

Questioning "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction": A Stroll around the Louvre after Reading Benjamin

by Jonathan Davis

ABSTRACT

In this article I claim that Walter Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" merits renewed critical attention. Just as Dada had confronted art with anti-art, so Benjamin hoped his essay would confront aesthetics with an anti-aesthetic. I examine Benjamin's capsule history of the aura and show it to be misleading, criticize the essay's underdeveloped ontology of painting and sketch an alternative, and draw attention to the surprising proximity of Benjamin's notion of value to that of neoliberal thought. I conclude with a critique of Benjamin's cultural politics.

KEY WORDS

aura, Benjamin, communism, consumerism, cultural politics, Louvre, magic, museum, neoliberalism, ontology, painting, Popular Front, preference, reproduction, Robbins, tradition, value

Questioning "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction": A Stroll around the Louvre after Reading Benjamin¹

1. Introduction: Evaluating "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"

With the crowd in the Grande Gallerie, we might as well be in the Metro as in the Louvre; the man approaching me with the uneven step of one going against the direction of the pedestrian traffic could be a tourist lost in one of the larger stations.

"Excuse me, can you tell me the way to the *Mona Lisa*?"

After I point to a doorway, he turns on his heel and hurries off with the rest of the crowd, heedless of the heavenward pointing finger of the Leonardo *John the Baptist* on the wall to his left. As I watch him join the queue for a view of the Louvre's most famous painting, I begin to reflect on an essay concerning visual culture that has been one of the most frequently cited, anthologized, and one hopes read in the last three decades or so: Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."^[2]

Observing this line of latter-day pilgrims advance towards *Mona Lisa*, I am initially tempted to join the architectural historian Richard A. Etlin in condemning Benjamin as simply and straightforwardly mistaken.^[3] Whatever precise sense we might ascribe to Benjamin's "aura," his prophecy of its dissipation in the age of photography and film would seem not to have been borne out. This initial temptation should, however, be resisted, because most of us do not turn to the artwork essay as a predictive document. Instead, we more often read the essay with the sense that is some sort of "classic," a foundational text for the understanding of the visual arts, an early intimation of the postmodern, a basic reading in media theory, or a charter for the study of popular culture. We might have encountered the essay in an investigation of the "Adorno Benjamin debate," and our assessment would then have taken the form of trying to decide which of these thinkers was more authentically Marxist in their approach to popular culture.^[4] We might have even met some of the ideas of Benjamin's essay before reading the essay itself; since the early seventies, John Berger's book *Ways of Seeing* has popularized some of the essay's ideas amongst Anglophones.^[5] We continue to read the artwork essay because we believe that we can discover important claims there.

As I stand in the Grande Gallerie, I recognize that my initial unease with the essay arises from a suspicion that Benjamin's claims about art history, the ontology of works of art, aesthetic value, and the relation of politics to art deserve closer scrutiny than they usually receive. This suspicion would be absurd if it were taken to mean that these topics have never been discussed before; one could

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compile a lengthy bibliography of writings on this one essay alone. Generally, however, those examining the artwork essay pursue one of three sometimes-overlapping paths. Some have treated the essay as an episode in intellectual history or as part of an intellectual biography of Benjamin himself. [6] One variant of this type explores the complex textual history of the essay, suggesting that a version other than that usually read in the *Illuminations* anthology offers a better guide to Benjamin's thinking or allows us to extract a richer cultural critique from Benjamin. [7] Others have chosen to examine the essay as an episode in the history of Marxist theory. [8] A third approach, superordinate to the two just mentioned, adopts the methods associated with "continental philosophy," seeing the essay as an episode in the history of philosophy; the tasks facing the philosopher are those of interpreting the views of Benjamin and accommodating the essay within the larger history of philosophy or of "theory," if the interpreter hails from a literary or art theory background. [9]

Less common are attempts to evaluate the essay's claims and arguments substantively, to examine them less from a historical point of view than from an interest in seeing if the arguments are sound and the claims true. [10] There have been a few attempts to examine the essay in this manner. In one of the supplementary essays to the 1980 edition of *Art and its Objects*, Richard Wollheim commented briefly on Benjamin's underdeveloped ontology, [11] and five years later Jerome Stolnitz argued that the growth of mass society explained the "apparent demise of really high art" better than Benjamin's suggestion of the waning of the aura. [12] In two articles, Ian Knizek suggested that Benjamin's essay obscures rather than illuminates our understanding of works of art, but his critical enterprise has found few successors. [13]

This paucity of critical analysis should not be surprising, given that the bulk of Benjamin scholarship tends to be interpretive and historical. Those whose background is analytical philosophy rather than intellectual history, continental philosophy, or literary theory might be ill at ease with the style of the essay, which tends towards the declarative, the narrative, and the prophetic rather than the straightforwardly argumentative. [14] This polymorphous rhetoric reflects both the multiplicity of topics within the essay itself and the multiple, shifting, and, at times, conflicting intellectual identities of its author. One commentator has noted that in 1955 Adorno was uncertain whether to classify him as philosopher, historian, or literary critic. Half a century later we are still as puzzled as Adorno; amongst those Anglophone philosophers who prize argumentative clarity, the suspicion that engagement with Benjamin could lead to entrapment in the labyrinthine obscurity of "criticism" has probably aggravated the more general puzzlement about Benjamin to ensure their neglect of the artwork essay. [15]

These difficulties in approaching Benjamin's essay manifest themselves when we come to consider the "aura." Readers looking for a lucid explanation of this concept in the artwork essay itself will be disappointed. They might even be exasperated, after beginning to grasp, perhaps with the help of a commentator, that the aura is a power to generate a sense of reverence consequent upon the viewer's belief in an artwork's uniqueness, authenticity, and embeddedness within tradition, [16] to then be told that the aura can be explained as "the unique phenomenon of distance, however close it may be" as experienced by the viewer of a natural object, such as a range of mountains or a branch. [17]

Readers hoping that Benjamin's explanation that the aura of a work of art is "that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction" [18] will encounter a problem when faced with crowds queuing to see the *Mona Lisa*. Readers might look beyond the essay to what one commentator has called the "fascinating" and "evocative" concept's history in Benjamin's thought for a clear definition; these optimists will probably, as they follow the twisting trail back to the Benjamin's earliest uses of "aura," agree that his

use of the term is not only "inconsistent" but also "infuriatingly imprecise." [19] Their disappointment might deepen on learning that the most important of these early uses of "aura" occurs when Benjamin, six years before the publication of the artwork essay, pressed the term into service to describe the effects of hashish. [20] From the point of view of literary history, Benjamin the drug-borne visionary is in distinguished company, but philosophers might doubt that their understanding of Benjamin's reasoning will be enhanced by the phenomenology of Benjamin stoned.

Understandable though these doubts may be, we can in fact derive from Benjamin's reflections on hashish an insight into both the "aura" and the artwork essay. [21] "Nothing conveys as accurate a conception of the genuine aura as van Gogh's late paintings, which could be described as all things painted with their accompanying aura," wrote Benjamin reflecting on a hashish session in March 1930. [22] He was affirming, contrary to the sense in which the theosophists used the term, that the aura was not a "magic ray" attached to just a few things or people, but was instead an "ornamental periphery" to all things and beings. As usual, Benjamin did not make himself unambiguously clear, but in his remarks on Van Gogh he was linking "aura" not only to the drugged state but also to aesthetic experience. Perhaps the expressionistic painterliness of the late Van Goghs, combined with some knowledge of the Dutch artist's quasi-religious understanding of his paintings, suggested to Benjamin that the thick impasto and vivid colors could be understood semiotically. Van Gogh's distinctive style thus becomes the outward and visible sign of a particular attitude towards persons, places, and things within our sensory experience. In this attitude, the objects of that experience present themselves to us, evoking a contemplative pleasure at once exalted and disinterested, dependent on our senses but not purely sensual, and indicative of concerns of universal importance that nevertheless lie beyond our perceptual and conceptual horizons. The reader familiar with the literature of hallucinogens will be reminded of Aldous Huxley's writing on mescaline, mysticism, and art, [23] while the reader interested in aesthetics will observe a similarity to the themes of Part One of Kant's *Critique of Judgement*.

Intellectual historians or literary scholars might object that this attribution of such aesthetic themes to the hashish writing of 1930 goes beyond the textual evidence. To this objection, I would reply that my interpretation of the hashish aura of 1930 is less an attempt to contribute to the intellectual history of Benjamin than a guess hazarded in an attempt to make sense of the artwork essay. This hermeneutical gamble appears justified when we turn to the artwork essay and read of an association of auratic art with "creativity and genius, eternal value and mystery," [24] when we see the painter compared to a magician, [25] and when Benjamin writes of the viewer absorbed in contemplation of the work of art. [26]

Of course, all of these aesthetic themes associated with the aura lie condemned in the artwork essay. [27] In fact, one of the main tasks of the essay is to end the tradition of aesthetic thought that had grown up since Kant. Just as the Dadaists had smashed art with anti-art, [28] so Benjamin would explode an anti-aesthetic bomb in the temple of culture. Let us see not only if the essay succeeds in this task, but also if that success would be desirable or even possible. Let us, in other words, evaluate the artwork essay. As the previous paragraphs have shown, such an evaluation will have to call on intellectual resources additional to those of philosophy; this multidimensional assessment is, of course, required by an essay that mixes with its philosophy, history, cultural criticism, and political manifesto. Rather than attempting to examine every claim of this complex work, I will, as suggested earlier, concentrate on some claims associated with art history, with the ontology of works of art, and with the relation of art to politics. The form of this evaluation, in a not entirely ironical tribute

to Benjamin, will take the form of a stroll around the Louvre and its environs.

2. History: Reproductions and Rock Art

We leave the milling crowds of the Grande Gallerie and descend to the floor below, where in all three wings of the museum we find works of art that date from antiquity. According to the artwork essay's capsule history of art, here is where we should find those individual objects born within the matrix of tradition and invested with a ritual or magical value, the ascription of auratic power owing more to their existence as individuals than to their appearance. [29] Only in the Renaissance, according to the essay, does the ostensible but not actual separation of aura from magico-religious cult take place, giving rise to a "secular cult of beauty" which prevails for three centuries before its assumption of the form of art for art's sake aestheticism and final incorporation into fascist ideology. We might note here that Benjamin does not in these pages explicitly mention the eighteenth century birth of aesthetics as a branch of philosophy, but it would seem to fit neatly into the essay's historical schema. As we stroll through the funerary artefacts in the Egyptian galleries, the beginnings at least of the essay's capsule history seem plausible. As, however, we continue to move through those galleries devoted to antiquity and ponder the essay's history further, the account seems not only questionable in its narrative of the past but also conceptually problematic.

Pausing in front of a glass cabinet filled with Greek terracotta figurines, we feel that we might have seen many of these before, the sensation being not the inexplicable thrill of *dj vu*, but that of plain familiarity. In fact, we might well have done; in Greece, molds for terracottas began to be used around the 15th century BCE; they became widespread in the 7th century BCE. [30] Mass reproduction certainly antedates the latter half of the nineteenth century. Of course, the attentive reader of the artwork essay could point out that Benjamin himself mentions antique terracottas, together with coins and bronzes, noting that "in principle a work of art has always been reproducible." [31] Unfortunately, the essay makes a concession but fails to absorb its import; the products of founding, molding, and stamping in the ancient world—coins, bronzes, ceramics—were common objects, and, moreover, common objects shaped in part according to aesthetic norms. This quotidian aesthetic abundance of reproductions scarcely accords with the essay's historical schema. Perhaps Benjamin would respond that he is drawing attention to historical trends; only over a period of time does a quantitative change become a qualitative one. [32] Such a stratagem cannot, of course, immunize the essay against contrary evidence, but can only suggest that the evidence so far adduced fails to invalidate Benjamin's historical schema.

In fact, this schema appears ever more misleading as we continue to stroll through galleries displaying the sculpture of classical antiquity. We pass the *Apollo Sauroctonus*, the *Diadumenus of Polyclitus*, the *Venus of Arles*, and the *Aphrodite of Cnidus*—all canonical works and thus, presumably, all to be counted as auratic—but also, as is the case with so many of these canonical works of antiquity, all copies! The power of the schema's attribution of aura to the original in the premodern period must surely weaken under the weight of these marble reproductions. Indeed, if the concept of the aura is, as suggested earlier, to be associated with the language of aesthetics originating in the eighteenth century, then early articulations of the auratic canons of beauty were themselves in large part the product of reflection upon reproductions, given the reliance of Winckelmann and Kant upon reproductions of works of art. [32] Here Benjamin could protest that it has not always been clear which antique statues are themselves originals and which are copies after lost originals. He could also note that even in those cases where later viewers have been aware that the antique sculpture in question is not an original, the sense that only a copy

of a lost original survives is itself a sense of lack or deficiency and thereby testimony to the auratic power of that lost original. In addition, Benjamin did in fact observe in his first note to his essay that the history of a work of art could include the "kind and number of its copies."[\[33\]](#)

Such counterarguments in favor of the essay's historical schema might have some value, but even if we accept them, Benjamin's narrative of the birth, life, and impending death of the aura will require considerable modification. As we consider further the central question of whether singular works of art have been invested with an aura, these adjustments to the essay's schema will become so far reaching that they will eventually amount to the schema's dismantlement. If we return to the sculpture of antiquity, we must acknowledge the possibility that the attitudes of the viewers of antiquity may at times have run counter to those that the essay's historical schema would ascribe to them. For example, the classical scholar Miranda Marvin has examined Cicero's remarks on the decoration of his villa with sculpture and argues that he was interested not in the work of particular artists but rather the types of sculpture that would be suitable for a particular location, his intention being to create a distinctive atmosphere as one strolled through the buildings.[\[34\]](#)

This concern with using types of sculpture to evoke a set of feelings within an environment, a concern which Marvin ascribes to other Roman villa builders, assimilates the work of art to a decorative fixture; the viewer's engagement with these works is surely closer to the "distraction" supposedly characteristic of the modern urban masses in an age of mass reproducibility than the contemplative immersion or religious awe that the essay claims to have been the prevailing attitude prior to modernity.[\[35\]](#) The defender of the essay could point to the passage where Benjamin writes about distraction and note that the essay specifically exempts architecture from the historical schema. Since "primeval times," the essay argues, we have used rather than contemplated architecture and our attitude has therefore always tended to be one of "distraction."[\[36\]](#) If the statuary of Cicero's villa at Tusculum is properly regarded as part of an architectural ensemble rather than as a set of individual works of art, then the anachronism of attitude is only apparent, not real, and the essay's larger historical schema still stands. For this defense to work, however, the essay's defender must posit a way of distinguishing the auratic from the non-auratic in the case of works of art produced prior to modernity. However, the introduction of such a division would weaken the link between the non-auratic and modernity so severely that the essay would lose much of its point. Our suspicion that antique sculpture fits ill with the essay's historical schema deepens as we read Marvin's article and her suggestion that types of statues were produced in large quantities in response to decorative programs rather than as specific copies of individual works.

Perhaps the defender of the essay would minimize the importance of Marvin's article, pointing out that it is based on a debatable interpretation of some remarks of Cicero and her own arguable conjectures about the place of statuary in a small selection of other Roman buildings. If we move ahead to the age of the icon in the Byzantine empire, we encounter the words of Theodore of Studium, who opposed the iconoclasts early in the ninth century CE. "By virtue of imitation [mimesis], the image and model are one," wrote Theodore. In an unwitting proleptic refutation of the essay's thesis that the aura of the artwork was an aspect of its singularity, he likened the power of multiple images or copies of an icon to the undiminished power of each of the multiple impressions of a signet ring. Gary Vikan explains that Theodore was expressing a belief common to the Byzantines of his age: the power of an iconic image "resided collectively and individually in all copies."[\[37\]](#) This conception of the power of the copy runs directly counter to the essay's claim that the magico-religious power of the premodern

image depended on its singularity as a physical object with a unique location in time and space.

The essay's historical claims look no better if we glance at later eras. Attitudes towards copies and originals during the Renaissance and the years that followed, supposedly the period in which the aura spawned a cult of beauty, in fact defy the schematic narrative. Towards the end of Veronese's life, his workshop "began to produce paintings seriatim, an assembly line production where sons and assistants duplicated compositions literally."[\[38\]](#) For a large segment of his market, this form of production posed no problem; the very distinctions that we might make today between workshop copy and the original from the hand of the master were less sharply made; what acquiring a Veronese meant to many was "buying a recognizable trademark" rather than an "original".[\[39\]](#) In short, the uniqueness of the original in the sixteenth century was by no means fetishized in the way that the essay would have us believe. We should not conclude that the century that saw the birth of connoisseurship had no regard at all for questions of authenticity; rather, these concerns coexisted with a primary attention to matters of pictorial quality and function.[\[40\]](#)

Among the collectors in the eighteenth century, a similar division is evident. Although verifying the authenticity of putative originals mattered greatly to some, others were equally satisfied with copies; the French writer Charles de Brosses, reflecting the academic taste of mid-eighteenth century France, unapologetically acknowledged that he preferred "beautiful copies of famous paintings" to "originals by minor masters." Even if de Brosses was rationalizing a budget constraint, he was not alone in his expressed preference; a "vogue for copies" manifested itself in the formation by notables of picture galleries composed entirely of copies.[\[41\]](#) In the second half of the same century, France witnessed a shift in taste from the lighthearted mythologies of Boucher to the domestic dramas of Greuze, a shift that we can also see as a move from the incidental pleasure of a decorative background to the rapt attention depicted within and demanded of the viewer by the later canvasses.[\[42\]](#) This shift from distraction to contemplation runs, of course, in the opposite direction to the transition identified as characteristic of modernity by Benjamin's essay.

At this point the defender of the essay might object that though the historical schema might require some modification, the broad thrust of its narrative nevertheless holds. Did not Benjamin rightly identify the magical power with which painting was invested at the moment of its genesis in the cave paintings of the paleolithic era?[\[43\]](#) Was he not right in broad terms, if not in detail, to identify the continuity between this ascription of magical power and the aesthetic aura of an age which is just now passing? Responding to the first question will draw attention to a common misapprehension about prehistoric art; it will also help us understand the significance for us now of the limitations of the historical schema that Benjamin sketched out in the mid-thirties. Answering the second question will draw attention to a conceptual problem that might well be buried in the common understanding of the essay, if not in the thinking of Benjamin himself.

The essay states baldly that "the elk portrayed by the man of the Stone Age on the walls of his cave was an instrument of magic." Today the specialist in prehistoric rock art would be unlikely to share this certainty. In the first half of the twentieth century, interpretations in terms of hunting and fertility magic held the field amongst rock art scholars. These interpretations had been preceded at the end of the nineteenth century by an understanding of prehistoric art as evidence of a primeval attraction to art for art's sake, and would be followed from the middle of the twentieth century by structuralist interpretations, which saw the same cave paintings as the representation of a binary gender division. These explanations have themselves been succeeded by hypotheses in

which shamanism, psychoactive drugs, and what might be termed early forms of scientific illustration all figure.^[44] No doubt the safest course to follow is that advocated by the paleoanthropologist Randall White, who points out that the heterogeneity and complexity of prehistoric art make the search for a single explanatory model misguided.^[45] In this light, an important premise of the essay's historical narrative appears shaky, and one might well ask whether the historical schema as a whole should simply be disregarded.

Even if the essay's equation of prehistoric art to magic and ritual is mistaken, we can certainly concede that at least some works of art at various times might have had a magical or ritual purpose. This concession does not, however, require us to affirm that Benjamin was correct to posit the transition from the overtly magical aura to the no less cultic aesthetic aura. As opposed to the difficulties with the essay's historical schema that I have drawn attention to so far, the problem here is more conceptual or philosophical than historiographical. Readers who follow the essay's account of the origin of the aura will be inclined to assume that aesthetic response and the very existence of works of art as a kind developed in a period after the cave paintings, and that they depend for their existence on the growth of a conceptual scheme that accompanied the transition from ceremonial instrument to exhibited work of art.^[46] This assumption parallels that made by commentators who make a point of refusing to use the word "art" to describe artefacts produced in the traditional, non-urban, and non-literate societies beyond Europe.

Denis Dutton has argued convincingly against this refusal, and there is every reason to think that his arguments apply equally well to the way we think about the products of our prehistory.^[47] In general, we should not assume that those who do not share our conceptual scheme and associated practices regarding art must therefore inhabit a world without an aesthetic dimension. We might note that Benjamin's ability to refer to marks on a wall as "the elk portrayed by the man of the Stone Age" shows his implicit recognition of the capacity of our prehistoric forebears to work in a medium for mimetic ends. To attain these ends, this activity must by definition satisfy certain representational norms; we can reasonably suppose that the satisfaction of these norms provided in the elk example a necessary condition for the adoption of a certain attitude towards the product of this activity by both its creator and its intended viewers.

If we are correct in supposing that this attitude included a sense that the marks on the wall were in some way important or special, and that this sense resulted in part from the recognition that the marks on the cave wall satisfied representational norms, then we are also justified in ascribing at least the germ of an aesthetic attitude to our prehistoric ancestors. Assuming for the moment that that these marks on the wall did serve a magical purpose, we might even conjecture this magical power was then ascribed to them as a consequence of their aesthetic quality. To acknowledge the plausibility of this conjecture is to admit the possibility of the relationship between paleolithic art and magic running directly counter to that posited by Benjamin.

We should certainly remember Randall White's warning against the assumption of a unitary interpretation of prehistoric art and therefore acknowledge that some representational artefacts from prehistoric times might have been no more the object of aesthetic appreciation than is a wiring diagram today. However, we should also be unapologetic about ascribing an aesthetic attitude to our prehistoric ancestors if we believe that will form part of the best explanation of the marks on cave walls that we usually term prehistoric art. Two groups will object in principle to such an ascription. One will be empiricists of a particular blinkered and old fashioned kind who object to the use of theoretical terms at all; we

can be sure that neither Benjamin nor his sympathetic readers belong to this group. The other group will be those in the grip of an antecedent and general skepticism about the existence of any aesthetic attitude that can legitimately be distinguished from the expression or enacting of a nonnormative taste. This skepticism, all too easily echoed in a reading of Benjamin's essay today, grows out of a set of misguided political commitments and beliefs; I will therefore leave further consideration of it to the section on the relation of art and politics in the essay.

3. History: Dislocation from Tradition

A concern not so much with politics as with a broader theory of sociohistorical development informs the essay's historical account. Only an insensitive reader could fail to detect, on occasion, a note of ambivalence in the essay's attitude towards the withering of the aura. For the most part, Benjamin appears to be unsentimentally single-minded in his pronouncement of the death of the aura and the necessity of purging our language of the mystificatory language of auratic aesthetics. Yet when he writes of the "melancholy, incomparable beauty" that emanates for the "last time" in the "fleeting expressions" captured in early portrait photography, Benjamin makes evident his sense of loss. This ambivalence regarding modernity and tradition, less marked in the artwork essay than in some of his other writings, provides a staple topic for Benjamin scholars; [48] it also sounds a sympathetic chord amongst those many readers of Benjamin who wish to be neither prisoners of tradition nor evangelists of progress. Those of us, however, who are interested in evaluating the arguments of the essay rather than understanding their place in Benjamin's intellectual history must note how this ambivalence regarding modernity and tradition masks a weakness at the foundation of the essay's historical schema.

The weakness manifests itself in the two conflated but ultimately distinguishable accounts of the rise of mechanism and the concomitant decline of aura in the essay. The tough-minded Benjamin notes that at the beginning of the nineteenth century lithography appeared and "the technique of reproduction reached an essentially new stage." [49] This development foreshadowed the invention of photography; the diffusion of this mechanical process sealed the aura's fate. In this account, the development of the technologies of reproduction is an aspect of what a Marxist would recognize as the development of the forces of production; the essay here could fairly be described as technologically determinist. Corresponding with the less salient but no less significant mournful Benjamin is an understanding of these technological developments as part of the disenchantment of the world, the same disenchantment that Max Weber had discussed in his lecture "Science as a Vocation" just under twenty years before; [50] this is the aspect of the essay that notes how the auratic was embedded in tradition before the replacement of magic by mechanism. One must be careful to note that this latter Benjamin wanted to distance himself from a simplistic understanding of tradition as monolithic or unchanging; he was at pains to characterize tradition as "alive and extremely changeable." [51] Nevertheless, the unique work of art, its aura dependent on its uniqueness, was always integrated into some kind of traditional context. Only with the rise of mass reproductive technology has the uniqueness and hence location within tradition of the work of art been destroyed. In spite, however, of a difference in attitude towards this severance of the artwork from tradition, both the Benjamins of the essay agree that the rupture took place in the nineteenth century. In fact, this belief is misleading, as we will see after we leave the antiquities and take a short walk upstairs to Galerie Michel-Ange.

As one might guess from the name, this gallery is where Michelangelo's *Slaves* are to be found. Before we even reach those sculptures, we cannot help noticing the seven foot high bronze group of Adrien de Vries, *Mercury Abducting Psyche*

(cartelfr.louvre.fr/cartelfr/).^[52] We walk around the whirling verticality of the two nude figures; eventually our gaze passes to the label, which informs us that this bronze by Adrien de Vries was cast in 1593 in the Prague of the Emperor Rudolph II. Having been carried off as booty by the Swedish army towards the end of the Thirty Years War, *Mercury Abducting Psyche* was left in France by Christina of Sweden during the travels that followed her conversion to Roman Catholicism and subsequent abdication. After being shifted around to park to palace, de Vries's sculpture was finally deposited in the Louvre. *Mercury Abducting Psyche* emerges from a variety of contexts, such as the Rudolphine court culture of Arcimboldo, astronomers, and alchemists that nourished the erudite allegory of this sculpture, or the manifestly self-conscious virtuosity of de Vries, whose stylishly spiraling figures might serve here to vindicate "mannerist" as a critical, if not historical, term.

"Tradition," however, in the sense of a pattern of belief and action handed down from generation to generation and respected on account of that transmission does not figure amongst these contexts of protoscience and preciousness; even if it did, and even if it were the dynamic tradition to which the essay alludes, we would still have to say that the dislocation of this work of art from that tradition took place two centuries before the invention of photography. This dislocation took place as a consequence of social processes and individual choices that together show a nascent modernity. In short, the essay's historical schema cannot accommodate *Mercury Abducting Psyche* because tearing works of art away from "tradition" had begun long before the nineteenth century. Of course, this applies not only to *Mercury Abducting Psyche*, but also to the *Slaves*, and in fact, to almost every other work not only in this gallery but also in this museum. The essay's claim concerning the impact of mass reproduction on tradition clashes with the reality that virtually nothing in the Louvre was created to be here; almost all the exhibits represent a rupture with tradition by virtue of both their passage to the Louvre and their display as objects severed from their traditional contexts.

The opening of the Louvre in 1793 as a public museum is coeval with the birth of aesthetics as a distinct topic in philosophy. We can also see it as the opening of the doors to a new public for art, a multitude less connected to artistic production than had been the patrons of previous generations. This new public severed the language of transcendence from that of religion and applied it to the viewing of objects now seen in the public space by right, rather than in royal or aristocratic palaces by the grace of their owners.^[53] Art prices rose from the 1860's onward,^[54] and the nineteenth century culminated not only in the language of art for art's sake but also in the ascent to cultural power of connoisseurs like Berenson; the connoisseur's authenticating word uttered over a work of art sufficed to consecrate both its cash value and its status as trophy to be boxed up and shipped off to the chateau of that successor to the Swedish general and French marshal, the American captain of industry. For this era, the essay's linking of the aura to both the unique physical object and a language of culture worship is appropriate. The essay's larger association of uniqueness to the ascription of magico-religious power in the form of the aura, is however, lost in this revision, and lost with it is the "insight" that mass reproducibility entails the death of the aura. The claim that Benjamin was really just targeting the inflated rhetoric of late nineteenth and early twentieth century culture worshippers might merit consideration from the point of view of Benjamin's intellectual history, but such a defense risks voiding the essay of everything that has drawn readers to it in the last few decades; one might just as well claim that Marx and Engels were really concerned about bad employment practices.

Drawing attention to the weaknesses of the essay's historical aspect should not be interpreted as criticism of Benjamin himself. To criticize an independent scholar, living the life of an exile in

strained circumstances, for not having anticipated the scholarly trends of the next seventy years in fields not his own would, of course, be absurd. On the other hand, we should today perhaps be ready to point to problems with Benjamin's historical narrative and use these to challenge the larger claims of the essay. To do so might not make sense if we were to be studying the essay merely as an episode in the intellectual biography of Benjamin. However the essay is, as noted earlier, frequently presented as a "classic" on its own account; in fact, most of us would probably have little interest in Benjamin's intellectual biography had he not written the artwork essay. Ultimately, we are entitled to assess the essay on its merits as we read it today.

An objector to my criticisms of the essay's historical dimension might concede that these criticisms are more or less sound but still maintain that they should count for little in an overall assessment of the essay's worth. After all, this objector might claim, the heart of the essay lies in its identification of how mass reproducibility has changed and is changing our attitudes to the work of art now; the historical dimension matters only insofar as it prompts us to think about the fate of the singular work of art in an age of multiplicity. To assign undue weight to a brief historical sketch is to ignore the central questions the essay raises for the sake of pedantic quibbling. This objection fails to take into account, however, that the truth of Benjamin's claims about the singular work of art in our time depends in part upon the soundness of the historical argument that he makes. If this narrative of the history of the aura is unsustainable, then the essay's account of the death of the aura will also be questionable. On the other hand, the objector does draw our attention to an aspect of the artwork essay that is important but less historical than philosophical: the essay's ontology of art.

4. Challenging Benjamin's Ontology

Let us leave the crowded sculpture gallery and make our way to the top floor of the Sully wing, where we can find Watteau's *Pierinage à la mode de Cythère*. As we think about the identity of this picture, we will find ourselves doubting the essay's ontology. Before calling the ontology into question, we ought to state just what that ontology is and why it matters. With respect to painting, the essay assumes the truth of what Richard Wollheim called the "physical object hypothesis": the painting is a physically constituted individual with a unique spatiotemporal location.^[55] This ontological account cannot apply to photography and film, the essay argues; moreover, this inapplicability to the new media requires a revision of attitudinal and evaluative approaches to visual culture. Some of the essay's remarks on the revision in evaluation can help shed light on evaluative concepts and practices that supposedly depend on the aura of the work of art considered as a physical object. The essay tells us that in an age of reproducibility we have a growing "sense of the universal equality of all things." Presumably, the preceding era of auratic objects was marked by a sense of the possibility of the "inequality" of things; the equality or lack of it can only be that of value.^[56] The use value once located in ritual gives way to the cultic value of beauty before its final displacement in the age of reproducibility by an exhibition value that finally pushes the artistic function to the sidelines.^[57]

So the evaluative notion of beauty grows out of the limitation of the objects of visual culture to discrete physical objects; once mass reproducibility has taken hold and the old ontology is no longer applicable, talking of "beauty" will be as absurd as asserting the autonomy of the work of art or attempting to incorporate the new media of cinema and photography within the old ideology of "art."^[58] In this new age, as opposed to the old auratic period, no expertise or special insight is required in order for one's judgments on visual culture to be those of an expert.^[59] Dada anticipated the liquidation of these evaluative concepts with paintings and poems

that made contemplation, and the evaluation that would emerge from this contemplation, impossible.[60] So the essay's ontology is supposed to liquidate aesthetics; we are asked to agree that aesthetic evaluation depended on the work of art being considered as a physical object and that therefore in this age of demystifying multiplicity, we should be skeptical about aesthetic claims past and present.

Later we will step outside the Louvre to consider what the essay offers in place of these aesthetic claims. Now though, we should consider how Watteau's *Pierinage à la déesse de Cythère* calls the essay's ontology and consequent aesthetic skepticism into question. Watteau painted the Louvre *Pierinage* in 1717 as his reception piece for the Royal Academy. Not long afterwards the exact date is unclear he produced a second version that is now exhibited at the Schloss Charlottenburg in Berlin.[61] ([View both versions at www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/watteau/.](http://www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/watteau/)) The Charlottenburg version is not a copy of the Louvre's; for example, in the Charlottenburg version the colors are notably brighter, the landscape of the Paris version has been replaced by the sails of a larger and more conspicuous pilgrims' barque, and an easily identifiable sculpture of Venus and Cupid replaces the less prominent bust of the Paris version. Most, but not all, critics have preferred the Louvre version; they have suggested that the Charlottenburg version is less poetic in its rhythms, too strident in hue, burdened by the addition of too many figures, impoverished by the loss of the landscape, and flawed by a mechanicity of execution in certain passages.[62] In other words, we have two versions that have been compared and valued in distinctly aesthetic terms. We can best understand what the versions are and the significance of the criticism if we abandon the essay's ontology and the relationship it posits between physical objecthood and aesthetic evaluation.

First of all, we should note that what we have in the case of the Louvre and Charlottenburg canvasses is quite different from those discussions that arise when a picture's authenticity is questioned. For example, John Berger, in best Benjaminite mode, claimed in *Ways of Seeing* that nothing more than a fetishization of the object as property was at work in curatorial disagreements between the Louvre and London's National Gallery about which museum's *Virgin of the Rocks* is the autograph Leonardo, as opposed to a copy.[63] In the case of the Louvre and Charlottenburg Watteaus, on the other hand, nobody has challenged authenticity or authorship. Therefore if critics have expressed an aesthetic preference for one version over the other, this cannot have arisen because one is a mere reproduction of the other. It might be retorted that the Charlottenburg version, executed later in time than the Louvre version, is a "copy" and that it therefore lacks the aura of the Louvre "original"; this temporal posteriority would explain the aesthetic inferiority the critics commonly ascribe to the Charlottenburg version.

This argument, although not logically impossible, is nonetheless implausible, because it fails to account for the opinions of that minority of critics who consider the Charlottenburg version to be superior to that of the Louvre. In fact, one can equally well imagine critics finding the Charlottenburg version superior, and the essay's supporters then explaining that its ostensible aesthetic superiority to the Louvre's version grew out of the aura attendant upon "finished" or "perfected" versions. In fact, we should think of these retorts as a possible auxiliary hypotheses that could be conjoined to the essay's main hypothesis, that aesthetic evaluation depends on the aura which itself depends on the physical objecthood of the painting. One of these auxiliary hypotheses would be added in order to save that main hypothesis in the face of *prima facie* disconfirming evidence: the aesthetic judgments associated with the Louvre and Charlottenburg Watteau canvasses. Nevertheless, we should not try to save the essay by adding this epicycle to its

theory of aesthetics because another explanation that is simpler, of more general application, and therefore better is available, namely that the differences in aesthetic evaluation depend partially on visible differences between the two versions.

We should now consider the ontology of the Louvre and Charlottenburg exhibits. So far I have referred to "versions" but versions of what? The obvious answer is "the same painting," with "painting" being qualified by "same" to emphasize the many-one relationship of "version" to "painting." I will borrow a pair of terms from Wollheim here; "painting" here functions as the "generic entity" of which a "version" is an "element."[\[64\]](#) To decide whether this relationship should be more exactly specified either as a token-type relationship or as some other pairing matters less for the moment than to notice that the relationship posited is incompatible with that hinted at by Benjamin in the artwork essay. It is also, of course, incompatible with Goodman's assignment of paintings to the class of "autographic works,"[\[65\]](#) and with Wolterstoff's insistence that paintings, unlike musical works, cannot be considered as instances, even singular ones, of norm-kinds.[\[66\]](#) This account of versions of a painting may have something in common with Gregory Currie's theory of art works as action types, but the objective here is less to tease out the finer points of an element-generic entity ontology than to see real paintings resist Benjamin's physical object ontology.[\[67\]](#)

Let us look again at the Louvre's *Peinture de la déesse de Cythère*. I maintain that this physical object in front of us in gallery 36 is one version or element of a generic entity of which another version exists in Schloss Charlottenburg. The relationship of these three entities parallels that of the performance of a jazz standard in Paris, the jazz standard, and a performance of the jazz standard in Berlin, which differs in many respects from the Paris performance, but is nonetheless a performance of the same standard. So the Charlottenburg version differs in significant respects from the Louvre version, but remains nonetheless a version of the same picture. The analogy with jazz helps us see that neither the absence of a notation for painting nor the presence of significant differences between the two versions should prevent us from seeing that in the Watteau case we have two elements, or occurrences, of the same generic entity. Before, however, anticipating any more objections to the ontology proposed as an alternative to that of Benjamin, at least one argument should be advanced for this proposal.

In the first place, the proposed ontology explains why in both lay and expert discourse we group versions of paintings together, compare them, and, on occasion, argue about the authenticity of one or the other. The element-generic entity relation makes sense of the Watteau exhibition catalog grouping of the Berlin and Charlottenburg versions. To the objection that this ontology is a revision of an established folk ontology, I would reply that the existence of a folk physical object ontology of paintings is by no means clear. Besides, even if we were able to establish by means of social enquiry that such a folk ontology did exist, we would not therefore be obliged to owe it deference. Just because scholars in art history, art theory, and aesthetics will never produce anything resembling the theories of researchers in the physical sciences, we should not dismiss their theorizing about works of art as being of no more value than putative folk theories of art. To think otherwise, one would have to believe that either the logical empiricists of the thirties or the "ordinary language" philosophers of the fifties had correctly identified the forms and limits of meaningful discourse. Since few would now accept either set of limits, we can hardly regard the appeal to folk ontology as convincing.

Surely, though, the popularity of Benjamin's artwork essay amongst many scholars in those fields mentioned in the preceding paragraph demonstrates that breaking with the physical object ontology would be truly revisionary; the element-generic entity ontology that

I am proposing for painting has not established a commanding position in the fields of art and aesthetic expertise, so I am unable to suggest that we defer to this ontology because of its prevalence in expert theory. Other reasons, however, for adopting this ontology do exist. We can note in passing that this version-painting ontology will incorporate the ontology of painting into the general element-generic entity ontology that specialists in aesthetics have found so useful in making sense of other arts, such as literature or music. Uniformity in ontology enjoys a significance beyond its appeal to systematic minds; following the scientific realist approach to theory appraisal, we could argue that its recognition as an epistemic norm has facilitated the development of other branches of enquiry, and we should therefore adopt it as a norm when theorizing about painting.

Benjamin devotees will probably not be moved by such an appeal. Sharing this unwillingness will be those who might distance themselves from Benjamin in describing themselves as "humanists," but who, by virtue of this identity, consider the engagement with the arts to differ radically from the scientific understanding of the world. To both these groups of readers, I would suggest that replacing the physical object ontology with the element-generic entity ontology can help us make better sense of how we locate a painting in history and some of the things we are doing when we evaluate a painting.

The Louvre and Charlottenburg Watteaus provide us with an example of two versions of one painting. Of course, most paintings will only exist in one version, but the singularity of a version should not blind us to its ontological status as an element of a generic entity. When we consider a painting, we can use this ontological duality to marshal our ideas about that painting's place in history. Distinguishing a version executed at a particular place and time from the painting as generic entity (with its own less easily discernible but no less real spatio-temporal co-ordinates) can help us determine at what level of historical specificity we should seek explanations for a particular feature of a version. As we become more aware of these levels, we can also become more conscious of whether the features of a version or those of the painting the generic entity are the focus of our aesthetic attention. How we distinguish the features of a version from those of the generic entity cannot be determined *a priori*. Instead, we will have to engage in art historical investigation to answer this question for each case that arises. We might, for example, find that this ontology helps us understand the pictures produced in the workshop of Veronese mentioned in the treatment of Benjamin's historiographical shortcomings.

We will also have to follow this path of historical investigation if we wish to grapple with the most serious objection to element-generic entity ontology. Unless, the objector might argue, clear criteria of identity and individuation are put forward, this version-painting ontology will be pointless; what is to stop one from saying that all of Watteau's canvasses are versions of one painting or drastically reducing the number of paintings in the world by proclaiming that there is but one painting *Virgin and Child*, existent though it might be in many versions? On the other hand, one could claim that the Charlottenburg Watteau exhibited in Berlin and the Charlottenburg Watteau loaned to Paris for an exhibition are two distinct versions of the same painting; one might even, drawing on reader-response theory, claim that different viewings of the Charlottenburg Watteau constitute different versions of the same painting.

The best response to this objection is to challenge the requirement for "clear criteria of identity and individuation" by pointing out that we know the Charlottenburg and Louvre Watteaus to be two versions of the same generic entity by virtue of the history of their creation; we can learn from this history that Watteau "repainted" his Royal Academy reception piece and that this "repainted" version

is the one now exhibited in Berlin.^[68] What counts here is Watteau's intention. The similarity in appearance of the two pictures might lead us to posit an intention on the part of Watteau to produce two versions of the same picture, but the similarity does not in itself constitute grounds for declaring two objects to be elements of one generic entity. Certainly we can use similarity as a guide to our historical narrative; in the absence of the documentation concerning the Louvre and Charlottenburg Wateaus, we might argue from their appearance that the best explanation of the visual relationship between the two was the intention of the artist to "repaint" a picture. If, however, resemblance alone sufficed, we would have no principled objection to grouping any similar looking pictures together as different versions of one painting. Such a result would be no more helpful than declaring that morphological similarities between organisms entitle us to declare them members of the same species. Just as biologists make species membership dependent on a certain history of common descent rather than on a phenotypic or genotypic feature, so we should make membership of the generic entity of painting dependent on the historical fact of intent. Of course, this historical approach will have to be supplemented to accommodate practices such as workshop production, copying, and forgery, but there is no reason to think that such accommodation is impossible.

This emphasis on intent rather than appearance opens the door to another objection to the ontology proposed here as an alternative to the physical object hypothesis underlying the artwork essay. Imagine Watteau in the grips of an illness that seriously degrades his vision. He intends to produce a third version of the *Plerinage l'île de Cythère*, but as a result of his near blindness the finished canvas is nothing but an unrecognizable mass of blots and streaks. Do we have a third element of our generic entity here, to be counted alongside those of the Louvre and Schloss Charlottenburg? Or does this show the soundness of Wolterstoff's argument that painting should not be accorded an ontology of element and generic entity on account of the absence of those criteria of correctness that determine "norm kinds" in music?^[69]

Thinking back to the analogy drawn between the Berlin and Paris Wateaus and two performances of a jazz standard will help us answer these questions. If we were to hear a third jazz performance, one that was quite unrecognizable as a version of the standard that we had heard in London or Paris, and then learned that it was, in fact, that standard performed in a style which made that standard difficult to recognize, we would probably accept it as a performance of that standard. We would probably supplement that acceptance with critical observations about the style in which the piece had been rendered. On the other hand, were we to hear a fourth performance of such obvious incompetence that it amounted to little more than noise, we would probably not accept it as a version of the standard; we could justify that non-acceptance by pointing out that to intend to do something implies that certain goals or criteria to be met in a resultant action are partially constitutive of an intention. Such an approach would not require us to declare the sick Watteau's canvas another version of the *Plerinage*. We could also respond to Wolterstoff by noting that norms do determine what can count as an element of a generic entity in painting, even though these norms, unlike those of classical music are not expressed in standardized public conventions.

These ontological considerations suggest that an alternative exists to the physical object hypothesis that underlies the central arguments of the artwork essay, and this element generic entity alternative can explain how responding aesthetically to paintings amounts to more than being in the grip of an obsolescent cult. As the examples of the preceding paragraph show, we respond to painting based on what we see, to be sure, but on much more besides; history and our conjectures regarding the intentions of the artist are but two of a host of considerations that both shape and

justify our responses. So these responses need not necessarily be simple, varying as they will according to our expectations, beliefs, and critical abilities. This complexity suggests that our responses grow not only from socio-economic processes as those are commonly understood, such as changes in techniques and relations of production or various forms of social stratification, but also as a consequence of aesthetic experience, intellectual development, and exposure to criticism. Yet many readers of the artwork essay will suspect that drawing attention to this complexity of aesthetic response is merely an attempt to update the older auratic vocabulary of "creativity and genius, eternal value and mystery."

5. From Communism to Consumerism

These readers have grounds for their suspicion — up to a point. Few of us today would be able to use that vocabulary unmodified; we cannot simply brush away the knowledge we now have of the historicity of judgments of value and proclaim in pretended innocence the language of Kantian aesthetics. Yet even though we cannot reinhabit the world of the eighteenth century pioneers of aesthetics, we can acknowledge that the question that they posed, of how we can distinguish expressions of personal taste from normative aesthetic judgments, cannot be immediately dismissed. Even if we think that question is itself not properly posed, we can certainly acknowledge that those philosophers began to provide us with a way of talking about both how we might justify our aesthetic evaluation and the aesthetic experience in itself. The artwork essay pronounces this language dead in an age of mechanical reproduction.

We can understand this pronouncement and its implications better if we descend to the Hall Napoléon and make our way into the adjoining Carrousel du Louvre. This space is, of course, a shopping mall. The inverted pyramid which we encounter between the entry to the Louvre and the Virgin store features in *The Da Vinci Code*; the film version's assignment of a crucial role to Leonardo's works in a narrative that combines conspiracy theory and New Age religiosity demonstrates Benjamin's limitations as a prophet not only of the future of the museum work of art but also of the motion picture. Yet success in prophecy, as was noted at the beginning of this article, can hardly be accounted as the sole or even main criterion for the evaluation of Benjamin's essay. Instead, as we stand in this new arcade of twenty-first century consumer capitalism, we can best evaluate the artwork essay's claims concerning aesthetic value and experience by considering them in a broader historical context than is customary, which entails going beyond the now well worn tracks of the Adorno-Benjamin debate.

The first element of this broader perspective is to be found in a text published shortly before Benjamin's essay, the 1932 *Essay on the Nature and Significance of Economic Science* by Lionel Robbins. Although Robbins, a British academic economist who later exercised enormous influence on the organization of higher education in the UK, might seem to have nothing in common with Benjamin, his *Essay* not only gives sharp expression to beliefs that would come to underpin the post New Deal, post-Keynesian neoliberal order, but also shows in respect of one of these beliefs a troubling overlap with Benjamin's artwork essay. This overlap occurs when Robbins, after arguing for the impossibility of interpersonal comparisons of utility, explained the significance of this incommensurability; economics, Robbins declared, "is incapable of deciding as between the desirability of different ends. It is fundamentally distinct from Ethics."^[70]

The positivist leanings of Robbins convinced him that economics could only be put on a scientific basis by purging the discipline of the Benthamite tendency to derive policy recommendations from the quantification and aggregation of individual utilities. As far as the Robbins of the thirties was concerned, to remove these

recommendations from "science" to "ethics" was to remove them from the scope of rational discourse and scrutiny. In promoting this purge, Robbins struck out against an older tradition of incorporating social welfare into economics under the guise of utility; this tradition still animated his contemporary, Keynes. One consequence, however, of this ban on the interpersonal comparison of utilities is to rehabilitate another element of the Benthamite heritage: "Prejudice apart, the game of push-pin is of equal value with the arts and sciences of music and poetry," wrote Bentham^[71], in unwitting anticipation of not only Robbins and his neoliberal progeny but also Benjamin and his successor scholars in cultural studies. Accordingly, the only rational discussion of value to be had is in terms of the satisfaction of preferences. One turns to Benjamin's pronouncements that in the postauratic age of film and sports, "everybody is somewhat of an expert"^[72] with the gloomy recognition that both Robbins and Benjamin want to declare questions of value to be beyond the bounds of reasoned discourse.

Of course, the relation between the two views is one of overlap rather than of congruence. For Robbins, the satisfaction of preferences takes place in the activities of the market. For Benjamin, on the other hand, these preferences both arise from and are organized by the experience of the postauratic collective. This description of the collective process is in itself disturbing. Benjamin's account of this process, no doubt intended as a cheerfully demystified prophecy of a socialist future, reads uncannily like a quotation from one of the American postwar critics of "mass culture" such as Dwight Mac Donald or David Riesman: "Individual reactions are predetermined by the mass audience response they are about to produce the moment these responses become manifest they control each other."^[73] Yet in spite of these differences in their conceptions of the social processes at work, both Benjamin and Robbins shared a conviction that to assert the existence of value beyond taste or preference could only obscure our understanding of modern life.

The Virgin megastore in the Carrousel du Louvre provides us with a material demonstration of this overlap. Walking through the store, we see that Benjamin's prophecy has been realized as one version of the cultural future, rather than as Benjamin himself envisaged it, the only alternative to fascism. More or less everything that Benjamin imagined can be found inside the Virgin megastore DVDs in which the freeze-frame possibilities and assorted commentaries demystify the film as effectively as Benjamin hoped, an abundance of reproductions untethered from any dependency on ritual and displayed with the "distracted" in mind, and a generalized equalization of all works of art. When we ask in what form this equalization has taken place and recognize the answer as "commodity," we are also aware that the Virgin megastore is not merely a version of the future, but a competitor with the museum one aspect of the continuing struggle of the neoliberal successors of Robbins against Keynesians, social democrats, the left anybody, in fact, who might dare to think that value can be rationally discussed independently of consumer preferences and that public institutions can reflect those values. The Virgin store belongs to the business empire of "hippie capitalist" Richard Branson, whose success, beginning in the late sixties, exemplifies the triumph of the antitraditionalist entrepreneur in the years that the postwar Keynesian consensus collapsed and a renewed interest in Benjamin in general and his artwork essay in particular nourished a postmodern insensibility to an older tradition of aesthetics.^[74] The anchor position of the Virgin store in the Carrousel du Louvre shows that, contrary to Benjamin's hopes, the development of reproductive technologies has benefited retailers rather than revolutionaries.

The link between the artwork essay and consumerism extends to the very understanding of the aesthetic experience itself. In the artwork essay, Benjamin contrasted the auratic with the

postauratic in terms of distance and closeness.^[75] This language of proximity, a reworking of Alois Riegl's distinction between haptic and optic perception,^[76] functions associatively and metaphorically in the artwork essay to establish a series of contrasting pairs. So "contemplation" of the distant and "distraction" by the proximate characterize the experience of the auratic and the postauratic respectively. Riegl's distinction between haptic perception's mental synthesis of discontinuous sensory inputs and optic perception's synoptic survey of objects in space ostensibly provided Benjamin with the raw material for his own historicization of perception. Beyond, however, the dubious psychology of perception underlying Riegl's distinction or the apparent suitability of that distinction for demarcating the sensory experience of modernity, the appeal of Riegl's distinction to Benjamin and of Benjamin's adaptation of that distinction to readers of the artwork essay lies in its potential for the elevation of impulse over reflection.

Under the heading of "impulse" we can subsume both the tastes of the observers-cum-experts of Benjamin's essay and the tastes of the shoppers in the Virgin megastore. The former set of impulses are synthesized within the collective life of the urban proletariat as the deepening crisis of capitalism makes socialist revolution the exclusive alternative to fascism, while the latter are synthesized within the operations of the market, which includes the preferences of consumers operating under budget constraints. In neither case can there be any appeal to anything beyond those impulses, or any search for a higher order perspective within which to reflect upon these impulses, for reference to either the vocabulary of aesthetic value or that of social value considered as more than the satisfaction of individual preferences would be a vain appeal to a tradition at once mystificatory and moribund in the face of the nascent revolution, whether that revolution be of the proletariat or of the market. Closeness, distraction, and the haptic all provide metaphors to describe the aesthetic experience as the impulsive satisfaction of preferences. Just as we should not be surprised that Benjamin could not foresee that consumerism, rather than communism, would fulfill his antitraditionalist prophecy of the new aesthetic experience, so we should not be astonished that the reputation of the artwork essay as a prophetic text has grown in the four decades that has seen the political ascendancy of the ideological heirs to Lionel Robbins with their exaltation of consumer sovereignty and their celebration of markets. In noting this simultaneity, however, we should be careful not to claim that the rise of neoliberal thought is the sole or even main reason for the success of the Benjamin essay; to explain that success, we should consider the intellectual history of West Germany and the United States in the sixties and seventies, the birth of media studies and cultural studies as academic fields, and, of course, the continuing growth of the process that attracted Benjamin's interest in the first place—the reproduction of works of art.

Yet even if we look at these historical processes, rather than to the rise of neoliberalism, for the proximate causes of the popularity of the artwork essay, we should still bear in mind the common passion that animated both Robbins and Benjamin. In spite of their differences, they shared a determination to break with a language of value that had grown up over the nineteenth century but was now, they thought, a dead weight upon the present. The artwork essay added political urgency to this break by declaring it a central task of those opposed to fascism.

6. Beyond Benjamin's False Dilemma

Benjamin, however, was wrong to think of the future as a choice between the revolutionary liquidation of tradition and a fascism that is heir to that tradition, and Benjamin's current enthusiasts are equally mistaken in thinking that the sole alternative to acceptance of the artwork essay's main theses is a hidebound cultural conservatism. To see that we are not limited to these alternatives, we need once again to place Benjamin's essay in a larger historical

perspective, that of the politics of the left in the years around the publication of the artwork essay. The significance of Benjamin's association with Brecht has long been noted,^[77] but my concern here is to make sense of the essay against the background of the sea change that was taking place in the politics of the left at the time of the essay's publication.

This transition can be seen in the change in line of the international Communist movement from the Third Period "class against class" position to the support of the Popular Front. These positions represented something deeper, however, than the political stances of the Comintern, for they posed two possible patterns of response of an antifascist left to the heritage of bourgeois culture, if we understand by culture a whole pattern of ideas, values and institutions that incorporate the political and the ethical as well as the aesthetic. Should that bourgeois tradition of museums and parliaments and appeals to universal human values be denounced as the rotten breeding ground for fascism? Or could that past be critically appropriated as part of a democratic, humanist, and therefore necessarily antifascist culture? These questions have a clear parallel in the concerns with the ambivalence alluded to earlier regarding modernity and tradition that runs throughout Benjamin's writings. Nevertheless, the artwork essay points clearly towards the drive to liquidate tradition that also fuelled the rhetoric of Third Period communists. Just as this politically disastrous Third Period communism gave way to the ultimately successful politics of the Popular Front,^[78] so we should seek an alternative to the cultural anti-aesthetic leftism that the artwork essay represents. This alternative should be a cultural matrix which nourishes an opposition to the values of fascistic antihumanism through a simultaneous engagement with modernity and the critical appropriation of tradition.

That matrix exists, if we are ready to take a short trip in space, time, and the Metro. As we go from the Louvre to Trocadéro, we should also travel back seventy years, so that we can step out to the Paris International Exposition of 1937. We make our way to the Spanish pavilion, where the attempt to win international support for the Spanish Republic's resistance to military insurgence and fascist aggression exemplifies the cultural politics of the Popular Front.^[79] Within the Josep Lluís Sert pavilion we find, alongside the paintings, prints, and sculptures, exhibits in the newer media of film, photography, and photomontage. We note that one of these media, photomontage, is being used to demonstrate how the Republic is safeguarding Spain's artistic heritage, including, of course, just those types of artwork that Benjamin pronounced irrelevant to a progressive future, against the air raids of Franco and his fascist allies.^[80]

What will become the most famous of all the exhibits, Picasso's *Guernica*, simultaneously exemplifies modernism and that most traditional of forms, the history painting. Just as consideration of the painting itself in its original context shows that Benjamin's essay was being overtaken by events, so *Guernica's* history in the seven decades since the exhibition challenges assertion of the fading power of painting. The location of the 1937 canvas as an object in space and time has mattered, and not in a reactionary or "cultish" way; one could argue that the absence of the canvas from Spain until the end of the Franco dictatorship helped the restoration of Spanish democracy.^[81] Nor is this political potency confined to the issues of the thirties; as the Spain of the twenty-first century grapples with questions of national minorities and varying conceptions of citizenship, controversy over the location of *Guernica* has once again become important.^[82]

The history of *Guernica* also calls Benjamin's binary typology of aesthetic experience into question. One can contemplate *Guernica* and recognize that one's encounter with a work of art might mean, contrary to the thinking of Bentham, Robbins, and Benjamin, that

aesthetic experience might involve more than the satisfaction of preferences; as we gaze at the picture, we become aware that *Guernica* might be awakening desires and fears hitherto dormant within us, cultivating new ways of seeing, and, in the most general terms, allowing us to lose ourselves within a particular visual experience so that we might find ourselves anew. Only the most obtuse amongst us, though, could fail to be aware that this contemplation does not take place in an ahistorical vacuum; our responses to *Guernica* as citizens of 2007 differ from those of the viewers of 1937. Our response is in part shaped by seventy years of criticism, the accommodation of modernism, Picasso's status not merely as an artist but as a celebrity, and our common understanding of fascism and war to give but a few examples of the processes that inform our viewing. We might understand our contemplation of *Guernica* as an element in a continuing collective effort, and this understanding should remind us that we should not allow ourselves to be browbeaten by either the ultraleftist disciples of Benjamin or the neoliberal followers of Robbins into believing that the individual is simply the contrary of the collective.

In fact, the relation between the collective and individual experience of art can be complementary; it is almost certainly complex, just like the relationship of modernity to tradition, elite to popular, or "original" to "reproduction" a complexity of which *Guernica* postcards, coffee mugs, and key rings remind us as forcibly as the versions of Watteau. This complexity and the passage of seven decades mean, of course, that we cannot simply take the cultural politics of the Popular Front as a substitute for those advanced by Benjamin in the artwork essay. We might, though, ask ourselves which provides us with a better starting point for thinking about the fate of the art object in an age of mechanical destruction; when in the midst of a war of aggression, soldiers stand by as museums and libraries are looted, are our responses better served by contemplation of *Guernica* or by distracting ourselves with "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"? [\[83\]](#)

ENDNOTES

[\[1\]](#) I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers of my manuscript for their comments. I would also like to thank Jeffrey Meikle and Karen King for discussing some of the ideas in this article with me. In addition, I am grateful to Susan Feagin for her advice and encouragement.

[\[2\]](#) Benjamin, Walter, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" in Walter Benjamin, Hannah Arendt ed., *Illuminations* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968) pp. 219-253.

[\[3\]](#) Etlin, Richard A., *In Defense of Humanism: Value in the arts and letters* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996) pp. 124-126.

[\[4\]](#) Zuidervaart, Lambert, *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory: the Redemption of an Illusion* (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 1991), p. 29.

[\[5\]](#) Berger, John, *Ways of Seeing: Based on the BBC Television Series with John Berger* (London: BBC and Penguin Books, 1988, 1972).

[\[6\]](#) Wolin, Richard, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), pp.183-197, exemplifies the intellectual biography approach.

[\[7\]](#) Hansen, Miriam Bratu, "Room-for-Play: Benjamin's Gamble with Cinema" *October* 109 (Summer 2004), 3-45, is representative of this variant.

[\[8\]](#) See, for example, Esther Leslie, *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), 130-148. For a recent example of the essay examined in the context of the Adorno-Benjamin debate, see Yvonne Sherratt, *Adorno's Positive Dialectic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 151-168. See also

note 4 above.

[9] Some notable examples include Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin and the Frankfurt Institute* (New York: The Free Press, 1977) *passim* but especially pp. 127-151; Susan Buck-Morss, "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered," *October* 62 (Fall 1992), 3-41; in Gerhard Richter ed., *Benjamin's Ghosts: Interventions in Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002) Miriam Hansen, "Benjamin and Cinema: Not a One-Way Street," pp. 41-73 and Eva Geulen, "Under Construction: Walter Benjamin's 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,'" pp. 121-141; Joel Snyder, "Benjamin or Reproducibility and Aura" in Gary Smith ed., *Benjamin: Philosophy, History, Aesthetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989) pp. 158-174.

[10] See Roger Pouivet's remarks in his review of *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art: The Analytic Tradition: An Anthology*, Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen eds., *British Journal of Aesthetics* 45 (2005): 88-94.

[11] Wollheim, Richard, *Art and its Objects: Second Edition With Six Supplementary Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 175.

[12] Stolnitz, Jerome, "On the Apparent Demise of Really High Art," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 43 (1985): 345-358.

[13] Knizek, Ian, "La ontología de las reproducciones mecánicas de Walter Benjamin," *Plural: Revista Cultural de Excelsior* No. 185 February 1987, 38-41; Ian Knizek, "Walter Benjamin and the Mechanical Reproduction of Artworks Revisited," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 33 (1993): 357-66.

[14] Geulen, 14, notes the discontinuous nature of the writing in the essay.

[15] Smith, Gary, "Thinking through Benjamin: An introductory essay," in Gary Smith ed., *Benjamin: Philosophy, History, Aesthetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989) pp. vii-xliii.

[16] Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 222-223; Graeme Gilloch, *Walter Benjamin: Critical Constellations* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), p. 182.

[17] Knizek, "La ontología," 39, notes how Benjamin's "nature" illustration obfuscates our understanding of "aura."

[18] Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 223.

[19] Gilloch, p. 164.

[20] Benjamin, Walter, et. al, "Protocols to the Experiments on Hashish, Opium and Mescaline 1927-1934," trans. Scott J. Thompson in Walter Benjamin Research Syndicate, www.wbenjamin.org/protocol1.html, (accessed January 7, 2007).

[21] For accounts that consider the drug assisted genesis of Benjamin's "aura," see Buck-Morss, *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 127, 274-275 and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, "Propaedeutics of Profane Illumination" in Gary Smith ed., *On Walter Benjamin: Critical Essays and Recollections* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988) pp. 33-50.

[22] "Protocol V: Walter Benjamin: Hashish Beginning of March 1930" in Benjamin et al., "Protocols."

[23] Huxley, Aldous, *The Doors of Perception, and Heaven and Hell* (New York: Harper and Row, 1956).

[24] Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 220.

[25] *Ibid.*, 235.

[26] *Ibid.*, 241.

[27] *Ibid.*, 239.

[28] *Ibid.*, 225-227.

[29] Higgins, Reynold Alleyne *Greek Terracottas* (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1967) pp. 1-2. See also Brunhilde S. Ridgway, "Defining the Issue : the Greek Period" in Kathleen Preciado ed., *Retaining the Original: Multiple Originals, Copies, and Reproductions*, Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts Symposium Papers VII, *Studies in the History of Art* Volume 20 (Washington DC: National Gallery of Art, 1989) 13-26.

[30] Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 220.

[31] *Ibid.*, 227, for an example of his understanding of the relation between quantitative and qualitative change.

[32] Preziosi, Donald, "Art as History: Introduction" in *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 24, notes the reliance of Winckelmann on copies. For the influence of Winckelmann on Kant, see Christian Helmut Wenzel, *An Introduction to Kant's Aesthetics: Core Concepts and Problems* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), pp. 73-75. Kant, of course, never left K nigsberg, so he was most likely largely dependent on reproductions for his remarks on the visual arts. That he bases much of his aesthetics on nature only further undermines Benjamin's case.

[33] Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 245.

[34] Marvin, Miranda, "Copying the Roman Sculpture: The Replica Series" in Preciado ed., *Retaining the Original*, pp. 29-45.

[35] Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 242.

[36] *Ibid.*, 241-242.

[37] Vikan, Gary, "Ruminations on Edible Icons: Originals and Copies in the Art of Byzantium" in Preciado ed., *Retaining the Original*, pp. 47-59, 50, 51.

[38] Brown, Beverly Louise, "Partial Contents: Replication and the Art of Veronese" in Preciado ed., *Retaining the Original*, pp. 111-124, 120.

[39] *Ibid.*, pp. 121-122.

[40] Muller, Jeffrey M., "Measures of Authenticity : the Detection of Copies in the Early Literature on Connoisseurship" in Preciado ed., *Retaining the Original*, pp. 141-149, 141.

[41] Bazin, Germain, *The Museum Age* (New York: Universe Books, 1967), p. 116.

[42] Fried, Michael, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).

[43] Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 227.

[44] White, Randall, *Prehistoric Art: The Symbolic Journey of Mankind* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2003) pp. 39-61.

[45] *Ibid.*, 57.

[46] Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 226-227.

[47] Dutton, Denis, "Mythologies of Tribal Art," *African Arts* 26 (1995): 32-43, updated in "Mythologies of Tribal Art," www.denisdutton.com/mythologies.htm (accessed 17 January 2007); Denis Dutton, "But They Don't Have Our Concept of Art" in Noel Carroll ed., *Theories of Art Today* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), pp. 217-238. See also Stephen Davies, "Non-Western Art and Art's Definition" in *Theories of Art Today*, pp. 199-216.

[48] See, for example, John McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1993).

[49] Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 221.

[50] Weber, Max, *Max Weber's "Science as a Vocation"* ed. Peter Lassman and Irving Velody , (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989).

[51] Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 225.

[52] Illustration of *Mercury abducting Psyche*:
http://cartelfr.louvre.fr/cartelfr/visite?srv=car_not_frame&idNotice=2987.

[53] Bazin, p. 160.

[54] *Ibid.*, p. 193.

[55] Wollheim, p. 4.

[56] Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 225.

[57] *Ibid.*, 226-227.

[58] *Ibid.*, 228-229.

[59] *Ibid.*, 233.

[60] *Ibid.*, 240.

[61] The two versions can be compared here:
www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/watteau/

[62] Grasselli, Margaret Morgan and Pierre Rosenberg, "Pilgrimage to the Island of Cythera" and "The Embarkation for Cythera" in *Watteau 1684 1721* (Washington D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1984) pp. 396 411.

[63] Berger, pp. 21-23

[64] Wollheim, p. 75.

[65] Goodman, Nelson, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1976) p. 113.

[66] Wolterstoff, Nicolas, *Works and Worlds of Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980) pp. 33-105, 72.

[67] Currie, Gregory, *An Ontology of Art* (New York : St. Martin's Press, 1989).

[68] Grasselli and Rosenberg, p. 410.

[69] Wolterstoff, p. 72.

[70] Robbins, Lionel, *An Essay on the Nature and Significance of Economic Science*, 2nd ed., (Macmillan and Company Ltd, 1935), p. 152.

[71] Bentham, Jeremy, *The Rationale of Reward* (London: John and H.L. Hunt, 1825), p. 206.

[72] Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 233.

[73] *Ibid*, 236.

[74] Jackson, Tim, *Richard Branson, Virgin king : Inside Richard Branson's business empire* (Rocklin, CA: Prima Publications,1996).

[75] Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 224-225, 235. 245, note 5. The allusion to the Kantian intuitions of space and time in this note which Benjamin makes in his note confuses the issue, because Benjamin's ambition to historicize perception is quite alien to Kant's transcendentalism.

[76] Riegl, Alois, *Late Roman Art Industry*, trans. Rolf Winkes (Rome, Italy: G. Bretschneider, 1985) 24-27; Margaret Iversen, *Alois Riegl: Art History and Theory* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press,1993) pp. 15-16, 71-80.

[77] Arendt, Hannah, "Introduction: Walter Benjamin: 1892-1940" in Walter Benjamin, Hannah Arendt ed., *Illuminations* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World,1968) pp. 14-15.

[78] "Ultimately successful" if we understand the alliance of the USSR with the anti-Axis capitalist powers from 1941 to 1945 as a resumption of the Popular Front.

[79] Trueba, Josefina Alix ed., *Pabell n espa ol, Exposici n Internacional de Par s, 1937* (Madrid: Ministerio de Cultura, Direcci n General de Bellas Artes y Archivos, 1987).

[80] *Ibid.*, pp. 146-147.

[81] Chipp, Hershell B., *Picasso's Guernica: History, Transformations, Meanings* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

[82] T ib n, Colm, "The Art of War," *The Guardian*, April 29 2006, www.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,,1764206,00.html, retrieved 8/7/2007.

[83] Jenkins, Simon, "In Iraq's four-year looting frenzy, the allies have become the vandals", *The Guardian*, 6/8/2007, arts.guardian.co.uk/art/heritage/story/0,,2098275,00.html, retrieved 8/8/2007.

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