

Text, Textuality and Digital Media
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Lecture 20

Walter Benjamin: 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'

We have by and large finished our discussion on print. A little bit of issues about print are going to be discussed in a future lecture and that is the lecture on Copyright and Authorship where we are going to deal with the various media to get, but for today, we are going to ready ourselves for our journey to move away from print. First, into other media like photography and films and then into the electronic that is the television before we move to the digital medium.

Right now, let us follow the discussion on the other media that is photography and films and for that we are going to now concentrate; we are going to come back to some important theorists who will help us understand the development of these new media. Today, we are going to take up a very important essay by Walter Benjamin - The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.

I strongly encourage you to read the essay, hopefully after today's lecture, reading the essay would become easier. You may have to read the essay several times, to be able to grasp its meaning but please do not be daunted, I am going to try and explain the essay to the best of my ability in today's lecture.

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Before we begin it is very important to note where Walter Benjamin actually emerges from because that has an effect on his theorization. Clearly he was a man who worked, he was a theorist who worked in the early 20th century and therefore, he lived through the development of this media of photography and films and therefore, was in a position to theorize it and he also was born in Germany, he was a Jew which brings us to this question of his relationship with fascism.

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Once Hitler comes to power in 1932 Benjamin like many other of his fellow Jewish, German Jews go on an exile, he runs away from Germany and he keeps on traveling through Europe for a fair bit of time through about eight years of his lives, till he finally tries to, before the imminent fall of France, he finally tries to flee Europe, trying to escape from the Nazi concentration camps and the Gestapo.

In fact, he was also imprisoned for a little while earlier, but ultimately in 1940 he is unable to escape and he commits suicide by an overdose of morphine. So, that is the story of the life of Walter Benjamin and is very direct and almost fatal confrontation with the Nazis and the Nazi regime. So, needless to say that this was-- and he actually wrote this particular essay while in France during this particular period.

So, his interest in understanding fascism and its processes is what had a very great influence on this particular essay but I must also warn you that this particular essay, it goes beyond the immediate interest that we have in this particular course where we are interested in

understanding the work of art but simply because we are taking on this essay, we will look at all its aspects.

So, let us not get lost, this course may not actually deal with the issue of understanding fascism and its processes, but because this is the logic through the series of arguments that Benjamin works through and his arguments actually help us understand the position of art in a changing within changing media is something that we need to understand the essay entirely. So let us move on with the essay.

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Benjamin points out that work of art has always been reproducible, as ultimately a work of art is an expression of an idea. And the difference between a work of art is different from a work of a physical kind, let us say a pen. Now, a pen is a physical thing, a pen has a singular existence, it is not transferable, if someone has this pen, when I have the pen, you cannot have it.

Whereas the idea works very differently. If I have an idea you can also have the idea at the same point of time, teaching is a process of that kind of transfer of idea. So, we will look at the issue of intellectual property later on in the course, but that is the fundamental understanding of the work of art, that it is reproducible and at the end of the day, a work of art is an expression of a particular idea.

So, if you have an idea you can have an expression, that expression could be multiple the expression could be similar to another expression. And that is what Benjamin is going to deal with in this particular essay.

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Mechanical Reproduction

The only techniques of mechanical reproduction known to Greeks were

- Stamping
- Founding



Silver coin of D. mission, 4th c. BC.
By John War. - Greek Coins and their parent cities, London, 1902, published by John Murray, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=1111111>

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He says that, the processes of reproduction that we have been dealing with, there is a process of manual reproduction that is bodily reproduction through bodily means, either the oral or the manuscript as we talked about but Benjamin's domain is much bigger, it is art. So, you can look at the plastic arts, you can look at paintings, graphic art so sculpture and other kinds of art forms which are made without the help of any mechanical device.

Now, mechanical reproduction historically has been very rudimentary, the only rights in the essay, the only technique of reproduction known to the Greeks that is in the ancient times was the stamping and founding, they would create maybe some toys or some coins and other kinds of things, we know that within the Indus Valley there would be clay tablets which would be created, we have looked at some of them, seals would be a way of stamping authority.

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Mechanical Reproduction

Print has increased the rate of reproduction of works of art



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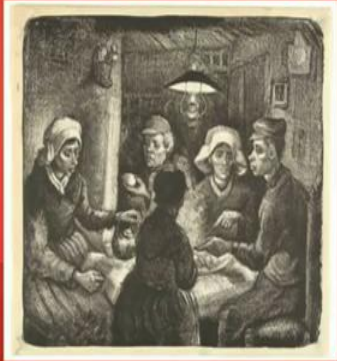
So, mechanical reproduction was a very rudimentary kind, but it is with the coming of print that we have seen, we have witnessed how the rate of reproduction of works of art primarily that of written works have increased phenomenally after the coming of print. Therefore, that brings about a certain transformation with human relationship with works of art.

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Mechanical Reproduction

Print has made reproduction of Graphic Art possible

- Woodcut
- Etching
- Lithography



The Potato Eaters - Lithography by Vincent van Gogh
By Vincent van Gogh - Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, Public Domain.
<https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/collection/SK-A-1234>

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Other than written, print has also made the reproduction of graphic arts easier and possible. So, there are historically various kinds of techniques of reproduction of graphic art were used there would be woodcut, there will be etching or lithography. So, various kinds of ways in which mechanical reproduction of graphic art would also take place. However, these are

qualitatively different from what he is going to discuss which is the nature of reproduction of graphic art through photography.

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Value of a Work of Art

is derived from its

- Uniqueness
- Presence in time and space
- Alterations
- Deterioration
- Changes in ownership

Imparts **authority** to the work



Statue of Vishnu Anantashayana - Enhanced image of, CC BY-SA 3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=5041176>

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Now, he then discusses several concepts and then all these concepts would add up together to his understanding of what fascism, how fascism works on culture. So, he argues that the value of a work of art is derived from several qualities, it is derived from its uniqueness. The fact that a particular object is unique, it has no comparable, no particular copy, there are no copies which are in existence and the uniqueness of a particular work of art because as we have seen in case of manuscript writing as well we have constantly noted that each copy of a manuscript is unique it is different from other copies of the manuscript and there would be certain errors, certain changes and that is something that we noted that would lead to a certain degree of confusion vis-a-vis the understanding between scholars because they might actually be referring to different versions of a manuscript.

Within a certain community they would look at maybe a singular version of a manuscript but across various scholarly communities they would be looking at various versions. But within a certain community where they are sharing a certain manuscript and manuscripts are few and far between, that would lead to what we looked at in the bubble. So, while the uniqueness of the manuscript or therefore the work of art does lead to certain difficulties in analytical understanding, its uniqueness actually lends it value.

And the fact that it has a uniqueness in the presence and time and space that there can be only a single work of a certain kind. Let us say, if we look at a monument, for example, a

particular monument let us say the Leaning Tower of Pisa that monument there are copies of it elsewhere but that particular Monument is unique, it exists in a certain time and space, it has a certain history of its own.

And it would have also undergone alterations indeed deteriorations but it is what that object carries with it, that object, that work of art carries with it all these histories and included within that history is the issue of the changes in ownership, that particular work of art may have gone through various historical moments through which ownership has changed.

Now, we need to understand this is something that we are going to discuss a little later is that there are two kinds, we can say there are two kinds of works of art. One which have a uniqueness in a certain time and space, the other is that that particular work of art is made for a particular spot altogether. However, a certain work of art could be prepared by the artist and while preparing it the artist actually does not know where it is going to be installed, someone goes purchases it and takes it away.


So, there are various ways in which works of art are created through history, the second example is a more commercial one, so you understand that it is treating art as a commodity and if you are treating art as a commodity, it occurs in a society where commodities do come into existence, commerce in art in does come into existence within a patronage structure, clearly the artist knows where that art is going to be installed.

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Reproduction of Work of Art

Can be undertaken for

- Apprenticeship
- Propagation
- Forgery



Smiling girl (J. A. Vermeer)
By Anonymous (fratist of Johannes Vermeer - National Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C. - oHR 141) (fratist, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=3190000>)

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So, let us work through some of these arguments which this essay is making. Now once produced, a work of art could be reproduced and in this particular case he is primarily talking

about manual reproduction, that the work of art could be reproduced for several purposes either for apprenticeship, there would be historically, learning of art requires one to actually copy, make exact copies of the work of the master.

In fact, when people go to art schools, when children go to art schools one of the ways in which they are taught is that they have to make a copy of a particular painting that is a particular work of art that is given before them, they have to be able to copy not only the outline but also the brush strokes and other details the colouring, the light and shade combination and all the things.

So, within apprenticeship copying of art, reproduction, has a certain usage. The other reason could be that the masters themselves in order to propagate their ideas, they make copies of a certain work of art particularly if the work of art is representative of a certain larger idea beyond the work of art itself then they would undertake reproduction of the work of art.

The other reason why a work of art could be reproduced within a system of manual reproduction would be for forgery, to actually make use of the valuation that the work of art has for unscrupulous means, to actually try to gain monetarily out of the reputation or the valuation of the work of art.

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The slide has a red background. At the top, the title "Reproduction of Work of Art" is written in white. Below the title, there are three bullet points in white text: "• Lacks uniqueness of presence in time and space", "• Lacks authority", and "• Authenticity interfered". To the right of the text is a photograph of a car's air vent, which is a reproduction of a traditional Indian graphic. In the bottom left corner, there is a small NPTEL logo. In the bottom right corner, there is a small line of text: "An autorickshaw sports an adaptation of Hanuman graphic on its windscreen. By Anirudh - Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/index.php?curid=77593648> 11".

Any reproduction of a work of art lack in uniqueness in time and space, it lacks authority, and this is specifically also true of any works of art which are mass produced, there is no uniqueness, I will come to this question of uniqueness later on but its valuation is minor, the

valuation is more emotional. Let us say within a manuscript culture, copies of particular manuscript will be few and far between.

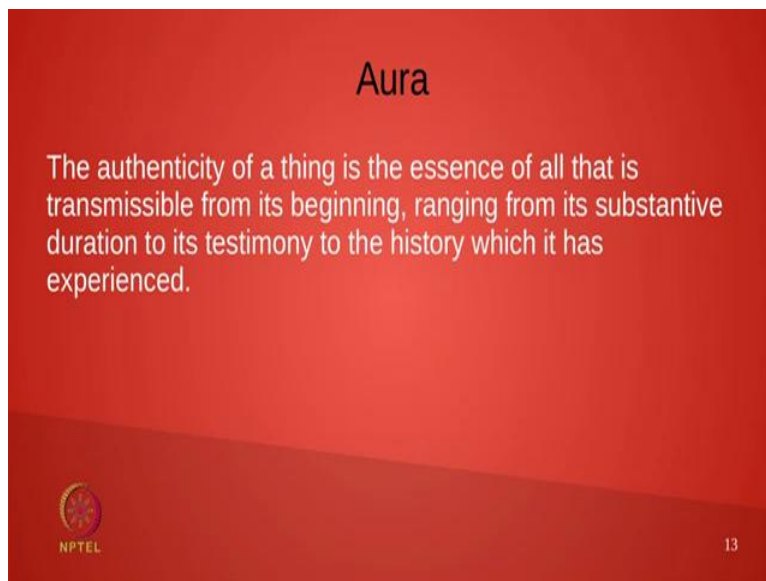
Therefore, a certain manuscript would be unique. In fact, very often manuscripts of particular texts are referred to by their location or sometimes by their ownership. However when print comes into being, when printed books come into being there could be hundreds and thousands of copies of a particular book and you can basically pick up any book and they will by and large be the same but sometimes individuals because they may have a signed copy of a particular book or they may have marginal notes so, any manual input into that work, into that book would render that book unique but the uniqueness of that book is tied to the individual who owns the book or for whom it is unique.

If I have been gifted a particular book and someone has inscribed my name on it and written a message on it, it might be valuable for me more than the cost of the book, there will be a certain emotional attachment but that attachment will not be true for other people.

However, if there is a famous personality who has signed the book or a famous personality who had owned the book and made notes on it, that book would have a greater degree of value beyond the person who owns the book, the valuation of that work of art will be a whole lot more. So, this is a uniqueness which does not emanate from that particular copy of the mass produced object.

And therefore it lacks authority and the authenticity of that work of art is interfered with, in cases of mass produced works we do not really know who has produced it or where it has come from, or what roots it has been through.

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And then after this, Benjamin focuses on the very singularly important concept of Aura. And he says that, “The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced,”.

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Now, what he tries to suggest is that a certain object, when it comes into existence, it carries with it a certain history. Now, in case of manually produced objects, it would be attached to a certain individual, a certain personality, a certain time and space in a way in which a mass produced object will not appeal.

To give you an instance and this is not necessarily only true of works of art, Let us say, we engage a kind of carpenter, you engage a carpenter to prepare something in your house, and the carpenter comes, he measures, he starts his work, he gets the wood, gets all his implements, sits down and prepares the piece of work. Now, while preparing the piece of whatever it could be, it could be a chair, it could be a piece of furniture he is custom making that piece to the requirements that you have, your household has. Not only that the carpenter is also bringing his own intelligence, his own creativity into creating that furniture.

The same requirement would have been satisfied, would have been put together very differently by another carpenter. Sometimes for a particular kinds of works you would want to engage a certain carpenter, you say this person can do the work perfectly or certain individuals can like the work of particular carpenters, there is a certain kind of synchrony between the ways of thinking and therefore, he says I like this person whereas a friend of yours may like someone else, some other carpenter's work and you may not like that person at all.

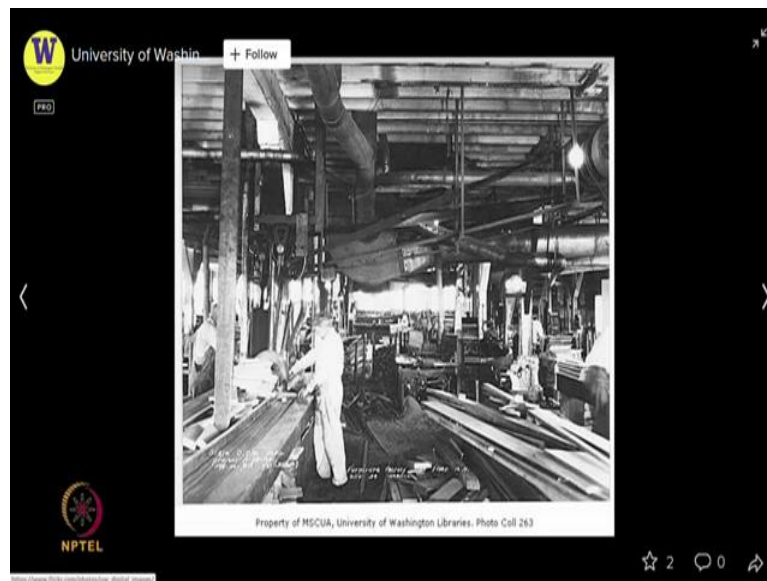
And then when that particular piece of furniture comes into usage, that particular furniture will remind you of the time in which it has been created, maybe if you shift houses, that piece

of furniture will remind you of the house that you have been in. So, objects carry with them a certain memory. And that particular object that particular piece of furniture will carry with it the personality of that particular carpenter.

Well in this particular case of course, you know that this is who the carpenter is but sometimes if it is a hand me down, or an object which has been purchased second hand you may not be aware of who the carpenter is that is because it is a question of how great that Aura is. The aura becomes greater when we know that there is greater amount of personality which is embedded in a particular piece of work.

So, a Chip and Dale furniture would have far greater Aura of its creator embedded within it. Whereas mass produced objects, a piece of furniture which has been created which has come from the factory we would not know the worker who has worked on it. We would only know maybe the corporate house which has created it, the company which has created it but there would be no great degree of Aura that is there of the specific worker who has worked on it.


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Aura

Aura of natural objects

- Unique
- Permanent



Old Man of Storr, Trotternish Peninsula, Isle of Skye, Scotland
By JoachimKohlerBremen - Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0,
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?round=70426047>

NPTEL 14

Because the specific worker we know that within an assembly line system of production one single worker may not have worked on a particular piece of furniture, they would be working on specific tasks to complete at that piece of furniture within an assembly line. So, therefore with mass produced objects, the level of the aura would come down.

And though that object will still retain a certain degree of aura but that aura would be limited to the contact between the user and the object which may not include its history of being made or its past history in case it is an object which is being purchased from a resale. If it has been purchased from a resale you may not be aware of what its history has been.

Whereas in case of important works of art, the provenance the history of its changes of ownership is something that becomes part of that piece of work. Now, Benjamin talks about the aura of natural objects. Natural objects are unique and permanent, they do not have parallel, they are not reproducible in that unique time and space, you cannot create a certain object of natural wonder at another place because its unique time and place, you have to be there, you have to go to that particular location in order to be able to perceive perceive that work of art that natural object within its particular location.

And therefore natural objects can have an aura which is unique and permanent. Of course there are cases where natural objects are destroyed by human action but that is not what Benjamin is concerned at the moment. But for art the aura is transient and transient specifically because any work of art is subject to deterioration and it is reproducible because at the end of the day any work of art is an expression of an idea.

And since the idea can be passed on from one person to another that idea can have multiple expressions. So, therefore the work of art is reproducible by the very process in which it comes into being it can be reproduced as well. So, art can derive aura as we have already tried discussing, art derives aura from its history, from its authority and understand,

The word authority derives from authorship that is the creator which in our example was the carpenter but we will look at artists who can be the authors of particular pieces of work. So, it derives from the authority because the artist's personality gets embedded in that object of art altogether and its authenticity. The fact that there are ways in which that object can be authenticated to be in possession of that particular history and that particular authority. In fact part of the work of art historians is to actually authenticate the history of objects of art and the authority of these pieces of art.

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Now, the historical testimony is linked to the authority of the object.

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So, a certain object, there could be a certain claim that this certain object has been through a certain lineage, a certain provenance we know that a certain work of art could have been in place in a particular city at a particular town and created by a certain historical figure. And now, it has changed hands, it was then in the ownership of a particular merchant or an aristocratic person and today it is in a particular museum or owned privately or whatever.

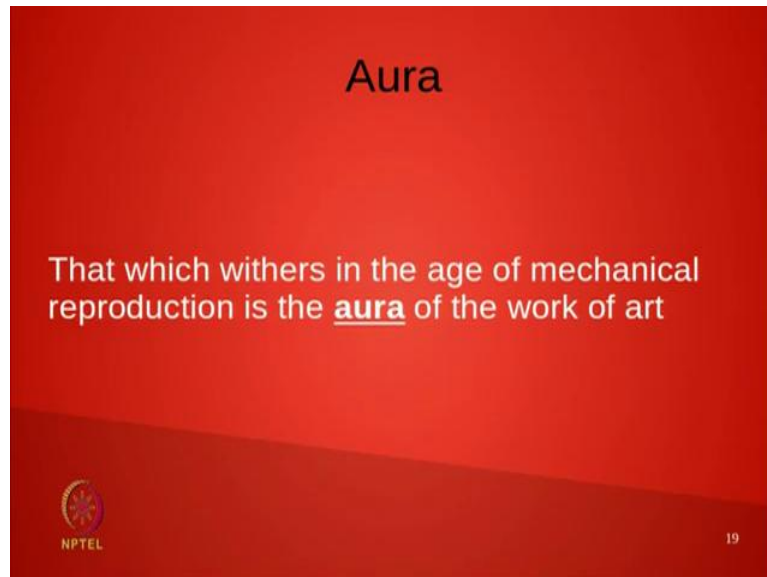
That history is authenticated by art historians through research, through testimonies and that is linked to the authority of the object. If there is a doubt on that history, then it affects the aura and the value of that work of art. If someone says no this particular painting does not look like it was painted by Rembrandt, it may have been a forgery someone trying to pose as Rembrandt to encash the market value of Rembrandt.

Or you would often have works of art which come to the market and purportedly posing as some piece which has a much greater history but later on it is figured out that there has been some careful counterfeiting to show a certain amount of decay which would fool the buyer to think that, the naked eye would think that this is probably a thousand years old but it is actually not, careful investigation, forensic investigation would actually disprove that history and therefore rob the work of art of that particular work of the value that it once enjoyed.

In fact a historical research can also render a certain work valuable. Certain times historically people who would have thought that certain painting is a forgery but further research shows that no this is not a forgery this is actually by let us say da Vinci or Van Gogh we do not

know. So whatever the historical records of a particular work of art is, is proportional to the kind of valuation it has.

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Now, he says that aura is that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction. With mechanical reproduction, the work of art loses its aura.

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He says and in order to explain this, we understand another concept that Benjamin brings in, he says valuation of works of art could be derived from two kinds of valuations. First, is the cult value, cult value is ceremonial, that a particular work has a value in ritual practices this is

true of deities, for example. And in case where it has a certain ceremonial value very often we would see that the existence is actually hidden.

For example, statue of a divinity in a temple which you can see in that image, this is a painting of lord Jagannatha in the temple in Puri and as would be true of most deities they are not out there in the open, they are there hidden somewhere, hidden as in enclosed within a certain structure, within a certain temple structure not to be openly accessible, you have to undertake certain ritual practices in order to be able to view that particular deity.

At the end of the day the idol of a deity is a work of art because it is artificial it is created it is an expression of an ideal but it has a certain ceremonial cult value involved with it. There is a certain tradition within which that particular object becomes valuable. There are instances where idols have been removed from temples and placed within museum then it loses its cult value, we will come to that in a moment but the cult value derives from that specific location in which that object or work is placed.

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So the earliest art works actually originate in the service of ritual. When the deity is being prepared it is prepared for that particular temple, it is not mass produced. We will for the moment assume the way in which religious practices did occur for let us say in historic times. Now, in present day one may be creating a temple by buying an idol off the market but we are in that case the temple is almost created through a product of mass production.

So, let us not go into the modifications of the ways in which temples are created but let us look at the specific ways in which historical temples have been created and he says the

earliest works of art originate in the service of ritual. The value is derived from the location of its original use, when it is removed when the deity is removed from its original use it does not have a value.

So, if we come back to this example that we just talked about of a temple which is created in a certain locality where the deity may have been purchased off the market that deity may not that particular idol may not have that kind of a value. In fact people do actually change those deities but you do not think of changing deities in more famous temples, because that idol is tied to that particular location and changing it will take away all its ritual significance.

So, any object even if it is a divine object even if it is of religious significance, if it has been a product of mass production which is created through mass production its value is much reduced its replace-ability is increased whereas in case of objects with ritual significance they are not replaceable, their valuation becomes almost priceless.

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Two values of Art

<p><i>Cult Value</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ceremonial• Existence can be hidden <p>eg. Statue of divinity in a temple</p>	<p><i>Exhibition Value</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Derives value from view• Needs mobility <p>eg. </p>
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NPTEL The Mona Lisa at the Louvre, Paris By Max Fierro/Art - Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0 https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=43425315

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However, the other ways in which works of art can derive value which is almost opposite of that of the cult value is the exhibition value. It derives value from view, people come to watch it, what you see in that image is the room in Louvre in Paris where the Mona Lisa is kept and everybody is eager to see the Mona Lisa and even if they are not able to see the Mona Lisa they just want to take a picture of the Mona Lisa through their own mobile phones, if not through your own eye if your camera eye take a look take a view of it.

So, here the work of art derives its value from viewership whereas in case of the divinity in a temple it would be by the hiding of it because you have to undergo certain ritual processes in

order to enter, you are supposed to take off your shoe, wash your feet then you enter. So, that is why the enclosure it is not readily available.

Whereas it is true that even towards the Mona Lisa in the Louvre you have to participate in certain activities but those are not ritual activities, you have to pay at the gate and you have to go through the security in order to get inside to get a view of the Mona Lisa.

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The slide is titled "Two values of Art" and is set against a red background. It compares two types of art value:

<i>Cult Value</i>	<i>Exhibition Value</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ceremonial• Existence can be hidden	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Derives value from view• Needs mobility
eg. Statue of divinity in a temple	eg. a portrait or a bust

Below the table, it states: "After the Renaissance Art was freed from ritual
Secular cult of beauty". The NPTEL logo is in the bottom left corner, and the number 23 is in the bottom right corner.

But those activities are not ritual, they are not activities of purifying, there could be securitizing activities, there could be commercial activities but not ritual activities and objects that derive their value from view or objects which possess exhibition value they need mobility, they do not derive their valuation from specific locations, that object then becomes installable in any location.

A certain idol which is removed from the temple and placed in a museum or stolen from the temple and sold to an art collector it changes its values, it loses its cult value and it assumes exhibition value. So, by becoming mobile it loses out on its ceremonial value, its a ritual value and the thing becomes important valuable because it is there in my possession it could have been anywhere else that is why it is valuable for me, that is why it is valuable.

That right now it is in my possession and therefore I derive the value from it, any wealth, any piece of wealth, whoever the possessor I mean it could be a banknote if it is in my hand I am the owner of it I enjoy its value in somebody else's hand that other person enjoys its value. Whereas in the case of ritual object, the possessor does not have the value, the valuation comes only when that ritual object is placed in its rightful location not in any location.

So, it is only beyond the Renaissance with the coming of the early modern era that the art object was freed from its ritual it was possible now to have artistic objects which have a secular value away from its ritual value. So, till the Renaissance there would be artistic objects which are created on the walls of churches through stained glass, through frescoes decorations on particular caskets, furniture but they derive their valuation from a particular location, they had a certain ritual significance.

But after that the same art form same kind of artistic techniques developed and changed and moved to the canvas. The important thing about the canvas is it is relocatable, it is mobile, it can move. This is true within our subcontinent as well you would find that a lot of if you go to some markets you would be able to buy various kinds of painting Gond painting, Madhubani painting.

In fact, these kind of painting styles are primarily supposed to have been paintings on walls. So, this in a specific location not removable but now with the coming of market in order to provide a certain sustenance to the artist and for this longevity of these artists within a market society, these art forms have been taken off from the walls or have been derived from the walls and now been put on canvas, on paper you can buy it off the market and frame it and put it up.

They're still manually produced but they are not mechanically produced but they are mobile and they derive now from exhibition value rather than from the cult value. In fact over the last 10 years or so artists who earlier would be doing paintings on temples in Kerala who print frescoes on it and temple walls have now started developing techniques through which they can reproduce the same kind of art on mobile services like bamboo and other kinds of devices, other kinds of surfaces which can then be purchased off the market and adorn walls of middle class households in cities and urban areas.

Thereby providing a certain sustenance to the artist. So, what we see here is that with a certain kind of market mechanism and that is the linkage with the coming of modernity, the object of art gets a certain mobility. We saw mobility is something that modernity actually brings in, we saw it brings in urbanization, it leads to mobility of labour, it also leads to mobility of the produce.

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So, what unites both these values, the cult value and the exhibition value within a manual production is that they both derive from the domain of tradition; there is a certain tradition which adds to the value of that work of art.

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Now, this tradition is alive, it is changeable, the tradition is changeable but retains the history and tradition. So, when the Gond painting stops being only ones which are on walls of particular communities where their houses and comes to the canvas and gets relocated in a very different location than what it has historically been.

This mobile derivation of the Gond painting, this canvas derivation of the gond painting tries to retain that history that tradition. And the object itself has a certain history for that particular person who has purchased it, who would remember if it has been a gift who has

gifted, if it has been purchased during a particular trip it would remind one of that particular trip of a journey it comes as a souvenir.

So, traditions could be of various kinds and a particular valuation of that tradition would continue to be alive, changeable but alive.

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But mechanical reproduction, what it does is it detaches the object from the domain of tradition. If the Gond painting is printed, then it detaches it from the domain of tradition. It liquidates the traditional value of the cultural heritage because it does not bring with it that aura that it is something that has been derived it has been produced by a machine, which is an altogether being which is devoid of that particular tradition.

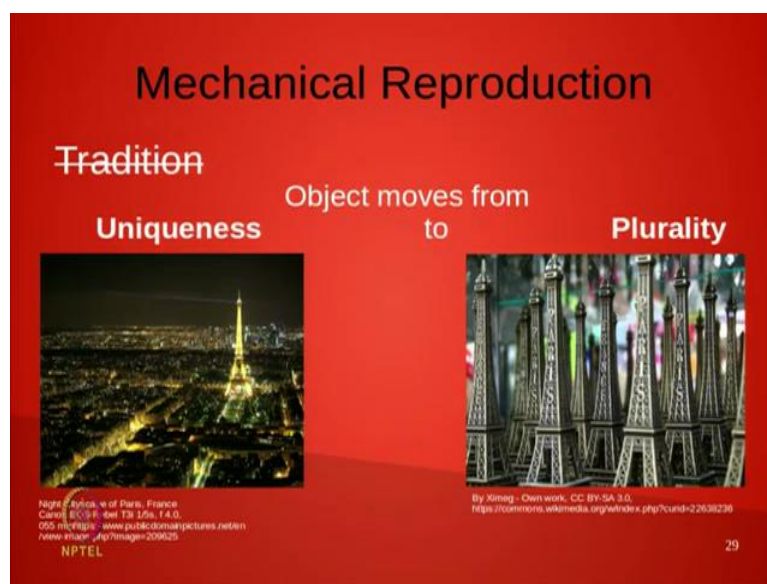
The only thing that it continues to retain is not the process of its creation mechanically but the manual creation of maybe the design that is the only reason why that manual why a mechanically produced painting would have a certain value. Well when you buy textiles, hand created let us say embroidery would be of a far greater valuation than a machine made embroidery.

So, there is a certain different degree of valuation and the valuation simply does not come from the fact that a certain amount of labour has gone into it but that labour becomes valuable because manual reproduction has a greater degree of valuation. Mechanical reproduction is precisely detached from the domain of tradition, far greater, it is not altogether distant, it is not completely losing sight of tradition, it tries to derive that tradition but that tradition is far greater detached, the distance becomes a whole lot more.

So, with that loss of tradition it depreciates the object from the quality of presence and in this particular case, Benjamin is particularly referring to the specific forms that he is going to actually discuss which he actually discusses in the essay and these are photography and films and that is where you will understand that the importance of it is that these objects can be anywhere, they are produced and then they are not unique they can be at multiple locations at multiple points of time.

The specific objects do not have any locational history which is common to them, that authenticity is interfered with.

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So, with mechanical reproduction, the object moves as he says from uniqueness to plurality. So, if you look at the Eiffel Tower in Paris you have to be there to be able to see it, there is no way you can have a one on one relationship with the Eiffel Tower, physical relationship with the Eiffel Tower without being there in Paris in that particular location at any point of time.

Someone may bring a souvenir to you but the souvenir also derives its certain value from the fact that someone who loves you had been to Paris and got that souvenir for you.

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Mechanical Reproduction

Tradition

Each reproduced object in its own particular situation reactivates the object reproduced



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So each reproduced object in its own particular situation reactivates the object that has been reproduced. So, that souvenir actually reactivates your memory of your visit to Paris or your memory of visit to Agra or reactivates the relationship or the bond that you shared with someone who has been to that space that location, its valuation does not derive from itself, its valuation that particular souvenir does not derive its value from itself, it derives its value from the relationship with the person who has gifted it to you or your own journey to that place of origin.

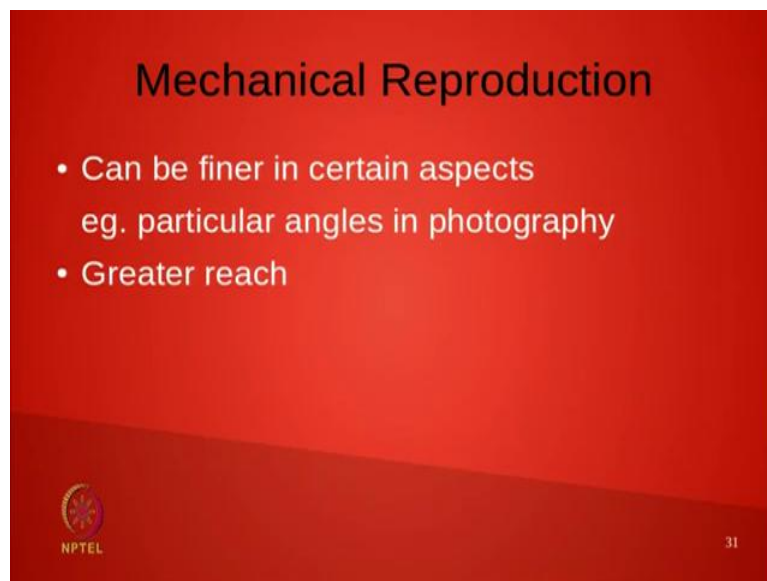
Very similar to when you stand in front of a particular painting by a famous painter let us say da Vinci. When you are standing in front of that particular painting you realize that you feel a certain presence of da Vinci himself because this is the object in front of which he stood or when you go to a museum and you see a letter which has been written by a famous personality, let us say Mahatma Gandhi then what you feel is the aura of that famous personality that this is the very paper on which he had written.

So, it carries with it the aura, that particular piece carries with it the aura of the person who has been responsible for creating of that letter. It is very different from machine generated letters which are automatically signed they will not carry that kind of an aura. Very interestingly some time back there was a particular case when a leader of one of the important countries of the world he had birthday wishes and there were many of them and he tweeted and said that or or his office claim that he has read each and every name of the people who have wished him. Now, someone calculated and said that if he were to read each and every one of them then it will probably take him ten whole days to read every single name.

So, obviously it is not possible so this desire to claim that there is a certain authenticity something that human beings try to ensure that I had written I had made a birthday wish, I had sent a postcard and this person had actually read my piece of writing you feel a certain kind of connection that is what human beings try to derive from their work, their effort.

But with machine produced algorithms that aura that connection is not retained it is lost. However what is something that is lost can be gained in other kinds of ways.

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Mechanical reproduction can be finer in certain aspects. For example, in photography specific angles of an object could be viewed which may not be possible in real life like zoom, close-up or a distant, wide-angle shot, specific techniques of photography you could have higher exposure or the lower exposure or higher shutter speed these are certain mechanical ways in which or infrared where our eyes may not have that power.

The human eye has an extremely powerful set of lenses, my own eyes have lost a bit of those powers so I need a certain device to be able to retain that bit of that power there but still the human eye is most sophisticated set of lenses which are there but then they are limited. So, the mechanical the camera can sometimes enhance the capacity of the human eye and it can have a greater reach.

Mechanical reproduction as we have seen with print it has an exponential reach, it can reach far greater distances than what manual reproduction can undertake.

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Photography

- Extension of the eye
- Can create image faster than the hand can draw
- There is no **Original**
- Not Unique
- Not Authentic



Now, he discusses photography he is going to move to the discussion of film and photography and he discusses photography as a form of mechanical reproduction. The interesting thing about photography this is something that we had encountered with Marshall McLuhan that he says is that the photography is an extension of the eye, the ability of the eye to see like any the medium is an extension any form of technology is an extension of the human body the human limbs.

The photography has the capacity of creating the image faster than the hand can draw. So, when you conceive a certain the speed at which the eye can see almost is what photography can actually replicate that to a great extent much faster than the way the hand can draw. An interesting thing about photography is that there is no original, there can never be an original because all that the camera produces is a negative.

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Now, this is interesting because many of you would never have used an actual physical analog camera with the film but certainly hundred years ago almost a hundred years ago that is the kind of camera that Benjamin is talking about where there would be the film which was inside on which the light impression is formed and what it results in is a negative, the negative is not the photograph.

The intended photograph is the positive which is created out of it and a certain negative can create any number of prints, any number of positives and each positive depending on the way it has been actually printed, it has been developed can produce a very different kind of image there could be a matte finish or there could be a glossy finish or there could be one with a greater exposure or the lower exposure or various kinds of ways in which that the print can be produced.

So, there is no original and therefore it is not unique and not authentic. There could be multiple kinds of images which are taken because the positives are not unique, the negative can produce any number of positives.

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Photography

- Extension of the eye
- Can create image faster than the hand can draw
- There is no **Original**
- Not Unique
- Not Authentic

Film

- Derives from Photography
- The Moving Image

NPTEL 34

So, that leads to a certain loss and he says the development of film derives from photography. So, some of the issues some of the core issues that we have discussed with respect to photography also applies to film because, what is a film? Film is but the moving image.

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Photography

- There is no **Original**
- Causes a reversal of the function of art
- **Ritual** to **Politics**

Film

NPTEL 35

And so, he says that since there is no original and this is the crucial crux of what he is trying to discuss. That since there is no original, this historically causes a certain reversion and he looks upon photography as that classic case of place where there is no region and this is true even of print is not it because even in print in mechanical reproduction printing technology.

We looked at the topographer who actually puts together the various typefaces into the lattice and once the lattice is created then impressions are taken and the quality of the impression will depend on the ink that is used, the kind of pressure that is used, the kind of paper that is used and it can produce different kind of versions. So, therefore which is the original is it the lattice, is it the print.

So, actually there is no original if you think of it. One can say yes, if we say that the original is the first impression that is made by a particular printer everything else is non-original or everything else is a pirated copy there is a very different kind of issue about intellectual property that we are getting into but that sense of originality is enforced legally or ethically it is not there physically whereas the Mount Everest is original, the Mona Lisa painted is original everything else is a copy of it, wherever there is human intervention or natural intervention that is original.

In case of mechanical reproduction there is no original everything is but a copy. The fact of the work of art in the mechanical reproduction not having original actually causes a reversal in the function of art from ritual to politics. I would like to modify this a little bit, we did see that with the coming of the early modern the ritual function of art had moved on to a more secular function of art what one would say to a commercial function of art.

But if we take both the Commerce and the ritual together then this shift to the political is something that is important out here because we have already seen how with the coming of print politics becomes an important field in which print actually operates and of course Benjamin is talking about modern day politics.

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So, from ritual to a political significance of art is something that interests Benjamin and to explain this he is going to use contrast between film and other forms of manual production of art. First contrast is between painting and films, painting is a particular form which is to be viewed by one person at any one point of time. There are of course other forms of visual art which can be viewed by many people together.

There could be for example there could be monument or sculpture which can be viewed by various people together, of course in a museum setting primarily, but that is because that particular piece of work can house so many people. But there is no event that happens at that particular point of time. So, each person's relationship with that particular painting is individual, and it allows contemplation.

So, he is actually looking at a situation where he is talking about where the painting is being approached or is being viewed, is being partaken by one person individually not in a mass setting. Typically in museums if you have a painting there would be a couch or a seat on which or a bench opposite to it, you're supposed to sit and contemplate, the painting is devised in a way in which it is enjoyed through a contemplative mode.

Whereas the film is mass consumed. The way it is designed of course with the coming of this is the you realize that this is an essay which is about a hundred years old with the coming of personal devices, the film is now moving to once again individual mode of viewing. It is individual as well as collective in the sense that people may have left comments on that film maybe on Netflix or on YouTube.

But for the moment we will encounter all that when we come to social media but let us not look at those examples because that is going to make our understanding of Benjamin more difficult because Benjamin did not have access to the modern technologies, contemporary technologies of our day. So, he was looking at a film within a film theatre which is meant for mass consumption that is how it is designed, a film is meant for mass consumption for collective viewing and therefore there are collective responses.

The painting is not meant for collective responses, it is meant for contemplation but films are made for collective responses and the moment these responses and when people respond to each other then these attitudes can coincide when someone likes a particular scene you can hear their responses. So, it is something that is meant for mass consumption, and he says that it does not allow the film as a form though it is a visual form it does not allow contemplation because it is a moving image, there is a constant supply of image even before you can actually respond to one image the other image comes into being.

So, there is a constant repetition of images which is actually creating a moving image, the moving images actually plays on the human eye to be able to perceive individual images. And therefore what it seems to us is an illusion, it seems to us that it is a frame rate, number of frames per second is that what creates the moving image, what it actually picks up the camera is picking up our single images which are played out very fast on the screen and so we think of it as a moving image.

So, this is case of a reception he says in a state of distraction. He says human perception of particular forms of art can be guided in two ways one is by contemplation, reflection on that. The other is by habit or guidance that is in the absence of contemplation it is habit or guidance that the way we are taught to respond to a certain work, we respond to it.

The audience is told that this is what you should be going to watch the film for and that could happen through various ways through reviews, through publicity, through advertisement, through discussion among friends and circles. That creates a certain habit of consumption of particular forms in this particular case the film.

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Film

- Opens itself to greater analysis
 - From multiple points of view
 - Extends comprehension
 - Close up
 - Slow motion

The process of popping a kernel
By A09kg - Own work, CC BY-SA 3.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/index.php?title=File:Popping_a_kernel.jpg

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However, what the film loses in terms of contemplation it gains as a form he says through opening it up opening the media up to greater analysis. As we have seen already, that photography can perceive a whole lot more than the human eye and the film camera can actually and the film projection can actually achieve a lot more, a slow motion or a close-up.

What you see in that image is the popping of corn kernel of corn what is popcorn? The mechanism of creation of popcorn which the human eye does not perceive but the camera is able to perceive much more succinctly. It extends comprehension it opens it up to greater analysis.

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Theatre	Film
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ephemeral• Actor can adjust to the audience<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Portrays and embodies a character• Performs at once	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mechanical• Actor's performance is fixed – assumes an audience<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Fragmented performances• Estrangement from the character• Performance without Aura

NPTEL

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Then he looks at the distinction between theatre and film both are played out in the auditorium but the two are different. Theatre is ephemeral and here I would like you to make a connection to our discussion on the oral narratives, oral narratives are performative forms as I said they are ephemeral, each occurrence is different. In the theatre the actor can adjust to the audience and temper his or her performance according to the temperament or the responses that have been got from the audience.

Whereas in films the actors performance is fixed, the actor performs once may assume an audience. So, it is very much like this lecture if I were teaching in a classroom I would be responding to students, if I find after saying certain bits of words that the students have not been able to comprehend or there are certain questions from the students I can stop and I can answer that.

Whereas that is the physical performance but here when I am speaking before a camera I am constantly trying to understand, trying to predict whether or judge whether the students will be able to understand what I am trying to say. Of course the process of clarification is there, there is the forum where you can ask questions and I shall respond to those questions.

But here the audience is being assumed, once this is recorded and edited and uploaded that performance this lecture gets fixed. So, in the theatre the actor portrays and embodies a character at a certain moment of time, performs at once. So, if it is a two three hour performance during that period the actor goes through that performance at once or in a particular scene if we break it down at the scene level once he is on stage, the actor performs without a break.

Whereas in film he or she can have multiple takes, even a single scene could be shot on different days almost. So, these are fragmented performances, there is more estrangement from the character and Benjamin says that this is performance without aura, because when the audiences are watching a film and performing there the actor is not there whereas if you go to a theatre and some famous actor is performing the actor is actually there so you go to see that actor perform.

The two are qualitatively different with or without the aura. So, whereas theatre he says is a cult form, it is unique and authentic because it is located within a particular location. The audience has to go to the theatre to be able to watch it, the performers and the audience have to be at the same location. Whereas in the case of the film, it can be performed it can be

projected, it can be shown and enjoyed partaken anywhere without any additional effort being made by the actors.

So, here the audience being removed from the actor, removes them from the ritual presence of the act. The audience is not overawed by the presence of the actor and therefore the audience can take the position of a critique, the audience takes the position of the camera because remember the camera can also open the image up for analysis, extends the comprehension.

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Theatre	Film
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ephemeral• Actor can adjust to the audience• Cult form – unique and authentic	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mechanical• Actor's performance is fixed – assumes an audience• Audience being removed from the actor takes the position of a Critic

Not an approach that can be adopted towards cult objects

Audience takes the position of the camera

NPTEL

So, when he says that the audience takes the position of the camera he means to say that the audience is able to analyse much more carefully and this is something that we have seen in the case of print as well. The very presence of multiple texts allows greater degree of analysis of the text itself of ideas that surround the text, that are embodied in the text and this critical position is not an approach that can be adopted towards cult objects he says.

For those of you who study theatre, you would remember that one of Benjamin's contemporaries and associates in fact Benjamin did write about Brecht's techniques of theatre. Bertolt Brecht German dramatizer also someone who went on an exile during the Nazi regime. Brecht developed the technique of alienation in theatre precisely to ensure that the audience gets removed from the action.

He used certain techniques through which he constantly wanted the audience to remember that what they were watching is a performance and not a slice of life or real life, not to be get sucked into the action because he wanted the audience to take the position of a critique and

that is what Benjamin says that the film as a mode can do, can engage in, a critical position to whatever is being viewed.

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But this position is something that is subverted, the market tries to nullify this effect. The market does not particularly take kindly to the position of the audience as a critique because a critical position will then empower the audience and the market cannot deal with a powerful audience. Because critical audience would try to direct the market but market only wants to be directed through profit not through criticism.

So, the market tries to nullify this effect and what it does according to Benjamin is that it creates the cult of the star, it tried to return cult into the mechanical form, it tries to create the cult of the star, the cult of personality around the star.

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The Cult of the Star

Film

- NOT the **Aura** of a Person / Actor
- BUT the spell of **Personality**
- The Spell of **Commodity**

• *Ritual to Politics*

FASCISM

NPTTEL 47

Photography

Film

- There is no **Original**
- Causes a reversal of the function of art
- **Ritual to Politics**

gives shape to

Arts for Arts Sake

stance

NPTTEL 45

Now, the cult of the star, is not the aura of the person or the actor but it is a spell of personality, it is not the person himself but a spell of personality it is a constructed personality, it is the spell that is created through commodity production. Now, we are going to see what connection he makes with fascism.

So, let us go back to one of our previous slides, photography in fact as an example to mechanical reproduction and there is no original and this leads to a reversal of the function of art from ritual to politics. This he says gives shape to the art for art's sake stance. Now, when artistic objects have a certain ritual significance their valuation is derived from their ritual significance, the cult value.

Whereas as we have seen that with the coming of mechanical reproduction, the reproduced objects in our case books do shape society and politics to a great extent, they do participate in politics. However participation in politics also means that at the end of the day what is politics? Politics has to deal with power and who would be interested in politics? Only those who would be interested in politics who would like to change the way the relationships of power are exercised.

Anyone who wants to question the existing relationships of power would be interested in politics. The art for art's sake stance works against it, it is a hegemonic position, it is a position of privilege, it is a position of power which says that art is only to be practiced on its own and should not get shaped to a political movement or should not make a political statement.

Because to politics is to give shape to a different kind of power relationship, is to question power relationship, is often to take a critical stance to take an analytical stance and the other point where he talks about the creation of the cult of the star, this is the spell of commodity. Now, this he links to the way fascism operates.

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FASCISM

- Tries to organise the proletariat
- Without affecting the property structure
- Prevents Critical/ Political reading of Art
- Strengthens Arts for Arts Sake
- Aestheticizes Politics
 - Away from Exercise of Rights
 - To Expression of Rights

 NPTEL 48



He says that what fascism does is that through the creation of this cult of the star, the cult of personality, it tries to give a certain guidance, create a certain habit within the proletariat, within the people, within the larger sections of the mass audiences. With mechanical reproduction certainly the audiences are mass audiences, very large audiences.

It tries to organize these audiences towards its own favour by creating a habit which centers around the cult of personality through the cult of the star and within fascism certainly who is the real star? The star is the supreme authoritarian figure, the leader, the Fuehrer. And it tries to organize the mass audiences in favour of the ruler so without questioning the structure of property, without questioning the power relationship that they are more habituated to celebrating the cult of the star without questioning or analyzing what that actor is actually portraying on the screen, they are sucked into it.

And this prevents a critical or a political reading of art and it strengthens the art for art's sake domain. He says what fascism thrives upon is an aestheticization of politics, moves people away, moves mass audiences away from the exercises of rights to the expression of rights. It is a far more vacuous, it is exercised in a certain kind of a hollowness where people may not have rights but they are happy with a certain cult which tries to tell them that their ability to enjoy this cult itself is an expression of right.

And the real rights of the things that matter to them education, shelter, food, nutrition, health these are not the issues that really matter but what really matter is that they get to have a certain access to this cult of the star. So, that is his criticism of fascism. The way fascism operates is to create this cult of personality around which the audience is allowed to function.

We should look through this theme furthermore in the next lecture with a discussion by Raymond Williams which will allow us to look further into this domain of the electronic media, thank you.