

# The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility [First Version]

**WALTER BENJAMIN**

TRANSLATED BY MICHAEL W. JENNINGS

*The true is what he can; the false is what he wants.*  
—Madame de Duras

## [Contents]

1. Foreword
2. Technological Reproducibility
3. Authenticity
4. Destruction of the Aura
5. Ritual and Politics
6. Cult Value and Exhibition Value
7. Photography
8. Eternal Value
9. Photography and Film as Art
10. Film and Test Performance
11. The Film Actor
12. Exhibition in Front of a Mass
13. The Aspiration to Be Filmed
14. Painter and Cameraman
15. Reception of Paintings
16. Mickey Mouse
17. Dadaism
18. Tactile and Optical Reception
19. Aesthetics of War

### [1.]

When Marx undertook his analysis of the capitalist mode of production, that mode was in its infancy. Marx adopted an approach that gave his investigations prognostic value. Going back to the basic conditions of capitalist production, he presented them in a way that showed what could be expected of capitalism in the future. What could be expected, it emerged, was not only an increasingly harsh exploitation of the proletariat but, ultimately, the creation of conditions which would make it possible for capitalism to abolish itself.

Since the transformation of the superstructure proceeds far more slowly than that of the base, it has taken more than half a century for the change in the conditions of production to be manifested in all areas of culture. How this process has affected culture can only now be assessed, and these assessments justify certain prognostic demands. These demands correspond less to theses on the art of the proletariat after its seizure of power, and still less to any theses on the art of the classless society, than to theses on the developmental tendencies of art under the present conditions of production. The dialectic of these conditions of production is evident in the superstructure no less than in the economy. It would therefore be a mistake to underestimate the combat value of such theses. They neutralize a number of traditional concepts—such as creativity and genius, eternal value and style, form and content—which, used in an unchecked way (and monitoring them is difficult today), allow factual material to be manipulated in the interests of fascism. *In what follows, the concepts which are introduced into the theory of art differ from others in that they are completely useless for the purposes of fascism. On the other hand, they are useful for the formulation of revolutionary demands in the politics of art [Kunstpolitik].*

### [2.]

In principle, the work of art has always been reproducible. Objects made by humans could always be copied by humans. Replicas were made by pupils in practicing for their craft, by masters in disseminating their works, and, finally, by third parties in pursuit of profit. But the technological reproduction of artworks is something new. Having appeared intermittently in history, at widely spaced intervals, it is now being adopted with ever-increasing intensity. Graphic art was first made technologically reproducible by the woodcut, long before written language became reproducible by movable type. The enormous changes brought about in literature by movable type, the technological reproduction of writing, are well known. But they are only a special case, though an important one, of the phenomenon considered here from the perspective of world history. In the course of the Middle Ages the woodcut was supplemented by engraving

and etching, and at the beginning of the nineteenth century by lithography.

Lithography marked a fundamentally new stage in the technology of reproduction. This much more direct process—distinguished by the fact that the drawing is traced on a stone rather than incised on a block of wood or etched on a copper plate—first made it possible for graphic art to market its products not only in large numbers, as previously, but in designs [*Gestaltungen*] that changed daily. Graphic art was thus enabled to accompany everyday life illustratively. It began to keep pace with movable-type printing. But only a few decades after its invention, graphic art was surpassed by photography. For the first time, photography freed the hand from the most important artistic tasks in the process of pictorial reproduction—tasks that now devolved upon the eye alone. And since the eye perceives more swiftly than the hand can draw, the process of pictorial reproduction was enormously accelerated, so that it could now keep pace with speech. Just as the illustrated newspaper virtually lay hidden within lithography, so the sound film was latent in photography. *The technological reproduction of sound was tackled at the end of the last century. With that, technological reproduction had not only reached a standard that permitted it to turn all traditional works of art into its objects, subjecting their effects to profound changes, but had also captured a place of its own among the artistic processes.* Nothing is so illuminating for the study of this standard as the recognition of how its two differing functions—reproduction of the work of art and the art of film—interpenetrate one another.

### [3.]

In even the most perfect reproduction, *one* thing is lacking: the here and now of the work of art—its unique existence at the place at which it is to be found. The history to which the work of art has been subjected as it persists over time occurs in regard to this unique existence—and to nothing else. The changes to the physical structure of the work over time, as well as the changes in the conditions of ownership into which it might have entered, are to be attributed to this history. Traces of the former can be detected only by chemical or physical analyses (which cannot be performed on a reproduction), while traces of the latter are part of a tradition that can be followed only from the standpoint of the original.

The here and now of the original constitutes the concept of its authenticity, and on the latter in turn is founded the idea of a tradition which has, to the present day, passed this object down as the same, identical thing. *The whole sphere of authenticity eludes technological—and of course not only technological—reproduction.* But whereas the authentic work retains its full authority in the face of a reproduction made by hand, which it generally brands a forgery, this is

not the case with technological reproduction. The reason is twofold. First, technological reproduction is more independent of the original than is manual reproduction. For example, in photography technological reproduction can bring out aspects of the original that are accessible only to the lens (which is adjustable and chooses its viewpoint arbitrarily) but not to the human eye; or it can use certain processes, such as enlargement or slow motion, to record images which escape natural optics altogether. This is the first reason. Second, technological reproduction can place the copy of the original in situations to which the original itself cannot attain. Above all, it enables the original to meet the recipient halfway, whether in the form of a photograph or in that of a gramophone record. The cathedral leaves its site to be received in the studio of an art lover; the choral work performed in an auditorium or in the open air is enjoyed in a private room.

These changed circumstances may leave the artwork's other properties untouched, but they certainly devalue its here and now. And although this can apply not only to the work of art but, for example, to a landscape moving past the spectator in a film, in the work of art this process touches on a highly sensitive core that no natural object exhibits in this manner. That core is its authenticity. The authenticity of a thing is the quintessence of all that is transmissible in it from its origin on, ranging from its physical duration to the history to which it testifies. Since the historical testimony is based on the physical duration, the historical testimony of the thing, too, is jeopardized by reproduction, in which physical duration has been withdrawn from human activity. Admittedly, it is only the historical testimony that is jeopardized; yet what is really jeopardized thereby is the authority of the thing, the weight it derives from tradition.

One might summarize these aspects of the artwork in the concept of the aura, and say: what withers in the age of the technological reproducibility of the work of art is the latter's aura. This process is symptomatic; its significance extends far beyond the realm of art. *It might be stated as a general formula that the technology of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the sphere of tradition.* By replicating that which has been reproduced many times over, the technology of reproduction substitutes a mass existence for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to reach the viewer in his or her own situation, it actualizes that which is reproduced. These two processes lead to a massive upheaval in the domain of objects handed down from the past—a shattering of tradition which is the reverse side of the present crisis and renewal of humanity. Both processes are intimately related to the mass movements of our day. Their most massive agent is film. The social significance of film, even—and especially—in its most positive form, is inconceivable without its destructive,

cathartic side: the liquidation of the value of tradition in the cultural heritage. This phenomenon is most apparent in the great historical films—from *Cleopatra* and *Ben Hur* through *Frederick the Great* and *Napoleon*. It is assimilating ever more advanced positions into its realm. When Abel Gance fervently proclaimed in 1927, “Shakespeare, Rembrandt, Beethoven will make films. . . . All legends, all mythologies, and all myths, all the founders of religions, indeed, all religions, . . . await their celluloid resurrection, and the heroes are pressing at the gates” (A[bel] G[ance], *Le temps de l’image est venu. L’art cinématogr[aphique] II*, Paris 1927, pp. 94–96), he was inviting the reader, no doubt unawares, to witness this comprehensive liquidation.

#### [4.]

*Just as the entire mode of existence of human collectives changes over long historical periods, so too does their perception.* The way in which human perception is organized—the medium in which it occurs—is conditioned not only by nature but by history. The era of the migration of peoples, an era which saw the rise of the late-Roman art industry and the Vienna Genesis, developed not only an art different from that of the classical era but also a different perception. The great scholars of the Viennese school Riegl and Wickhoff, resisting the weight of the classical tradition beneath which this art had been buried, were the first to think of using such art to draw conclusions about the organization of perception at the historical moment in which the art was produced. However far-reaching their insight, it was limited by the fact that these scholars were content to highlight the formal signature which characterized perception in late-Roman times. They did not attempt to show the social upheavals that came to expression in these changes in perception—and perhaps could not have hoped to do so at that time. Today, the conditions for an analogous insight are more favorable. And if changes in the medium of present-day perception can be understood as a decay of the aura, it is possible to demonstrate the social determinants of that decay.

What, then, is the aura? A strange tissue of space and time: the unique appearance 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. In the light of this definition, it is easy to grasp the particular social determination of the aura’s present decay. It rests on two circumstances, both intimately linked to the increasing spread and intensity of the mass movements. Namely: the desire of the present-day masses to “bring things closer” and their equally passionate concern, the tendency to overcome the uniqueness of every

reality through its reproducibility. Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at close range in an image [*Bild*], or, better, in a facsimile [*Abbild*], in reproduction. And the reproduction as offered by illustrated magazines and newsreels differs unmistakably from the image. Uniqueness and permanence are as closely entwined in the latter as are transitoriness and repeatability in the former. *The shelling of the object from its hull, the destruction of the aura, is the signature of a perception whose “sense for sameness in the world” (Joh[annes] V Jensen) has so increased that, by means of reproduction, it extracts sameness even from what is unique.* The increasing significance of statistics that is becoming noticeable in the realm of theory is now repeating itself in the realm of observation. The alignment of reality with the masses and of the masses with reality is a process of immeasurable importance for both thinking and perception.

#### [5.]

The uniqueness of the work of art is identical to its embeddedness in the context of tradition. Of course, this tradition itself is thoroughly alive and extremely changeable. An ancient statue of Venus, for instance, existed in a rather different traditional context for the Greeks (who made it an object of worship) than that in which it existed for the medieval church fathers (who viewed it as a sinister idol). But what was equally evident to both was its uniqueness—that is, its aura. The most originary manner in which an artwork was embedded in the context of tradition found expression in the cult. As we know, the earliest artworks originated in the service of rituals—first magical, then religious. And it is highly significant that the artwork’s auratic mode of existence is never entirely severed from its ritual function. In other words: the unique value of the “authentic” work of art is always founded on theology. This foundation, however mediated it may be, is still recognizable as secularized ritual in even the most profane forms of the cult of beauty. These profane forms of the cult of beauty, which developed during the Renaissance and prevailed for three centuries, clearly displayed these foundations after the passing of this period—in the first severe crisis that befell it. For when, with the advent of the first truly revolutionary means of reproduction (namely photography, which emerged at the same time as socialism), art felt the approach of that crisis, which a century later has become unmistakable, it reacted to that which was to come with the doctrine of *l’art pour l’art*, which is a theology of art. This in turn gave rise to a negative theology of art, in the form of an idea of *pure* art, which rejects not only any social function but any definition in terms of an objective purpose. (In poetry, Mallarmé was the first to achieve this standpoint.) No investigation of art in the age of its technological reproducibility can overlook these connec-

tions. For they lead to a crucial insight: *for the first time in world history, the technological reproducibility of the work of art emancipates the work from its parasitic subservience to ritual.* To an ever-increasing degree, the work reproduced becomes the reproduction of a work designed for reproducibility. From a photographic plate, for example, one can make any number of prints; to ask for the authentic print makes no sense. But at the moment at which the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applied to artistic production, the whole social function of art is revolutionized. Instead of being founded on ritual, it is based on a different practice: politics.

In films, the technological reproducibility of the product is not an externally imposed condition of its mass dissemination, as it is, say, in literature or painting. *The technological reproducibility of films is based directly on the technology of their production. This not only makes possible the mass dissemination of films in the most direct way, but actually compels it. It compels it because producing a film is so costly that an individual who could afford to buy a painting, for example, could not afford to buy a film.* Film is an acquisition of the collective. It was calculated in 1927 that, in order to make a profit, a major film needed to reach an audience of nine million. Of course, the advent of sound film initially caused a movement in the opposite direction: its audience was restricted by language boundaries, and that coincided with the emphasis placed on national interests by fascism. But it is less important to note this setback (which in any case was soon mitigated by dubbing) than to observe its connection with fascism. The simultaneity of the two phenomena results from the economic crisis. The same disorders which led, in the world at large, to an attempt to maintain existing property relations by brute force—that is, in fascist form—induced film capital, under the threat of crisis, to speed up the development of sound film. Its introduction brought temporary relief from the crisis, not only because sound film mobilized the masses for the visit to the cinema but also because it consolidated new monopoly capital from the electricity industry with that of film. Thus, considered from the outside, sound film promoted national interests; but seen from the inside, it helped internationalize film production even more than before.

## [6.]

One could portray art history as the working out of a tension between two polarities within the artwork itself and see the course of its history in the shifts in balance between one pole of the artwork and the other. These two poles are the artwork's cult value and its exhibition value. Artistic production begins with constructs [*Gebilde*] that stand in the service of magic. What is solely important for these constructs is that they are present, not that they are seen. The elk

depicted by Stone Age man on the walls of his cave is an instrument of magic and is exhibited to others only coincidentally; what matters is that the spirits see it. Cult value as such even tends to keep the artwork hidden: certain statues of gods are accessible only to the priest in the *cella*; certain images of the Madonna remain covered nearly all year round; certain sculptures on medieval cathedrals are not visible to the viewer at ground level. *With the emancipation of specific artistic practices from the womb of the cult, the opportunities for exhibiting their products increase.* The exhibitability [*Ausstellbarkeit*]<sup>1</sup> of a portrait bust that can be sent here and there is greater than that of a statue of a divinity that has a fixed place in the interior of a temple. The exhibitability of a painting is greater than that of the mosaic or fresco which preceded it. And if the exhibitability of a mass may perhaps in and of itself have been no less than that of a symphony, the symphony came into being at a time when its exhibitability promised to be greater than that of the mass. With the various methods for the technological reproduction of the artwork, its exhibitability has increased so enormously that, as happened in prehistoric times, a quantitative shift in accent between its two poles has led to a qualitative transformation in its nature. Just as the work of art in prehistoric times, through the exclusive emphasis placed on its cult value, became first and foremost an instrument of magic—which only later came to be recognized as a work of art—so today, through the exclusive emphasis placed on its exhibition value, the work of art becomes a construct with quite new functions. Among these, the one we are conscious of—the “artistic function”—may subsequently be seen as rudimentary. This much is certain: today, film is the most serviceable vehicle of this understanding. Certain, as well, is the fact that the historical scope of this functional transformation of art—which appears as most advanced in film—allows for the methodological as well as the material confrontation with the primeval era of art. This era made use of certain fixed notations in the service of magical practice. These notations, to be sure, probably served not just as the execution of magical procedures, or as instructions for them, but also as objects for contemplative observation to which were ascribed magical effects. The subjects for these notations were humans and their environment, which were depicted according to the demands of a society whose technology existed only in fusion with ritual. This society stood as the counterpoint to contemporary society, whose technology is the most emancipated. This emancipated technology now, however, stands opposed to contemporary society as a second nature and, to be sure, as economic crises and wars prove, as one that is no less elemental than that given to primeval society. Humans of course invented, but no longer by any means master this second nature which they now confront; they are thus just as compelled to undertake



an apprenticeship as they were once when confronted with first nature. And art once again places itself at the service of such an apprenticeship—and in particular film. Film serves to train human beings in those new apperceptions and reactions demanded by interaction with an apparatus whose role in their lives is expanding almost daily. To make the enormous technological apparatus of our time an object of human innervation—that is the historical task in whose service film finds its true meaning.

**[7.]**

*In photography, exhibition value begins to drive back cult value on all fronts.* But cult value does not give way without resistance. It falls back instead to a last entrenchment: the human countenance. It is no accident that the portrait is central to early photography. In the cult of remembrance of dead or distant loved ones, the cult value of the image finds its last refuge. In the fleeting expression of a human face, the aura beckons from early photographs for the last time. This is what gives them their melancholy and incomparable beauty. But as the human being withdraws from the photographic image, exhibition value now for the first time shows its superiority to cult value. To have given this development its place constitutes the unique significance of Atget, who captured an important aspect of the Paris streets around 1900: they are devoid of humans. It has justly been said that he photographed them like scenes of crimes. A crime scene, too, is devoid of humans; it is photographed for the purpose of establishing evidence. With Atget, photographic records begin to be evidence in the historical trial [*Prozess*]. This constitutes their hidden political significance. They demand a specific kind of reception. Free-floating contemplation is no longer appropriate to them. They unsettle the viewer; he feels challenged to find a particular way to approach them. At the same time, illustrated magazines begin to put up signposts for him. Whether these are right or wrong is irrelevant. In the illustrated magazines, captions [*Beschriftung*] for the first time 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 appears prescribed by the sequence of all the preceding images.

**[8.]**

The Greeks had only two processes for the technological reproduction of works of art: casting and stamping. Coins and terra cottas were the only artworks they could produce in large numbers. All others were unique and could not be

technologically reproduced. *That is why* they had to be made for all eternity. *The state of their technology compelled the Greeks to produce eternal values in their art.* To this they owe their preeminent position in art history—the standard for subsequent generations. Undoubtedly, our position now lies at the opposite pole from that of the Greeks. Never before have artworks been technologically reproducible to such a degree and in such quantities as today. Film is the first art form whose artistic character is entirely determined by its reproducibility. It would be idle to compare this form in all its provisions with Greek art. But on one precise point such a comparison would be possible. For in film one quality of the artwork has become crucial, a quality which would have been the last to find approval among the Greeks, or which they would have dismissed as marginal. This quality is its capacity for improvement. The finished film is the exact antithesis of a work created at a *single* stroke. It is assembled from a very large number of individual images and image sequences that offer an array of choices to the editor; these images, moreover, can be improved in any desired way in the process leading from the initial take to the final cut. To produce *A Woman of Paris*, which is 3,000 meters long, Chaplin shot 125,000 meters of film. The film is therefore the artwork most capable of improvement. And this capability is linked to its radical renunciation of eternal value. This is corroborated by the fact that for the Greeks, whose art depended on the production of eternal values, the pinnacle of all the arts was the form least capable of improvement—namely sculpture, whose products are literally all of *one* piece. In the age of the assembled [*montierbar*] artwork, the decline of sculpture is inevitable.

#### [9.]

The nineteenth-century dispute over the relative artistic merits of painting and photography seems misguided and confused today. But this does not diminish its importance, and may even underscore it. The dispute was in fact an expression of a world-historical upheaval whose true nature was concealed from both parties. Insofar as the age of technological reproducibility separated art from its basis in cult, all semblance of art's autonomy disappeared forever. But the resulting change in the function of art lay beyond the horizon of the nineteenth century.

And even the twentieth, which saw the development of film, was slow to perceive it. Though commentators had earlier expended much fruitless ingenuity on the question of whether photography was an art—without asking the more fundamental question *of whether the invention of photography had not transformed art itself*—film theorists quickly adopted the same ill-considered set of questions. But the difficulties which photography caused for traditional aesthetics were child's play compared to those presented by film. Hence the blind

violence of early film theory. Abel Gance, for example, compares film to hieroglyphs: “By a remarkable regression, we are transported back to the expressive level of the Egyptians. . . . Pictorial language has not matured because our eyes are not yet adapted to it. There is not yet enough respect, not enough *cult*, for what it expresses.”<sup>2</sup> Or, in the words of Séverin-Mars: “What other art has been granted a dream . . . at once more poetic and more real? Seen in this light, film might represent an incomparable means of expression, and only the noblest minds should move within its atmosphere; in the most perfect and mysterious moments of their lives” (*L’art cinématographique II*, Paris 1927, pp. 101, 100).<sup>3</sup> It is instructive to see how the desire to annex film to “art” impels these theoreticians to attribute elements of cult to film—with a singular boldness. Yet when these speculations were published, works like *A Woman of Paris* and *The Gold Rush* had already appeared. Abel Gance speaks of sacred script and Séverin-Mars speaks of film as one might speak of pictures by Fra Angelico. It is revealing that even today especially reactionary authors look in the same direction for the significance of film, if not actually in the sacred, then at least in the supernatural. In connection with Max Reinhardt’s film version of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Werfel comments that it was undoubtedly the sterile copying of the external world—with its streets, interiors, railway stations, restaurants, automobiles, and beaches—that had thus far prevented this film from ascending to the realm of art. “Film has not yet realized its true meaning, its real possibilities. . . . These consist in its unique ability to use natural means to give incomparably convincing expression to the fairylike, the marvelous, the supernatural” (Franz Werfel, “A Midsummer Night’s Dream: A Film by Shakespeare and Reinhardt” in *Neues Wiener Journal*, cited in *Lu*, November 15, 1935).

#### [10.]

To photograph a painting is one kind of reproduction, but it is quite another that allows photography to take part in a process in a film studio. In the first case, what is reproduced is a work of art, while the reproduction itself is not. The cameraman’s performance with the lens is no more an artwork than is the conductor’s with a symphony orchestra; at most, it is an artistic performance. This is unlike the shoot in a film studio. Here, what is reproduced is not an artwork, and the reproduction is naturally no more an artwork than is a photograph of a painting. The work of art is ideally produced only by means of montage. The work of art is based on a montage, of which each individual component is a reproduction of a process that is an artwork neither in itself nor produces one through photography. What, then, are these processes reproduced in film, since they are certainly not works of art?

To answer this, we must start from the peculiar nature of the artistic performance of the film actor. He is distinguished from the stage actor in that his performance in its original form, which is the basis of the reproduction, is not carried out in front of a randomly composed audience but before a group of specialists—executive producer, director, cinematographer, sound recordist, lighting designer, and so on—who could find themselves in a position to intervene in his performance at any time. This aspect of filmmaking is highly significant in social terms. For the intervention in a performance by a body of experts is also characteristic of sporting performances and, in a wider sense, of all test performances. The entire process of film production is determined, though, by such intervention. As we know, many shots are filmed in a number of versions. A single cry for help, for example, can be recorded in several different takes. The editor then makes a selection from these; he establishes one of them as the record, as it were. An action performed in the film studio therefore differs from the corresponding real action the way the throwing of a discus in a sporting competition would differ from the throwing of the same discus from the same spot in the same direction in order to kill someone. The first is a test performance, while the second is not.

The test performance of the film actor is, however, entirely unique in kind. In what does this performance consist? It consists in crossing a certain barrier which confines the social value of test performances within narrow limits. It is not a matter of a performance in the world of sports, but of a performance produced in a mechanized test. In a sense, the athlete is confronted only by natural tests. He measures himself against tasks set by nature, not by those of an apparatus—apart from exceptional cases like Nurmi, who was said to run against the clock. Meanwhile the work process, especially since it has been standardized by the assembly line, daily generates countless mechanized tests. These tests are performed unawares, and those who fail are excluded from the work process. But they are also conducted with permission, in agencies for testing professional aptitude. In so doing, one encounters the barrier mentioned above.

These tests, unlike those in the world of sports, are not exhibitable to the degree one would desire. And this is precisely where film comes into play. *Film makes test performances capable of being exhibited, by turning the exhibitability of the performance itself into a test.* The film actor performs not in front of an audience but in front of an apparatus. The film director occupies exactly the same position as the examiner in an aptitude test. To perform in the glare of arc lamps while simultaneously meeting the demands of the microphone is a test requirement of the highest order. To meet it is to preserve one's humanity in the face of the apparatus. Interest in this performance is enormous. For the majority of

city dwellers, throughout the workday in offices and factories, have to relinquish their humanity in the face of an apparatus. In the evening these same masses fill the cinemas to experience the film actor taking revenge on their behalf not only by asserting *his* humanity (or what appears to them as such) against the apparatus but by placing that apparatus in the service of his triumph.

### [11.]

In the case of film, the fact that the actor represents someone else before the audience matters much less than the fact that he represents himself before the apparatus. One of the first to sense this transformation of the actor by the test performance was Pirandello. That his remarks on the subject in his novel *Si gira* (Shoot!) are confined to the negative aspects of this process, and to silent film only, does little to diminish their relevance. For in this respect, the sound film changed nothing essential. What matters is that the actor is performing for a piece of equipment—or rather, in the case of the sound film, for two pieces of equipment. “The film actor,” Pirandello writes, “feels as if exiled. Exiled not only from the stage but from his own person. With a vague unease, he senses an inexplicable void, stemming from the fact that his body has lost its substance, that he has been volatilized, stripped of his reality, his life, his voice, the noises he makes when moving about, and has been turned into a mute image that flickers for a moment on the screen, then vanishes into silence. . . . The little apparatus will play with his shadow before the audience, and he himself must be content to play before the apparatus” (cited in Léon Pierre-Quint, *Signification du cinéma. L’art cinématographique II*, Paris, 1927, pp. 14–15).

*The representation of human beings by means of an apparatus has made possible a highly productive use of the human being’s self-alienation.* The nature of this use can be grasped through the fact that the film actor’s estrangement in the face of the apparatus, as Pirandello describes this experience, is basically of the same kind as the estrangement of the Romantic before his mirror image—as is well known, a favorite motif in Jean Paul. But now the mirror image has become detachable from the person mirrored and has become transportable. And where is it transported? Before the masses. Naturally, the screen actor never for a moment ceases to be aware of this. While he stands before the apparatus, he knows that in the end he is confronting the masses. These masses will be checking on him. And precisely these masses are not visible, not even present while he completes the artistic performance that they will monitor. This invisibility heightens the authority of their monitoring. It should not be forgotten, of course, that there can be no political advantage derived from this monitoring until film has liberated itself from the fetters of capitalist exploitation. For film capital

uses the revolutionary opportunities implied by this monitoring for counter-revolutionary purposes. Not only does the cult of the movie star that it fosters preserve that magic of the personality which has long been no more than the putrid glimmer of its own commodity character, but its counterpart, the cult of the audience, reinforces the corrupt composition of the masses, with which fascism seeks to supplant their class consciousness.

*The art of the present day can count on a correspondingly greater effectiveness as it increases its reliance on reproducibility*, and thus as it displaces the original work from its central position. If drama has, of all the arts, most clearly suffered the effects of the crisis, that lies in the nature of the crisis itself. Indeed, nothing contrasts more starkly with a work of art completely subject to (or, like film, founded in) technological reproduction than a stage play with its deployment of the actor that is new and originary every single time. Any thorough consideration will confirm this. Expert observers have long recognized that, in film, “the best effects are almost always achieved by ‘acting’ as little as possible. . . . The development,” according to Rudolf Arnheim, writing in 1932, has been toward “using the actor as a prop; chosen for his typicalness and . . . introduced at the proper place” (Rudolf Arnheim, *Film as Art*, Berlin 1932, pp. 176–177). Closely bound up with this development is something else. The stage actor puts himself into a role. The film actor very often is denied this opportunity. His performance is by no means a unified whole, but is assembled from many individual performances whose here and now is determined by incidental concerns about studio rental, availability of other actors, scenery, and so on. A leap from a window, for example, can be shot in the studio as a leap from a scaffold, while the ensuing flight might be filmed weeks later at an outdoor location. And far more paradoxical edits can easily be imagined. An actor is supposed to be startled by a knock at the door. If his reaction is not satisfactory, the director can resort to an expedient: he could have a shot fired without warning behind the actor’s back on some other occasion when he happens to be in the studio. The actor’s frightened reaction at that moment could be recorded and then edited into the film. Nothing shows more graphically that art has escaped the realm of “beautiful semblance,” whose climate was regarded for so long as the only one in which it could thrive.

This directorial technique that experimentally evokes an actual frightened reaction by the actor in order to shoot the frightened reaction of the person portrayed is quite appropriate to film. *No actor can demand, during the shoot, to have an overview of the context in which his own performance stands.* The demand that a performance be delivered without direct experiential contact to a situation that is not subject to the rules of the game is common to all tests,

athletic as well as cinematic. Asta Nielsen occasionally demonstrated this in an impressive way. During a break at the studio—a film based on Dostoevsky’s *Idiot* was being shot—Asta Nielsen, who was playing Aglaya, stood in conversation with a friend. They were about to start one of the main scenes: Aglaya sees Prince Myshkin passing by with Nastassya Filippovna, and her eyes fill with tears. Asta Nielsen, who had rejected all her friend’s compliments during their conversation, suddenly saw the actress playing Nastassya walking back and forth, devouring her breakfast at the back of the studio. “Look, that’s what I call movie acting,” said Nielsen to her visitor, looking at him with eyes that had filled with tears at the sight of her colleague, as the coming scene called for—without so much as bending a brow.

The technological demands made on the film actor are different from those made on the stage actor. Movie stars are almost never outstanding stage actors. It is mostly second- or third-class actors for whom film has opened the way to a great career. And, conversely, it has seldom been the best movie actors who have attempted to move from film to stage—an attempt, moreover, that has usually failed. (These circumstances lie in the particular nature of film, in which it is much less important that the actor represents someone else before the audience than that he represents himself in front of the apparatus.) *The typical film actor plays only himself.* He stands in contrast to the mime as a type. This circumstance limits his usefulness on stage, but increases it to an extraordinary degree in film. For the film star addresses his audience above all in that he appears to open to them out of himself the possibility of “joining the filming.” The notion that one could be reproduced by the apparatus is an enormous attraction for today’s humans. Bobby-soxers, to be sure, used to dream of going on stage. The dream of being filmed, however, has two great advantages. First, the dream is more likely to be fulfilled because film consumes many more actors than does the stage, because, in film, every actor plays only himself. And second, the dream is bolder because the idea of seeing one’s own appearance and one’s own voice disseminated on a mass basis makes the glow of the great stage actor pale by comparison.

## [12.]

The change in the mode of exhibition brought about by reproduction technology also makes itself noticeable in politics. *The crisis of democracies can be understood as a crisis in the conditions governing the exhibition of politicians.* Democracies exhibit the politician directly, in person, before elected representatives. The parliament is his public. But innovations in recording equipment now enable the speaker to be heard by an unlimited number of people while he

is speaking and to be seen by an unlimited number shortly afterward. This means that priority is given to the engagement of the politician before the recording equipment. Parliaments are becoming depopulated at the same time as theaters. Radio and film are changing not only the function of the professional actor but, equally, the function of those who, like the politician, represent themselves in front of them. The direction of this change is the same for the film actor and the politician, regardless of their different specialized tasks. It seeks to attain the exhibitability of testable, readily comprehensible performances under certain social conditions, just as sports first called for such exhibition under certain natural conditions. This demands a new form of selection—selection before an apparatus—from which the champion, the star, and the dictator emerge as victors.

### [13.]

It is inherent in the technology of film, as of sports, that everyone who witnesses these exhibited performances does so as a quasi-expert. Anyone who has listened to a group of newspaper boys leaning on their bicycles and discussing the outcome of a bicycle race will have an inkling of this. In the case of film, the newsreel demonstrates unequivocally that any individual can be in a position to be filmed. But that possibility is not enough. *Any person today can lay claim to being filmed.* This claim can best be clarified by considering the historical situation of writing today. For centuries it was in the nature of writing that a small number of writers confronted many thousands of readers. This began to change toward the end of the past century. With the enormous extension of the press, which constantly made new political, religious, scientific, professional, and local journals available to readers, an increasing number of readers—in isolated cases, at first—turned into writers. It began with the space set aside for “letters to the editor” in the daily press and has now reached a point where there is hardly a European engaged in the work process who could not, in principle, find an opportunity to publish somewhere or other an account of a work experience, a complaint, a report, or something of the kind. Thus, the distinction between author and public is about to lose its fundamental character. The difference becomes functional; it may vary from case to case. At any moment, the reader is ready to become a writer. As an expert—which he has had to become in any case in a highly specialized work process, even if only in some minor capacity—the reader gains access to authorship. Work itself is given a voice. And the ability to describe a job in words now forms part of the expertise needed to carry it out. Literary competence is no longer founded on specialized higher education but on polytechnic training, and thus is common property.

All this can readily be applied to film, where shifts that in writing took place



over centuries have occurred in a decade. In cinematic practice—above all, in Russia—this shift has already been occasionally realized. Some of the actors taking part in Russian films are not actors in our sense but people who portray *themselves*—and primarily in their own work process. In Western Europe today, the capitalist exploitation of film obstructs the human being’s legitimate claim to being reproduced. The claim is also obstructed, incidentally, by unemployment, which excludes large masses from production—the process in which their primary entitlement to be reproduced would lie. Under these circumstances, the film industry has an overriding interest in stimulating the involvement of the masses through illusionary displays and ambiguous speculations. This has been particularly successful with women. To this end it has set in motion an immense publicity machine, in the service of which it has placed the careers and love lives of the stars; it has organized polls; it has held beauty contests. All this in order to distort in a corrupt manner the original and justified interest of the masses in film—an interest in understanding themselves and therefore their class. Thus, the same is true of film capital in particular as of fascism in general: an irrefutable urge toward new social opportunities is being clandestinely exploited in the interests of a property-owning minority. For this reason alone, the expropriation of film capital is an urgent demand for the proletariat.

*Every highly developed art form stands at the intersection of three lines of development.* First, technology is working toward a particular form of art. Before film appeared, there were little books of photos that could be made to flit past the viewer under the pressure of the thumb, presenting a boxing match or a tennis match; then there were coin-operated peep boxes in the arcades, with image sequences kept in motion by the turning of a handle. Second, traditional art forms, at certain stages in their development, strain laboriously for effects that later are effortlessly achieved by new art forms. Before film became established, dadaist performances sought to stir in their audiences reactions which Chaplin then elicited more naturally. Third, inconspicuous social changes often foster a change in reception that benefits only the new art form. Before film had started to create its public, images (which were no longer motionless) were received by an assembled audience in the Kaiserpanorama.<sup>4</sup> Such a public existed of course even at the painting salons, yet their interior furnishings were not capable—like those in a theater—of organizing it. In the Kaiserpanorama, on the other hand, seats were provided whose distribution before the various stereoscopes promised to organize a multiplicity of viewers of images. In a painting salon, emptiness can be pleasant; in a Kaiserpanorama, this is no longer the case, and in the cinema not for all the money in the world. And yet in the

Kaiserpanorama each individual has his own image—as is usually the case in the painting salon. The dialectic of this matter finds expression precisely here: shortly before the viewing of an image experiences its dialectical reversal [*Umschlag*] in film and becomes a collective viewing, the principle of the viewing of an image by an individual emerges with a new clarity, much as had the observation of the divine image by the priest in the holy of holies.

[14.]

The shooting of a film, especially a sound film, offers a hitherto unimaginable spectacle. It presents a process in which it is impossible to assign a single viewpoint from which the film apparatus that is not part of the action being filmed—the lighting units, the technical crew, and so forth—would not fall in the field of vision of the spectator (unless the alignment of the spectator's pupil coincided with that of the camera, which, as it were, encroaches upon the actors). This circumstance, more than any other, makes any resemblance between a scene in a film studio and one onstage superficial and irrelevant. In principle, the theater includes a position from which the action on the stage cannot easily be detected as an illusion. There is no such position where a film is being shot. The illusory nature of film is of the second degree; it is the result of editing. That is to say: *In the film studio the apparatus has penetrated so deeply into reality that a pure view of that reality, free of the foreign body of the apparatus, is the result of a technological procedure peculiar to it—namely, the shooting by the specially adjusted camera and the assembly of that shot with others of the same kind.* The apparatus-free aspect of reality has here become artifice, and the vision of unmediated reality the Blue Flower in the land of technology.

This state of affairs, which contrasts so sharply with that which obtains in the theater, can be compared even more instructively to the situation in painting. Here we have to pose the question: How does the camera operator compare with the painter? In answer to this, it will be helpful to consider the concept of the operator as it is familiar to us from surgery. The surgeon represents one pole in an order; at the other stands the magician. 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 magician maintains the natural distance between himself and the person treated; more precisely, he reduces it only slightly by laying on his hands, but increases it greatly by his authority. The surgeon proceeds in the reverse manner: he greatly diminishes the distance from the patient by penetrating the patient's body and increases it only slightly by the caution with which his hand moves among the organs. In short: unlike the magician (traces of whom are still found in the general practitioner), the surgeon

abstains at the decisive moment from confronting his patient person to person; instead, he penetrates the patient by operating.—Magician is to surgeon as painter is to cinematographer. The painter observes in his work a natural distance from the given [*Gegebenen*], whereas the cinematographer penetrates deeply into the tissue of reality [*Gegebenheit*]. The images that each of them carry away differ enormously. The painter's is a total image, whereas that of the cinematographer is fragmentary, its manifold parts being assembled according to a new law. *Hence, the presentation of reality in film is incomparably the more significant for people of today since it provides the equipment-free aspect of reality they are entitled to demand from art and does so precisely on the basis of the most intensive interpenetration of reality with the apparatus.*

**[15.]**

*The technological reproducibility of the artwork changes the relation of the masses to art. The extremely backward attitude toward a Picasso painting changes into a highly progressive reaction to Chaplin.* The progressive attitude is characterized by an immediate, intimate fusion of pleasure in seeing and experiencing with an attitude of expert appraisal. Such a fusion is an important social index. As is clearly seen in the case of painting, the more reduced the social impact of an art form, the more widely criticism and enjoyment of it diverge in the public. The conventional is uncritically enjoyed, while the truly new is criticized with aversion. Not so in the cinema. The decisive reason for this is that nowhere more than in the cinema are the reactions of individuals, which together make up the massive reaction of the audience, determined by the imminent concentration of reactions into a mass. No sooner are these reactions manifest than they regulate one another. Again, the comparison with painting is fruitful. A painting has always exerted a valid claim to be viewed primarily by a single person or by a few. The simultaneous viewing of paintings by a large audience, as happens in the nineteenth century, is an early symptom of the crisis in painting, a crisis triggered not only by photography but, in a relatively independent way, by the artwork's claim to the attention of the masses.

Painting 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 social effect whenever painting is led by special circumstances, as if against its nature, to confront the masses directly. In the churches and monasteries of the Middle Ages, and at the princely courts of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, the collective reception of paintings took

place not simultaneously but in a manifoldly mediated way. If that has changed, the change testifies to the special conflict in which painting has become enmeshed in the course of the previous century by the technological reproducibility of the image. And while efforts have been made to present paintings to the masses in galleries and salons, this mode of reception gives the masses no means of organizing and regulating their response. It would certainly have required a scandal in order for the public to manifest its judgment openly. In other words: the open manifestation of the judgment of the public would have produced a scandal. Thus, the same public that reacts progressively to a slapstick comedy inevitably displays a backward attitude toward surrealism.

**[16.]**

*Among the social functions of film, the most important is to establish equilibrium between human beings and the apparatus.* Film achieves this goal not only in terms of man's presentation of himself to the camera but also in terms of his representation of his environment by means of this apparatus. On the one hand, film furthers insight into the inevitabilities governing our lives by its use of close-ups from their inventory, by its accentuation of hidden details in familiar objects, and by its exploration of commonplace milieus through the ingenious guidance of the camera; on the other hand, it manages to assure us of a vast and unsuspected field of play [*Spielraum*]. Our bars and city streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories seemed to close relentlessly around us. Then came film and exploded this prison-world with the dynamite of the split second, so that now we can set off calmly on journeys of adventure among its far-flung debris. With the close-up, space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended. Clearly, it is another nature which speaks to the camera as compared to the eye. Different above all in the sense that a space informed by human consciousness gives way to a space informed by the unconscious. Whereas it is a commonplace that, for example, we have some idea what is involved in the act of walking (if only in general terms), we have no idea at all what happens during the split second when a person actually takes a step. We are familiar with the movement of picking up a cigarette lighter or a spoon but know almost nothing of what really goes on between hand and metal, and still less how this varies with different moods. This is where the camera comes into play, with its many resources for swooping and rising, disrupting and isolating, stretching or compressing a sequence, enlarging or reducing an object. It is through the camera that we first discover the optical unconscious, just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis. Moreover, these two types of unconscious are intimately linked. For in most

cases the diverse aspects of reality captured by the film camera lie outside only the *normal* spectrum of sense impressions. Many of the deformations and stereotypes, transformations and catastrophes that can assail the world of optical perception [*Gesichtswahrnehmung*]<sup>5</sup> in films afflict the actual world in psychoses, hallucinations, and dreams. Thanks to these capacities of the camera, therefore, the individual perceptions of the psychotic or the dreamer can be appropriated by the collective perception of the audience. The ancient truth expressed by Heraclitus, that those who are awake have a world in common while each sleeper has a world of his own, has been invalidated by film—and, to be sure, less by depicting the dream world itself than by creating figures of collective dream, such as the globe-encircling Mickey Mouse. If one considers the dangerous tensions which technology and its consequences have engendered in the masses—tensions that at critical stages take on a psychotic character—one also has to recognize that this same technologization [*Technisierung*] has created the possibility of psychic immunization against such mass psychoses. It does so by means of certain films in which the forced development of sadistic fantasies or masochistic delusions can prevent their natural and dangerous maturation in the masses. Collective laughter is one such preemptive and healing outbreak of mass psychosis. The enormous number of grotesque events consumed in films today is a graphic indication of the dangers threatening mankind from the repressions implicit in civilization. American slapstick comedies and Disney films trigger a therapeutic demolition of the unconscious. Their forerunner was the eccentric. He was the first to be at home in the new fields of play opened up by film—the first occupant of the newly built house. This is the context in which Chaplin takes on historical significance.

### [17.]

It has always been one of the primary tasks of art to create a demand whose hour of full satisfaction has not yet come. The history of every art form has critical periods in which the particular form strains after effects which can be easily achieved only with a changed technical standard—that is to say, in a new art form. The excesses and crudities of art which thus result, particularly in the so-called periods of decadence, actually emerge from the core of its richest historical energies. In recent years, dadaism has amused itself with such barbarisms. Only now is its impulse recognizable: *Dadaism attempted to produce with the means of painting (or literature) the effects which the public today seeks in film.*

Every fundamentally new, pioneering creation of demand will overshoot its target. Dadaism did so to the extent that it sacrificed the market values so characteristic of film in favor of more significant aspirations—of which, to be sure,

it was unaware in the form described here. The dadaists attached much less importance to the commercial usefulness of their artworks than to the uselessness of those works as objects of contemplative immersion. They sought to achieve this uselessness not least by the thorough degradation of their material. Their poems are “word-salad” containing obscene exclamations and every imaginable kind of linguistic refuse. Exactly the same is true of their paintings, on which they mounted buttons or train tickets. What they achieved by such means was a ruthless annihilation of the aura in every object they produced, which they branded as a reproduction through the very means of its production. Before a painting by Arp or a poem by August Stramm, it is impossible to take time for concentration and evaluation, as one can before a painting by Derain or a poem by Rilke. Contemplative immersion—which, as the bourgeoisie degenerated, became a breeding ground for asocial behavior—is here opposed by distraction [*Ablenkung*] as a variant of social behavior. The form of social behavior provoked by dada is: to take offense. Dadaist manifestations actually guaranteed a quite vehement distraction by making artworks the center of scandal. One demand had above all to be satisfied: to outrage the public. From an alluring visual composition or an enchanting fabric of sound, the dadaists turned the artwork into a projectile. It jolted the viewer and was thus ready to win back for the present day the tactical [*taktisch*]<sup>6</sup> quality that is indispensable for art in the great periods of historical change.

Dadaism gave new life to the notion that everything perceived and present to the senses is something that jabs out at us—which is the formula of dream perception and, at the same time, the tactical side of artistic perception. Dadaism thereby fostered the demand for film, since the distracting element in film is also primarily tactical, being based on successive changes of scene and focus which have a jerking effect on the spectator. Film has freed the physical shock effect—which dadaism had kept wrapped, as it were, inside the moral shock effect—from this wrapping. In its most progressive works, above all in Chaplin, film united both shock effects on a new level.

Let us compare the screen [*Leinwand*] on which a film unfolds with the canvas [*Leinwand*] on which a painting is to be found. The image on the film screen changes, whereas the image on the canvas does not. The painting invites the viewer to contemplation: before it, he can give himself up to his train of associations. Before a film image, he cannot do so. No sooner has he seen it than it has already changed. It cannot be fixed on, neither as we fix on a painting nor on something real. The train of associations in the person contemplating it is immediately interrupted by changing images. This constitutes the shock effect of film, which, like all shock effects, seeks to be absorbed through heightened

presence of mind. *Film is the art form corresponding to the pronounced threat to life in which people live today.* It corresponds to profound changes in the apparatus of apperception—changes that are experienced on the scale of private existence by each passerby in big city traffic, and on the scale of world history by each fighter against the present social order.

**[18.]**

The masses are a matrix from which all customary behavior toward works of art is today emerging newborn. Quantity has been transformed into quality: the greatly increased mass of participants has produced a different kind of participation. The fact that this new mode of participation first appeared in a disreputable form should not mislead the observer. The masses are criticized for seeking distraction [*Zerstreuung*] in the work of art, whereas the art lover supposedly approaches it with concentration. In the case of the masses, the artwork is seen as an occasion for entertainment; in the case of the art lover, it is considered an object of devotion. This calls for closer examination. Distraction and concentration form an antithesis, which may be formulated as follows. A person who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it; he enters into the work, just as, according to legend, a Chinese painter entered his completed painting while beholding it. By contrast, the distracted masses absorb the work of art into themselves. Their waves lap around it; they encompass it with their tide. This is most obvious with regard to buildings. Architecture has always offered the prototype of an artwork that is received in a state of distraction and through the collective. The laws of architecture's reception are highly instructive.

Buildings have accompanied human existence since primeval times. Many art forms have come into being and passed away. Tragedy begins with the Greeks, is extinguished along with them, and is revived centuries later. The epic, whose origin lies in the early days of the tribes, dies out in Europe at the end of the Renaissance. Easel painting is a creation of the Middle Ages, and nothing guarantees its uninterrupted existence. But the human need for shelter is permanent. Architecture has never had fallow periods. Its history is longer than that of any other art, and its effect ought to be made present in any attempt to account for the relationship of the masses to the work of art according to its historical function.

Buildings are received in a twofold manner: by use and by perception. Or, better: tactilely [*taktisch*] and optically. There is at present no concept for such reception so long as one imagines it according to the kind of aggregate reception that is typical, for example, of a traveler before a famous building. On the tactile side, there is no counterpart to what contemplation is on the optical side.

Tactile reception comes about not only by way of attention but also by way of habit. The latter largely determines even the optical reception of architecture, which originally takes the form less of an attentive observation than of a casual noticing. Under certain circumstances, this form of reception shaped by architecture acquires canonical value. For the tasks which face the human apparatus of perception at historical turning points cannot be accomplished solely by optical means—that is, by way of contemplation. They are mastered gradually—guided by tactile reception—through habit.

Even the distracted person can form habits. What is more, the ability to master certain tasks in a state of distraction first proves that their accomplishment has become habitual. The sort of distraction that is provided by art represents a covert measure of the extent to which it has become possible to perform new tasks of apperception. Since, moreover, individuals are tempted to evade such tasks, art will tackle the most difficult and most important tasks wherever it is able to mobilize the masses. It does so currently in film. *Reception in distraction—the sort of reception which is increasingly noticeable in all areas of art and is a symptom of profound changes in perception—finds in the cinemas its central place.* And there, where the collective seeks distraction, the tactically [taktisch] dominant element that rules over the regrouping of apperception is by no means lacking. It finds its more ordinary form in architecture. Yet nothing more clearly betrays the violent tensions of our time than the fact that this tactically dominant element asserts itself in optics itself. And precisely this occurs in film through the shock effect of its image sequences. In this respect, too, film proves to be the most important subject matter, at present, for the theory of perception that the Greeks called aesthetics.

#### [19.]

The increasing proletarianization of present-day man and the increasing formation of masses are two sides of the same process. Fascism attempts to organize the newly arisen proletarian masses while leaving intact the production and property relations which they strive to abolish. It sees its salvation in granting expression to the masses—but on no account granting them rights. One should note here, especially with regard to the newsreel, whose significance for propaganda purposes can hardly be overstated, that *mass reproduction is especially suited to the reproduction of the masses.* In great ceremonial processions, giant rallies and mass sporting events, and in war, all of which are now fed into the recording apparatus, the masses come face to face with themselves. This process, whose significance need hardly be emphasized, is closely bound up with the development of reproduction, or as the case may be, recording technologies. In



general, mass movements are more clearly apprehended by the camera than by the eye. A bird's-eye view best captures assemblies of hundreds of thousands. And even when this perspective is no less accessible to the human eye than to the camera, the image formed by the eye cannot be enlarged in the same way as a photograph. This is to say that mass movements, and above all war, are a form of human behavior especially suited to the apparatus. *The masses have a right to changed property relations; fascism seeks to give them expression in keeping these relations unchanged. The logical outcome of fascism is an aestheticizing of political life.* With D'Annunzio, decadence made its entry into political life: with Marinetti, futurism; and with Hitler, the Schwabing tradition.<sup>7</sup>

*All efforts to aestheticize politics culminate in one point. That one point is war.* War, and only war, makes it possible to set a goal for mass movements on the grandest scale while preserving traditional property relations. That is how the situation presents itself in political terms. In technological terms it can be formulated as follows: only war makes it possible to mobilize all of today's technological resources while maintaining property relations. It goes without saying that the fascist glorification of war does not make use of *these* arguments. Nevertheless, a glance at such glorification is instructive. In Marinetti's manifesto for the colonial war in Ethiopia, we read: "For twenty-seven years, we Futurists have rebelled against the idea that war is anti-aesthetic. . . . We therefore state: . . . War is beautiful because—thanks to its gas masks, its terrifying megaphones, its flame throwers, and light tanks—it establishes man's dominion over the subjugated machine. War is beautiful because it inaugurates the dreamed-of metallization of the human body. War is beautiful because it enriches a flowering meadow with the fiery orchids of machine guns. War is beautiful because it combines gunfire, barrages, cease-fires, scents, and the fragrance of putrefaction into a symphony. War is beautiful because it creates new architectures, like those of armored tanks, geometric squadrons of aircraft, spirals of smoke from burning villages, and much more. . . . Poets and artists of Futurism, . . . remember these principles of an aesthetic of war, that they may illuminate . . . your struggles for a new poetry and a new sculpture!"

This manifesto has the merit of clarity. Consideration of the question it poses deserves to pass from the aesthete to the dialectician. To the dialectician, the aesthetic of modern warfare appears as follows: if the natural use of productive forces is impeded by the property system, then the increase in technological means, in speed, in sources of energy will press toward an unnatural use. This is found in war, and the destruction caused by war furnishes proof that society was not mature enough to make technology its organ, that technology was not sufficiently developed to master the elemental forces of society. The most horrifying

features of imperialist war are determined by the discrepancy between the enormous means of production and their inadequate use in the process of production (in other words, by unemployment and the lack of markets). Imperialist war is a slave revolt on the part of technology, which demands repayment in “human material” for the natural material society has denied it. Instead of deploying power stations across the land, society deploys manpower in the form of armies. Instead of promoting air traffic, it promotes traffic in shells. And in gas warfare it has found a new means of abolishing the aura.

“Fiat ars—pereat mundus,” says fascism, expecting from war, as Marinetti admits, the artistic gratification of a sense perception altered by technology. This is evidently the consummation of *l’art pour l’art*. Humankind, which once, in Homer, was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, has now become one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached the point where it can experience its own annihilation as a supreme aesthetic pleasure. *Such is the aestheticizing of politics, as practiced by fascism. Communism replies by politicizing art.*

## Notes

Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1991), 431–469. © Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt, 2009. Translated by Michael W. Jennings based on earlier versions translated by Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn and edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. Editorial insertions are marked by brackets. All end-notes are those of the editors.

1. This neologism is necessary; without it, two things are lost: first, the link to the idea of the exhibition value of the artwork; second, the link to the suffix of the titular term “reproducibility.” See Samuel Weber, *Benjamin’s -abilities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008).

2. In French in the original.

3. In French in the original.

4. The Kaiserpanorama (Imperial Panorama) was located in a Berlin arcade. It consisted of a dome-like apparatus that presented stereoscopic views to customers seated around it. See the section titled “Kaiserpanorama” in Benjamin’s *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, in *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, 1935–1938, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2002), 346–347.

5. With the term *Gesichtswahrnehmung*—analogous to expressions like *Tastwahrnehmung* (tactile perception) and *Gehörswahrnehmung* (acoustic perception)—Benjamin appropriates a concept widely used in the field of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century “physiological psychology.”

6. The German word *taktisch*, employed here and throughout sections 17 and 18 of the essay’s first version, poses an irresolvable crux for the translation of Benjamin’s text because it contains a semantic ambiguity that cannot be reproduced by any single English term. Seen in light of the essay’s historical contexts, the word *taktisch* can be read as referring (1) to the field of military “tactics” and the related avant-garde idea of a “tactically” reoriented aesthetics, and (2) to art historian Alois Riegl’s (1858–1905) notion of a *taktische* form of artistic composition, which represents the “tactile” qualities of objects by optical means. Unlike previous translations of Benjamin’s artwork essay, which exclusively render the word *taktisch* as “tactile,” the translation presented here shifts between the two English terms *tactical* and *tactile*, depending on which of the two meanings takes *relative* precedence at any given point in Benjamin’s text. For a more detailed discussion of the word *taktisch* and its particular significance in the artwork essay, see the paper by Tobias Wilke in this issue of the journal.

7. Schwabing is a district in Munich; it became famous as a bohemian quarter during the reign of Prince Regent Luitpold of Bavaria (1886–1912), when artists, writers, and intellectuals such as Hugo Ball, Stefan George, Wassily Kandinsky, Thomas Mann, Gabriele Münter, and Rainer Maria Rilke lived and worked there.