belting and others would later advocate that art began (i.e., aura faded) with the introduction of oil painting for private domestic display. Belting again didn't fully work the history of prints into his thesis,³ but he did issue an implicit challenge to the Benjaminian idea that modernism totally changed the framework for comprehending art. His work also fed into the growing stream of re-evaluation of the relative dominance of Italian over Northern Renaissance art. Belting's arguments reformulated and refined the longstanding idea that a thoroughly secular art was revived during the Renaissance (an idea Erwin Panofsky had resisted). These arguments implicitly challenged Benjamin's thesis that modernity was as different from earlier periods in its aesthetics as it was in the wielding of political power.

Exhibition (Benjamin's role for art post-aura), we can agree with Belting, goes back to the early modern period – not least to Dürer's extraordinary

Four Apostles in Munich, a large painting with an inscription, presented by him to the town hall in Nuremberg in 1526.⁴ The extended caption in script warned the town leaders not to be duped by the false reports circulating everywhere. An artist using an image (albeit of saints) to caution politicians, not to mention an artist writing a text to adjust and amplify the visual message: the presentation of the *Four Apostles* was a quietly revolutionary event in the early modern history of art. The painting was conceived as two wings without a center panel, a structure that implies a shift in the attitude expected of the now less dominated viewer.

Benjamin tended to elide secular or collectible art (i.e., art for exhibition) with reproducible art, as the opposite to the art of aura, understood as fundamentally religious. Historians of prints had long prioritized defending the “originality” of prints rather than exploring the consequences of their multiplicity, William Ivins being the notable exception with his book of 1953, *Prints and Visual Communication*, written when television was already complicating the idea of mass visual communication.⁵ This tendency had made it easier for Benjamin to overlook prints in the first place (woodcuts were the least likely to be claimed as original prints). Wood and Nagel’s contribution to the debate, *Anachronic Renaissance* (2010),⁶ examined complications in the concept of authenticity even within the confines of a religious tradition dependent upon receptivity to aura.

Meanwhile the digital world has raised the stakes on trying to comprehend the consequences of an imagery so conceptual and technological that it is no longer even remotely autograph, an imagery that can exist in many locations without hierarchical distinctions of worth and often without effective copyright protection.⁷ The rise of installations, especially interactive ones or performances, has been one strategy by which museums responded to this threat to their function as treasure houses, a threat compounded by issues of colonialism and accusations of white supremacy and privilege. (Many museums were founded to share privilege, but such philanthropy is no longer routinely judged to be virtuous, partly because charitable donations started in

the twentieth century to have tax benefits and partly because faith in any common canon disintegrated.)

Whereas modernists sometimes eschewed making art in support of political causes (abstraction was faulted by both fascists and communists; in repudiating Victorian painting in favor of significant form, Clive Bell pronounced succinctly, “To associate art with politics is always a mistake”),⁸ recently art has routinely been commissioned to complement science (especially, to publicize climate change threats) or valued for providing a forum for issues of race or gender. Disapproval of propaganda or otherwise political art, already partly abrogated by the Futurists, has been increasingly nullified, and artists (and museums with them) have recently been called upon to function as a tool to remedy problems as formidable as structural inequities in society. So much having changed, both in art and in the larger world, in what ways is it now incumbent upon us to revise how we think about Benjamin’s article, which for so long seemed conveniently to sum up so much? The mass public of the mid-1930s has a limited resemblance to the general public of the twenty-first century. The cultural memory of a primarily religious art has faded, and with it some of the bias against didacticism that was shared both by art for art’s sake advocates in the nineteenth century and many of the modernists with their quest for aesthetic purity.

Benjamin may have exaggerated the importance of religious mindsets for pre-modern apprehension of works of art, making only slight mention, for example, of secular architecture. What could be more frivolous than the Villa Rotonda, like a giant summer house pretending to be a temple, pretending to be stone. It sets the precedent for a succession of landscape follies, expressions not only of extravagance but also of exuberance. Benjamin conceived of architecture as an art apprehended by the masses, tactilely and optically, as he put it. Architecture he hails as the most permanent of the arts, but he finds that its pertinence to the history of art centers on how distractedly the masses apprehended it. Architecture is more lived with than contemplated, seen out of the corner of the eye. Benjamin’s ultimate villain is “reception in a state of distraction”; such distraction becomes a norm for the arts of mechanical

reproduction. Greek temples, it might be supposed, were early examples of works reproduced regularly using what technology was available, and it might be pointed out to Benjamin that each yet possesses particular graces. Benjamin presumably would have countered that the Greeks who used the temples barely took note of each building's particular qualities, so that their distracted observers anticipated the viewers in the age of mechanical reproduction even if the buildings themselves seem to avoid the potentially deadening aspects of replication. For Benjamin, whenever the same visual objects are encountered in varying contexts, their [political] value lies not in the objects but in their communal apprehension. And what alarmed Benjamin was that communal apprehension's lacking alertness and critical resource, i.e., being "absent-minded" or what we might now call being on auto-pilot. He focuses not on the function of the work but its reception, and architecture, in his view, has long anticipated the casual viewership of mass-produced imagery.

Benjamin took as premise the idea that an art which was founded upon ostensibly deceptive imitation was passé, that photography and moving pictures had become the relevant modalities for representing the world. For him, the crucial element is mechanization, though humans can be made to operate as machines and machines can sometimes be made to operate nearly as human.

But just as the artifice of photography has become increasingly evident, all the more so in an era of digital photography, so have visual artists since Benjamin's time found ways of reinventing the project of representation, coming in through the back door of advertising with Pop art and expanding thereafter.⁹ A new era of representation, enriched by pure abstraction and defining parameters deliberately outside the realm of cinema, occasionally tangent to photography, began with the artists who came to maturity after the Second World War. Benjamin's quest to invent a surrogate for authenticity in a secular world (i.e., the art made for exhibition and valued for its political effect) then found itself in a world in which the relationship of art to ideology was fundamentally different, the Cold War world and then the youth culture of the 60s. The whole

phenomenon of art as anti-establishment (rather than simply bohemian or anti-bourgeois) post-dates Benjamin, being largely a response to the nuclear arms race. Benjamin in the 30s had assumed that twentieth-century art would be drawn to the service of powerful institutions; his goal was to push the direction toward communism rather than fascism, whereas post-War art at least flirted with the idea of defying any establishment respectability. This impetus owed something to the rise of a gay aesthetic, but also to what used to be called the generation gap. Art had traditionally been geared to older people with more discretionary money to spend, but the youth culture defined by the music scene and later by the anti-War movement permeated the art market as well. It became part of the mythology of the art world that figures who in their later years sold works for millions had barely been able to give it away when they were starting. Keith Haring actually did give art away. The basic scenario of the struggling, yet later wealthy and lionized artist was not new, but the degree of later wealth and celebrity was. It made the early remoteness from market forces all the more valuable, a kind of artist virginity. This, in combination with the emphasis on youth and heterodox culture, gave the early work radical credentials, a new authenticity. What *Dr. Strangelove, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964) was to film, Jasper Johns had already been to paint and prints and Samuel Beckett to theater in the 50s. Art had become confrontational, even cheeky, in a way that Benjamin could scarcely have anticipated, its politics having grown newly subversive and indirect.

The combination of these two factors (politicization and high prices), in conjunction with diminished reverence toward art objects (Benjamin's prime theme), has produced the odd time for art in which we now find ourselves, a time in which no art aspires to be high (i.e., aristocratic), a very elite group of artists achieves wealthy celebrity while many struggle to make a living (both the money spent and gained being very concentrated), and in which the descendants of Benjamin's masses often have no respect for, and take no pride in, contemporary art. The mass public whose collective response

Benjamin planned to put to revolutionary use was described by Adorno and Horkheimer only a decade later as no longer even pretending to a role other than consumers of ephemera for the sake of the owners of capital.¹⁰

For Benjamin, excellence had been replaced by the concept of progressiveness. Progressive art made the public aware of itself as a political force. He did not foresee the degree to which film would become a purveyor of scenes of intimacy, although he did signal the issue of merchandizing violence. More aware of this, Adorno and Horkheimer lamented that the only criterion valid in the arts had been borrowed from fellow “industries,” namely, various other forms of capital investment, the prime criterion being the return on investment. Ideas were supplanted by technical flourishes (that which money could buy); films were made for a public conditioned to want what it was given.

Adorno and Horkheimer lamented the false laughter that the culture industry provides: “a laughing audience is a parody of humanity,” because such laughter derides others. It attacks happiness rather than signifying it; it is a form of self-assertion. For Adorno and Horkheimer, the public knows that this art manufactured for the sake of conformity is inauthentic, and yet it does not resist: “The double mistrust of traditional culture as ideology is combined with mistrust of industrialized culture as a swindle.” In a word, the viewer of art in the age of advertising is alienated. And whereas Benjamin had emphasized that the aesthetics of war, of explosions and speed such as the Futurists had admired, would be promoted in the post-aura world of distracted mass viewership, Adorno and Horkheimer were more attuned to the insidious effect of both eroticism and comedy: “uniform and sugary” romance and Donald Duck displace the Romantic poets Baudelaire and Hölderlin. Mechanical reproduction and beauty are antithetical; the viewer becomes “the eternal consumer” never satisfied, perpetually repressed. Art (i.e., advertising, since all art has been subsumed to advertising) signifies social power (*soziale Gewalt*). Members of the public are assimilated to sport team members, familiars without any true bond.

Adorno and Horkheimer now read as curiously attached to Romanticism and to the idea of beauty as a key attribute of art. Although they know Chaplin, their attack on laughter is based on Henri Bergson; they find little more in Chaplin than nonsense. What alarms them about Chaplin is that Chaplin succeeds without needing critical acclaim. His art, such as it is, succeeds by being popular. It renders the “aesthetic expert” a dinosaur in a world in which every aesthetic product is the same, in which style has ceased to have a history, in which the system guarantees its own success. The producers have become the arbiters of taste. Adorno and Horkheimer, like Benjamin, anticipate that the new world of art has no place for them, because the critic – any critic attempting to function in a system in which art has become an opiate – has been reduced to a mere vestige of elitism. The fundamental problem for cultural critics is not so much how art will adapt as how the critic should adapt to a world of mechanical reproduction, in which, for example, letters to the editor by the general public dispute reviews by critics. It is not only aura that has been dismantled, but critical authority.

One of the successors to aura – to art as relic of a saint-surrogate who holds a pen (or brush) rather than a palm – has been irony, as in Jeff Koon’s costly but unimposing monuments to conspicuous consumption or Jenny Holzer’s sign (for \$20) “MONEY CREATES TASTE”. This latter constitutes an art not of derisive laughter but of ruefulness; it expresses the alienation of the public from that it is itself called upon to admire, if only through its own attendance at exhibitions. Such art provides anti-hymns to the eternal consumer. This phenomenon the Frankfurt critics can handle. The dissatisfied consumers of culture are central to their thesis. But they are less able to describe an art whose wit might be compatible with authenticity.

What if the alternative to an art built on the response of aura was not an art serving politics, even so tangentially as Holtzer, but a thoroughly playful art, an art from which real-world causality and real-world emotional or ideological complexity have been filtered, yet an art able to maintain some potential connection to deep-seated issues and values? Andy

Goldsworthy climbing through a hedge, or carefully arranging thin sheets of ice before the sun strikes, or laboriously building stone walls that meander through trees and (fictively) sink into and then rise out of a stretch of water on the other side, might be deemed a distant spiritual descendent of Dada or Paul Klee, practicing art as grown people's play in a world that newly acknowledges the importance of play. They are works that invite the viewer to feel a certain glee at the deliberate pointlessness that yet expresses a sense of fellowship around the sharing of nature, humanity, observation, labor, and art. Similarly, William Kentridge sometimes alludes to the heavy historical topics and desolate industrialized landscapes of his native South Africa, but at other times allows image and text to swirl and dance without any obtrusive moral other than goodwill to humankind and hurrah for creativity, books, typewriters, and more advanced technology, too. Kentridge's range of reference and of affect is as broad as had been the case for pre-modern art. Period (as opposed to personal) style was itself a triumph of packaging for the consumer; it is odd that Adorno and Horkheimer so regretted its loss, but it may have seemed to them that style was the glue that kept art from being too much based in the individual, that style insured the collective nature of the enterprise.

Artists since Benjamin's time have had to market products that reflect the position of an artist in a world that often but vaguely remembers why it needs artists rather than only graphic and fashion designers, and that remembers, even if remotely, yet distrustfully, that somehow classical art fed into Nazism. Not by mere coincidence, some of the ideas that had once been associated with classical art, some of them suitable for very wide application (reliance on the human form and its expressive movement), ceased to be taboo as a generation came to maturity that couldn't remember the War and maybe especially, pre-War rallies. Even artists who could remember the War were responding by the mid- to late 60s to an increasingly post-War public. But the general effect of that shared trauma and the resulting distaste for what had once been admired changed the course of mid-century

art (soon after the Frankfurt School essays), and beyond. The whole process partly echoed the turn away from Neo-classicism after the fall of Napoleon. It was not simply that New York threatened the cultural primacy of Paris, but that a sense of taint by past imperialism was beginning to permeate the perception of the tradition of western art. Its triumphal arches and equestrians, its portraits of lords and ladies, and not least, its scenes of Christian martyrdom seemed oddly out of joint with the space age.

Benjamin, crucially, contrasted the public's response to images by Picasso with those of Chaplin, finding that the public easily produced a joint response, a surrogate for the feeling of aura, when confronted with Chaplin, but was unable to digest Picasso's wild digressions from the task of imitating nature. Chaplin's films, slapstick as they are, strike home on old standard themes of compassion and longing. He plays an everyman who has nothing and yet deserves better, an extreme, idealized version of a member of the proletariat, or sub-proletariat. Picasso, instead, hangs on to the Romantic notion of an artistic genius who effortlessly produces value, like an idealized extreme version of management.

What Benjamin failed to take note of is that Chaplin and Picasso at times both tap into lightheartedness in a way that the Old Master tradition did but rarely, promoting – along with Matisse, for example – what one might deem an Apollonian glee, and that this constitutes no small part of their share in modernity. Benjamin, and after him Adorno and Horkheimer, wanted a public that was always thinking of its own status in what was deemed realistic terms, rather than succumbing to the deception practiced upon it by business interests. They got some of what they wanted in the narcissistic tendencies of present-day culture, though they hadn't meant this centeredness on self to function as an adjunct to advertising, but rather as an antidote. But Picasso and Chaplin – in Benjamin's view, opposites – both afforded channels by which members of the public, in groups great or small, might be temporarily engrossed – or even communally bewitched – by imagination. So focused was Benjamin on an idea of photography as it was in his

time, primarily a means of recording static objects (or moving objects before a static movie camera) in non-extreme lighting conditions, that he did not consider that an artistic tradition that was cutting itself off from religiosity (specifically, Judeo-Christian religiosity) might not look for an alternative to aura at all, but might instead define itself by contrast with the regimentation of modern life, meaning not as the effusion of a traditional Romantic, hegemonic artistic personality but as emblems of impulse, chance, a subsuming of individual will in favor of letting natural processes work themselves out, for the sake of arriving somewhere unexpected and unpredictable. Benjamin was aware of Surrealism and unimpressed; Surrealism was, in any case, seldom lighthearted, being at least partially aligned with Freudianism. A more carefree fantasy had not had a central role in the history of art since Botticelli turned pagan goddesses into frail and swaying armatures for diaphanous drapery, but fantasy was reborn along with laughter when Duchamp posed for Man Ray as Adam or played chess on a rooftop with Man Ray for René Clair. Heady heedlessness was the counter to calculation, and so came into being a new strain of art Benjamin didn't fully acknowledge or foresee, and neither did Adorno and Horkheimer. For them the masses either took opium or didn't. The possibility of temporarily bathing themselves in the luxurious springs of imagination, only to emerge energized beyond the limits of self-pity, ready to practice and to observe serendipity, did not exist for the sociologists.

This is not to discount the valid warning of Benjamin, and of Adorno and Horkheimer, that capitalism and authoritarianism (of whatever kind) had little vested interest in fostering a broad public that thought independently or critically, and that in fact for the masses to remain massed, such tendencies needed to be reined in. Who would it serve were the unpredictability espoused by an artist like Hans Arp to become characteristic of the public more generally, if in fact each person thought about each political problem and considered various alternative solutions? For that anti-uniformity was what many artists were practicing, even while museums and dealers tried to bundle their efforts into movements

with leaders and titles. How frequently do museums assure their visitors that the contemporary art they are featuring is already "celebrated" or "internationally recognized," implying thereby that it would be presumptuous for members of the public to judge for themselves?

Benjamin thought of authenticity as something that attached to objects, as in the case of medieval relics (relics might possess questionable provenance, yet, if they worked miracles, they were authentic). But he lived in a time before many synthetic substances had yet been invented and the world had not been yet flooded with cheap imitations.¹¹ Artists he thought of as painting their own paintings, which is not necessarily the case since Warhol's Factory and continuing through the large fabrication studios of Koons and others. Even earlier, successful artists had studio assistants who would occasionally produce replicas of compositions for which there was demand; and for centuries new generations of artists would copy what they admired from their predecessors.¹² Imitation as an aesthetic value has a longer history than originality, but Benjamin, like Adorno and Horkheimer, lived in a time closer to Romanticism than to the aesthetics of imitation (as Petrarch explained, not an exacting imitation, but recreation, as the child resembles the parent). Film, both for Benjamin and since, is an art in which the viewer tends to accept as real scenes the viewer knows to be not just enacted but collected and spliced into a highly artificial whole. The viewer experiences what never actually happened, and the viewer (once having swallowed any initial credulity with respect to film magic) knows it. Although it may temporarily absorb the heart and mind of the viewer, it is not an art that offers authenticity. In effect, we have an art of contemplation in which the interval of contemplation to which the viewer freely makes a commitment, has itself become integral to the work's value. The viewer of film contemplates a constructed otherness, as the viewer of an icon was meant to. Whereas a relic promised authenticity, an icon was supposed to point to an absent reality, as did film.

The nineteenth-century value of truth to materials shifts when the material itself becomes the focus of contemplation and locus of authenticity, rather

than the hand that works the material. When Andy Goldsworthy places stone, the stones and the place are both accorded a kind of primacy to which he defers. He is the agent, and yet whether he works alone or with others is secondary to the objective that the work of art in the end have something natural about it. His works are like totemic monuments to the environment, to weather, and to geological time. He allows the landscape's own transformative power to be enhanced with outcomes that only time will reveal. The aging of the work of art is ultimately the spectacle, and that implies many views by a succession of viewers, each of whom will imagine the others.⁷ The work of art is apprehended conjointly, by many acts of quiet contemplation.

The artist's not controlling his own work's parameters has itself become a kind of authenticity, and one with some correlate inherent in printmaking. Many is the printmaker, no matter how experienced, who acknowledges that the moment of peeling the paper off the plate after it has been through the press entails both delight and, to some degree, surprise, a mini-revelation. That is, it is as though printmaker and plate are in dialogue and neither is dominant. Andy Goldsworthy (who sometimes takes an impression off stone) similarly establishes a kind of dialogue with his material. This is a kind of process and a route to authenticity that Benjamin did not envisage, yielding works that may or may not be of use politically. In either case, it is not the political power of the mass audience that provides the authenticity but its atomized public, a public that need have nothing much in common with its fellows other than having experienced the work in some way or other. The contemplation in all its complexity may be taken as part of the value of the art, as also in watching a film.

During Benjamin's time, the power of propaganda threatened to achieve a new level of effectiveness through the mechanization of image making, not only via Nazi movies and posters but also the imagery of performance art, the mechanical salute and the rallies with their phalanxes of uniformed participants, filmed, infamously, by Leni Riefenstahl at Munich in 1934.

An analogy may readily be drawn with concern about the effects of social media in our own economically and politically fraught and volatile time. Adorno and Horkheimer's alarm about the pervasive effects of advertising remains valid. Some of us can remember how Instagram at first seemed a forum for the sharing of imagery, only to be quickly infiltrated by targeted advertising. But it is also true that social media have allowed artists to exhibit images and sell their work world-wide, and have allowed the public to buy work directly from the maker, a shift that fosters an art market no longer geared almost exclusively to high-end purchases. Benjamin, despite being a Marxist, showed remarkably little interest in the prices of works of art, in particular those prices vis-à-vis the prices of reproductions of works of art. (Admittedly, prices were not then so extreme.) We live now in a time in which reproductions can cost much more than original works by more obscure artists, whether living or dead. Museum shops, themselves a fairly recent phenomenon, sometimes sell works of art but routinely sell reproductions, sometimes costly ones, of works of art. They inculcate the idea that the experience of a work of art is properly concluded by buying a reproduction. Particularly when a state-funded museum sells reproductions for more money than less prestigious original works of art, in this travesty the fears of the Frankfurt School essayists are realized: the point of the art establishment has become the protection of capital rather than the fostering of creativity and its proper correlate, critical discourse. Museums, when they cannot – due to the quantity of objects on display and/or the masses of the public there to view – match the atmosphere of a basilica with a high altarpiece above a crypt with a saint's tomb, enact a ritual of their own, whereby purchasing a poster or other memento mimics the dropping of a coin in a donation box by the worshipper.¹³ Even more insidiously, the museum's ruling elite, the donors with their names emblazoned on galleries and foundations, impersonate saints, interceding between the public and the magic of modern art that makes almost any object, no matter how vile in another context, exhibitable. Duchamp produced argument;

Koons only crowds. The public for art is plentiful now, yet heartfelt admiration has become scarce, as has meaningful discussion about film and art (as opposed to claims about the worth, often stated in strictly market terms, of a particular example).

The reason for the lack of admiration is the public's underlying sense that it is being had: that like film extras (though having paid admission rather than being paid a pittance), their function is to fill the rooms, to visit the café and shop, to lend the building an air of busy-ness, while the business is conducted by the board of trustees in the interests of their collections and their taste, somewhat moderated by the curatorial staff. In Benjamin's day, collectors were not averse to getting advice not only from commercial gallery directors but from curators (on the understanding that purchases would eventually come to the museum).¹⁴ Paradoxically, as collectors became generally less versed in the history of art, they also became less willing to take such direction, or turned to interior decorators rather than curators. About the time of Andy Warhol's New York prominence, that is, the mid-60s, coolness became the new aura.¹⁵ But coolness then was anti-establishment; it might be newly and deliberately vulgar, or otherwise transgressive. Leo Castelli's gallery might be a cool place to be exhibited, but not any museum. Castelli died in 1999 and Tate Modern with its Turbine Hall opened in 2000, by which time the transformation of the relationship between living artists and the museum world was well underway (as the market for Old Masters dried up and the high-end market for contemporary art grew). Curators became a priesthood, guiding now the public rather than collectors toward special exhibition experiences which left them feeling they had paid their cultural dues. The extreme example of marketing art to the public, orchestrated by Christie's, was the campaign on behalf of the *Salvator Mundi* attributed to Leonardo, including the artful video of a succession of people of various walks of life experiencing aura, to the accompaniment of post-minimalist, quasi-Albinoni string music, "On the Nature of Daylight" by Max Richter. The video did not show the art object, and it was titled, "The World is Watching" (strangely echoing the anti-Viet Nam War chant, "The whole world

is watching").¹⁶ That video represents the apotheosis of what the Frankfurt school meant to critique.

Contemplation and crowds don't mix. When a cathedral full of adherents heard the bell and saw the chalice raised, that was religious ritual and not aesthetic contemplation. Religious ritual, like theater, properly requires an audience. Contemplation of a work of art does not; there is nothing interactive about it, whether it is an altarpiece, a domestic furnishing, the adornment of a piazza or lobby or public space of another sort. A film seen in an auditorium, particularly a comedy, can benefit from the group dynamic, but it doesn't require it. To look at a work of art with others may enhance the experience, but alternatively it can be done alone, like reading a book. Reading out loud together or reading alone have different benefits. When children play soccer around the base of Verrocchio's *Colleoni*, this affects the viewer of the piazza but not of the equestrian statue. If someone puts a political sign on a statue, or spray paints it, the statue does not change, the politics of original installation do not change, but a new installation may be made, perhaps for the sake of distributing the photograph on social media, like refurbishing a house in a new style (or, if the change is temporary, like putting up a pavilion that changes the appearance and functionality of the building for a time). The basic problem of the Frankfurt theses was that reception was defined as a group activity, like Nazis at a rally – and tending toward adulation rather than contemplation. The most important element of the new post-aura aesthetic is the avoidance of adulation. If the public is to have art in a technological age, it needs to address the art in a critical frame of mind: experiencing the lively Venetian piazza communally, yet individually apprehending the statue and the design of the facades of the basilica and its neighboring hospital in all their complexities, as entities that both persist and deteriorate, as works both unique and typical, the understanding of which both has been and will be part of civic identity.

Benjamin saw that, in the newly emerging world in which the masses had more political power, art was being put to political use, and he wanted to forestall the newly ubiquitous art of mechanical

reproduction's becoming a driver of hatred and violence. The modern world was in the process of fully accepting multiples as the predominant, most frequently accessed works of art. This context spurred the tenet that modern works should assume political meaning as their *raison d'être*, despite modernism's initial bias in favor of formalism. Benjamin wanted art to help the cause of ordinary people. In subsequent decades, the phenomenon of art multiples has only grown, compounded by the ubiquity of digital imagery, engineered for mass distribution. Whereas in Benjamin's day, the cultural memory of objects endowed with aura persisted, now such memory has faded. As Erwin Panofsky famously argued that the historical distance from anxiety about idolatry made Renaissance art possible, so now the distance from the art associated with aura has undermined even Benjamin's exhibition value and opens up new possibilities, including that of a rediscovery of authenticity, a new species of authenticity, albeit mechanically reproduced, that depends upon the public's rapt attention and critical discernment. Watching Kentridge's "2nd Hand Reading" on YouTube is not entertainment for distracted masses, nor for conditioned consumers, but a focused if deliberately underdetermined experience for Everyperson.¹⁷ It can be shared without making people into mass consumers, since it was not made by an artist who exemplifies control. On the contrary, its sharing will be multifaceted and open-ended.¹⁸

Works of art, films included, can be directed to mass viewership, but if they are made to promote a point of view they will find themselves obliged to conform, at some level, to an orthodoxy. For Benjamin this was not a problem. But in such cases, *de facto* descendants of an aesthetic of classical clarity, the works fall back into being instruments of political ritual, and such ritual generally produces adulation, an extreme form of respect more appropriate to a religion than to a democracy (it is worth remembering that Pericles' use of the arts for political ends was offensive to many). The space for art between functioning as instruments of ritual which inspire adulation, on the one hand, and art for art's sake to such an extent that the general public takes no sustained and serious interest, on the other, has barely begun

to be explored. Art, be it witty or earnest, minatory or innocent like a child's, need not invoke anything like cult value. The crucial criterion is that the viewer find the work both meaningful and to some degree unfamiliar, thus providing an education of sorts, though potentially one that leads neither to consensus nor to certainty on the part of the public, only to perspicuity.¹⁹ Wittiness, like wisdom, can be admired, though not adored, and the same is true of earnestness and innocence. Contemplation (the opposite of Benjamin's despised distraction) is the goal, not adulation (the cousin of the aura toward which he had some ambivalence).

The new aesthetics Benjamin tried to promote is no longer new enough. It had no place for that unaccustomed entity, a compelling artist (or critic) who freely relinquishes any claim to authority.

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Notes

- ¹ William Carlos Williams, "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower", 1955. My thanks to the anonymous readers for their helpful comments.
- ² Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, edited by Hannah Arendt, tr. H. Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 217–51. See also, *inter alia*, Lijster Thijs, *Benjamin and Adorno on Art and Art Criticism: Critique of Art* (Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam Press., 2017), where the more literal translation, "age of technological reproducibility," is preferred.
- ³ See also Peter Parshall and Rainer Schoch, "Early Woodcuts and the Reception of the Primitive". No. 3, *Origins of European Printmaking: Fifteenth-century*

Woodcuts and Their Public, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 14; Cf. Hans Belting and Bill Viola, "A Conversation", *Bill Viola, The Passions* (Los Angeles: Getty Museum, 2003), 203, in which Viola comments on finding aura in the experience provided by a new technology, the LCD screen.

⁴ Bill Viola's *Observance*, 2002, a 10-minute video that was shown as part of *The Passions*, has been described by the filmmaker as a response to the Dürer; John Walsh, "Emotions in Extreme Time: Bill Viola's *Passions* Project", in *Bill Viola, The Passions* (Los Angeles: Getty Museum, 2003), 53. It was shown at the Getty in 2003, touring also to Canberra and London, again in Madrid (Fundación 'la Caixa') in 2005 and Bern in 2014. Viola's videos are issued in limited editions, as small as 5.

⁵ For a push back against Ivins' approach, one which attempts to put prints into "the full range of modern and contemporary art", unconfined by replication, see Jennifer Roberts, "Pressure", accessed 27 April 2021, <https://www.nga.gov/research/casva/meetings/mellon-lectures-in-the-fine-arts/roberts-2021.html>.

⁶ Alexander Nagel and Christopher S. Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance* (New York: Zone, 2010).

⁷ On the development of cryptoart, by which ownership of digital art follows blockchain protocols, accessed 27 Feb. 2021, https://www.christies.com/exhibitions/2018/art-and-tech-summit-exploring-blockchain/#programmeinfo_Nav; see also Daniel Penny, "How Much for that Pepe? Scenes from the First Rare Digital Auction", *The Paris Review*, 23 Jan. 2018, accessed 27 Feb. 2021, <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2018/01/23/much-pepe-scenes-first-rare-digital-art-auction/>; Nora McGreevy, "Entirely Digital Artwork will be Sold by Major Auction House for the First Time", *Smithsonian Magazine*, 18 Feb. 2021, accessed 27 Feb. 2021, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/entirely-digital-artwork-just-sold-major-auction-first-time-180977039/>. Beeple's [Mike Winkelmann's] work *Everydays: The First 5000 Days* was sold by Christie's for almost \$70,000,000; accessed 11 March 2021, <https://www.christies.com/features/Monumental-collage-by-Beeple-is-first-purely-digital-artwork-NFT-to-come-to-auction-11510-7.aspx>. See also Kyle Chayka, "How Beeple Crashed the Art World", *The New Yorker*, 22 March 2021, accessed 26 April 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/tech/annals-of-technology/how-beeple-crashed-the-art-world>.

⁸ Clive Bell, *Art* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1928 [1914]), 21.

⁹ It should be remembered that it used to be possible to have some fondness for advertisements, e.g., Burma Shave, whose roadside ads, often featuring amusing rhymes, ran from 1926–63.

¹⁰ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception", *Dialectic of Enlightenment, Philosophical Fragments*, tr. E. Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 94–136 ("Kulturindustrie: Aufklärung als Massenbeteug", 1944); see also Adorno, "The Culture Industry Reconsidered" [1975], in *The Culture Industry, Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, 98–106, ed. J. M. Bernstein (London: Routledge, 2001). Cf. Martin Scorsese, "Il Maestro: Federico Fellini and the lost magic of cinema", *Harper's Magazine*, March 2021: "in the movie business, which is now the mass visual

entertainment business, the emphasis is always on the word 'business', and value is always determined by the amount of money to be made from any given property", accessed 20 Feb. 2021, <https://harpers.org/archive/2021/03/il-maestro-federico-fellini-martin-scorsese/>.

¹¹ His essay prompts me to remember the pride with which a family in Dresden in the early 80s showed me the plastic gondola they had somehow gotten from Venice; for them it had aura, because it was a rarity in the DDR and signified something wonderful and remote, whose reality was attested to by the object. Authenticity and mass reproduction need not be antithetical. That precious piece of plastic betokened Venice.

¹² For a consideration of visual art as now "one big stylistic mash-up", Robert Shore, *Beg, Steal and Borrow: Artists against Originality* (London: Laurence King, 2017), 159.

¹³ A notorious ad campaign of 1988 at the Victoria and Albert Museum featured six posters, each with the caption "An ace caff with quite a nice museum attached", produced by Saatchi, accessed 27 February 2012, <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O92603/where-else-do-they-give-poster-arden-paul>

¹⁴ Interview with A. Hyatt Mayor, 1969, by Paul Cummings, accessed 27 February 2021, <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-hyatt-mayor-13146#transcript>.

¹⁵ See, e.g., Robert Benton and David Newman, "The New Sentimentality", *Esquire*, LXII:1 (1 July 1964): 25–31. More homespun but equally anti-establishment, the Bread and Puppet Theater of Glover, Vermont, founded in 1963, still exists, supported by Cheap Art sales.

¹⁶ Kander Nadav (director), "The Last da Vinci: The World is Watching", 2017, accessed 11 Feb. 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d7omwQLuGJQ>.

The video is indebted to the work of Viola, see n. 4 above. The *Salvator Mundi* was introduced to the public at the exhibition at the National Gallery, London, "Leonardo da Vinci: Painter at the Court of Milan", 2011–12.

¹⁷ William Kentridge, "Second-Hand Reading", 2013, edition of 9, accessed 12 Feb. 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IEfUjg5viGk&t=23s>. Kentridge used 35mm cameras until 2020, when he first used a digital one. On his analogue aesthetic, see Ed Krčma, "Cinematic Drawing in a Digital Age", accessed 26 April 2021, <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/14/cinematic-drawing-in-a-digital-age>. Kentridge based an 11-minute film, *Zeno Writing*, 2002, edition of 8, on Italo Svevo's *Confessions of Zeno*, 1923, in which the alienation of the author from his work is confronted. For analogous issues about how mechanical reproduction affects an entire art, in this case music, see, recently, Nicholas Spice, "The Phonic and the Phoney", *London Review of Books* XLIII:III (4 Feb. 2021): 31–33.

¹⁸ Marianne Moore in 1946 refers to the "strange new obscurity" in literature of the 20s in Frederic Prokosch's *Voices: A Memoir* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1984), 178; Ben Thomas, *Edgar Wind and Modern Art, In Defence of Marginal Anarchy* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020) gives a detailed and lucid analysis of debates about the morality of art in an age of abstraction, censorship, and mass culture, esp. Ch. 5, also 203, n. 1.

¹⁹ E.g., Béla Tarr's *The Turin Horse* (2011), which won critical acclaim but grossed \$162,088, and which expects prolonged contemplation by the viewer.

Patricia Anne EMISON

Naujojo Hampšyro universitetas, Durhamas,

Naujasis Hampšyras (Niuhempšyras), Jungtinės Valstijos

MENAS, AURA IR SUSIŽAVĖJIMAS SKAITMENINIO REPRODUKAVIMO AMŽIUJE

Santrauka

Walteris Benjaminas, kaip visi žino, įrodinėjo, kad XX a. plačioji visuomenė neišvengiamai koreliuos su neseniai politizuotu menu. Tačiau nuo tada, kai buvo parašytas Benjaminio straipsnis, pasaulis smarkiai pakito, kaip mažiau nei po dešimtmečio jau įvertino Theodoras Adorno ir Maxas Horkheimeris. Šiame straipsnyje siekiama išnagrinėti, kaip Frankfurto mokyklos estetika, nors dažnai tebeapstatelkiama, neteko dalies tiesioginio aktualumo. Septintojo dešimtmečio isteblišmentui priešiškas tarpsnis, pastiprintas ryškaus ironijos pomėgio, aurą ir eksponavimą pavertė nemandingomis vertybėmis, tačiau, kita vertus, kainų kilimas meno rinkoje ir skaitmeninimas parodė, kad Frankfurto mokyklos argumentai tampa vis aktualesni. Remiantis Golsdworthy ir Kentridge'o pavyzdžiais, straipsnyje įrodinėjama, kad sąmoningas menininkų abiejų terpių (auros ir eksponavimo) kontrolės ir recepcijos silpninimas

ištumia atgyvenusias, Benjamino patvirtintas religines reakcijas, vietoj jų reikalaujant didesnių intelektualinių pastangų iš žiūrovų, kurių kaip plačiosios publikos tapatybė neseniai tapo komplikuota.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: Benjaminas, Horkheimeris, Adornas, autentiškumas, aura, reklama, masinė visuomenė, muziejai, filmai, Čaplinas, Pikasas, Goldswortis, Kentridžas, technologija, nepagarba.

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Patricia Anne EMISON

Professor of art history at the University of New Hampshire with a specialization in the history of prints, Patricia Emison is the author of *Moving Pictures and Renaissance Art History* (Amsterdam University Press, 2021) and *Art and its Observers* (forthcoming, Vernon Press), among other books and articles on the Italian Renaissance, on prints, on aesthetics, and on the discipline of art history.

E-mail: patricia.emison@unh.edu