The Aura and its Simulacral Double: Reconsidering Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"

Charlie Bertsch

Interest in the work of Walter Benjamin has grown vigorously in the last decade, largely because critics have had the opportunity to familiarize themselves with his immense and incomplete *Passagenwerk* (translated as *Arcades Project*). This has had peculiar consequences for "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." By contrast with the complexities of the *Passagenwerk*, Benjamin's most widely read essay appears to make a distressingly one-dimensional argument. He condenses "that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction" into the figure of the "aura."[1] Photography and, above all, film are the media that best express the destruction of the aura that once surrounded works of art. This aura exemplifies what is lost as more and more aspects of daily life are subjected to the inexorable force of capitalism.

Unlike many of his contemporaries, Benjamin claims that this destruction is a *good* thing. Mechanical reproduction

"detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition." However, instead of lamenting the "tremendous shattering of tradition" this brings about, he celebrates it as "the obverse of the contemporary crisis and renewal of mankind" for which the "most powerful agent is the film."[2] At one point in the essay, he writes that the realities of everyday life "appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this prison world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go travelling."[3]

Although Benjamin's tone is not always as gleeful as it is in this passage, his claim for the world-shattering importance of film and, by extension, mechanical reproduction is one to which he adheres throughout the essay. This is why critics infatuated with the multi-faceted Benjamin of the *Passagenwerk* have had a hard time dealing with "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." It verges on a technological determinism of which we have every right to be wary. This presents considerable problems for cultural studies. If Benjamin really intends for us to believe that film is somehow post-ideological, then his argument can be of little value to a criticism that finds its *raison-d'etre* in the ideological analysis of cultural production. Fortunately, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" cannot be reduced to its thesis. It is considerably more complex than lapidary statements about its "message" imply. To invoke Wittgenstein, we see the essay *as* an essay celebrating the destruction of the aura instead of being able to see it anew.

In writing this piece, I want to give Benjamin's essay a fresh look. This is not to imply that previous critics have read Benjamin all wrong. It is indisputable that he celebrates aura's demise. The question we must ask is whether he is doing anything else. I think "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" is less one-dimensional than is generally supposed. For all its concern with the destruction

of the aura, it also suggests the emergence of something new that functions *like* it: the simulacral aura. And it is this concept of the simulacral aura that links this seemingly anomalous essay to the rest of Benjamin's work from the 1930s. It helps us see how "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" can be considered, not as a contradiction of the *Passagenwerk*, but as its complement.

Because this idea of the simulacral aura can only be comprehended in relation to the aura itself, I need to rehearse Benjamin's thesis in greater detail. He begins by noting that "in principle a work of art has always been reproducible," that "man-made artifacts could always be imitated by men."[4] However, "even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be." Even if a copy *looks* exactly the same as the original, it can never *be* the same. His argument is founded on the assumption that the appearance and essence of a work of art are fundamentally opposed to one another because works of art, like all other objects in the material world, are not exempt from the passage of time. However much our perception of a work of art may represent an attempt to abstract it from its physical and historical context, that work of art retains a residue of particularity derived from its unique coordinates in space and time. This particularity constitutes the work of art's "presence."

When Benjamin writes that "the presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity," he means "its presence in time and space," in the sense that no other work could have had an identical history. Where a copy of the original is present in time and space, the original must be absent, both temporally (since it cannot have had the same history) and spatially (even if it's only a few feet away). Although this may seem to be splitting hairs, exactly this concept of presence undergirds the determination of value in

the art market. A one-of-a-kind work commands higher prices than a print of which there are forty-nine other more or less identical copies.

Benjamin theorizes that a crucial change occurs in our understanding of the work of art's presence when it becomes possible to make multiple copies of an original by mechanical means. In the heyday of manual reproduction—the sort that occurs when a painter copies a painting—the copy "was usually branded as a forgery" and "the original preserved all its authority." However, this is "not so *vis a vis* technical reproduction" because the camera that photographs a painting can capture details that the naked eye could not see and "can put the copy of the original into situations which would be out of reach for the original itself."[5] Manual reproductions are thought to *lack* something that the original has, to represent its *diminishment*. Mechanical reproductions, however, are thought to *have* something that the original, paradoxically constrained by those qualities that give it presence, lacks. On the one hand, mechanical reproductions thus represent an *enhancement* of the original, since they allow it to be seen in new ways and new places: "the cathedral leaves its locale to be received in the studio of a lover of art; the choral production, performed in an auditorium or in the open air, resounds in the drawing room." On the other hand, "the situations into which the product of mechanical reproduction can be brought may not touch the actual work of art, yet the quality of presence is always depreciated."[6]

There is a paradoxical relation between mechanical reproduction and the work of art. While mechanical reproduction gives the work of art powers *beyond* its unique coordinates in space and time, functioning as a prosthetic insofar as it extends the work's 'reach,' it simultaneously empties the work out *from within* of the very quality that granted it authority and authenticity in the first place, its "presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be." This process is best understood metaphori-

cally. The work of art starts out as an object filled with the presence that marks its ontological singularity, its essence. In the course of being mechanically reproduced the scope of its influence expands greatly; yet the space-time coordinates of the original object come to delimit only the void left behind by its disintegration. It is as though the matter of the original object were converted into the pure energy of a field of influence. Benjamin describes a similar process in another context when he writes of a "hollowing out of inner life" in the modern era that is reflected in the work of Romantic poets. In them he detects "an infinite regress of reflection" that affected living space (*Lebensraum*) in paradoxical fashion; it "both expanded it in ever more stretched-out circles and contracted it in an ever more tightly-bound frame."[7] The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction exerts its influence in exactly these ever-widening circles, only to find its essence shrink to nothing. What begins as an interiority defined by presence becomes an exteriority predicated on absence; solid being is transformed into hollow appearance.

When Benjamin describes a historical transformation in the way works of art are valued, he echoes this shift from interiority to exteriority. "Artistic production begins with ceremonial objects destined to serve in a cult" where "one may assume what mattered was their existence, not their being on view." From the perspective of Benjamin's era this "cult value would seem to demand that the work of art remain hidden." He gives the example of "the elk portrayed by the man of the Stone Age on the walls of his cave" which "was an instrument of magic. He did not expose it to his fellow men, but in the main it was meant for the spirits."[8] Benjamin also cites the example of religious art that is not on public display to explain how a work of art's existence can be more important than its visibility.

Mechanical reproduction marks a significant change in the way "works of art are received and valued" because "for the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction

emancipates the work of art from its parasitic dependence on ritual." Mechanical reproduction increases the work of art's "fitness for exhibition" to such an extent that "a qualitative transformation of its nature" occurs: "the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility." Production is reconceived as the production of exhibition value. No longer is it enough for a work to be; now it must be seen. The cult value of the work of art depends on its being concealed from the majority of people; its exhibition value depends on its being exposed to as many people as possible. Because the work of art ceases to be something for the privileged few, "the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production" and "the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it becomes based on another practice—politics."[9] To return to our earlier metaphor, once art extends its reach into this political dimension, its function changes to such an extent that it leaves its original coordinates in space and time behind, emptying the space where its original cult value inhered.

As Benjamin conceives it, the aura of a work of art is a function of two qualities: its presence and its cult value. The aura signifies all that is eliminated when "the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition."[10] Not surprisingly, given the definition of the work of art's presence as "its unique existence at the place where it happens to be," the aura is conceptualized in spatial terms as the "unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be."[11] Benjamin explains:

> [This] definition of the aura . . . represents nothing but the formulation of the cult value of the work of art in categories of space and time perception. Distance is the opposite of closeness. The essentially distant object is the unapproachable one. Unapproachability is a major quality of the cult image.[12]

The work of art's aura derives from its exclusivity. The aura persists so long as its guardians—priests or their secular doubles—maintain their privileged access to the work of art while keeping it from the majority of people.

For Benjamin, photography and cinema play an exemplary role in the destruction of the aura. On the one hand, they allow mechanical reproduction to develop fully its prosthetic relation to the work of art. On the other hand, however, they also represent a means with which to make aesthetic objects which, if they are not works of art, at least resemble them. Like traditional creative media such as painting, sculpture, and literature, the new media of mechanical reproduction usually represent some aspect of the world we live in. This gives them the capacity to alter our perception of that world just as traditional media have. However, the break they mark with those traditional media ensures that they will alter our perception in a new way. The elimination of the aura that mechanical reproduction heralds "is a symptomatic process whose significance points beyond the realm of art." Benjamin argues that when mechanical reproduction is used to represent, not a work of art, but some other aspect of the visible world such as "a landscape which passes in review before the spectator in a movie" the "quality of presence" is also "always depreciated."[13] Earlier he defines the work of art's presence as its unique coordinates in space and time; here he extends that definition of presence to embrace the entire object-world that makes up our visual environment.

There is an intuitive basis for this move. When you take a picture of something, you remove its image from its mass, its appearance from its essence. Indeed, the concept of presence is more easily understood when applied to the immediate objects of the visible world than it is when applied to the art objects that mediate that world. Traditional media all require that the artist abstract her or his object from its context. This process is particularly obvious in painting, because three-dimensional objects must be 'flattened' into

two-dimensional representations. The mechanical reproduction of a painting, while it does leave out the traces of that painting's history, cannot appreciably flatten what has already been flattened on the original canvas. In contrast, a mechanical reproduction, whether in the form of photo or film, of an object with the enormous mass and dimensions of an entire landscape represents the radical flattening of that object. The object's presence in space and time vanishes in the process.

The abstraction or flattening of objects that occurs in photography and cinema differs from that of traditional media in that it renders obsolete the concept of an original. Although painting flattens the objects it represents, it also creates a new art object with presence of its own. It is as though some law dictating the "conservation of presence" were in effect. In contrast, mechanical reproduction "substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence."[14] Presence is not conserved, but transformed into something else. The flattening of objects it brings about is not accompanied by the creation of an art object with dimensions in space and time.

Benjamin's narrative about the aura's demise becomes even more fascinating when considered in relation to other theories of modernity. Max Weber is famous for describing "the increasing intellectualization and rationalization" of the world, which "does not mean an increasing general knowledge of the requirements of life" but rather "the knowledge or belief that a person, if she or he only wanted to, could at any time learn." As their world becomes modern, people start to believe that it works according to plans that can, with proper training and effort, be deciphered and understood. This rationalization of the world thus implies that "there are no incalculable powers full of secrets that enter into play, that, instead, a person could, in principle, master all things through calculation." This means that, unlike "the savage for whom such powers did exist," a person need no longer "grasp at magical means in order to master or appease the spirits.

Rather, the technical means and calculation manage this." What all this adds up to is "intellectualization as such" or the "disenchantment of the world."[15]

Weber argues that art and science are incommensurable with one another because they are subject to radically antithetical logics. Whereas "scientific work is caught up within the course of progress," art is not. "A work of art that is truly 'realization' will never be surpassed, it will never age." Scientific works, on the other hand, are completed in the hope that they will one day be surpassed in the name of progress.[16] Benjamin sees the enormous importance of photography and film in the fact that they blur this distinction between science and art. They apply the fruits of scientific progress, but in order to create the sort of aesthetic experience traditionally provided by the arts. Benjamin writes that "film tends to promote the mutual penetration of art and science." When some aspect of the human body or its behavior appears on screen, "it is difficult to say which is more fascinating, its artistic value or its value for science. To demonstrate the identity of the artistic and scientific uses of photography which heretofore usually were separated will be one of the revolutionary functions of film."[17]

Benjamin invokes this blurring of the division between art and science in an extended metaphor that also hearkens back to the distinction between cult and exhibition value:

> How does the cameraman compare with the painter? To answer this we take recourse to an analogy with a surgical operation. The surgeon represents the polar opposite of the magician. The magician heals a sick person by the laying on of hands; the surgeon cuts into the patient's body. The magician maintains the natural distance between the patient and himself. . . . The surgeon does exactly the reverse. . . . In short, in contrast to the magician—who is still hidden in the medical practitioner—the surgeon at the decisive moment abstains from facing the patient man to man; rather, it is through the operation that he penetrates into

> him. Magician and surgeon compare to painter and cameraman. The painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, the cameraman penetrates deeply into its web.[18]

The surgeon to whom the cameraman is likened perfectly embodies both the positive and negative stereotypes of the Western "man of science". On the one hand, he appears detached and unfeeling; he is not capable of treating his patient as a fellow human being, much less an equal. On the other hand, in establishing the abstract relation to his patient that makes him seem so inhuman, he makes it possible to rationally apply his skills: he can cure his patient in ways that a traditional healer never could have. Benjamin suggests that the cameraman with his *Objektiv* (the word for camera lens in German, French, Russian, and several other European languages) is a similarly paradoxical figure.

Of crucial importance here is the fact that the surgeon's rationality is predicated on an operation that *exteriorizes* what has traditionally been hidden and hence a "mystery." In order to apply his skills rationally, he must open up the inside of the body for *exhibition*. Since human *being* has, throughout history, been thought to reside *inside* the body—as heart, soul, etc.—the surgeon's entry into it constitutes a violation of a traditional sacred space. In other words, he *dispels* the illusion that the body's surface conceals an inviolable interiority: his actions perfectly match Weber's description of disenchantment. If the cameraman is like the surgeon, then we can infer that he relates to his object, the visible world, in similar fashion. He is the *disenchanter* of that world, exteriorizing and thereby annihilating the presence that gave it an aura. This insight can also be formulated in more pessimistic terms without straying from Weber's theory of modernity. In an essay that covers the same territory I am exploring here, W.J.T. Mitchell writes that the camera is "the epitome of the destructive, consumptive political economy of

capitalism" because it "dispels the 'aura' of things by reproducing them in a leveling, automatic, statistically rationalized form."[19]

Both Weber and Benjamin were strongly influenced by the work of Karl Marx, particularly his analysis of the commodity form. Marx writes that the commodity "and the value-relation of the products in which it appears, have absolutely no connection with the physical nature of the commodity."[20] When an object becomes a commodity, it is subjected to a logic exterior to its "physical nature." For the purposes of exchange, its unique qualities are given abstract expression in the form of monetary value and are thereby shorn of their uniqueness. After all, what is unique cannot be substituted for something else. Thus, if iron and gold can both be expressed in the common denominator of money—marks, pounds, dollars—they are no longer incommensurable substances. In theory, by reducing all things to the commodity form it becomes possible to substitute them for each other infinitely. Since the modern era is also the era of a capitalism in which the commodity form dominates everyday life to a previously unheard-of extent, it is an era in which things are radically substitutable for each other.

This radical substitutability has profound consequences for the differences between places and peoples which, as Marx and Friedrich Engels note in *The Communist Manifesto* "are daily more and more vanishing, owing to the development of the bourgeoisie, to freedom of commerce, to the world market, to uniformity in the mode of production and in the conditions of life corresponding thereto."[21] Benjamin's analysis of the aura's destruction directly echoes their words. Because capitalism constantly needs to revolutionize production, they argue that "all fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify." In subjecting everything to its totalizing logic, capitalism liquidates all that remains of earlier

modes of production. Cultural and religious traditions with origins in earlier historical moments find themselves radically subverted. "All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned."[22] In "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," Benjamin makes a great deal out of a short prose piece in which a poet loses his halo crossing a busy street, but decides that it is better to be alive and profane than dead and holy. This tale concisely relates the destruction of the aura in allegorical form. It is mirrored in Marx and Engels' words: "The bourgeoisie has stripped of its halo every occupation hitherto honoured and looked up to with reverent awe. It has converted the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science, into its paid wage-laborers."[23]

Benjamin's thesis about the aura's demise suggests that the effects of technological progress are inevitable. And, like Weber and Marx before him, Benjamin is criticized for his implicit teleology. Ferenc Feher writes that the valorization of Benjamin's "elegant, laconic, witty and truly pioneering way of writing" has blinded people to the fact that "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" is "one of the most problematic, if not outright reactionary pieces of modern art criticism." What Feher finds particularly disturbing is that Benjamin does not condemn the fact that mechanical reproduction blurs the distinction between art and science. "Surprisingly from such a convinced enemy of evolutionism, there is an unmistakable 'evolutionist' accent in his description, as well as an explicit and approved comparison between the progress inherent in techniques of artistic reproduction and the application of progress to everyday life." In other words, instead of defending art's right to an autonomous space outside of the logic of progress, Benjamin cheerfully welcomes its subjection to that logic. Feher categorizes this as a "brutally 'industrializing' view" and indicts Benjamin's "uncritical infatuation with technological progress and its allegedly 'progressive' trend" and his "animosity towards

the autonomous individuality (author, recipient, and art work alike)."[24]

Benjamin's friend Theodor Adorno voices similar concerns in a letter he wrote after first reading the essay in 1936. He praises Benjamin for showing how the "dialectical penetration" of technology has undermined the autonomy of the work of art, but faults him for exaggerating the progressive aspects of mass culture while denying its reactionary ones. He thus advises that Benjamin revise his thinking to include a "stronger dialecticization of utilitarian art in its negativity."[25] Adorno also thinks that Benjamin is too hard on autonomous works of art. Thus, although he agrees with Benjamin that "the aural element of the work of art is declining—not only because of its technical reproducibility, incidentally, but because of the fulfillment of its own 'autonomous' formal laws," he states that "the autonomy of the work of art, and therefore its material form, is not identical with the magical element in it." He proposes a counter argument to Benjamin's that would redeem, not the utopian promise of mass culture, but that of autonomous works of art, for "both are torn halves of an integral freedom, to which however they do not add up." It would, he argues, "be romantic to sacrifice one to the other, either as the bourgeois romanticism of the conservation of personality . . . or as the anarchistic romanticism of blind confidence in the spontaneous power of the proletariat in the historical process—a proletariat which is itself a product of bourgeois society."[26]

In arguing that there is a difference between the autonomy of a work of art and "the magical element in it," Adorno offers an implicit critique of the notion that the aura is necessarily bound to presence. As we have shown, in Benjamin's account the aura derives from an object's unique coordinates in space and time. Mechanical reproduction destroys the aura as it exteriorizes the object's inner mystery and subjects it to universal criteria extrinsic to it such as those of science in Weber's account or the value form in Marx's.

The aura inheres in an object only to the extent that its individual qualities are not eliminated; that is, so long as it retains a measure of autonomy relative to the universals that threaten to disenchant it. Adorno, however, claims that the magical element in a work of art is not necessarily a function of its autonomy. If this is the case, then the aura cannot inhere in the object. As a consequence, whatever magical element is in a work of art must be *added* to it at some point. Though autonomous works of art may be auratic, they are not *necessarily* so. Conversely, if the aura does not derive from an object's presence, it cannot be claimed that photographs and films are *necessarily* anti-auratic. This is why Adorno blatantly contradicts Benjamin's claims about film's relation to the aura by stating that "if anything does have an aural character, it is surely the film which possesses it in an extreme and highly suspect degree."[27]

While Adorno is right to criticize the technological determinism implicit in Benjamin's thesis, he overlooks a passage in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" that is considerably more pessimistic about the transformations that film signals. In this passage, Benjamin's celebration of film's revolutionary potential is tempered by criticisms of the film industry as it actually exists. In discussing some Soviet filmmakers' use of ordinary citizens instead of actors, he writes that the "capitalist exploitation of the film denies man's legitimate claim to being reproduced." To conceal this, "the film industry is trying hard to spur the interest of the masses through illusion-promoting spectacles and dubious speculations."[28] Here Benjamin suggests that film is by no means inherently progressive, for its potential can be exploited by capitalism. Furthermore, if films under capitalism can promote illusions, it is clear that they can be ideological. Mechanical reproduction may destroy the aura, but it does not follow that it destroys ideology in the process. On the contrary, the destruction of the aura leaves a void for which the film industry compensates by creating "illusion-promot-

ing spectacles:"

> The film industry responds to the shrivelling of the aura with an artificial build-up of the 'personality' outside the studio. The cult of the movie-star, fostered by the money of the film industry, preserves not the unique aura of the person but the 'spell of the personality,' the phony spell of a commodity.[29]

Benjamin's reference to the "cult of the movie star" hearkens back to the distinction between cult and exhibition value. His argument has already made clear, however, that the film is the exemplary sign of cult value's eclipse. What we see here is the emergence of something that functions like a cult—Benjamin can find no other word to describe it—in a time when exhibition value has supplanted cult value. Analogously, although mechanical reproduction has exteriorized and therefore disenchanted the inner mystery of objects, something that functions like magic still holds sway in the world.

Marx's famous chapter from *Capital* on "The Fetishism of the Commodity and its Secret" helps to illuminate this return of the irrational. He writes of a wooden table, which "as soon as it emerges as a commodity changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness" and "evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas." Marx uses his wit here to make an important point: the transformation of something into a commodity *enchants* it. The most inanimate object comes to life. "The mysterious character of the commodity-form" arises because the commodity "reflects the social relation of the producers to the sum total of labour as a social relation between objects, a relation which exists apart from and outside of the producers. Through this substitution, the products of labour become commodities, sensible things which are at the same time suprasensible or social." As I noted earlier, when objects are expressed as exchange value,

they are infinitely substitutable for one another. As the evolution of capitalism commodifies more and more of the world, it no longer becomes possible for a person to tell whose labor went into a particular commodity. The only contact the consumer of a commodity has with its producer(s) is through the commodity itself. Commodities "converse" with one another in the process of exchange; their producers and consumers do not. Thus, the “definite social relation between men themselves” in the capitalist mode of production assumes “the fantastic form of a relation between things.”[30]

Marx’s argument is extremely complex, but of crucial importance for Benjamin’s essay. Under capitalism, the unique abilities of the individual are effectively liquidated because they are expressed in terms of human labor in the abstract. As workers’ inner essence is subjected to this radical exteriorization, they become estranged not only from their fellow producers, but from their own labor. The human labor in the abstract that derives from this liquidation of each individual’s uniqueness congeals in the commodity. In a sense, when workers purchase commodities, they are buying their own labor back, but in alien form. Seeing part of themselves mirrored back to them in these commodities, they confront them as living beings. Inanimate objects like the "magical" wooden table Marx describes take on human qualities to the extent that workers are estranged from their own.

Central to Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism is the idea that a fetish is something people psychologically *invest* with powers it does not really have. As Mitchell makes clear, this act of investing is not something people consciously intend to do. “The magic of the fetish depends on the projection of consciousness into the object, and then a forgetting of that act of projection.”[31] Although Freud’s work on fetishism deals with entirely different subject matter, it helps to shed light on this process. In his account, the fetish substitutes in the male mind for the penis that the mother was once imag-

ined to have but has now been revealed to lack. Believing that if his mother has been castrated he can suffer the same fate, the boy attempts to disavow his perception that she is lacking. What is unique about fetishism is that the perception of lack persists in the face of these attempts to keep the belief in her penis alive. As Freud puts it, "he has retained that belief, but he has also given it up." By substituting for the mother's penis, the fetish allows him a psychological compromise. The fetish "inherits the interest which was formerly directed to its predecessor." However, "this interest suffers an extraordinary increase as well, because the horror of castration has set up a memorial to itself in the creation of this substitute." The fetish thus "remains a token of triumph over the threat of castration and a protection against it." It also has an added benefit in that it "is not withheld from him: it is easily accessible."[32]

Two aspects of Freud's account here are useful for our understanding of commodity fetishism. First, the fetishist imaginatively *invests* what is usually an *inanimate* object with power he has found to be lacking in a *human being*. Second, the fetish is a suitable substitute for what is lacking because it is not susceptible to the same sort of lack. To put this another way, a shoe fetishist is never going to make the horrifying discovery that a shoe lacks a penis, since he knows from the outset that, as an inanimate object, it can neither have nor lack one. This is why the fetish is "a token of triumph over the threat of castration." As different as the commodity fetish is from the sort of sexual fetish Freud describes, it functions in analogous fashion. To the extent that workers under capitalism are estranged from their own labor, part of their human essence is "cut off" and transported away from them. This process generates a lack in them, for which they compensate by investing the commodity with the human qualities of which they themselves have been deprived. Since commodities are usually inanimate objects that cannot labor and are thus incapable of being estranged from their own

labor, they cannot suffer the workers' fate and take on "an extraordinary interest" for those workers. Marx's theory of commodity fetishism is rigorously materialist, for it assumes that there are no higher powers except the ones that people create. Human beings have themselves devised the chains that bind them. In traditional religions they serve a god or gods that are mere projections of their own collective power; under capitalism they 'worship' commodities that congeal their collective labor power. Whatever mystery appears to emanate from the commodity is mystery that they themselves have invested in the commodity as a response to their self-estrangement. Cult value does not derive from an object's inherent properties, but from the way in which people perceive their relation to it.

Returning to Benjamin, we can see that the destruction of the aura is accompanied by the construction of its simulacrum. As we have already noted, the aura derives from something's presence. Its simulacrum, however, derives from its *absence*. When an object becomes a commodity, it is completely severed from its physical nature. The coordinates in space and time that make it unique and thereby give it presence cease to matter. It is the object's *matter*—iron can substitute for gold—that ceases to matter. Since "the presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity," it follows that "the whole sphere of authenticity is outside technical—and, of course, not only technical—reproducibility."[33] This is why Benjamin refers to "the spell of the 'personality'" that underlies "the cult of the movie star" as the "phony spell of the commodity": it *must* be inauthentic insofar as it does not derive from the physical presence of an actual person.

When Adorno describes film as having an "aural character," it is the spell of the personality that he has in mind. As Benjamin's reference to this spell indicates, however, he was quite aware of this aural character. It appears, rather, that he did not wish to conflate the aura-like spell of the commodity with the traditional aura that derives from presence. This

attentiveness to the ways in which superficially similar phenomena can be vastly different from one another crops up again and again in Benjamin's texts. In "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," for example, he suggests that Proust's *A La Recherche du temps perdu* should not be regarded as a reflection of true experience, but "as an attempt to produce experience synthetically . . . under today's conditions, for there is less and less hope that it will come into being naturally."[34] Proust's 'experience' is thus a *simulacrum* of experience in an era that has witnessed the destruction of the aura. In a brief history of different forms of art that appears toward the end of "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Benjamin writes that "tragedy begins with the Greeks, is extinguished with them, and after centuries its 'rules' only are revived." This reference to his *The Origins of German Tragic Drama* mirrors his statement about Proust in the care that it takes in distinguishing between 'the real thing'—Greek tragedy—and its simulacrum—Baroque *Trauerspiel*. These are but two examples of a distinction between what is authentic or 'natural'—tradition—and what is inauthentic or synthetic—attempts to revive tradition or fashion something like it.

It should be noted that such attentiveness to fine distinctions was of particular importance at the time in which Benjamin wrote "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," for, as Benjamin points out in the preface to the essay proper, Fascism was using "outmoded concepts, such as creativity and genius, eternal value and mystery" for its own ends. When he suggests that his theses about "the developmental tendencies of art under present conditions of production" are written so that "they are completely useless for the purposes of Fascism," he makes it clear that revealing fascism's revival of tradition to be but the *simulacrum* of tradition is a principal goal. Like many leftists of his day, including his some-time collaborators from the Frankfurt School, Benjamin was seeking to show how, in the capitalist

mode of production, the appearance of irrational developments like Fascism derives not from a revival of still viable traditions, but from the totalizing rationality of capitalism itself. Describing the *Passagenwerk*, Susan Buck-Morss writes that, in contrast to the "shibboleth in social theory that the essence of modernity is the demythification and disenchantment of the social world," Benjamin's text suggests that "under conditions of capitalism, industrialization had brought about a *re*enchantment of the social world."[35] In contrast, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" has traditionally been thought to argue for the disenchantment of the world. The concept of the simulacral aura marks a point of tangency between these seemingly incompatible texts, while also helping to clarify the important differences between the enchanted world that antedates modernity and the reenchanted world that the logic of the commodity produces.

In an intricate reading that refracts "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" through "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," Kaja Silverman argues that, although Benjamin initially seems to be arguing that the aura "is something inherent in the art object," he ultimately suggests that it derives from "a social 'attitude' toward the work of art, rather than a property inherent in the latter."[36] Furthermore, his description of cult value suggests that "it is not so much physical as psychic."[37] The aura is projected onto an object by a process she terms "investiture." It arises, in other words, much as a fetish does: people project their own powers onto the inanimate or intangible. Or, as Benjamin himself puts it, "to perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return."[38] In the end, Silverman's argument suggests that if there is a difference between the aura and its simulacrum, it can only originate in people's minds.

"The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" points toward such a conclusion. Benjamin argues that

"the mode of human sense perception changes with humanity's entire mode of existence" and implies a correspondence between modes of production in the economic base and modes of perception in the cultural superstructure. In fact, the essay can easily be read as an analysis of the mode of perception commensurate with industrial capitalism, one characterized by an overwhelming desire "to get hold of an object at very close range." Benjamin adds that "to pry an object from its shell, to destroy its aura, is the mark of a perception whose 'sense of the universal quality of things' has increased to such a degree that it extracts [it] even from a unique object by means of reproduction."[39] In this version of the aura's demise, Benjamin implies that mechanical reproduction responds to human beings' desire for proximity by giving them what they want, rather than inundating them with what they would rather not have.

As Marx's and Freud's accounts of fetishism make clear, however, the desire "to get hold of an object" arises only with the perception of a lack. That is, people desire the proximity of one thing in order to make up for the extremity of another. According to Marx's theory of commodity fetishism, for example, workers achieve proximity with commodities in order to compensate for the distance between their estranged labor and themselves. Silverman writes that "to bring an image 'closer' is also to 'liquidate' its specificity—to standardize it, or strip it of its particularity." Such a liquidation, she argues, "can perhaps best be understood as the homogenization of heterogeneity."[40] The mode of perception that desires to bring something closer thus desires to liquidate its difference. However, if people's perception under capitalism relentlessly asserts a sense of the universal quality of things, it is because that perception has itself been rationalized by the totalizing logic of capital. The perception that desires homogeneity is the perception that has itself been homogenized. Paradoxically, the desire to buy back one's estranged uniqueness only serves to perpetuate the annihilation of difference.

It destroys the aura that derives from presence, yet creates its simulacrum, a sort of "anti-aura." Unfortunately, as Silverman's argument implies, this desire to buy back one's self is a hopelessly *narcissistic* desire. It is also a desire produced by the same forces to which it seems a desirable response. In Terry Eagleton's words, "the effect of the commodity is to suppress difference beneath repetition," imprisoning the subject "in an illusory self-identity by ceaselessly reflecting back to it an image that is at once itself and another."[41]

Notes

I welcome feedback on my piece. I can be contacted at the following internet address: cbertsch@crl.com

I would like to thank Kaja Silverman, Joel Schalit, and Kim Nicolini for their help on this paper and Renate Holub, Bob Holub, and everyone at *Bad Subjects* for sharpening my understanding of Marxian critique.

1 Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 221.
2 *Ibid.*
3 *Ibid.*, 236.
4 *Ibid.*, 218.
5 *Ibid.*, 220.
6 *Ibid.*, 221.
7 Walter Benjamin, *Das Passagenwerk*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1982), 440. [my translation]
8 Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 224-5.
9 *Ibid.*
10 *Ibid.*, 221.
11 *Ibid.*, 222.
12 *Ibid.*, 243, and endnote to 224.
13 *Ibid.*, 221.

14 *Ibid.*
15 Max Weber, "Vom Inneren Beruf zur Wissenschaft" in *Max Weber: Soziologie, Universalgeschichtliche Analysen, Politik*, ed. Johannes Winckelmann (Stuttgart: Alfred Kröner Verlag, 1973), 317. [my translation].
16 *Ibid.*, 315.
17 Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 236.
18 *Ibid.*, 233.
19 W.J.T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 180.
20 Karl Marx, *Capital: Volume One*, trans., Ben Fowkes (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), 165.
21 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* in *Marx: Selections*, ed. Allen W. Wood (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1988), 156.
22 *Ibid.*, 144-145.
23 *Ibid.*
24 Ferenc Feher, "Lukacs and Benjamin: Parallels and Contrasts," *New German Critique* 34 (Winter 1985), 131-133.
25 Theodor Adorno to Walter Benjamin on March 18th, 1936 in *Aesthetics and Politics: Debates Between Ernst Bloch, Georg Lukacs, Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor Adorno*, trans. ed. Ronald Taylor (London: NLB [New Left Books], 1977), 124.
26 *Ibid.*, 122-123.
27 *Ibid.*, 123.
28 Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 232.
29 *Ibid.*, 231.
30 Marx, *Capital: Volume One*, 164-165.
31 Mitchell, 193.
32 Sigmund Freud, "Fetishism," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud,* v.XXI (1927-1931), 152-154.
33 Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 220.
34 Walter Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" in *Illuminations*, 157.
35 Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Boston: MIT University Press, 1989), 253.

[36] Kaja Silverman, "Political Ecstasy" in *Threshold of the Visible World* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 94.
[37] *Ibid.*
[38] Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire", 188.
[39] Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 222-223.
[40] Silverman, 99.
[41] Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin, or, Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (New York: Verso, 1981), 37.