Reproduction/Repetition: Walter Benjamin/Carl Einstein

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To reproduce a work of art was for Walter Benjamin a means of renewing it, of making it useful again in the present:

> the technology of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By replicating the work many times over, it supplants uniqueness with massive quantity. And in permitting the reproduction to reach the receiver in his own situation, it actualizes that which is reproduced.[1]

As his essay of 1936, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," makes clear, the stakes were high: Benjamin saw in the technique of reproduction an instrument for making not only the work of art but the world new; it led to a "shattering of tradition," which was "the reverse side of the present crisis and renewal of humanity."[2] To Carl Einstein the idea that reproduction, *any* form of reproduction or repetition, could strike a blow against tradition was an oxymoron. Repetition served a lie that humanity told itself about the Real; repetition generated "the illusion of the immortality of things," and endowed them with a semblance of stability and durability, when in truth all was in continual flux.[3] Repetition, then, was a deadly bulwark against radical change.

Though they were contemporaries, there is no evidence that either Benjamin or Einstein was familiar with the other's work; neither's name appears in the writings or the correspondence of the other. Apart from a single encounter in November

1. Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, ed. Michael W. Jennings et al. (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), vol. 2, p. 104. For the convenience of the reader I have cited, here and throughout this article, references to the English translation, even though, translating from the German, I have at times occasionally used slightly different wordings.
2. Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, p. 104. This title, used in the Harvard edition, is a more accurate translation of "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit" than the more familiar "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."
3. Carl Einstein, "Notes sur le cubisme [1929]," *Werke Band 3. 1929–1940*, ed. Hermann Haarmann and Klaus Siebenhaar (Berlin: Fannei & Walz, 1996). English translation by Charles W. Haxthausen, "Notes on Cubism," this issue, p. 165.

OCTOBER 107, Winter 2004, pp. 47–74. *© 2004 October Magazine, Ltd. and Massachusetts Institute of Technology.*

1913, at a Berlin "Authors' Evening," they evidently never met.[4] These facts would not be noteworthy were it not for the common threads that link these two intellectuals, separated in age by seven years. Both were leftist German Jews of the Weimar era, each of whom eked out an existence as a freelance critic, first in Berlin, then in Paris (Einstein emigrated in 1928, Benjamin in 1933), during what were mostly times of economic and political crisis.[5] In Paris, both had important encounters with Surrealism, and, later, as Germans residing in France, both were interned after the outbreak of World War II; finally, in 1940, each, in flight from the Nazis, took his life near the French-Spanish border, Einstein in July, Benjamin in September.[6]

Most important, Einstein and Benjamin each developed a theory that was driven by a sustained, utopian faith in the socially transformative potential of contemporary visual practices. Yet for each the present was haunted by the images of the past, and both Benjamin and Einstein grappled with the issue of reproduction and repetition within the visual order, espousing strategies for breaking free of the fetters of tradition into the radically new. At the heart of their respective positions—antithetical positions—on reproduction lie differing positions on language, media, and perception.[7] The present essay is an attempt to bring these two radically original thinkers together in dialogue on these issues.

Reproduction/Repetition

The germ of Benjamin's reproduction theory can be found in an interesting passage in his "Paris Diary" of 1930, recording a visit to the bookshop of Adrienne Monnier. Benjamin had remarked to her

4. Their encounter, as speakers on the evening's program, is documented solely by an announcement in *Die Aktion*, which sponsored the event. In his "Berlin Chronicle," Benjamin recorded the bizarre unfolding of this event, in which, "before an astonished but less than captivated audience," he and his friend Fritz Heinle delivered speeches "with the same title and almost identical texts." See Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, pp. 605–06.

5. Rainer Rumold, as cited by Klaus H. Kiefer, has established that Benjamin's Paris address book, which included the names of many members of the avant-garde, does not include that of Einstein. Klaus H. Kiefer, "Die Ethnologisierung des kunstkritischen Diskurses—Carl Einsteins Beitrag zu 'Documents,'" in *Elan vital oder das Auge des Eros*, ed. Hubertus Gassner (Munich: Haus der Kunst, 1994), p. 101, n. 10.

6. For chronologies on Einstein, see Wilfried Ihrig, "Vita Carl Einstein," *Text + Kritik* 95 (July 1987), pp. 80–86; on Benjamin, see Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vols. 1–4, in which an exhaustive chronology is included at the end of each volume.

7. Comparative examination of the writings of Benjamin and Einstein has been rare up to now. Only Jean-Maurice Monnoyer, *Walter Benjamin, Carl Einstein et les arts primitifs* (Pau: Publications de l'Université de Pau, 1999) has explored the subject at length, focusing, as the title suggests, on a different aspect than the present study, although he does examine the issue of aura and reproduction. Georges Didi-Huberman's *Devant le temps: Histoire de l'art et anachronisme des images*, Collection "Critique" (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 2000), comprises extended essays on both, but he does not systematically compare them or examine in detail the issue of reproduction in their work. The present essay is a substantial revision and expansion of my "Reproduktion und Wiederholung, Benjamin und Einstein: Eine kritische Gegenüberstellung," *Études Germaniques* 1 (March 1998), pp. 55–76.

> how much easier it is to "enjoy" a painting—and especially a sculpture, and even a work of architecture—in a photograph than in reality. But when I went on to call this manner of dealing with art wretched and fatiguing, she became obstinate: "The great creations," she says, "cannot be thought of as the works of individuals. They are collective objects, so powerful that to enjoy them requires precisely their reduction in size. In the last analysis, the methods of mechanical reproduction are a technology of miniaturization. They help people to obtain the degree of power over the works without which they could not experience enjoyment." In this way I exchange a photograph of the *vierge sage* of Strasbourg, which she had promised me at the beginning of our conversation, for a theory of reproduction that may be even more valuable to me.[8]

How valuable Monnier's theory was became evident in Benjamin's "Little History of Photography," published in *Die literarische Welt* a year and a half later.[9] In the concluding part of his brief discussion of reproduction in that essay, he essentially adapted her formulation in discussing the phenomenon of reproduction, but with two crucial changes of wording:

> Everyone will have noticed how much easier it is to grasp a painting, and especially a sculpture, and even a work of architecture, in a photo than in reality. It is certainly tempting to blame this squarely on the decline of a feeling for art, on the shortcomings of one's contemporaries. But contradicting such an interpretation is the knowledge of how, during roughly the same period, the understanding of great works has changed along with the development of reproductive technologies. They can no longer be thought of as the products of individuals; they have become collective objects, so powerful that to assimilate them requires precisely their reduction in size. In the last analysis mechanical methods of reproduction are a technology of miniaturization and help people to achieve the degree of power over the works without which they simply could not make use of them.[10]

8. Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, p. 348.

9. Whatever Benjamin's debt to Adrienne Monnier, his reproduction theory probably owed something as well to László Moholy-Nagy's discussion of reproduction in his chapter "Domestic Pinacoteca" [*Hauspinakothek*], in *Painting, Photography, Film* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1969): "Contemporary technology offers a means of assuring a wide circulation for 'originals' too. With the aid of machine production, with the aid of exact mechanical and technical instruments and processes . . . we can today free ourselves from the domination of the individual handmade piece and its market value. Such a picture will obviously not be used as it is today as a piece of *lifeless room decoration* but will probably be kept in compartments on shelves or 'domestic picture galleries'; and brought out only when they are really needed" (pp. 25–26). Benjamin's indebtedness to this passage was first pointed out by Krisztina Passuth, "Moholy-Nagy et Walter Benjamin," *Cahiers du Musée National d'Art Moderne* 5–6 (1980–81), pp. 399–403. In his "Little History of Photography" Einstein quoted from Moholy's book.

10. Here and in the preceding passage from the "Paris Diary" I have used my own translation after the German because those in the Harvard edition, prepared by different translators, do not reflect the

Benjamin made two notable word substitutions in Monnier's formulation for the "Little History of Photography": *genießen* (enjoy) became *assimilieren* (assimilate); and *Genuß* (enjoyment) was changed to *Verwendung* (use). These changes were deeply significant, however, for they shifted the effect of reproduction from aesthetic enjoyment to political instrumentalization.[11]

In his "Little History of Photography," Benjamin described the condition that enables this instrumentalization, this displacement of power from the work to the beholder, as, simply, the "technology of miniaturization." He did not discuss the source of the power exerted by "great works"; whatever it was, reduction in scale was evidently sufficient to break it. Only five years later, in the "Work of Art" essay, did Benjamin provide an explicit answer: the source of the work's power—"authority" was now his term—was its "aura."[12] To be sure, there was considerable discussion of aura and reproductive technology in the photography essay, and some of it was applied to the discussion of reproduction of works of art in 1936. The need of the modern masses "to take possession of the object close-up in the form of a picture, or rather a copy"; the identification of "uniqueness and duration" with the original image and of "transience and repeatability" with its reproduction; "the peeling away" of the object's shell, "the destruction of aura," by means of reproduction: all of these are present in both essays. Yet in 1931 Benjamin chose to illustrate what he called aura not with a physically unique work of art in a traditional artistic medium but with the early portrait photograph.[13] He located the experience of aura in the encounter between a rising bourgeois class and a new photographic technology that had emerged with it to record its image, and the technical limitations of primitive photography contributed to produce, without intention or artifice, that auratic effect: "There was an aura about them, a medium that lent fullness and security to their gaze even as that gaze penetrated the medium." The technical manifestation of this was "the absolute continuum from brightest light to darkest shadow."[14] Yet, paradoxically, the aura that Benjamin experienced in these early photographs he experienced through the *reproductions* in the books under review, that very technology of replication which, in the same essay, he credited with the destruction of aura. The aura, this suggests, was located in the *image*, not in any unique physical object.

In his "Work of Art" essay Benjamin resolved this contradiction. To be sure, he offered virtually identical—and equally elusive—definitions of "aura" in these

similarities in wording. The passages in question can be found, respectively, in Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, pp. 348, 523.

11. Clearly the influence of Bertolt Brecht's *Versuche* is evident here. In a radio broadcast of 1930, Benjamin quoted Brecht's statement, from the first volume of *Versuche*, that this publication took place "at a time when certain works are intended less as individual experiences (or as possessing the character of finished 'works') than as means of using (transforming) certain institutes and institutions." "Bert Brecht," in Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, p. 366.

12. Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, p. 103.

13. This discussion is indebted to Rolf H. Krauss's close analysis of "Little History of Photography" in his *Walter Benjamin und der neue Blick auf die Photographie* (Ostfildern Ruit: Cantz, 1998), pp. 20–28.

14. Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, pp. 515, 517.

two essays. Here I cite the 1936 version, in which the first two sentences were taken over unaltered from the 1931 text:

> What, then, is aura? The unique manifestation 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.[15]

Yet if this formulation hardly changes from one version to the other, Benjamin has nonetheless introduced entirely new elements into his notion of aura. Now he mentions the aura of early portrait photographs only in passing ("In the fleeting expression of a human face, the aura beckons from early photographs for the last time"); and while he retained the language about the demands of the masses to bring objects closer to them, the focus has now shifted to the aura within traditional art forms—painting, sculpture, theater.[16] Equally important, the cited locus of the aura is displaced from the *reproductive* image of the photograph to the *unique* physical art object:

> In even the most perfect reproduction, *one* thing is lacking: the here and now of the work of art—its unique existence in a particular place. It is this unique existence—and nothing else—that bears the mark of the history to which the work has been subject. This history includes changes to the physical structure of the work over time, together with any changes in ownership. . . .
>
> The here and now of the original underlies the concept of its authenticity, and on the latter in turn is founded the idea of a tradition which has passed the object down as the same, identical thing to the present day. The whole sphere of authenticity eludes technological—and of course not only technological—reproduction. . . .
>
> One might focus these aspects of the artwork in the concept of the aura, and go on to say: what withers in the age of the technological reproducibility of the work of art is the work's aura.[17]

A new element in this concept is that of *authenticity*, linked to a unique physical identity that has survived and persisted through material changes, as well as

15. Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, pp. 104–05. The corresponding passage in the photography essay is in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, pp. 518–19; the example remains the same, but the wording is slightly different. As in the case of the passage cited above, the virtually identical formulation is lost in the Harvard edition due to translations by different hands.
16. Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, p. 108.
17. Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, pp. 103–04.

changes of ownership and even of function.[18] The value we place on the uniqueness of the "authentic" work of art has, according to Benjamin, its origin in the ritual function—initially magical, then religious—of the oldest works.[19] The "auratic mode of existence" of a work of art is most closely linked with these beginnings in cultic practice; this cult value survived in the secularized ritual of the cult of beauty that began in the Renaissance and persisted into the modern era in the cult of *l'art pour l'art*. The singular, auratic object is forever haunted by its past history and functions, which enshroud it like a veil and render it resistant to use in the present.[20] Reproduction strips away this veil; it removes the object from its "embeddedness in tradition," which is tied to its actual physical history and provenance, and renders it functionally malleable and mobile. "The cathedral leaves its site to be received in the studio of an art lover."[21]

In 1940, after reading Benjamin's newly published Charles Baudelaire essay, Theodor Adorno wrote to him that "the concept of the aura still seems to me incompletely 'thought out.'"[22] It is difficult to avoid that impression, for in "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," the third of the essays in which Benjamin addresses the issue of aura in depth, the concept seems to have undergone further change.[23] Now the focus is not on the life of unique material objects but on the functions of

18. It is tempting to speculate whether this stress on the unreproducibility of an object's authenticity owes something to Erwin Panofsky's essay, "Original und Faksimilereproduktion," *Der Kreis* 7 (1930), pp. 3-16; reprinted in Erwin Panofsky, *Deutschsprachige Aufsätze II*, ed. Karen Michels and Martin Warnke (Berlin: Akademie Verlag), pp. 1078–90. Strikingly close to Benjamin is Panofsky's observation, "That which a reproduction, no matter how 'successful,' can never convey, and quite sensibly does not in the least wish to convey, is that unanalyzable 'experience of authenticity [*Echtheitserlebnis*],' which is a quite irreplaceable ingredient . . . of the aesthetic act that is consummated before the original." He further identified the physical changes the work has undergone, patina, weathering, etc. with this *Echtheitserlebnis* (pp. 1080–81, 1088). On Panofsky and Benjamin see Michael Diers, "Kunst und Reproduktion: Der Hamburger Faksimile-Streit," *Idea: Jahrbuch der Hamburger Kunstsammlungen* 5 (1986), pp. 129–32.

19. As Horst Bredekamp has shown, this aspect of Benjamin's thesis is contradicted by the historical facts, and those facts had been established by art historians long before Benjamin wrote his "Work of Art" essay. During the Middle Ages cult images were duplicated in order to extend their ostensible powers. If the form of a cult image or a reliquary was reproduced, then its redemptive or healing power, i.e., its aura, was transferred to the reproduction. The cult value was therefore not diminished but intensified by reproduction. Horst Bredekamp, "Der simulierte Benjamin: Mittelalterliche Bemerkungen zu seiner Aktualität," in *Frankfurter Schule und Kunstgeschichte*, ed. Andreas Berndt et al. (Berlin: Dietrich Riemer Verlag, 1992), pp. 125–33.

20. In a footnote Benjamin defines "auratic reality" with a quote from his earlier essay on Goethe's *Elective Affinities*: "The beautiful [i.e., the auratic] is neither the veil nor the veiled object but the object *in* its veil." Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, p. 127, n. 22.

21. Ibid., p. 103.

22. Letter of February 29, 1940, Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence, 1928–1940*, ed. Henri Lonitz, trans. Nicholas Walker (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 321.

23. These are not, however, the only texts in which Benjamin deals in depth with the phenomenon that he called "aura." In "Unpacking My Library," published four months before "Little History of Photography" in July 1931, and "The Storyteller," which he completed just after the "Work of Art" essay, he is clearly dealing with the same phenomenon, even if he does not mention it by name. (The use of the word "aura" at the end of the latter essay occurs only in the English translation; it is not used in the German original.)

memory. Benjamin builds on Marcel Proust's distinction between *mémoire involontaire,* a spontaneous memory unwilled by the subject, which he now associates with aura, and *mémoire volontaire,* conscious, willed acts of recollection, for which photography can function as an aid. It is not my purpose here to explore this extraordinarily rich and complex essay, but merely to extract from it a dimension of aura that I believe to be useful in linking Benjamin's three disparate treatments of the phenomenon. That dimension is the identification of aura with a semblance of *human subjectivity*. The aura of early photography is bound up with the human gaze into the primitive camera, a gaze that "penetrated the medium." Aura is also associated with subjectivity in the earlier "Work of Art" essay, although, to be sure, Benjamin did not discuss it explicitly with regard to the unique art object; where it comes out is in his comparison of the stage actor with the film actor. Quoting Pirandello on how the film actor has been "stripped of his reality, his life, his voice," as he plays before an apparatus, later to be reduced to a "mute image that flickers on the screen then vanishes into silence," Benjamin adds that the film actor must perform with his "whole living person, while forgoing its aura." Because his audience remains invisible, he cannot look at them, and so he loses his authority.[24] This identification of the aura with the projection of subjectivity becomes even more explicit in the Baudelaire essay, in which Benjamin identifies aura with the gaze, even that of inanimate objects.

> Inherent in the gaze . . . is the expectation that it will be returned by that on which it is bestowed. Where this expectation is met . . . there is an experience of aura in all its fullness. . . . Experience of the aura thus arises from the fact that a response characteristic of human relationships is transposed to the relationship between humans and inanimate objects or natural objects. The person we look at, or who feels he is being looked at, looks at us in turn. To experience the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look back at us.[25]

Responding to Adorno's long letter on this essay, Benjamin disagreed with his interlocutor's suggestion that aura might be understood as the "trace of a forgotten human moment in the thing," the moment of human labor.[26] No, he responded, the "forgotten human moment" was not necessarily the moment of human labor, for aura could also be experienced in nature: "The tree and the shrub which offer themselves to us are not made by human hands. There must therefore be something human in the things themselves, something that does *not* originate in labor."[27] As we have seen, this association of photography with "something human" is present in the photography essay of nearly a decade earlier.

24. Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, pp. 112–13.
25. Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, p. 338.
26. Letter of February 29, 1940, Adorno and Benjamin, *Correspondence*, p. 322.
27. Letter of July 15, 1940, Adorno and Benjamin, *Correspondence*, p. 327.

Further, Benjamin identifies the destruction of photographic aura with the absence of human beings in Eugène Atget's Paris street scenes—"they suck the aura out of reality like water from a sinking ship"—and August Sander's anonymous typology of German citizens, carried out, in Benjamin's words, from a "scientific viewpoint."[28]

This seeming ability of things—including works of past art—to look back at us, to project the subjectivity of an *other* toward us, is beyond the control of the viewing subject, resistant to power exerted by the viewer, and hence resistant to instrumentalization and actualization.[29] This is crucial to the notion of *Einmaligkeit* in Benjamin's definition of aura, "einmalige Erscheinung einer Ferne so nah sie sein mag." *Einmalig* is translated in the Harvard edition as "unique," yet that word does not capture its meaning here, which is lucidly explained by Marleen Stoessel in her brilliant book on Benjamin's concept of aura: "It has a double meaning: The appearance of aura does not last, and it is unrepeatable. . . . It is independent of the conscious will of the subject. What appears may well appear again, but it cannot be captured by the subject or be consciously conjured up again."[30] This resistance to control renders instrumentalization, the exertion of *authority* by the viewing subject, impossible.

Like Benjamin, Einstein saw the surviving art of the past as a formidable impediment to the refiguring of vision that, in his view, was a precondition to remaking the world. Yet for him it was not the survival of the "auratic" trace of another *subjectivity* with the capacity to "look back at us" that constituted the problem, but the continuing presence and influence of the *forms* of the past. Even works of art that seemed to hold little interest for contemporary viewers continue to influence their vision "through their formal construction or composition; i.e., the forms have an effect that outlasts the intended effect of the images, their meaning."[31] This position, so different from that of Benjamin, derives from the central tenet of Einstein's theory of art: in its highest determination art's purpose is neither aesthetic nor ritualistic but *cognitive*; i.e., art's defining function is the figuring of human vision:

> Above and beyond its specifically delimited role art determines vision in general. When viewing an individual picture or gazing upon nature the beholder is burdened by the memory of all previously seen art. Art

28. Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, pp. 518–20.

29. The subject's sense of not merely viewing but being viewed in return, of being subject to the will of another, is most likely the meaning of Benjamin's strangely cryptic illustration of aura in both the "Little History of Photography" and the "Work of Art" essay. "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." Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, pp. 104–05. Important here is that the shadow cast on the observer is fleeting and is not subject to his will.

30. Marleen Stoessel, *Aura: Das vergessene Menschliche: Zu Sprache und Erfahrung bei Walter Benjamin* (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1983), p. 47.

31. Carl Einstein, *Werke Band 4: Texte aus dem Nachlaß I*, ed. Hermann Haarmann and Klaus Siebenhaar (Berlin: Fannei & Walz, 1992), p. 391.

> transforms vision as a whole, the artist determines how we form our general images of the world. Hence it is the task of art to organize those images.[32]

In other words, by changing artistic form one transforms human vision as such, and by changing our visual construction of reality we have the potential to remake ourselves and the world.[33] Yet, historically, according to Einstein, art had instead most often exerted a conservative, stabilizing function: it countered the anxieties provoked by the vital flux of nature and the inevitability of death, and it did so by providing images of order, duration, and stability, images that had fixed and rationalized the dynamic flood of phenomena that assaulted the senses. Needless to say, the abundance of surviving art from past eras only reinforced this conservative tendency; these works were not merely objects of a retrospective art history but active agents of past epistemic orders that everywhere hindered the transformation of vision and hence of reality.

> The historical past is a shadowy, distant memory. Works of [past] art, however, are concretely available to us and have the concrete effect of something definitely present, and these old images possess a kind of material and sentimental immortality that stands in contradiction to every historical process. In other words, the sum of works of art represents a concrete and terrible legacy, the sight of which falsifies the present for contemporary man, causing him suddenly to age, and sprinkles fictions and dead perceptions into the present, which become as effective as perceptions that are of the moment.[34]

And not merely the extant art of the past had this effect, but, historically, most contemporary production did as well. Even in the twentieth century a major part of so-called modern art—Henri Matisse, with his metaphor of the painting as "armchair," was Einstein's bête noir in this regard—continued to serve this purpose;

32. Carl Einstein, "Totalität," *Anmerkungen* (Berlin: Verlag der Wochenschrift "Die Aktion," 1916), p. 32; English translation by Charles W. Haxthausen,"Totality," this issue, pp. 116–17. Einstein's position derives from the neo-Kantian theorist Konrad Fiedler. If, according to Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, objects are "given to us by means of our senses," for Fiedler it is *only as constituted through art* that such objects can be said to come into being for the viewing subject. "Artistic activity begins," wrote Fiedler, "where the human being encounters the visual world as something infinitely mysterious, where, driven by an internal necessity, he grasps, with the power of his mind, the confused mass of visual phenomena that assaults him and shapes from it an organized existence." He continues, "The artist does not need nature, rather it is nature that has need of the artist." The forms of the visual world as we perceive them are therefore not the starting point of art but its *end product*; plastic art is the source of our mental representations (*Vorstellungen*) of the visual world. "The artistic drive is a cognitive drive, artistic activity is an operation of the cognitive faculty, the artistic result is a cognitive result." Konrad Fiedler, *Schriften zur Kunst*, second edition, ed. Gottfried Boehm (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1992), vol. 1, pp. 32, 33, 46.
33. See Einstein's formulation of 1931: "Through vision we change human beings and the world." Carl Einstein, *Die Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts*, in *Carl Einstein Werke*, vol. 5, ed. Uwe Fleckner and Thomas W. Gaehtgens (Berlin: Fannei & Walz, 1996), p. 92.
34. Carl Einstein, unpublished notes from the late 1930s, *Werke 4*, p. 419.

it reinforced the inherited construct of the visible world. "The world is created, experiences have been fixed, and one passively submits to them. . . . The typology of vision is given, inherited from the masters and our destiny has been laid down like railroad tracks."[35] Such art Einstein scorned as "reactionary and life-diminishing, because, out of cowardice, it freezes what is past."[36]

Against this tendency Einstein advocated an art that was directed *against* the existing visual order. "Pictorial images are meaningful to us only when by means of them reality is destroyed and newly generated. Images are therefore tools for intensifying crisis. They should not represent but be." This passage pithily captures Einstein's faith in the radical potential of artistic form. Works of art should not reaffirm the given by means of mimesis, by "tautology," but as "living beings, provisional fragments," serve as an "early phase . . . of the real."[37] He cited the work of Fernand Léger as an art that had already fulfilled this purpose: "His influence on the milieu of the modern masses is considerable. Architecture and the imagery of the street often reflect early pictures by Léger, in which the reality of today was formed."[38]

For Einstein Cubism was the art that promised to fulfill art's radical potential, and he hailed it as such as early as 1913. For him the art of Georges Braque, Juan Gris, Léger, and above all that of Pablo Picasso was the most radical. Cubism "transformed the structure of vision and defined anew the optical image of the world, which had disintegrated into a confused anecdotal mass of objects."[39] And these tectonic forms of Cubism he declared to be the "most human," for they were "the distinguishing sign of the visually active human being, constructing his own universe and refusing to be the slave of given forms."[40]

> The Cubists' daring annihilation of the old *apparences* of reality demanded as its first step the dissolution and restructuring of the former person and his consciousness. Here we grasp the significance of Cubism, which ruptured the merely aesthetic and destroyed the conventions of bourgeois reality. Now painting had regained a sense of acting in and on the present. In their pictures the Cubists combated existing reality and its antiquated types, which they refused to reproduce. A subversive art, one directed against the existing order and its forms, had to be "antirealistic." . . . To copy was now an impossibility, because it meant nothing but the reproduction of dying *apparences*. In isolation they collaborated on the formation of a new reality.[41]

From this it should be clear what Einstein would have thought of Benjamin's faith

35. Einstein, *Die Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts* (1931), pp. 69, 70.
36. Einstein, *Georges Braque* (1934); *Werke 3*, p. 275.
37. Einstein, *Werke 3*, pp. 220, 221.
38. Einstein, "Léger: Neue Arbeiten," *Werke 3*, p. 590.
39. Einstein, *Georges Braque*, p. 270.
40. Einstein, "Notes on Cubism," this issue, p. 160.
41. Einstein, *Georges Braque*, p. 275.

in the power of reproductions to actualize works of past art, to make them into an instrument of social transformation. Any replication and multiplication of past forms was an obstacle to the new.

Yet Einstein ignored the critical issue of which Benjamin was so acutely aware—how medium determines the conditions for the reception of works of art and the dissemination of their effects:

> Painting, by its nature, cannot provide an object of simultaneous collective reception, as architecture has always been able to do, as the epic poem could do at one time, and as film is able to do today. And although direct conclusions about the social role of painting cannot be drawn from this fact alone, it does have a strongly adverse effect whenever painting is led by special circumstances, as if against its nature, to confront the masses directly.[42]

Einstein, on the other hand, could optimistically declare, around 1932, that Cubism "will influence how everyone sees"; yet, through all of his writings he never felt compelled to ask how, through what form of mediation this would occur.[43] Through reproductions perhaps? He had little to say about the technology of photomechanical reproduction as such, but where he did mention it he was usually negative. In 1922 Einstein wrote to Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, with reference to a planned (and never realized) monograph on Gris, that he wished to illustrate it with twenty plates, "but not of paintings: since on the whole I can no longer bear to look at reproductions of paintings." At most, he insisted, only reproductions of watercolors and graphic works would be acceptable—which in fact was the case with the color plates in the first two editions of his *Art of the Twentieth Century*. There are two other references in letters, to Erwin Panofsky and to the collector G. F. Reber, in which Einstein suggests that a collapse in the quality of writing on art had gone hand in hand with, as he phrased it to Panofsky, "an overestimation of the reproduction."[44]

Yet the differences between Einstein and Benjamin on the issue of reproduction go far beyond their respective attitudes about reproductions of works of art. While Einstein had little to say about technological reproduction, he had much to say about reproduction in a more general sense—it is a central concept, a *negative* factor, in his art theory. "Reproduction" is synonymous with "repetition," "imitation," and "tautology." Mimetic art he derided as "the reproduction business," in another instance, as "idiotic reproduction," and it satisfied a craven human

42. Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, p. 116.
43. Einstein, *Georges Braque*, p. 270.
44. Letter of December 1922, *Carl Einstein, Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler: Correspondance, 1921-1939*, ed. and trans. Liliane Meffre (Marseille: A. Dimanche, 1993), p. 132. Letter of January 4, 1933, *Erwin Panofsky: Korrespondenz 1910–1936*, ed. Dieter Wuttke (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz Verlag, 2001), p. 557. (I am grateful to Bruce Boucher for directing me to this letter.) See also Einstein's comment to the collector G. F. Reber in a letter of 1929, in Klaus H. Kiefer, *Avantgarde, Weltkrieg, Exil: Materialien zu Carl Einstein und Salomo Friedlaender/Mynona* (Frankfurt: Lang, 1986), pp. 67–68.

need—repetition "calmed those who feared death."[45] Images proved "more secure and durable than human beings"; "pictorial doubles fulfilled a longing for eternity."[46] A passage in his "Notes on Cubism" sums up his position:

> As stable signs of our actions, objects are precious. We treasure resemblance as a guarantee of life. The world as tautology. One duplicates creation, which is regarded as perfect. The astonishment wrought by miracles, the sensation of gaps, the multisensory experience of objects—all this disappears for the sake of a reassuring repetition. A bit of positive theology is eternalized by reproduction, and the need for identity is satisfied because everywhere one finds the identity that one sought within oneself. Yet we pay for this tendency toward reproduction by diminishing creation.[47]

The consummation of "this tendency toward reproduction," toward visual tautology, was the photograph; and with the perfecting of photographic technology the history of art would have come to an end.[48]

One can recognize Bergsonian motifs in Einstein's thinking on reproduction, or, more precisely, in his desire for an art that is directed *against* the functioning of memory as analyzed in *Matter and Memory*. "Memory, inseparable from perception, imports the past into the present," writes Bergson; in other words, perception is "impregnated with memory images which complete it as they interpret it."[49] Those memory images were for Einstein not merely personal but above all cultural, imprinted on the mind by art, and they were a "terrible legacy"

45. Carl Einstein, "Anmerkung [1932]," *Werke 3*, p. 219; "Diese aesthetiker veranlassen uns [Gestalt und Begriff]," Einstein, *Werke 4*, p. 218; English translation by Charles W. Haxthausen, "Gestalt and Concept" this issue, p. 169–76.

46. Einstein, "Notes on Cubism," this issue, p. 161.

47. Ibid., p. 165.

48. Carl Einstein, *Die Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts*, Propyläen-Kunstgeschichte 16 (Berlin: Propyläen-Verlag, 1926), p. 64; "Ich sehe ein Haus" (manuscript fragment), Einstein, *Werke 4*, p. 226. In holding such views Einstein revealed himself to have a remarkably narrow grasp of the photographic medium and to have been unfazed by the most progressive contemporary photographic theory. Moholy-Nagy, to cite only one source (one, incidentally, who is quoted by Benjamin in his "Little History of Photography"), developed a theory of photography that might seem, at first glance, to be compatible with Einstein's art theory. Moholy-Nagy stressed that photographic "reproduction (repetition of already existent relations)" was no more than empty virtuosity; he chose rather to emphasize photography's potential as a "productive" medium, one that expanded the world of the visible. Productive as opposed to reproductive photography gave us the capacity to "see the world with entirely different eyes," to transform human perception. Yet these claims were based on the belief that photography had made possible for the first time an "objective vision": "Everyone will be compelled to see that which is optically true, is explicable in its own terms, is objective. . . . This will abolish that pictorial and imaginative association pattern which has remained unsuperseded for centuries and which has been stamped upon our vision by great individual painters." Moholy-Nagy, *Painting, Photography, Film*, pp. 28–31. This is a notion that for Einstein would have been at best a delusion and at worst an end to human freedom, a death blow "to the visually active human being, constructing his own universe and refusing to be the slave of given forms." Einstein, "Notes on Cubism," this issue, p. 160.

49. Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer (New York: Zone, 1988), pp. 73, 133.

to be overcome. The greatest achievement of the Cubists was precisely that they destroyed "mnemonic images," that "they undermined memory."[50]

Ultimately Einstein's use of the term "reproduction" has less to do with Benjamin, that is with reproduced artifacts, than with Kant, specifically with reproduction as it relates to the faculty of cognition. According to Kant, it is the "reproductive faculty of the imagination" that enables us to "bring the manifold in visual perception into an image." The binding "synthesis of this manifold" is formed into a unity by means of concepts, through the process of apperception, the last stage in the cognition of an object. This reproductive imagination "rests on conditions of experience," that is of memory.[51] What for Kant was a mediating, indispensable function of the cognitive faculty is for Einstein a mechanism for the construction of a static and therefore deceptive image of the world. For the reproductive imagination, in its recall of the already perceived, sets limits to apprehension, exerting an inhibitory, conservative effect. He decisively rejected the subordinate role that sense apprehension (*Anschauung*) plays in Kant's epistemology:

> Visual apprehension [*Anschauung*] is not the stable material of higher powers, whom it should serve unchangingly, it is not only the memory of the given, but in art is refashioned into something autonomous. . . . In art visual apprehension becomes a productive factor, and as such it becomes the foundation of creative freedom and visual apprehension thereby becomes human. . . .[52]

What is apprehended, the manifold, what Einstein later calls *Gestalt*, becomes opposed to the concept.[53] The concept, which for Kant is the final stage in cognition of an object, is for Einstein an impoverishment of the Real. By the early 1930s Einstein had come to regard even cognition as "deadly"; "for cognition is an escape from the concrete, an elimination of events associated with gestalt, which are supplanted by logical operations. With every act of cognition or of judgment one distances oneself from the concrete event."[54]

Although Einstein wrote nothing in this context about reproduction of works of art, one can, I believe, surmise from the above what he would have said about the effect cited by Benjamin in his "Little History of Photography," i.e., that reproductions "help people to achieve the degree of power over the works without which they simply could not make use of them." Works over which one could gain power would have long since forfeited any transformative agency; their use would therefore have nothing to do with their concrete form, but would require reducing the work to a mere concept. Hence the given would inevitably be repeated and reinforced.

50. Einstein, "Notes on Cubism," this issue, p. 165.
51. Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, ed. Wilhelm Weischedel (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1974), vol. 1, pp. 174–77; see also p. 117.
52. Einstein, *Die Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts* (1931), p. 92.
53. See Einstein, "Gestalt and Concept," this issue, pp. 169–76.
54. Ibid., p. 172.

Reading Einstein alongside Benjamin brings out one of the stranger aspects of the latter's reproduction thesis. While Einstein sees the forms of the past as a deadly ballast, as an oppressive drag on creative vision, for Benjamin, it seems, no form, no style, is anachronistic; the historical resonance of the formal and spatial particulars of a painting, a sculpture, or a building are of no importance for its actualization; they seemingly have no share in aura. Once the image is excised, as it were, from its historical body through reproduction, it is free to be deployed for contemporary purposes. Clearly it is the *image*, not the form, that interests Benjamin, and, it seems, all images, regardless of their origins and formal articulation, are homogenized by reproductive technology. "The destruction of the aura," he writes, "is the signature of a perception whose 'sense for sameness in the world' has so increased that, by means of reproduction, it extracts sameness from what is unique."[55] In effect, the work of art loses all singularity, all concreteness. It is reduced to the status of a concept, for as Nietzsche defined it: "The concept originates through equating that which is not equal."[56] Yet in this case it is a concept that is *external* to the work, which, purged of aura, awaits "actualization." Einstein, for his part, insisted that what distinguished a work of art was that, "in contrast to the concept, it is defined by its singularity and nothing can touch its highest value, which is its concrete efficacy."[57]

To argue for Benjamin's indifference to the concrete visual substance of images will strike many as a provocative claim: Was not the very historicity of visual perception the premise on which he based his reproduction thesis? "Just as the entire mode of existence of human collectives changes over long historical periods" he wrote, "so too does their mode of perception." Reading this, one might conclude that Einstein and Benjamin were in substantial agreement, that they shared a common theoretical foundation. But the next sentence shows where Benjamin's real interest lay: "The way in which human perception is organized—the *medium* in which it occurs—is conditioned not only by nature but by history."[58]

Benjamin credited Aloïs Riegl for his insight into the historically changing nature of human perception, and over a period of more than a decade he repeatedly cited his indebtedness to him.[59] Yet Benjamin's interest in "perception" is as different from Riegl's as it is from Einstein's. He is vague about the relations between vision and cognition, and at bottom he displays no interest in the changing concrete visual and spatial constitution of the world through art but only in

55. Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, p. 105.
56. Friedrich Nietzsche, "Über Wahrheit und Lüge im außermoralischen Sinn," in *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Bänden*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1980), vol. 1, p. 880.
57. Einstein, *Die Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts* (1931), p. 91.
58. Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, p. 104. My emphasis.
59. On Benjamin and Riegl, see the still indispensable articles by Wolfgang Kemp, "Walter Benjamin und die Kunstgeschichte: Teil 1: Benjamins Beziehungen zur Wiener Schule," *Kritische Berichte* 1, no. 3 (1973), pp. 30–50, and "Fernbilder: Benjamin und die Kunstwissenschaft," in *Links hatte noch alles sich zu enträtseln: Walter Benjamin im Kontext*, ed. Burkhardt Lindner (Frankfurt: Syndikat, 1978), pp. 224–57.

the medium, the *Technik*, through which human perception is organized and how that medium configures the relationship to reality.[60] "The technological reproducibility of the artwork," asserted Benjamin, "changes the relation of the masses to art. The extremely backward attitude toward a Picasso painting changes into a highly progressive reaction to a Chaplin film." This statement tellingly reveals what is distinctive about Benjamin's ideas on perception. Here what is regressive or progressive is determined not by the form of the work, not primarily by the visual constitution or content of the image, but by the conditions of its reception.[61] The mass audience of cinema "has produced a different kind of participation" from that of the unique work of art, which "has always exerted a claim to be viewed primarily by a single person or a few."

This focus on medium and reception rather than on the forms of art produces a new master narrative of the history of art. "The vital, fundamental advances in art," Benjamin wrote in 1927, "are a matter neither of new content nor of new forms—the technological revolution takes precedence over both."[62] For Riegl the history of art was a continuum, a unity encompassing even the present, and the media in which the *Kunstwollen* manifested itself through history always fall into the same broad categories—painting, sculpture, architecture, decorative arts; the most significant events were changes in a *Kunstwollen* that produced a new perception of the world mediated through new forms. While Einstein rejected this historiographical model of history as continuity, in his writing he nevertheless theorized the social function of visual practices with an exclusive focus on these media. Both Riegl and Einstein were interested only in what Benjamin called the "first technology" of art, one which, in all of its changing forms, was driven by the desire to gain mastery over nature. Its origins lay in ritual; the objects were fashioned by human hands.

The "second technology," which began with the advent of photography and found its most vital contemporary expression in film, was one in which human beings, "by an unconscious ruse . . . first began to distance themselves from

60. Benjamin's emphasis on medium probably reflected the work of Eduard Fuchs, on whom he was intermittently writing at the time. "Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian" appeared the following year (1937). There Benjamin quotes the following passage from Fuchs's *Honoré Daumier* (1918–22): "Every age has very specific reproduction techniques corresponding to it. These represent the prevailing standard of technological development and are . . . the result of a specific need of that age. For this reason it is not surprising that any historical upheaval which brings to power . . . classes other than those currently ruling . . . regularly goes hand in hand with changes in techniques of pictorial reproduction. This fact calls for careful elucidation." Benjamin cited his reading of Fuchs's books on Daumier and Gavarni in a letter of September 10, 1935, to Gretel Karplus. Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe*, ed. Christoph Gödde and Henri Lonitz (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1995), vol. 5, p. 162.

61. In his long, critical response to Benjamin on this essay, Adorno took strong exception to this passage: "The idea that a reactionary individual can be transformed into a member of the avant-garde through an intimate acquaintance with the films of Chaplin, strikes me as simple romanticization; for I cannot count Kracauer's favorite film director, even after *Modern Times*, as an avant-garde artist, and I cannot believe that the valuable elements in this piece of work will attract the slightest attention anyway. You need only have heard the laughter of the audience at the screening of this film to realize what is going on." Letter of March 18, 1936, Adorno and Benjamin, *Correspondence*, p. 130.

62. Walter Benjamin, "Reply to Oskar A. H. Schmitz," *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, p. 17.

nature."[63] This second technology aims at an interplay between nature and humanity, and, Benjamin declares:

> The primary social function of art today is to rehearse that interplay. The function of film is to train human beings in the apperceptions and reactions needed to deal with a vast apparatus whose role in their lives is expanding almost daily. Dealing with this apparatus also teaches them that technology will release them from their enslavement to the powers of the apparatus only when humanity's whole constitution has adapted itself to the new productive forces which the second technology has set free.[64]

Accordingly, later in the essay, when he is dealing with film, Benjamin writes that among its social functions the most important is "to establish an equilibrium between human beings and the apparatus."

Rainer Rochlitz has observed that "for Benjamin—at least in this, 'The Work of Art' essay—the medium is already the message; the significance of art is reduced to the medium through which it addresses the public."[65] Rochlitz's characterization might seem unfair. After all, in his rare commentaries on film Benjamin did discuss the medium in terms of the visual content and its cognitive effects, which open up "a new realm of consciousness."[66] Through "swooping and rising, disrupting and isolating, stretching or compressing a sequence, enlarging or reducing an object," the camera leads us to perceive reality in new ways; we discover the "optical unconscious." In introducing the idea of the optical unconscious Benjamin makes it clear that this is not confined merely to revealing new aspects of "the *normal* spectrum of sense impressions" but also the "instinctual unconscious of psychoanalysis."[67] But my concern here, for purposes of comparison with Einstein, is with the discovery of the optical unconscious as it relates to perception. Even though Benjamin's topic is film, this discussion nonetheless invites comparison with the process that Einstein

63. Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, p. 107.
64. Ibid., pp. 107–08.
65. Rainer Rochlitz, *The Disenchantment of Art: The Philosophy of Walter Benjamin*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (London: The Guilford Press, 1996), p. 158. The cited passage merits further quotation: "Benjamin does not allow himself to recognize in the aesthetic quality of works—their coherence, their force of revelation, their ability to open eyes and elicit new ways of seeing and evaluating—the desacralized heir to what he had called aura. In a peculiar manner, his sociological theory or art now leads him to be interested not in works of art, but only in the social functions that art as such fills 'in the age of its mechanical reproducibility.' Yet these functions are no longer linked to the significance of a unique work."
66. Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, p. 17.
67. Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, pp. 117–18. The psychoanalytic dimension of the optical unconscious comprises "the deformations and stereotypes, transformations and catastrophes which can assail the optical world in films alter the actual world in psychoses, hallucinations, and dreams." By enabling the collective reception of these disturbing individual psychic phenomena in cinema, Benjamin proposes that cinema can tame them. Here he compares this forced stimulation of psychotic fantasies to immunization. The psychoanalytic dimension of Benjamin's reproduction theory merits examination alongside Einstein's theories of hallucination, automatism, etc., which were influenced by Surrealism and occur in his writings of the Paris period, beginning with his Picasso chapter in the second edition of *Die Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts* (1928).

saw exemplified in Cubism, i.e., vision as function. For Benjamin what the camera reveals are previously unobserved aspects of objects, movements, and spaces, which are taken to be givens that exist apart from the perceiving subject. What Cubism renders in pictorial form, on the other hand, is not something that exists prior to vision, awaiting discovery as it were, but our own cognitive movements in the figuring of objects and spaces.[68] Einstein writes: "Instead of presenting, as one did previously, a group of different objective movements, one creates a group of subjective optical movements." These movements reveal the visual world to be "a function of human vision," to be our own creation, and therefore, one that can be constructed differently.[69]

In the "Work of Art" essay, Benjamin illustrated the difference between painting and cinema with a metaphor: "Magician is to surgeon as painter is to cinematographer."

> The attitude of the magician, who heals a sick person by a laying-on of hands, differs from that of the surgeon, who makes an intervention in the patient. . . . The painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, whereas the cinematographer penetrates deeply into its tissue. The images obtained by each differ enormously. The painter's is a total image, whereas that of the cinematographer is piecemeal, its manifold parts being assembled according to a new law.[70]

In this metaphor the patient that is cut open by the surgeon is reality; the "manifold parts being assembled according to a new law" are *out there*. Yet, it is Benjamin's metaphor of the surgeon that best suits Einstein's concept of the *painter*, but here the patient is *human vision*, and the painter is a *brain* surgeon. What is reassembled is not reality but visual function.

Word/Image

In section seven of Benjamin's "Work of Art" essay there is a passage that seems oddly discordant with his comments later, in section fifteen, about the "optical unconscious" opened up by cinematic perception. In the latter passage Benjamin seems to attribute to technologically mediated visual experience the potential to effect collective change, yet in this earlier passage he equates the comprehension of cinema with the meanings established by *language*, i.e., with the captions that in illustrated magazines serve as signposts to the reader:

68. Significantly, Einstein dismissed the efforts of the Futurists to render movement as "cinematographic," as "ossified film narrative." Einstein, *Die Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts* (1931), p. 108.
69. Carl Einstein, "Notes on Cubism," this issue, pp. 163–66. Benjamin's example falls into the category of mechanical repetition of motor movements, a bodily aptitude formed by what Bergson called habit memory, and which he distinguished from the mental representations produced by the intersection of perception with memory images that was Einstein's concern.
70. Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, pp. 115–16.

> whether these are right or wrong is irrelevant. For the first time, captions become obligatory. And it is clear that they have a character altogether different from the titles of paintings. The directives given by captions to those looking at images in illustrated magazines soon become even more precise and commanding in films, where the way each single image is understood seems prescribed by the sequence of all the preceding images.[71]

In this passage Benjamin does not specifically mention spoken dialogue or the intertitles of silent films, but it is clear from the context that the sequence of cinematic images, which precludes the "free-floating contemplation" that characterizes the response to painting, creates a "directive" that has the status of a linguistic message, like the captions of the magazine and newspaper photograph. This suggests that, whatever the effect of the technical apparatus of film on the sense perception of the spectator, it is ultimately the *word* that makes it a political instrument. This is consistent with the position Benjamin had articulated two years earlier in his lecture "The Author as Producer," in which he declares that the political struggle of the working class was being furthered by the "literarization of all the conditions of life."[72] Indeed, such a position is completely consistent with the trajectory of his thought since youth. Precisely this issue of language and its relation to the visual field lies at the core of differences between Einstein and Benjamin on the issue of reproduction.

The primacy of word over image is evident in Benjamin's earliest attempt at formulating a theory of art, his curious early essay, "Painting, or Signs and Marks," into which he put considerable thought in the late summer and fall of 1917, although he never published it.[73] In this short philosophical text he attempted to establish the fundamental distinction between graphic art, an art of signs or *Zeichen*, and painting. Benjamin built on the derivation of *Malerei*, painting, from *Mal*, defined in the Grimms' *Deutsches Wörterbuch* as: (1a) a naturally caused spot or blemish on the human body; and (1b) the sign of illness or injury on the body. Benjamin writes: "Whereas the absolute sign does not for the most part appear in living beings but can be impressed or appear on lifeless buildings, trees, and so on, the mark appears on living beings (Christ's stigmata, blushes, perhaps leprosy and birthmarks.)" It is only a "higher power" that elevates the stain of colors to a pictorial image, to a "composition": "This power is the word [*das sprachliche Wort*], which lodges in the medium of the composition." A picture that cannot be named "would cease to be one and would therefore enter into the realm of the mark as such; but this is something that we cannot imagine."[74] "The great epochs of painting,"

71. Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, pp. 108.
72. Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, pp. 772, 776.
73. Walter Benjamin, "Painting, or Signs and Marks," *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, pp. 83–86. The original German title is "Malerei, oder Zeichen und Mal," and "mark" does not quite capture the resonance of "Mal" or capture its semantic link to "Malerei."
74. Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, pp. 84, 86.

Benjamin concluded, "are distinguished according to composition and medium—that is to say according to which word and into which mark the medium enters."[75]

The catalyst for Benjamin's essay was a letter from Gershom Scholem that is unfortunately lost, but we can get the probable gist of it from Benjamin's response. Challenged by the radical example of Cubism, Scholem had evidently sought to construct a model of painting broad enough to encompass the Cubists as well as Raphael. He proposed that all painterly practice, whatever its degree of relative abstraction or naturalism, could be located within one of a trichotomy of modes: colorless (*farblose*) or linear painting, color (*farbige*) painting, and synthetic painting (presumably a combination of line and color). Cubism he apparently regarded as an example of the first of these modes. Benjamin, however, rejected this purely formal differentiation and sought instead to ground the unity of all painting in the dyadic relationship between *Wort* and *Mal*, between word and mark. He rejected Scholem's position that the "quintessence," the defining task, of Cubism was "to convey the nature of the space that constitutes the world through the analysis of that space"; this, Benjamin argued, reflected a mistaken understanding concerning the relationship of painting to its sensuous object. A painting could not, by representing the subject of a "Lady with Fan," produce an analysis of the nature of space; what it communicated had to concern that specific subject.[76]

In this same letter to Scholem, Benjamin made it clear what was at stake for him: "to let the problem of painting merge with the great domain of language, whose contours I indicate in my work on language."[77] In that work, "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," Benjamin argued that if within creation all things had their respective language through which they communicated themselves, the linguistic essence of man was the act of naming. More important, this act of naming was a trait that man shared with God; "God's creation is completed when things receive their names from man." The creation narrative in the Book of Genesis linked the act of naming with God's act of creating. Benjamin saw everything created, including painting and sculpture, as having a language in which it communicated itself; but it is only through the act of naming, "the translation of the nameless into name," that they are translated into "the language of man."[78] It is this process that is reenacted in the naming of a painting; it is this act of naming that makes the mark into an image.

Benjamin's belief in the primacy of the word remained fundamental to his thinking throughout his subsequent development, including his embrace of Marxism in the later 1920s. This privileging of word over image is central to the discussion of symbol and allegory in the final chapter of his book on the German baroque *Trauerspiel*, published in 1928. He opened that chapter with a withering

75. Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, p. 86.
76. The words are Scholem's as quoted by Benjamin, *Briefe*, vol. 1, pp. 393, 395.
77. Benjamin, *Briefe*, vol. 1, p. 395.
78. Benjamin, "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, pp. 62–74.

critique of the Romantics' usurpation of the theological concept of the symbol, the paradoxical "unity of the material and transcendent object," which they distorted into a philosophy of beauty that "insists on the indivisible unity of form and content." This "distorted conception," this "destructive extravagance," lived on in the "desolation of modern art criticism."[79] Allegory, on the other hand, which is opposed to the aesthetic symbol's ostensible unity of form and content, works in the "depths which separate visual being and meaning"; the object is "quite incapable of generating any meaning or significance on its own; such significance as it has, it acquires from the allegorist," who inscribes it with meaning, for allegory is "a form of *writing*."[80]

The allegorist's view that the object "is quite incapable of generating any meaning or significance on its own" is evident in Benjamin's insistence, in his "Little History of Photography," on the necessity of a caption for the photograph. For without such inscription, he asserts, "all photographic construction must remain arrested in the approximate."[81] What sort of inscription Benjamin had in mind becomes explicit in his lecture of three years later, "The Author as Producer": "What we require from the photographer is the ability to give his picture a caption that wrenches it from modish commerce and gives it a revolutionary use value. But we will make this demand most emphatically when we—the writers—take up photography." This required overthrowing one of the antitheses that fettered the production of intellectuals, namely "the barrier between script and image."[82]

As Benjamin began his book on *Trauerspiel*, he confided to Scholem what was

79. Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 1998), pp. 159–60.

80. Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, pp. 165, 185. My emphasis. As Sigrid Weigel writes, "it is clear that Benjamin regarded images in terms of their property as writing (*Schrift*) rather than as representations. As such, Benjamin's concept of images has nothing to do with the history of material images. . . ." Sigrid Weigel, "Thought-Images: A Re-reading of the 'Angel of History,'" *Body and Image-Space: Re-reading Walter Benjamin*, trans. Georgina Paul (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 49.

81. Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, p. 527. The human subjects of the first, "auratic," photographs were, significantly, *unbeschriftet*, uninscribed; they "entered the visual space of photography with their innocence intact—or rather, without inscription. Newspapers were still luxury items . . . the photographic process had not yet become a journalistic tool and ordinary people had yet to see their names in print" (p. 512).

82. Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, p. 775. In the same text Benjamin, quoting the composer Hanns Eisler, makes a similar point about the effect of words in music: " . . . the task of changing the concert is impossible without the collaboration of the word. It alone can effect the transformation, as Eisler formulates it, into a political meeting" (p. 776). See also Benjamin's comments regarding the "obligatory" captions to the photographs in the illustrated magazines in "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" (*Selected Writings*, vol. 3, p. 108), and also his "Letter from Paris (2): Painting and Photography" (*Selected Writings*, vol. 3, p. 241). Even after Benjamin seemed to move away from the instrumentalist view of language of his middle period, the primacy of the word remains apparent in his short but unjustly ignored late text, "Chinese Painting," a review of an exhibition at the Bibliothèque Nationale in 1938. It is understandable that Benjamin would be drawn to these works, in which inscriptions by artists were frequently an integral part of the image. These paintings combined that "which appears to be irreconcilably opposed, i.e., the thought and the image." Walter Benjamin, "Peintures chinoises à la Bibliothèque Nationale," *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1972), vol. 4, p. 603.

at stake in his project: to salvage and rehabilitate allegory.[83] It was through his encounter with the work of Bertolt Brecht, whom he met in May 1929, that Benjamin found a way to actualize his desire for the rehabilitation of allegory, to endow it with a strategic political dimension.[84] Part of Brecht's appeal certainly lay in his theories about language, more specifically of *Literarisierung*, of literarization—through slogans, captions, quotations—as a political strategy to mobilize the masses, words as a catalyst for reflection leading to action.[85] Hence even in a verbal art form like the theater, the action is punctuated by text projected into the scenes, commenting on the action, "interspersing 'formulations' throughout the 'performed,'" contributing to the *Verfremdungseffekt*, the estrangement effect that worked against the spectators' propensity to empathy.[86] Benjamin had quoted Brecht on this topic in his unpublished manuscript, "What Is Epic Theater," completed early in 1931, and he cited him again several months later in "Little History of Photography": "A photograph of the Krupp works or the AEG tells us next to nothing about these institutions."[87] Benjamin adds: "Isn't it the task of the photographer . . . to reveal guilt and point out the guilty in his pictures? . . . Won't inscription become the most important part of the photograph?" Adopting Brecht's term, Benjamin related this to the "literarization of the conditions of life," the phrase he later repeated in "The Author as Producer."[88]

"The technological reproducibility of the work of art leads to its literarization"—this was the third of eight "provisional theses" that Benjamin formulated in preparing his "Work of Art" essay. He then crossed out "literarization" and replaced it with "politicization."[89] But it should be obvious that, in accord with Brecht, the terms were synonymous, or at least linked: reproduction promotes literarization, and hence politicization. And this literarization is, at bottom, *allegorization*, the

83. Letter to Gershom Scholem, December 22, 1924, *Briefe*, vol. 2, p. 508.

84. As Bernd Witte formulates it, "By becoming sociologically concrete, allegory for its part acquires a political dimension." See Witte, *Walter Benjamin: An Intellectual Biography* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), pp. 119–20. On Benjamin's relationship to Brecht, see Witte's still indispensable article, "Krise und Kritik. Zur Zusammenarbeit Benjamins mit Brecht in den Jahren 1929 bis 1933," in *Walter Benjamin: Zeitgenosse der Moderne*, ed. Peter Gebhardt (Kronberg/Taunus: Scriptor, 1976), pp. 9–36.

85. Bertolt Brecht, "Zu *Die Dreigroschenoper*," in Brecht, *Werke: Grosse kommentierte Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe*, ed. Werner Hecht and Jan Knopf (Berlin/Frankfurt: Aufbau/Suhrkamp, 1988), vol. 24, p. 56.

86. Ibid., p. 58. *Verfremdungseffekt*, thanks to John Willett, is normally translated as "alienation effect." But as Fredric Jameson argues, "estrangement effect" is more accurate. The term *Verfremdungseffekt* "seems to have migrated from the 'ostranenie' or 'making-strange' of the Russian modernists via any number of visits to Berlin by Soviet modernists like Eisenstein or Tretiakov." Fredric Jameson, *Brecht and Method* (London: Verso, 1998), pp. 39, 85–86, n. 13.

87. In the first, unpublished version of "What is Epic Theater," completed early in 1931, Benjamin quotes Brecht's remarks on *Literarisierung* from his notes to *The Threepenny Opera* (see n. 85). See Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2, pp. 524–25.

88. Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, pp. 526–27. Brecht's formulation, in his "Notes to *The Threepenny Opera*," is: "Die Literarisierung aller öffentlichen Angelegenheiten," the literarization of all public affairs. Brecht, *Werke*, vol. 24, p. 58.

89. Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1, p. 1039.

inscription of the de-auraticized work of art, no longer capable of generating any meaning on its own.

Einstein's position could hardly be more different. Allegory he once characterized as "a form of murder, since it suppresses the object and robs it of its proper meaning."[90] The "proper meaning" of the object remained within the autonomous realm of the visual, impenetrable by language. In contrast to Benjamin, for whom the act of naming things was an imitation of divine creation, Einstein equated naming with loss, with a disenchantment, an impoverishment of the world. In a fragment for his unfinished novel, "Bebuquin II," the child BEB (Einstein's alter-ego) experiences in his newly acquired ability to speak a terrifying, deadly power:

> On no account does the child want to speak rationally. . . . Through speaking, his youth and secret fairy tales die. BEB ages through language, which poisons and cripples him. This foul old stagnant pool infects. . . . The child experiences how in language an uncanny power takes control of him, one that continues to work within him and speaks through him against his will. The child wishes to remain mute. . . . Persons [and] animals come or make sounds or threaten him when he names them. But the things that were previously alive for him are now dead. They remain as though lamed by astonishment and are lost to him. So through his speaking most of the world becomes dead for him, becomes powerless and mute. Now he flees his old thing-friends, whom he has killed by speaking (this is how he feels).[91]

This infectious "foul old stagnant pool" of language—created, Einstein writes elsewhere in this fragment, "by spirits and the dead"—parallels the dead artistic forms of bygone eras that continue to haunt the present, forming a hard, impenetrable crust over the concrete, dynamic Real.

As one might deduce from Einstein's position on reproduction, language's impoverishment of the Real was due in part to its necessarily iterative, reproductive character. The linguistic signified is always a concept, and hence, for Einstein, a pale abstraction of the concrete singularity to be found within the Real. Language was a major cause of our propensity to freeze a dynamic, ever changing reality into rigid signs. "The rigidity of things," he wrote, "is effected by linguistic habit and . . . produced by our desire for comfortable, i. e. repeatable signals for actions."[92]

The failure of language vis-à-vis the manifold, concrete *Gestalt*, as Einstein called the unfiltered subjective experience of the Real, naturally extended also to the relationship between word and pictorial image. He was scornful of those who believed that "the visible could be rendered in words and [who], numbed by the

90. Carl Einstein, "Dictionaire critique: Rossignol," Einstein, *Werke 3*, p. 31; English translation, Charles W. Haxthausen, "Critical Dictionary: Nightingale," this issue, p. 153.
91. "Bebuquin II," CEA Berlin. Quoted in Kiefer, *Avantgarde, Weltkrieg, Exil*, p. 15.
92. Einstein, *Die Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts* (1931), p. 94.

sound of their own baying, failed to see the hopeless gulf between word and image." In a passage from his last book, *Georges Braque*, he summed up his own approach: "We shall not attempt to describe in words the extraordinary work of Braque or to imitate its hues and mandolins, its figures and lighting; speaking and painting—each has its own way." His goal, rather, was to determine how the formal constructs of art "approach our own state of mind, i. e., how they fit into a preexisting image of the world and into our own life, or how they contradict it, unsettle it, or influence it." He sought to articulate what he saw as the vision that generated the form, to evoke the visual character of a body of work, avoiding any impression that he was somehow offering a verbal equivalent, a "paraphrase," of a concrete visual experience untranslatable into language. Einstein was contemptuous of "effete word-*decorateurs*" who "exploit" pictures, "instead of opening themselves to pictures' power to alter vision. . . . They debase themselves, becoming illustrators of someone else's creation, instead of using pictures as visual material like any other for fashioning one's own mental position."[93] In effect this amounts to an indictment of Benjamin's allegorical position.

In the end, of course, the hopes of Einstein and Benjamin for a socially transformative visual practice proved illusory—indeed, as such their theories represent the twilight of a dream of the historical avant-garde. In view of this failure their fundamental differences on issues of reproduction, language, and vision might seem to be of little consequence. And yet, for critical practice there is a profound difference between a model that locates the agency of a work of visual art in the linguistic meanings inscribed onto it and one that locates that agency in the cognitive impact of a work's singular, concrete visuality, a visuality with the potential to unsettle, to destabilize the very constructs of language.

Epilogue

In staging a dialogue between Einstein and Benjamin on the issue of reproduction, I have omitted a significant fact: the cited texts by the two authors are in most cases not strictly contemporary with each other; there is a chronological misalignment in their careers. Benjamin's first essays on film and photography date from 1927 and 1928, respectively, but it is not until the 1930s that he wrote his two

93. Einstein, *Georges Braque*, pp. 253, 255. The consequences of Einstein's radical renunciation of description are particularly evident in his treatment, in the third edition of *The Art of the 20th Century,* of the highly diverse oeuvre of Paul Klee: supplementing a discussion of more than ten pages with illustrations of twenty-five works (the third largest number given to any artist), Einstein makes no reference to a single work by title, nor does he even relate his commentary to specific plate numbers. *Die Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts* (1931), pp. 259-269, pp. 667-687, plates XXX-XXXI. On the question of pictorial description in Einstein's writing, see German Neundorfer, "Ekphrasis in Carl Einsteins *Negerplastik*," in *Carl-Einstein-Kolloquium 1998: Carl Einstein in Brüssel: Dialoge über Grenzen,* ed. Roland Baumann and Hubert Roland (Frankfurt/Main: Peter Lang, 2001), pp. 49–64, as well as his *"Kritik an Anschauung": Bildbeschreibung im kunstkritischen Werk Carl Einsteins* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2003).

major theoretical essays on these media.[94] In October 1931, when Benjamin's "Little History of Photography," appeared, Einstein's career as a publishing art critic was, by his own choice, coming to an end. Although a substantially revised third edition of his *Art of the Twentieth Century* was published in that year and he was at work on *Georges Braque*, his most extensive and developed theoretical text on visual art, Einstein's belief in the social relevance of avant-garde art as well as in its potential to effect collective change was near collapse. Around the time that Benjamin published his photography essay Einstein wrote to Ewald Wasmuth of his growing disgust with art criticism and his plan to abandon it:

> The art book that I still have to do will be my last. I have had enough of it, it makes me puke. Enough of theories, too. We have been pasted over with this wallpaper long enough. Either something completely different will come my way or Herr Einstein isn't writing anymore. If it's a matter of earning money, then I can do that more comfortably in some other way.[95]

Einstein kept to his resolution—he apparently wrote no more art criticism after 1932, although *Georges Braque* was not published until 1934. An undated text, almost certainly from this time, found among many neatly cut correction strips intended for what was presumably once a manuscript for the never completed "Bebuquin II" novel, reveals the bottomless depth of his despair. Describing his alter-ego BEB, he writes: "the eternal phony revolutionary becomes completely sterile and remains hopelessly behind the changing conditions of the times, because he is always fighting for the same revolutionary utopia, which he seeks to achieve through a change in artistic form."[96] In 1936, a few months after Benjamin published, in French translation, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, Einstein and his wife Lyda left Paris, "without saying a word," and set out for Spain, where he served, initially as a journalist, and then as a combatant under Buenaventura Durruti with the Anarcho-Syndicalist forces in the Spanish Civil War.[97] As he later wrote to Kahnweiler, "Nowadays the rifle is necessary to make up for the cowardice of the pen."[98] Sometime between the completion of *Georges Braque* and his departure for Spain, he produced a manuscript of nearly 500 pages, "The

94. "On the Present Situation of Russian Film" and "Reply to Oskar A. H. Schmitz" (on Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*) appeared in *Die literarische Welt* in March 1927 (*Selected Writings*, vol. 2, pp. 12–19); "News about Flowers," a review of Karl Blossfeldt's *Urformen der Kunst: Photographische Pflanzenbilder*, appeared in the same journal in November 1928. Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, pp. 155–57.
95. The letter, written on a typewriter from Paris, is dated "28.XV[*sic*].31." Ewald Wasmuth archives, Deutsches Literatur-Archiv, Marbach. One assumes that Einstein must have meant to type "I" instead of "V," which would date the letter to the time when Benjamin's photography essay appeared, in the October/November issue of *Die literarische Welt*.
96. "Bebuquin II," folder 35, Carl-Einstein-Archiv, Berlin Akademie der Künste.
97. On Einstein's years in Spain, see Liliane Meffre, *Carl Einstein, 1885–1940: Itinéraires d'une pensée moderne* (Paris: Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 2002), pp. 290–305.
98. Letter of January 6, 1939[?], *Carl Einstein, Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler: Correspondance*, pp. 106, 107.

Fabrication of Fictions," that was at once a searing, unsparing critique of avant-garde culture and a bitter self-reckoning with his own former delusions about it.[99]

After abandoning art criticism, Einstein seems at last to have faced the media question that, as Benjamin was writing in these very years, was more important for the advance of the history of art than changes in either form or content. There is evidence, albeit fragmentary, of Einstein's belated recognition of the importance of film and photography for modern culture. It is this development that I now wish to examine.

It is difficult to extrapolate from Einstein's writing a clearly defined position on photography. As an art critic he certainly used photographs on a routine basis, and, like most people, he exchanged them with friends and lovers. And yet, curiously, there is throughout his published and unpublished writing no serious effort to incorporate photography into his theory of vision except as the ultimate form of visual "tautology," of "the idiotic reproduction business." Although Einstein was associated for a time with the Berlin Dadaists, he neither wrote about the photomontages of George Grosz and John Heartfield nor did he reproduce them in any of the three editions of *The Art of the Twentieth Century*. In his single discussion of photomontage (with reference to a mixed-media Dadaist work by Rudolf Schlichter), he refers to those photographic elements pejoratively as "ready-formed elements of mechanical life."[100] Writing of the more realist work of Grosz and Otto Dix, he recognized the allure of a photography-inspired verism for the artist intent on reaching the masses. These painters had succumbed to the "fabulous effects of photography in magazines and the cinema"; consequently their art often degenerated into a "propagandistic, universally understandable demonstration of actual reality . . . photography writ large with an exclamation point; uncompromising photography for the benefit of the suffering," "precise depictions for the workers." What resulted was painting in which the motif was "more revolutionary than the power of the formal construction." In other words, this was painting that only reinforced the visual and epistemic order that it believed to subvert.[101] The passage is striking in that Einstein at least concedes that the desire to reach the masses would drive a painter to compete with the photograph.[102]

99. Carl Einstein, *Die Fabrikation der Fiktionen*, ed. Sibylle Penkert, Gesammelte Werke in Einzelausgaben (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1973).

100. On Einstein and Berlin Dada, see my "Bloody Serious: Two Texts by Carl Einstein," *October* 105 (Summer 2003), pp. 105–18. This formulation, and Einstein's thought on repetition and fixity more generally, strongly suggest that his resistance to photography was attributable in part to those very qualities that Craig Owens, quoting and expanding on Benjamin, identified as the "allegorical potential" of the medium: "'An appreciation of the transience of things, and the concern to rescue them for eternity, is one of the strongest impulses in allegory.' And photography, we might, add. As an allegorical art, then, photography would represent our desire to fix the transitory, the ephemeral, in a stable and stabilizing image." Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism," in *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture*, ed. Scott Bryson, Barbara Kruger, Lynne Tillman, and Jane Weinstock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p. 56.

101. Einstein, *Die Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts (*1931), pp. 227–28.

102. It is noteworthy that Benjamin, writing in 1937, came to a diametrically opposite verdict on Grosz and Dix, precisely because of their fulfillment of the nineteenth-century prophecy that "painting and

Only in "The Fabrication of Fictions" did Einstein finally acknowledge the impact of technology on art, as he addressed what he now saw as the destructive consequences of photography for the practice of painting. This occurs in an extended discussion of the fate of the arts in modernity, which for the sake of clarity I quote here at length:

> The people of the final, liberal phase rapidly used up formal and linguistic means. Perhaps intellectuals were driven to such haste by the tempo of technological development. Through the mass of journalism everyday language had become hackneyed and useless for relating facts. Now the poets sought after new words and signs. They formed a more hermetic, sectarian poetic language. Modern mannerism was born.
>
> At the same time a significant share of visual experiences and ideas were realized by photography, and simultaneously devalued. The artists who wanted to avoid adapting to convention therefore had to leave behind the large domain of technological vulgarization; but by doing this the possibilities for modern art became extremely limited or at least displaced.[103]

Photography had pushed art into ineffectual isolation. Two decades earlier Einstein had declared, "Art transforms vision as a whole, the artist determines how we form our general images of the world"; now he writes "a significant share of visual experiences and ideas were realized by photography, and simultaneously devalued."[104] Einstein had arrived at a view closer to that Benjamin expressed during these same years, except that in Benjamin's view photography had already eclipsed painting after Gustave Courbet. And while Einstein saw only negative consequences in the ascendancy of photography, Benjamin hailed this development, for "the usefulness of the image has been considerably expanded by photography."[105]

The most surprising development of the 1930s is in Einstein's relationship to film. What little he had published about the medium was corrosively negative. His only essay on the subject, "The Bankruptcy of German Film," published in 1922 in *Der Querschnitt*, oozes contempt and *Schadenfreude*:

> When stepping into a cinema, one checks not only his hat and cane at the cloak room but above all his brain and life experience, in order to subject himself to the most painful stupidity. . . . He feels an embarrassed shame,

photography must one day fuse together." It is their works that inspired him to declare: "Painting has not lost its function." See "Letter from Paris (2): Painting and Photography," *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, p. 242.

103. Einstein, "Die Fabrikation der Fiktionen," Folder 6, pp. 176–77, CEA, Akademie der Künste Berlin. Because Einstein's meaning is clear in the original manuscript, later corrected, I quote from it rather than from Sybille Penkert's published edition.

104. Einstein, "Totality," this issue, p. 116.

105. Benjamin, "Letter from Paris (2): Painting and Photography," pp. 239, 240–41.

> as though he were stepping out of a house of ill repute, when all he has done is look at some atavistic childishness.[106]

Einstein spared only Charlie Chaplin from this gleeful orgy of verbal destruction. (This, at least, is one point on which he agreed with Benjamin.) Eight years later, in a brief note on current cultural events in Paris written for a German magazine, Einstein mocked Sergei Eisenstein's signing on with Paramount ("we are convinced that the worthy collectivist director has negotiated a smart contract"), and took swipes at Erich von Stroheim and Emil Jannings, although he seemed at least to give Luis Buñuel ("Bunnyel") the benefit of the doubt.[107] Yet, four years later Einstein was writing a screenplay—for Jean Renoir's *Tony*.[108] From the meager evidence that remains it is difficult to know whether Einstein turned to film at this time out of economic expediency or out of the conviction that, after his clear-eyed recognition of the social irrelevance of avant-garde painting and sculpture, this was the only visual art form with the potential to reach the masses.

One might conclude that Einstein's work with Renoir was a failed experiment, a dead end, were it not for his taking up a film project in Spain in 1938. Three times in letters to Kahnweiler he refers to working on a film of which he is "author of the screenplay, manager, and director in one person."[109] In a 1938 interview with a Spanish newspaper, he also spoke briefly of this project, and gave the title, "La Paz que mata" (The Peace that Kills).[110] This is all that we know of the project, yet it seems clear that Einstein viewed the film at the very least as an effective instrument of propaganda in the struggle against Franco.

Finally, there is one more brief reference to film and photography to be considered here, which appears in the large collection of notes and fragments related to a hugely ambitious project under the title "Manuel des arts," and "Handbuch der Kunst," a handbook of art. We cannot be certain of the span of dates during which Einstein worked on this project—given the quantity of notes, its beginnings must predate his departure for Spain; and dated material confirms that he did work on it after his return to Paris in February 1939. The extensive notes, in both French and German, suggest that in the "Handbuch" Einstein aimed to construct a new kind of art history, one unprecedented in its scope, which focused on art's

106. Carl Einstein, "Die Pleite des deutschen Films," *Werke Band 2. 1919–1928*, ed. Hermann Haarmann and Klaus Siebenhaar (Berlin: Fannei & Walz, 1996), p. 210.

107. Carl Einstein "A propos," *Werke 2*, pp. 151–52.

108. Liliane Meffre has turned up important new documentation of this collaboration. Her account is the most extensive to date. See Meffre, *Carl Einstein*, pp. 274–90. From correspondence between Einstein's Paris acquaintances Claire and Ivan Goll we learn that, in 1933, he was talking to G. W. Pabst, presumably about a screenplay, but nothing came of it. On this, see Rolf-Peter Baake, "Carl Einstein—Kunstagent," in *Carl Einstein: Materialien. I: Zwischen Bebuquin und Negerplastik*, ed. Rolf–Peter Bakke (Berlin: Silver & Goldstein, 1990), p. 22.

109. Two undated letters from 1938, *Einstein/Kahnweiler Correspondance*, pp. 94, 97, 99. See also Meffre's discussion of this project in Meffre, *Carl Einstein*, pp. 289–90.

110. A German translation of the interview by Marianne Kröger, "Carl Einstein erläutert den Mehrfrontenkrieg und die Kriegspläne des Nazifaschismus," has been reprinted in Einstein, *Werke 4*, pp. 645–49.

changing functions—“social and biological”—within the diverse cultures of the world, from prehistoric times until modernity.[111] A recurring theme in the notes is art’s development from an anonymous collective achievement serving crucial social functions to an autonomous, individualistic, socially isolated practice in modernity. The projected work—which at one point was to encompass five volumes[112]—examined an historical and anthropological phenomenon, art, which had for centuries been central to human culture but which, in modernity, had become marginal:

> Modernity: This deprives the history of art of all meaning. On the whole anything that happens in art resembles a sport, a game that has become pointless. Older art has, if we are honest with ourselves, lost all meaning. And the “new art” has been left far behind by the social and political present. The oppositional posture of modern art is already obsolete.[113]

It is against this background of art’s irrelevance, the end of the history of art, that film and photography enter. As recently as 1931, Einstein had proposed that painting, by means of tectonic form, had the potential to convert subjective visual experience into collective signs.[114] The legitimacy of any art required of it its instrumentality in forming a collective subjectivity. Now, Einstein acknowledged, works of art had “long ago lost their concrete meaning and distinctive efficacy”; they had become objects of mere aestheticism. But near the conclusion of an extensive exposé for the “Handbook of Art,” immediately following mention of the “purposeless work of art,” the “bankruptcy” of art, the idea of the collective reappears. Einstein writes: “New collective tendencies. The revolt of the petit bourgeois. National art.” He adds to the typescript by hand, seemingly as an afterthought: “Film Photo Mickey Mouse.”[115] To be sure, the passage in the “Handbook” exposé is brief, but in the context of Einstein’s thought it suggests that the collective agency that modernity had denied to painting had passed to the reproductive media of film and photography. At long last the anticipated collective visual culture was emerging: it was the culture of fascism.

111. This ambitious work was to include sections on the relationship between speaking, writing, and images; on art as a means of power and domination; on changing conceptions of reality; it was to encompass the arts of China, Japan, Africa, Oceania, Persia, Nomadic art, the Eskimos, the Caucasus, Siberia, the Balkans, Australia, and examine such topics as art under colonialism, art in the provinces, and the phenomenon of collecting.

112. The exposé “Handbuch der Kunst” lists the following: I, Art atlas; II, Chronology; III, Illustrations; IV, Selected sources from early antiquity to the modern era with commentary; V, The entire history of art in one volume of 300 pages of text. Einstein, *Werke 4*, pp. 301–02.

113. Einstein, *Werke 4*, p. 423.

114. Ibid., p. 320.

115. Einstein, *Die Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts (*1931), p. 106.