Article

Journal of Communication Inquiry
0(0) 1–19
© The Author(s) 2017
Reprints and permissions:
sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/0196859917715741
journals.sagepub.com/home/jci

Walter Benjamin and the Question of Print in Media History

Charles Berret[1]

Abstract

Although Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" is a seminal essay in the study of media history, the work itself gives a surprisingly brief account of one of field's core subjects: the printing press. Books and literature present only a special case of mechanical reproduction, according to Benjamin, but the implications of this point remain largely unexplored by scholars. The purpose of this essay is to ask why Benjamin would have considered print to be different or less historically consequential compared to photography and cinema when the revolutionary potential he ascribes to these more recent technologies is also prefigured in his other writings on books and literature. Answering this question helps to create a sharper picture of what matters to Benjamin about new media and also points to figures like Georg Lukács who influenced Benjamin's account of technology and art. Ultimately, this line of questioning also raises concerns about the place of the "Work of Art" essay in the study of media history, a field in which the signal error is to treat new media as unprecedented developments.

Keywords

media history, critical and cultural studies, communication technology, aesthetics, philosophy of communication, history of the book, Walter Benjamin

> The enormous changes which printing, the mechanical reproduction of writing, has brought about in literature are a familiar story. However, within the phenomenon which we are here examining from the perspective of world history, print is merely a special, though particularly important, case. (Benjamin, 1969, pp. 218–219)[1]

[1]Columbia University, New York, NY, USA

Corresponding Author:
Charles Berret, Columbia University, Pulitzer Hall, 2950 Broadway, New York, NY 10027, USA.
Email: charles.berret@columbia.edu

In this short passage from "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Walter Benjamin places the printing press in a somewhat puzzling position. He acknowledges that movable-type printing is a form of mechanical reproduction and that its invention was somehow entangled with changes in literature. Yet, he also maintains that print is distinct from newer media like photography and cinema, whose political and aesthetic challenges he addresses for the remainder of the essay. The basis of this distinction is unclear, and its implications are counterintuitive. Whereas movable-type printing is often central in the historical study of technology and culture—and Benjamin at least implies that this position is both well documented and well deserved—he sidesteps the topic with little explanation.[2] Benjamin proceeds to offer a vivid account of machine aesthetics, the heightened political significance of mass-produced art, and the challenge this poses to the unique "aura" of traditional artworks like paintings. And yet books were not so different from paintings before the printing revolution. They were rare, costly, often sacred. The arrival of the printing press was certainly a factor in the decline of the illuminated manuscript—a medium both as hallowed and as thoroughly dead as any other—but Benjamin's treatment of print is so brief in the "Work of Art" essay that it is difficult to judge how much distance he means to place between print and more recent technologies of mechanical reproduction.

The question of where books and literature stand within the "Work of Art" essay remains largely unexplored, even in the vast body of commentary that followed Benjamin's revival in the 1960s. The novelist and critic J. M. Coetzee (2001) once noted in the *New York Review* that Benjamin had little to say about the printing press because he had focused on later stages in the age of mechanical reproduction,[3] but it seems unlikely that Benjamin himself intended for the age in question to extend so far into the past. The printing press appeared in Europe during the late Renaissance and grew into a fixture of Western society amid a flourishing of the very arts that Benjamin considered to be transformed by photography. Instead, the "Work of Art" essay mostly ranges over the long 19th century, when a rush of invention and an expansion of industry encouraged the impression of an age defined by its machines. "For the last twenty years neither matter nor space nor time has been what it was from time immemorial," wrote the symbolist poet Paul Valery in a passage that Benjamin quotes to begin the "Work of Art" essay (Benjamin, 1969, p. 217). Technologies developed during the 19th century promised, in Valery's words, to "transform the entire technique of the arts, thereby affecting art itself and perhaps even bringing about an amazing change in our very notion of art" (p. 217). By the close of the 19th century, photography, sound recording, and moving images brought new forms of entertainment to the masses as the means of mechanical reproduction made these works abundant enough to distribute widely. Books and newspapers also found larger

audiences during the machine age, with the steam-powered rotary press and automated typesetting machines dramatically increasing the possible speed and scale of printing runs, but the evolution of print and its own extension to a broader public was already five centuries along by that point in time.

This highlights the need for caution when we imagine the "familiar story" Benjamin had in mind when he wrote that the arrival of the printing press had been somehow entangled with changes in literature. This story is so familiar to media historians today that it is difficult to pinpoint which version Benjamin had in mind when he was writing in the 1930s. Today, we tend to associate this line of thinking with accounts published decades later by people like Marshall McLuhan (1962), Walter Ong (1982/2013), Elizabeth Eisenstein (1978, 2005), or even Friedrich Kittler (1986/1999). Writers in this tradition tend to describe the printing revolution as a period that reconfigured modes of communication and transformed any number of Western institutions.[4] With this well-known and variously contested (Johns, 1998; Williams, 1974) discourse in mind, it would be perilously simple to misread Benjamin's familiar manner of speaking and reroute his account of print and literature through later lines of thinking.

On the other hand, Benjamin might have had an even more widely familiar story in mind. Perhaps he meant to offer a quick gesture to Gutenberg, who is well known even to schoolchildren and is commonly credited with opening the gates of social, political, and religious upheaval in Europe by providing reading material to increasingly literate masses. Even though this interpretation is attractive in its simplicity, it would not clarify whether Benjamin accords to print the same radical potential he sees in other means of mechanical reproduction. If Benjamin had meant to credit the printing press with this common account of its social effects, the list would closely resemble the central provocations in the "Work of Art" essay, namely, that the emergence of a mass medium may transform both art and society. In short, it still does not answer why Benjamin would consider the mechanical reproduction of books to be a special case distinct from photography.

Granted, the topic of print is all but absent in the "Work of Art" essay, and it could appear misguided to approach such a bountiful work through its omissions. But the history of the book is a considerable matter to leave on the margins during any discussion of mechanical reproduction, much less one that has been so widely influential. To foreground the status of print while reading the "Work of Art" essay raises critical questions about a piece that has become well rehearsed in many fields of study. Specifically, how does Benjamin define an artwork or its aura such that books and literature might be excluded? What are the qualities of photography and cinema such that they might stand apart from earlier means of mechanical reproduction? And who does Benjamin consider the audience for the "Work of Art" essay such that the printing press and its "transformation of literature" would be familiar enough to gloss in a

few lines? To approach the "Work of Art" essay with these points in mind is to insist upon a sharper picture of what matters to Benjamin about media technologies in general and what features he ascribes to mechanical reproduction itself. Ultimately, Benjamin's apparent bias toward the new media technologies of his own time should raise concerns, especially among media historians who consider it a grievous error to treat the "new" as though it is unprecedented.[5]

The Artwork, the Aura, and the Replica: Delineating the Subjects of the "Work of Art" Essay

Print is not the only means of mechanical reproduction that Benjamin shelves for the "Work of Art" essay. Just before he addresses print, Benjamin lists several earlier techniques for crafting in batches.[6] He notes the ancient arts of terra-cotta molding, coin stamping, and metal founding. Then, in addition to movable type, Benjamin points to lithography, woodblock printing, and copperplate etching as technologies of mechanical bookmaking. He pushes each of these technologies aside, noting them early in the essay as though to indicate that he has not failed to consider them.

Instead, Benjamin takes photography and cinema as his primary subjects in the "Work of Art" essay, and it is worth recalling why these technologies could have appeared to present such a break from the past. By the mid-19th century, devices for visual entertainment like magic lanterns, phantasmagoria, and even painted panoramas offered various means of depicting images, but these were not indexical reproductions of existing images, and they were not crafted in multiples.[7] Photography made it possible to directly capture an image and reproduce it in identical copies, while capturing a succession of photographs led to the breakthrough of motion pictures. The concurrent invention of audio recording meant that the ephemeral sense of hearing could, for the first time, be imprinted as a reviewable and repeatable document.[8] In his unfinished *Arcades Project* (2002), Benjamin viewed mechanical images with particular fascination, dissecting the insights of several inventors and tracing the deep roots of photography in the construction of modern life. For many, the invention of photography, cinema, telegraph, radio, and railway travel seemed to signal a break from the past, a newfound speed and ephemerality that Karl Marx famously expressed as the very character of industrial modernity: "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. All that is solid melts into air" (Marx & Engels, 1978, p. 476). Valery depicts the same feeling of unbridled transformation in the passage that Benjamin quotes to begin the "Work of Art" essay:

> In all the arts there is a physical component which can no longer be considered or treated as it used to be, which cannot remain unaffected by our modern knowledge

> and power. For the last twenty years neither matter nor space nor time has been what it was from time immemorial. (Benjamin, 1969, p. 217)

Here, Valery's remarks prefigure one of the most celebrated passages from the "Work of Art" essay, where Benjamin delineates the effect of mechanical reproduction on the *aura* of an artwork. The defining quality of the aura is that it originates in the uniqueness of the work, "its presence in time and space" (Benjamin, 1969, p. 220), which provides a direct lineage of owners and audiences back to the time of its creation. But as the likeness of an artwork spreads through mass reproduction, the original carries fewer of the privileges of limited spectatorship. Benjamin at first laments the consequences in rather dramatic terms: The aura "withers" (p. 221) when we "pry an object from its shell" (p. 223) through mechanical reproduction, and now the sight of immediate reality has become "an orchid in the land of technology" (p. 223). The aura, this essential quality of a traditional artwork, seems to be plundered as its replicas proliferate, whereas film and photography thrive because they were designed for a mass audience from the outset. The power of photography, for Benjamin, is not just to capture and multiply the image of other artworks but to produce a new kind of artwork whose basic purpose is to be replicated for a mass audience. To stress this point, the title of his essay is sometimes translated as "The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical *Reproducibility*" (italics added) to stress that the subject is not the age of mechanical reproduction, writ large, but the age in which artworks have become mechanically reproducible.

With the concept of the aura, Benjamin not only posits an essential distinction between different artforms, grounded in their modes of production, but also stakes ontological consequences on viewership itself. Some essential quality of a traditional artwork can be debased when it is exposed to a larger audience, while the mass audience reached through mechanical reproduction is precisely the source of power for new artforms like the photograph and motion picture. Benjamin presents the concept of the aura at first as though to share a wistful regret for something precious we have lost, but this momentary concern gives way to a positive thesis about new artistic possibilities. Benjamin had defined the aura and registered its demise in order to untether the broader concept of the artwork from traditional expectations, and by implicating mechanical reproduction in this process, the "Work of Art" essay articulates how new kinds of art may emerge from the very technologies that have undermined the old ones.

Beyond aesthetics, Benjamin also noticed that the emergence of mass media could be politically precarious: An artwork multiplied and amplified by mass media could support any message, no matter how objectionable. Benjamin began writing the "Work of Art" essay shortly after the release of Leni Riefenstahl's film "The Triumph of the Will," in which her visionary camerawork glorified the traditional symbols of German nationalism and depicted the Third Reich as a glamorous war machine. Hitler's incendiary radio broadcasts

compounded the impression that mass media could enable persuasion and deception on a previously unimaginable scale. For Benjamin's colleagues in the Frankfurt School, notably Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, these cases contributed to a growing conviction that mass media are inevitably colored with an insidious stain, exemplified in popular works of low culture produced for seemingly defenseless audiences. Adorno would later argue that only artworks on the remote perimeter of the avant-garde, like Arnold Schoenberg's serial compositions, could manage to resist appropriation within the culture industry because they are *inherently unenjoyable* and thus anathema to commercial interests.[9] In essence, Adorno called for an aesthetic retreat against the encroachment of mass media.

Despite this disagreement, Benjamin and Adorno's aesthetic theories were both influenced by the seminal art historian Alois Riegl, whose concept of *Kunstwollen* (or "artistic will") describes the perennial, active reinvention of art during each historical era. As Riegl argued in his landmark study *The Late Roman Art Industry* (1985), the significance of an artwork is not decorative or even mimetic, as competing theories held; An artwork is significant because it projects a specific way of understanding the world. In a sense, Adorno and Benjamin stood behind competing *Kunstwollen*, and their disagreement lay implicitly in the question of whether mass media contributed to the *Kunstwollen* of their time or threatened to destroy it.

Beyond style and form, the meaning of "art" is if course persistently contested, and there were conspicuous shifts in the use and referents of the term *art* even during the century leading up to the gathering of the Frankfurt School.[10] Both Paul Oskar Kristeller (1951) and Raymond Williams (1958) have traced the modern concepts of "art" and "aesthetics" to 18th century moral philosophy and literary criticism. With the origin of the "aesthetic" as a philosophical concern in the work of Alexander Baumgarten, the term remained close to its ancient Greek root, *aisthitikos*—experience gathered through the passive reception of the senses rather than the active construction of the rational faculties.[11] After Baumgarten, David Hume, and Immanuel Kant began to associate aesthetics with a sense of beauty that must be cultivated by training one's private faculties of judgment, while Edmund Burke's notion of the "sublime" first imparted religious qualities to the experience of art. In studying this complicated history, Susan Buck-Morss (1992) has even argued that the very concept of aesthetics had only begun to be applied to the fine arts during Benjamin's lifetime. This further complicates the task of identifying Benjamin's subject matter when he discusses the fate of artworks confronted with technologies that can reproduce replicas on a massive scale.

One reading of the "Work of Art" essay holds that artworks had only become *auratic* at some point in the recent past, and thus only some artworks even have an aura. Paddy Scannell (2003) suggests that Benjamin's concept of the aura points to a relatively recent change in the very nature of art, following in the wake of the Renaissance and the rise of secular devotion to the arts.

This argument is rooted in Benjamin's claim that today's artworks have fallen upon *negative theology*, a manner of definition by negative assertion that leads to the autonomy of the arts from outside concerns—better known as the principle of art for art's sake. When art was detached from its ritual function, religious concepts like the "sublime" and the "transcendent" gained freestanding secular significance. The aura, on this account, is a product of negative theology. Given this line of thinking, we could infer that film and photography could have been among the first technologies to affect the aura of an artwork, but only because the aura had only entered Western art in recent centuries.

Yet, the idea of preauratic art is unsatisfying in the greater context of the "Work of Art" essay. Benjamin treats ancient art alongside the masterpieces of the Renaissance when he discusses the nature of the aura. His examples stretch as far back as prehistoric ritual artifacts, and he gestures often to classical Greece. Mechanical reproduction should confront all historical artworks with the same challenges outlined in the "Work of Art" essay. Among these, the disappearing aura is just one in a larger set of connections between mass reproduction, social movements, new ways of seeing, and the political stakes of a historical moment. Taken literally, Benjamin treats artworks, past and present, as exceptional only insofar as the means of mechanical reproduction appear to affect them uniquely—whether as a threat to the aura of traditional arts like painting and sculpture or as a catalyst in the formation of new ones like photography and cinema.

Still, not all *forms* of art seem to have an aura as Benjamin describes it. Consider performances of music, dance, and theatre. The score or script is in some sense the original, with a lineage that extends back to the artist, but this set of instructions for the work is not, strictly speaking, the work itself. The philosopher Nelson Goodman (1968) untangles this point with a useful distinction between *allographic* and *autographic* artworks. Music, theater, and dance are allographic: Every performance is a legitimate instantiation of the work itself, and furthermore there are no "fakes" of allographic works. An autographic work, on the other hand, is physically unique and accumulates its own specific history, lore, and provenance—the features that Benjamin considers the basis of the *aura*.

Returning to the question of print, it stands to reason that Benjamin is mainly concerned with the fate of autographic pieces in the "Work of Art" essay, whereas books appear to be essentially allographic. Each manuscript or printed volume is a token or copy. Even when the book is typeset differently, or reprinted in translation, it is generally considered the same allographic work. And yet not all books, and not even all printed books, are strictly allographic. Many rare and ancient manuscripts are treated autographically—they are unique specimens, treasured and locked away in libraries, museums, or private collections. Illuminated volumes, for instance, are autographic artworks even though their written contents are copied from a common source. Consider the

tourists who visit the Book of Kells and wish to bring home a memento: They choose postcards and coffee table books, not bibles. They want photographs that capture the rare aura of this autographic work, not its common allographic contents. This illustrates a pointed shift in the nature of the book before and after they could be reproduced by the printing press. Even early printed books, much like early photographs, maintain some autographic quality that could be considered an aura. The "Work of Art" essay offers a sharp lens for interpreting this shift in terms of the aura and the audience of a piece, but Benjamin foregoes the opportunity to apply this lens to the history of the book.

Locating a Familiar Story: Benjamin on Literary History, Class Consciousness, and the Modes of Cultural Production

Since Benjamin refers to the story of print transforming literature as "familiar," it should help to understand more about the intended readers of the "Work of Art" essay. He wrote the original draft in 1935, while living as an exile in Paris, and sent it to his colleagues Adorno and Horkheimer to publish in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, the journal of the Frankfurt School.[12] Benjamin had the support of Horkheimer, in particular, who thought the essay could attract wider attention to their school through its evocative union of aesthetics and politics.[13] Adorno, on the other hand, rebuked the essay in a series of letters. They settled on heavy revisions, and the "Work of Art" essay was accepted for publication in 1936, in French, under the editorial supervision of Raymond Aron.[14] Benjamin wrote a second version over the Winter of 1936. In this version, he walked back some of his editorial concessions, and he continued to work on yet another version over the next 3 years until his tragic death, in 1940, while attempting to cross the Spanish border to escape from Vichy France. These later versions of the "Work of Art" essay remained unpublished during Benjamin's lifetime.

Adorno responded indirectly to Benjamin in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* with his 1938 essay "On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression in Listening" (Adorno, 1996). Here, Adorno facetiously dismisses key ideas from the "Work of Art" essay as merely "new possibilities" in the forms of "regressive listening" (Adorno, 1996, p. 295).

> One might be tempted to rescue it if it were something in which the "auratic" characteristics of the work of art, its illusory elements, gave way to the playful ones. However it may be with films, today's mass music shows little of such progress in disenchantment. Nothing survives in it more steadfastly than the illusion, nothing is more illusory than its reality. (Adorno, 1996, p. 295)

Although Adorno seems to leave room for the redemptive value of cinema, he jeers at "auratic qualities" and "new possibilities" that Benjamin ties to mass

media. Adorno rarely even mentions technology, itself, and focuses his attention on the industries and audiences of the radio and the phonograph. Adorno held that the music industry, in particular, would inevitably damage society and diminish the general capacity to appreciate art. Still, he maintained that artists could remain unscathed as long as they projected a radical aesthetic stance that remained incompatible with mass culture—distant, inaccessible, unenjoyable.

In the ‘‘Work of Art’’ essay, Benjamin not only argues that the means of mechanical reproduction can and have affected art itself, but he is also convinced that mechanically reproduced art could potentially steer society in a positive direction. Benjamin had seen both sides himself. He had witnessed the powers and dangers of mass media in the emerging propaganda machine of the Third Reich before fleeing into exile. He also believed in the revolutionary potential of connecting art to the masses, largely due to the influence of the playwright Bertolt Brecht, whom Benjamin considered both a friend and a mentor. In the ‘‘Work of Art’’ essay, Benjamin offers a pithy formulation of these cultural crossroads when he delineates the relationship between aesthetics and politics among the leading political and ideological powers of interwar Europe. He observed that the Fascists, from Marinetti to Hitler, had used mass media to *aestheticize politics*. Artworks multiplied on a massive scale could augment, amplify, and beautify war while concealing its horrors. Benjamin predicted, on the other hand, that the envoys of Communism would use the means of mechanical reproduction to *politicize aesthetics*—that is, to deliver artworks of genuine political significance to the masses.

For Benjamin to have constructed this elegant theory of aesthetics and politics makes it all the more remarkable to notice that the ‘‘Work of Art’’ essay is an outlier in his writings. It is his most political essay, striking a pitch of social hope and revolutionary defiance in contrast to the dreamy, buoyant, and cerebral tone of his other work.[15] Moreover, with the exception of some fragmentary reflections in his towering but incomplete *Arcades Project*, Benjamin wrote little else about the visual arts.[16] In fact, most of Benjamin’s writing focused on literature, from his habilitation on the origins of German tragic drama to his prescient and influential readings of contemporaries like Proust and Kafka. In these works, Benjamin tends to emphasize style, insight, imagery, interpretation, and modes of expression, not the diagnosis of society in the midst of an urgent political crisis. And yet, in the ‘‘Work of Art’’ essay, Benjamin urges his readers to view his thesis as a weapon in the ‘‘formulation of revolutionary demands in the politics of art’’ (p. 218).

Beyond politics, Benjamin rarely addresses technology as a topic of historical or artistic significance elsewhere in his writings, but there is one exception that deserves closer attention. In Benjamin’s essay ‘‘The Storyteller,’’ a tribute to the Russian writer Nikolai Leskov from the same year the ‘‘Work of Art’’ essay was published, Benjamin describes a seismic shift in modes of human communication over recent centuries as the epic form of storytelling has all but disappeared.

Amid this shift, he praises Leskov as the rare writer who still commands the force of epic style. Benjamin goes on to implicate the printing press in the decline of the epic, but he also notes its role in the emergence of new narrative forms. One of these he terms *information*, a form of communication that "lays claim to prompt verifiability" and must "appear 'understandable in itself'"(Benjamin, 1969, p. 89).[17] Information, as Benjamin defines it, is a phenomenon best exemplified in the daily newspaper's promise to help us keep track of a world that changes rapidly.[18] The other narrative form that Benjamin ascribes to the printing press is that of the novel, which is even more closely implicated in the decline of storytelling because it "neither comes from oral storytelling nor goes into it"(1969, p. 87). Unlike a fable or folktale, which may be recited and revised over generations, the novel is defined by the fixity and specificity of printed form, as well as the narrative interiority of the solitary reader.[19] But in this account, Benjamin does not consider technology itself to be entirely responsible for the decline of storytelling and the rise of the novel: "It took the novel, whose beginnings go back to antiquity, hundreds of years before it encountered, in the evolving middle class, those elements which were favorable to its flowering" (Benjamin, 1969, p. 88). The bourgeois middle class, which "has the press as one of its most important instruments in fully developed capitalism" (p. 88), served to create the book market and news industry just as much as the proliferation of printed matter contributed to their developing ideology. In this deeply Marxist passage, we find the clearest account of the changes in written culture that Benjamin attributed to the arrival of the printing press.

Beyond Leskov, "The Storyteller" points to another writer who influenced Benjamin's account of literary history. He credits the Hungarian philosopher Georg Lukács for noticing that a novel's distinct narrative modes of temporality and internality result from its printed form. This point is drawn from the *Theory of the Novel* (Lukács, 1915/1971), completed in 1915, two decades before Benjamin wrote the "Work of Art" essay and "The Storyteller." Here, Lukács described the decline of epic form and the appearance of the novel as entwined not only with print but also with the emergence of a particular form of consciousness that was out of sync with the historical conditions of the modern world. According to Lukács, the art of earlier civilizations was attuned to history such that "every art form was born only when the sundial of the mind showed that its hour had come, and had disappear when the fundamental images were no longer visible on the horizon" (Lukács, 1915/1971, p. 41). On the other hand, Lukács portrayed the novel as a reflection of *transcendental homelessness* in modern life, a form of disconnection from traditional sources of meaning that is similar to what Max Weber characterized as *disenchantment*. An epic is inherently alive, social, connective, and subject to revision. Epic works depict to their audience a sense of who they are as a people and what collectively matters to them at that moment in their history. But the novel's reflection of class consciousness is more localized, less affirming, and less adaptable, according to

Lukács. It articulates a worldview of detachment, solitude, and ultimately alienation. In short, Benjamin and Lukács both find traces of alienation in the material and historical conditions of printed literature, that is, in the modes of literary production under the capitalism and its primary cultural organ, the press. Benjamin's account in ''The Storyteller,'' guided by Lukács, sheds considerable light on how he viewed the history of print as both a technology and a factor in the emergence of cultural forms.

So, is this the ''familiar story'' in Benjamin's comment on print transforming literature? Although Lukács was nominally Hegelian when he wrote *Theory of the Novel*, by the 1930s he had progressed to Marxism and was one of the most prominent living philosophers of literature. It is likely that Benjamin's audience, among the core of the Frankfurt School and the readers of their journal, would have been quite familiar with Lukács, his *Theory of the Novel*, and his account of changes in literature that followed the arrival of the printed book.

And yet, if Benjamin is indeed referring to Lukács in the ''Work of Art'' essay, then the case of the printing press would bear an even more striking resemblance to photography and cinema. Benjamin draws a parallel between the development of narrative form in print and cinema, where ''transitions that in literature took centuries have come about in a decade'' (Benjamin, 1969, p. 232). This passage describes the collapsing distinction between author and public—between the creators and audiences of works. Not only did the cinema deliver images to the masses, it also invited the masses to become filmmakers themselves. This popular appeal made cinema at once groundbreaking and also conspicuously similar to the rise of print, which led many readers to become writers themselves. Here, even as Benjamin maintains that the emerging media of his own time presented transformative challenges that were altogether new, he still uses print as a paradigm case for the technological and cultural changes he wishes to describe.[20]

Benjamin compares print to these newer media once more in his essay ''Little History of Photography,'' which leads with a historical comparison to movable type:

> The fog that surrounds the beginnings of photography is not quite as thick as that which shrouds the early days of printing; more obviously than in the case of the printing press, perhaps, the time was ripe for the invention, and was sensed by more than one. (Benjamin, 2008, p. 274)[21]

Here, Benjamin refers to the fact that two French inventors, Nicephore Niépce and Jacques Daguerre, had each tinkered independently with mechanisms for photography before they met and collaborated to build the first viable working model.[22] Likewise, the invention of printing is sometimes contested between Gutenberg and Laurens Koster, not to mention the much earlier invention of the printing press in China and movable type in Korea. In short,

even through the apparent fog, the resemblance is manifest even in Benjamin's own essays. Benjamin's every mention of print can make it feel at once familiar and unapproachable, resistant to understanding even though it appears to be deeply implicated in the emergence of his own milieu—and especially convenient as an analogy for the technologies at the center of the "Work of Art" essay. Still, Benjamin insists that print stands apart from "the phenomenon which we are here examining from the perspective of world history" (Benjamin, 1969, p. 219).

Benjamin's appreciation of print aesthetics is only apparent when he discusses his own book collection in the essay "Unpacking my Library." Here, Benjamin gushes about the aesthetic pleasures of his favorite pieces, one of which he boasts of being "designed by the foremost French graphic artist and executed by the foremost engraver" (Benjamin, 1969, p. 64). The quality of this book, executed in a collection of identical reproductions, could make it appear similar to a fine photograph, but Benjamin focuses instead on the private pleasures and the rarity of the work. He writes that "not only books but copies of books have their fates" (p. 61) and treats each volume as though the appreciation that emerges from careful selection can impart certain uniqueness to what is otherwise just a copy from a printing run. The replica gains something resembling an aura, but one that is paradoxically located in the experience of a single spectator. When Benjamin marvels at the potential of photography and cinema, it is because they can achieve their effects on a massive scale, whereas his appreciation of books is reserved for volumes that achieve some special significance even though they are merely copies.

Yet, the craft of bookmaking was not always premised on mass reproduction. Recall that before the printing press, many books were as rare and precious as paintings. Illuminated manuscripts, in particular, were sometimes invested with time and resources that could exceed the temples and palaces that enclosed them. These sacred books were vividly decorated with precious pigments on pages of vellum or parchment, and their creation sometimes extended over the course of generations. In short, these were unique objects of otherworldly significance, and they were supplanted by mechanical reproductions after the introduction of the printing press. Illuminated manuscripts survive today only in museums and special collections where they carry all the trappings of an auratic artwork.[23]

Even if we set aside illuminated volumes as an exceptional case, all books were once rare. Before the advent of the printing press, even the humblest manuscript would have required the concentrated effort of a scribe, and oftentimes collaborative effort in a scriptorium as large as any artist's studio.[24] This scribal labor was memorably characterized by Lewis Mumford (1934, 1952) as the mechanization of a workforce that primed the arrival of a machine to fully automate this form of labor.[25] Mumford deploys the example of the printing press specifically in order to outline the union of art and technics in a delicate balance, and he treats print bookmaking as the quintessential example of a

mechanical art that emerged from a precision handicraft. It is striking for Mumford to have placed the history of the book this light when Benjamin, just 3 years older than Mumford, had lamented that the early history of the printing press was shrouded in impenetrable fog. This points to an acute distinction. Mumford tried to understand the modern age through old technologies. In devices like the printing press, the clock, and the waterwheel, Mumford found logic and values that would guide Western society for centuries: uniformity, precision, and automation. In contrast, Benjamin wrote as though technology and culture had never been so entangled as they had become in the 1930s. Mass audiences gathered around new media, aesthetic values were challenged, and the political consequences were dire—but this description applies just as well to the Printing Revolution and even the rise of the Internet. When Benjamin placed the printing press on the margins of the ''Work of Art'' essay, he missed something crucial: the opportunity to probe the longer history of technology as evidence for the remarkable fecundity of his theory.

Conclusion: Walter Benjamin and Media History

The very fecundity of the ''Work of Art'' essay may play a part in concealing its omissions. Benjamin's remarks on printing are so brief, vague, and counterintuitive that they seem to be overlooked by many readers, if not misunderstood entirely. Consider a recently published edition of Benjamin's essays from the Belknap Press at Harvard entitled *The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media* (2008). It is a useful and well-edited collection, but its cover is decorated with a Ralph Stedman illustration of Walter Benjamin himself operating a rotary printing press.[26] This case, though anecdotal, highlights that the role of the printing press in Benjamin's most famous essay is quite easily misconstrued and even depicted as its opposite. The broader lack of commentary on Benjamin's view of print only underscores this point.

Perhaps the reason for this confusion is that many of the most evocative and convincing points in the ''Work of Art'' essay do, in fact, offer productive ways of interpreting the role of the written word since the dawn of its mechanical reproducibility. Benjamin even seems to suggest this in ''The Storyteller'' (1969), when he signals the decline of the epic and connects the novel and the newspaper to the emergence of new narrative forms. And yet, even at the outset of the ''Work of Art'' essay, the discussion of technology and social change is narrowed to a single historical moment, the interwar years in which Benjamin observed European society manifesting the economic and technological changes that had been churning at its base for the past half-century, according to his own historical-materialist view. The political uses of mass media during the 1920s and 1930s suggested that these technologies could have enormous persuasive power, and Benjamin clearly recognized the danger of mass media in Fascist persuasion tactics, but he also believed that mass media had the potential to undermine false

ideology and lead the public toward revolutionary action. For Benjamin, the cases of radio and cinema may have eclipsed the consideration of print, whose historical potential had already calcified into the prevailing order of the modern world. He treats the book, an object presently devoid of an aura, as though it never had either the sacred quality of old artifacts or the radical quality of a mass medium in the midst of emergence. Meanwhile, Benjamin called his readers to witness as new aesthetics and politics filled the airwaves and movie theaters.

Viewed from this angle, even though more recent accounts of the printing revolution do resemble Benjamin's theory of social change during the age of mechanical reproduction, these accounts may lack a feature that would have been crucial for Benjamin if, indeed, he was writing as an ardent historical materialist: The printing press, for all the turmoil in its wake, was entwined with the emergence of bourgeois class consciousness and the cultural institutions of advanced capitalism. It might be that print seemed different to Benjamin not because of its aesthetic qualities, but because it was implicated in an unfavorable stage in the history of human labor and economic relations.[27] Whatever role print may have had in the history of technology and class consciousness, it could easily appear to be just a "special case" rather than one aligned with the specific historical potential Benjamin recognized in that interwar moment. Even if Benjamin had considered the printing press under the rubric he outlines in the "Work of Art" essay, the question of whether the printing press had served to politicize aesthetics or to aestheticize politics might have appeared either irrelevant, or else lost in the fog of history.

Whether print has been dismissed, forgotten, or even cut for brevity, it raises the question of how the "Work of Art" essay should be interpreted as a theory of media, technology, and society. What many readers take away from the "Work of Art" essay is that new technological forms may bring about new symbolic forms, and thus new ways for us to construct and understand the world around us. And yet, strictly speaking, this is a broader model than Benjamin offers. If we choose to read the "Work of Art" essay as an account of new or emerging media, we should be prepared to concede that Benjamin dismisses the resemblance of old technologies like the printing press and the lessons to be found in studying this resemblance. Media historians tend to begin with the premise that all technologies were once new and proceed to gather accounts of how technologies were received when they were still unfamiliar, still taking shape.[28] This method carries its own politics: It encourages critical distance from new technologies and active reflection on how we may construct and understand the world through these technologies. The "Work of Art" essay instead depicts a society confronted with unprecedented challenges. This stance aids Benjamin in his call for revolutionary politics, but it comes at the expense of the wisdom that could be gained from studying past revolutions. Ultimately, the "Work of Art" essay evinces the same oversight that media historians often seek to correct: Benjamin invests the emerging media of his

own time with exaggerated significance, neglecting the perennial entanglement of media technologies in the development of human culture and politics.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to Howard Eiland for helping me to clarify my premises when I was just beginning this essay, and to Todd Gitlin for several insights that carried this essay to completion. Travis Mushett's careful reading of a late draft led to more precise phrasing of a few key points. Two anonymous referees have my greatest thanks for their perceptive and generous comments throughout.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. In the original German, this passage reads: "Die ungeheuren Veränderungen, die der Druck, die technische Reproduzierbarkeit der Schrift, in der Literatur hervorgerufen hat, sind bekannt. Von der Erscheinung, die hier in weltgeschichtlichem Maßstab betrachtet wird, sind sie aber nur ein, freilich besonders wichtiger Sonderfall."
2. The "Work of Art" essay touches on print just once more, in a short passage that highlights the collapsing distance between author and audience that began with the printed book and became especially pronounced in the case of film.
3. Coetzee mentioned Benjamin's unclear stance toward print as a sidenote while discussing the concept of the aura.

   > Benjamin's key concept (though in his diary he hints it was in fact the brainchild of the bookseller and publisher Adrienne Monnier) for describing what happens to the work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility (principally the age of the camera—Benjamin has little to say about printing) is loss of aura. (2001, p. 28)

4. Critics of this tradition like Raymond Williams (1974) and Adrian Johns (1998) argue that locating a monolithic set of social changes in the arrival of a technology inherently ignores the intricate political, cultural, and economic conditions in which the technology itself took shape and gained purchase among its users. Recent studies such as Poe (2010), Cochran (2005), and Striphas (2009) continue to build a more nuanced understanding of print history than these early forays into the subject.
5. See Peters (2009) for a review of work by media historians who foreground the fact that all media technologies were once new.

6. In the second version of the "Work of Art" essay, Benjamin moved this point to a later section (VII). The quoted passage on print appears in Section II, framed by a discussion of woodblock printing and lithography.
7. See Jonathan Crary (1992, 1994, 1999, 2002) for studies of the cultural techniques, popular spectacles, and media technologies that preceded and facilitated the emergence of modern visual culture.
8. See Jonathan Sterne (2005) and Emily Thompson (2002) for historical accounts of audible culture before and during the invention of sound reproduction technologies and other means of controlling sound.
9. Adorno makes this argument most vividly in *Negative Dialectics* (1990), his intensely pessimistic final work. Here, Adorno suggests that genuine progress in the art, culture, and criticism may only be possible through negative critique. Even radical creative contributions, if they are noticed at all, will inevitably be coopted and retranslated into some anodyne, popular form that is consistent with the dominant ideology.
10. Beyond the particular history of aesthetic concepts at issue here, it is worth noting that there is no equivalent distinction between art and craft in the majority of cultures outside the West.
11. Benjamin himself privileges the ancient Greek origin of "aesthetics," apparently without noticing that the philosophical sense in which he uses the term had emerged much more recently.
12. After Horkheimer and Adorno emigrated from Frankfurt to New York City, along with the rest of the Institute for Social Research, they continued publishing the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* as *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science*.
13. For more on Benjamin's writing and publishing during this period, see Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings's *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life* (2014).
14. The version of the "Work of Art" essay most often read in English today is not the version originally published in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, but rather a second draft that Benjamin rewrote in German several years later. See the editor's notes in Benjamin (2008), which outline the history of the two later drafts.
15. Benjamin does address weighty political themes in the essay "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1969), also written in 1933, and on occasion in *The Arcades Project* (2002), a vast mosaic of fragmentary writings that center on life in Paris amid the rapidly evolving world of high modernity.
16. Some exceptions include his reflections on Surrealism in "Dream Kitsch" (p. 3), "Some Remarks on Folk Art" (p. 278), and an unpublished attempt to develop a formal vocabulary in "Painting and the Graphic Arts" (p. 78).
17. Benjamin returns to this account of the novel and the epic in "The Crisis of the Novel," a review of Alfred Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, but besides a brief remark about "petty-bourgeois printed matter," he leaves modes of production out of it.
18. Michael Schudson (1978) notes Benjamin's account of information to illustrate an emerging model of news in the 1890s that emphasized impartiality, and stood in contrast to the more narrative, story-based reporting that had characterized most journalism up to that point.
19. Elizabeth Eisenstein (1978, 1983) would later assert that the fixity of print as a material quality that influenced a range of historical developments, including the development of the scientific method. See Adrian Johns (1998) for a rebuttal of Eisenstein's account.

20. Benjamin's famous conclusion that communism politicizes aesthetics, while fascism aestheticizes politics, is premised on the claim that the new possibilities of photography and film have placed art upon this unprecedented historical crossroad.
21. Benjamin's "Little History of Photography" (2008, pp. 274–298) antedates the "Work of Art" essay by roughly five years.
22. See Batchen (1997) for an account of photography's invention as a response to a widespread and growing desire for such a device.
23. As some of the first printed books, Gutenberg Bibles receive the same display treatment in museums that their manuscript predecessors do. In Benjamin's terms, there is something special and ineffable about the earliest copes, remarking that the earliest photographs carry an aura that later ones did not.
24. Of course, in the preprint era, the scribal workforce also produced heaps of mundane documents like financial records, private correspondence, and official decrees. See Pettegree (2010) for a study of the massive role that written documents played in the day-to-day life of large European cities even before the introduction of the printing press.
25. Mumford writes: "The social division of labor precedes the mechanical division of labor... and the mechanical division of labor, in general, precedes the invention of complicated machines" (Mumford, 1952, p. 65).
26. To its credit, Belknap Press volume (Benjamin, 2008) includes several additional pieces by Benjamin on the subjects of journalism, newspapers, and the publishing industry, but these pieces total just seven pages including annotations.
27. A point that is often overlooked in Marx and Engels' philosophy of history is that they consider the inventions that flow from the capitalist mode of production to be valuable assets that contribute to the richness and complexity of human life, even if the economic system that gave rise to these inventions is ultimately unjust.
28. Marvin (1988), Gitelman (2006), and Peters (2009) make the case that studying "old" media technologies at the time of their emergence may offer critical perspective on the "new" media in our midst.

References

Adorno, T. (1990). *Negative dialectics*. London, England: Routledge.

Adorno, T. (1996). On the Fetish-character in music and the regression in listening. In A. Andrew & E. Gebhardt (Eds.), *The essential Frankfurt school reader* (pp. 270–299). New York, NY: Continuum.

Batchen, G. (1997). *Burning with desire: The conception of photography*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Benjamin, W. (1969). *Illuminations*. New York, NY: Schocken.

Benjamin, W. (2002). *The Arcades Project* (H. Eiland & K. McLaughlin, Trans.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Benjamin, W. (2008). In M. W. Jennings, B. Doherty, & T. Y. Levin (Eds.), *The work of art in the age of its mechanical reproducibility and other writings on media*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.

Buck-Morss, S. (1992, Autumn). Aesthetics and anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's artwork essay reconsidered. *October, 62*, 3–41.

Cochran, T. (2005). *Twilight of the literary: Figures of thought in the age of print*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Coetzee, J. (2001, January 11). The marvels of Walter Benjamin. *The New York Review of Books*, *48*(1), 28.

Crary, J. (1992). *Techniques of the observer*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Crary, J. (1994, Spring). Unbinding vision. *October, 68*, 21–44.

Crary, J. (1999). *Suspensions of perception*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Crary, J. (2002). Géricault, the panorama, and sites of reality in the early nineteenth century. *Grey Room*, *9*, 5–25.

Eiland, H., & Jennings, M. W. (2014). *Walter Benjamin: A critical life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Eisenstein, E. (1978). *The printing press as an agent of change: Communications and cultural transformations in early-modern Europe*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Eisenstein, E. (2005). *The printing revolution in early modern Europe*. 2nd ed. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Eisenstein, E. (1983). *The printing revolution in early modern Europe*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Gitelman, L. (2006). *Always already new: Media, history and the data of culture*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Goodman, N. (1968). *Languages of art: An approach to a theory of symbols*. Indianapolis, IN and Cambridge, MA: Hackett Publishing.

Johns, A. (1998). *The nature of the book: Print and knowledge in the making*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Kittler, F. (1986/1999). *Gramophone, film, typewriter* (G. Winthrop-Young & M. Wutz, Trans.). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Kristeller, P. O. (1951). The modern system of the arts: A study in the history of aesthetics. (S. Feagin & P. Maynard, Eds.). *Journal of the History of Ideas, 12*(4), 496–527.

Lukács, G. (1915/1971). *Theory of the novel*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Marx, K., & Engels, F. (1978). In C. T. Robert (Ed.), *The Marx-Engels Reader*. New York: Norton.

Marvin, C. (1988). *When old technologies were new: Thinking about electric communication in the late nineteenth century*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

McLuhan, M. (1962). *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The making of typographic man*. Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press.

Mumford, L. (1934). *Technics and civilization*. London, England: Routledge & Keegan Paul.

Mumford, L. (1952). *Art and technics*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

Ong, W. (1982/2013). *Orality and literacy: The technologizing of the word*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Peters, B. (2009, February/March). And lead us not into thinking the new is new: A bibliographic case for new media history. *New Media and Society, 11*(1–2), 13.

Pettegree, A. (2010). *The book in the renaissance*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Poe, M. (2010). *A history of communications: Media and society from the evolution of speech to the internet*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Riegl, A. (1985). *The Late Roman Art Industry* (R. Winkes, Trans.). Rome: Georgio Bretschneider.

Scannell, P. (2003). Benjamin contextualized: On 'the work of art in the age of technological reproduction'. In E. Katz, J. D. Peters, T. Liebes & A. Orloff (Eds.), *Canonical texts in media research* (pp. 74–89). Cambridge, England: Polity Press.

Schudson, M. (1978). *Discovering the news: A social history of American newspapers*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Sterne, J. (2005). *The audible past: Cultural origins of sound reproduction*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Striphas, T. (2009). *The late age of print: Everyday book culture from consumerism to control*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

Thompson, E. (2002). *The soundscape of modernity: Architectural acoustics and the culture of listening in America, 1900-1933*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Williams, R. (1958). *Culture and society: 1780-1950*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

Williams, R. (1974). *Television: Technology and cultural form*. New York, NY: Schocken.

Author Biography

Charles Berret is a PhD candidate in Communications at Columbia University, where he is writing a dissertation on the conceptual origins of modern cryptography. Other recent projects have focused on typography, digital security, and data-driven storytelling as symbolic practices in which aesthetic and political values are persistently negotiated.