



Literary Criticism (From Plato to Leavis)
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Walter Benjamin's The Work Of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction 2

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VII

The nineteenth-century dispute as to the artistic value of painting versus photography today seems devious and confused. This does not diminish its importance, however; if anything, it underlines it. The dispute was in fact the symptom of a historical transformation the universal impact of which was not realized by either of the rivals. When the age of mechanical reproduction separated art from its basis in cult, the semblance of its autonomy disappeared forever. The resulting change in the function of art transcended the perspective of the century; for a long time it even escaped that of the twentieth century, which experienced the development of the film. Earlier much futile thought had been devoted to the question of whether photography is an art. The primary question—whether the very invention of photography had not transformed the entire nature of art—was not raised. Soon the film theoreticians asked the same ill-considered question with regard to the film. But the difficulties which photography caused traditional aesthetics were mere child's play as compared to those raised by the film. Whence the insensitive and forced character of early theories of the film. Abel Gance, for instance, compares the film with hieroglyphs: "Here, by a remarkable regression, we have come back to the level of expression of the Egyptians. . . . Pictorial language has not yet matured because our eyes have not yet adjusted to it. There is as yet insufficient respect

Hello and welcome to today's session, where we continue looking at Walter Benjamin's essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction". In the previous session, when we took a look at the last section that we discussed, section six, there he talks about how cult resistance fails, and how the exhibition value has completely taken over the cult value that art had in its inception from time immemorial. And he talks about different ways in which this had an impact on the way in which art has been perceived and how human perception has been changing accordingly as well.

In the seventh section, he talks about whether art has changed its nature and this is in continuance with the discussion that he has been trying to have about the changing nature of art, and how human perception also has been changing historically according to that. And the larger the crux of this seems to be in locating the historicity of art with respect to the many objective things, seemingly objective things that art and its perception has had from time immemorial.

In the seventh section, he begins by drawing our attention to "the 19th century dispute as to the artistic value of painting versus photography today seems devious and confused". And look at these examples that he has been trying to provide, painting and photography. Painting

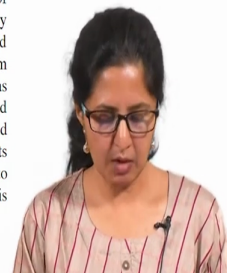
is something which is seen, of course today there is digital painting as well, but when we are talking about the time when Benjamin is talking about painting as well as photography, one is heavily mediated by technology, the other is seen as artistic labor, human labor. “This does not diminish its importance, however; if anything it underlines it. The dispute was in fact the symptom of a historical transformation, the universal impact of which was not realized by either of the writers.”

And so he talks about how the autonomy of art has disappeared in this process, especially with respect to techniques of production. To locate one of the signs of this transformation, he uses this analogy about photography and painting and this apparently is also the best place where this argument could be pushed forward about how the autonomy of art entirely disappears. It is not entirely about what the artist conceives, it is also mediated by various other kinds of things which aid this production.

Elsewhere, we have already seen how when he talks about the photographer as an artist, he also talks about how there is a mediation of looking through a certain kind of lens or clicking at certain times and how the image gets captured with the aid of technology. So, all of these things are also becoming determinants in this process of reproduction, production and reproduction of art. So, in that sense the art also begins to lose its autonomy in a very large sense.

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for, insufficient cult of, what it expresses.”⁹ Or, in the words of Séverin-Mars: “What art has been granted a dream more poetical and more real at the same time! Approached in this fashion the film might represent an incomparable means of expression. Only the most high-minded persons, in the most perfect and mysterious moments of their lives, should be allowed to enter its ambience.”¹⁰ Alexandre Amoux concludes his fantasy about the silent film with the question: “Do not all the bold descriptions we have given amount to the definition of prayer?”¹¹ It is instructive to note how their desire to class the film among the “arts” forces these theoreticians to read ritual elements into it—with a striking lack of discretion. Yet when these speculations were published, films like *L’Opinion Publique* and *The Gold Rush* had already appeared. This, however, did not keep Abel Gance from adducing hieroglyphs for purposes of comparison, nor Séverin-Mars from speaking of the film as one might speak of paintings by Fra Angelico. Characteristically, even today ultrareactionary authors give the film a similar contextual significance—if not an outright sacred one, then at least a supernatural one. Commenting on Max Reinhardt’s film version of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Werfel states that undoubtedly it was the sterile copying of the exterior world with its streets, interiors, railroad stations, restaurants, motorcars, and beaches which until now had obstructed the elevation of the film to the realm of art. “The film has not yet realized its true meaning, its real possibilities . . . these consist in its unique faculty to express by natural means and with incomparable persuasiveness all that is fairylike, marvelous, supernatural.”¹²



And further in this section, he also tries to make a comparison between film and hieroglyphs; and he talks about how this movement, which is generated by film, which perhaps could be

analyzed through this historical transformation as well. And through these various examples, by giving examples of art from different centuries, from different parts of the world, he is also trying to bring in a certain kind of historical seamlessness about the way in which art and its perception and its appreciation has evolved over ages.



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fairylike, marvelous, supernatural.”⁸

VIII

The artistic performance of a stage actor is definitely presented to the public by the actor in person; that of the screen actor, however, is presented by a camera, with a twofold consequence. The camera that presents the performance of the film actor to the public need not respect the performance as an integral whole. Guided by the cameraman, the camera continually changes its position with respect to the performance. The sequence of positional views which the editor composes from the material supplied him constitutes the completed film. It comprises certain factors of movement which are in reality those of the camera, not to mention special camera angles, close-ups, etc.

⁸ Abel Gance, *op. cit.*, pp. 100-1.
¹ Séverin-Mars, quoted by Abel Gance, *op. cit.*, p. 100.
² Alexandre Arnoux, *Cinéma pris*, 1929, p.28.
³ Franz Werfel, “Ein Sommernachtsstraum, Ein Film von Shakespeare und Reinhardt,” *Neues Wiener Journal*, cited in *Lu* 15, November, 1935.



In section 8, he talks about film as a type of optical testing, and this is how he begins this section: “The artistic performance of a stage actor is definitely presented to the public by the actor in person; that of the screen actor, however, is presented by a camera with a twofold sequence.” So here, there is another comparison which is being brought to our attention, the theatre versus the film.

In the theatre when we are witnessing a performance, we witness the performance of a stage actor. But when we are watching a film, it is again a mediated sort of a performance. It is a screen actor, of course it is real enough, but it is presented by a camera. There is a two-fold sequence, and now we know that with the greater kinds of interventions of digital technologies, there are multiple interventions in between, where there are multiple players and mediators in between before the images on the screen are brought home to us.

“The camera that presents the performance of the film actor to the public need not respect the performance as an integral whole. Guided by the cameraman, the camera continually changes its position with respect to the performance”. Look at the way in which the camera also emerges as a character here, as an important determinant over here. It is not about the human

eye alone, it is about this intermediary, this technical intermediary, which plays a very significant role.

The camera may not know how to respect the performance, how to respect the person who is performing over there. And there is also this thin divide between who exactly is the artist over here, whether it is the screen actor over there or the one who is recording this. And quite often we also find that there is not just one person behind this technology, it is a series of things. There is a cameraman, there is a process of editing that goes on. So, there are multiple intermediaries which are at work at a purely technical level before the film is out for us to perceive as an artistic performance.

“The sequence of positional views which the editor composes from the material supplied him constitutes the completed film.” Look at the process which is involved before the completed film is being released to the audience. Compare this and contrast this with the process of an artistic performance of a stage actor, where there is more immediacy. And we also realize that the performance, the assessment of the performances happens on a different realm altogether. This is not really to value one over the other; that is not Benjamin's intention at all over here. He is trying to showcase how the function of art, the value of art, the process of art, the techniques of art have been undergoing a significant transformation in accordance with these historical changes, with these technological changes.

Coming back to this comparison between theater and film, it comprises certain factors of movement which are in reality those of the camera, not to mention special camera angles, close-ups etcetera; he had used a similar sort of example to talk about photography as well.

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Hence, the performance of the actor is subjected to a series of optical tests. This is the first consequence of the fact that the actor's performance is presented by means of a camera. Also, the film actor lacks the opportunity of the stage actor to adjust to the audience during his performance, since he does not present his performance to the audience in person. This permits the audience to take the position of a critic, without experiencing any personal contact with the actor. The audience's identification with the actor is really an identification with the camera. Consequently the audience takes the position of the camera; its approach is that of testing.¹⁰ This is not the approach to which cult values may be exposed.



Hence, the performance of the actor is subjected to a series of optical tests. This is the first consequence of the fact that the actor's performance is presented by means of a camera." Unlike a stage actor in a theatre, the screen actor cannot present himself or herself, he or she needs to be presented, this actor's performance needs to be presented, only through a camera and many other factors as he has already pointed out." The camera, the lighting, the lenses, the editing, all of these have to be in the right sort of combination.

"Also, the film actor lacks the opportunity of the stage actor to adjust to the audience during his performance". That is also the difference between a live performance and a recorded performance as you would know.

"Since he does not present his performance to the audience in person". So, technology plays a very significant role over here as a mediator. And when you think about its larger implications, a film, when you look at that as an artistic object, it is also an object of art which could be carried to different places unlike the stage actor who needs to carry himself or herself. The entire entourage have to travel together in order for them to be able to give a performance elsewhere, that is not the case with the film actor, that is not the case with the film.

The film roll is able to travel, which means that the entire performance is able to travel as well. "This permits the audience to take the position of a critic without experiencing any personal contact with the actor. The audience's identification with the actor is really an identification with the camera." Here is how Benjamin is trying to situate this new interface which has developed and this is how Marxist critical framework is also encouraging us to

look at the means of production and the means of artistic reception in the wake of the new impending changes.

Here the connect is not entirely with the screen actor, of course the performance is important, the performance is heavily mediated by the techniques of the camera. So, for the critic, the audience who is in the position of a critic, there is a double onus to critique both the performance of the individual actor as well as this mediating agency, the camera and its various techniques. It also calls for an entirely new set of skills as well. The one who is critiquing a film, as you would know, would require a different skill set entirely from the one who is critiquing a play, a play which is being read, or a play which is being performed on a stage.

And with the intervention of technology, with camera playing a significant role in bringing these artistic performances home, we realize that the camera also becomes something which becomes critiqued. And when we talk about camera, which is what Benjamin also has been reminding us of time and again, when we talk about the camera, there are multiple things which are part of the camera, not just the person who is operating the camera. Sometimes it is least the person who is operating the camera, but it is more about the lighting, the settings, the different angles, the lenses which are used, the angles in which certain kinds of shots are being taken.

So, it is about the camera's eye and the cameraperson's eye becoming one and how they together record this performance which could be critiqued and analyzed in an entirely different space altogether.

We find that with the intervention of technology, not just the techniques of artistic production changes, but also the place and the time where this review happens, where this analysis happens, all of that changes entirely. Like Benjamin reminded quite appropriately, when a stage actor is performing, it is like a live critique, but when a screen actor is performing, we do not know, we have absolutely no control over the time and space where this assessment of art, this reception of art would take place.

“Consequently, the audience takes the position of the camera, its approach is that of testing. This is not the approach to which cult values may be exposed.” Here we also realize historically there is a heavy tilt towards the exhibition value because the cult of resistance is almost like a lost game as Benjamin also reminds us. So, the exhibition value entirely takes

over and here, particularly with the case of the film, the audience also becomes, the audience who becomes the critic also takes the position of the camera. And this is really not the approach to which cult values may be exposed, it is entirely about the exhibition value.

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approach is that of testing.¹⁰ This is not the approach to which cult values may be exposed.

IX

For the film, what matters primarily is that the actor represents himself to the public before the camera, rather than representing someone else. One of the first to sense the actor's metamorphosis by this form of testing was Pirandello. Though his remarks on the subject in his novel *Si Gira* were limited to the negative aspects of the question and to the silent film only, this hardly impairs their validity. For in this respect, the sound film did not change anything essential. What matters is that the part is acted not for an audience but for a mechanical contrivance—in the case of the sound film, for two of them. "The film actor," wrote Pirandello, "feels as if in exile—exiled not only from the stage but also from himself. With a vague sense of discomfort he feels inexplicable emptiness: his body loses its corporeality, it evaporates, it is deprived of reality, life, voice, and the noises caused by his moving about, in order to be changed into a mute image, flickering an instant on the screen, then vanishing into silence . . . The projector will play with his shadow before the public, and he himself must be content to play before the camera." This situation might also be characterized as follows: for the first time—and this is the effect of the film—man has to operate with his whole living person, yet forgoing its aura. For aura is tied to his presence; there can be no replica of it. The aura which, on the stage, emanates from Macbeth, cannot be separated for



And in section 9, where he extensively talks about film again, he makes this very pertinent point that film has no aura. "For the film, what matters primarily is that the actor represents himself to the public before the camera rather than representing someone else. One of the first to sense the actor's metamorphosis from this form of testing was Pirandello. Though his remarks on the subject in his novel *Si Gira* were limited to the negative aspects of the question and to the silent film only, this hardly impairs their validity. For in this respect the sound film did not change anything essential. What matters is that the part is acted not for an audience but for a mechanical contrivance—in the case of a sound film, for two of them." "The film actor", this is Pirandello, "feels as if in exile, exiled not only from the stage but also from himself". So there is a certain sense of an alienation which is also happening over here which accentuates the artistic effect.

"With a vague sense of discomfort he feels inexplicable emptiness: his body loses its corporeality, it evaporates, is deprived of reality, life, voice and the noise is caused by his moving about in order to be changed into your mute image, flickering an instant on the screen then vanishing into silence. The projector will play with the shadow before the public and he himself must be content to play before the camera." He is talking about the changes that has

come about in the embodiment of this actor as well. In this transition from a stage actor to a screen actor, these are the kind of changes which also come into effect.

So, look at the physical changes, also the emotional changes also which are being felt by the actor going through this historical transformative process of mechanical reproduction. “This situation might also be characterized as follows:

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first to sense the actor's metamorphosis by this form of testing was Pirandello. Though his remarks on the subject in his novel *Si Gira* were limited to the negative aspects of the question and to the silent film only, this hardly impairs their validity. For in this respect, the sound film did not change anything essential. What matters is that the part is acted not for an audience but for a mechanical contrivance—in the case of the sound film, for two of them. “The film actor,” wrote Pirandello, “feels as if in exile—exiled not only from the stage but also from himself. With a vague sense of discomfort he feels inexplicable emptiness: his body loses its corporeality, it evaporates, it is deprived of reality, life, voice, and the noises caused by his moving about, in order to be changed into a mute image, flickering an instant on the screen, then vanishing into silence . . . The projector will play with his shadow before the public, and he himself must be content to play before the camera.” This situation might also be characterized as follows: for the first time—and this is the effect of the film—man has to operate with his whole living person, yet forgoing its aura. For aura is tied to his presence; there can be no replica of it. The aura which, on the stage, emanates from Macbeth, cannot be separated for the spectators from that of the actor. However, the singularity of the shot in the studio is that the camera is substituted for the public. Consequently, the aura that envelops the actor vanishes, and with it the aura of the figure he portrays.

It is not surprising that it should be a dramatist such as Pirandello who, in characterizing the film, inadvertently touches on the very crisis in which we see the theatre. Any thorough study proves that there is indeed no greater contrast

⁹ Luigi Pirandello, *Si Gira*, quoted by Léon Pierre-Quint, “Signification de cinéma,” *L'Art cinématographique*, op. cit., pp. 14-15.



than that of the stage play to a work of art that is completely subject to or, like the film, founded in, mechanical reproduction. Experts have long recognized that in the film “the greatest effects are almost always obtained by ‘acting’ as little as possible. . . .” In 1932 Rudolf Arnheim saw “the latest trend... in treating the actor as a stage prop chosen for its characteristics and . . . inserted at the proper place.”¹¹ With this idea something else is closely connected. The stage actor identifies himself with the character of his role. The film actor very often is denied this opportunity. His creation is by no means all of a piece; it is composed of many separate performances. Besides certain fortuitous considerations, such as cost of studio, availability of fellow players, décor, etc., there are elementary necessities of equipment that split the actor's work into a series of mountable episodes. In particular, lighting and its installation require the presentation of an event that, on the screen, unfolds as a rapid and unified scene, in a sequence of separate shootings which may take hours at the studio; not to mention more obvious montage. Thus a jump from the window can be shot in the studio as a jump from a scaffold, and the ensuing flight, if need be, can be shot weeks later when outdoor scenes are taken. Far more paradoxical cases can easily be construed. Let us assume that an actor is supposed to be startled by a knock at the door. If his reaction is not satisfactory, the director can resort to an expedient: when the actor happens to be at the studio again he has a shot fired behind him without his being forewarned of it. The frightened

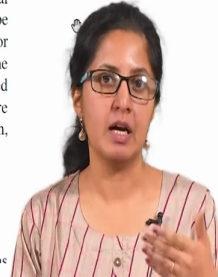


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X

The feeling of strangeness that overcomes the actor before the camera, as



For the first time—and this is the effect of the film—man has to operate with his whole living person, yet forgoing its aura”. Just like the case with painting or with stage actor, the human element is still there. The actor in his or her entire person is still there but through this technical mediation, through this technical production of this form of art, namely film, the living person is there. The actor has to operate within his whole living person, yet there is no aura, yet the essence of that person cannot be transmitted if at all that is what Benjamin means by the aura.

The aura is tied to his presence; there can be no replica of it. If the aura is seen as the original essence, as the original being that cannot be replicated at all, we realize that in a film, even in the first shot, due to this technical production the aura cannot be replicated at all. It is quite unlike what happens in a stage production in the theater. The aura which on the stage emanates from Macbeth cannot be separated for the spectators from that of the actor. However, the singularity of the shot in the studio is that the camera is substituted for the public.

Here when Benjamin is referring to Macbeth, he is talking about a stage production. He is not really talking about Macbeth getting into the form of a cinematic experience. He is talking about how when one is watching a play like Macbeth, when it is a stage actor whose performance is being witnessed, there is no way in which the aura of the actor can be separated from the aura of the character that he or she is playing.

However, the singularity of the shot in the studio is that the camera is substituted for the public. So, instead of the public who is directly witnessing the actor, who is there on the

stage, it is the camera who is witnessing. The camera becomes the first audience and once this entire process of production is over, when the film reaches us in the form of an edited moving artistic form, it is far removed from what the camera had witnessed it. And consequently, the aura that envelops the actor vanishes and with it the aura of the figure he portrays.

So, with increasing technological intervention, with increasing means of technological production as well as reproduction, we realize that the diminishing of the aura is an inevitable thing. It is part and parcel of what goes with artistic productions as well as with mechanical productions as well as reproduction of art. "It is not surprising that it should be a dramatist such as Pirandello, who in characterizing the film, inadvertently touches on the very crisis in which we see the theater. Any thorough study proves that there is indeed no greater contrast than that of a stage play to a work of art, it is completely subject to, or like the film founded in mechanical reproduction." Film becomes the prime example that Benjamin and others could quote when one talks about mechanical reproduction.

"Experts have long recognized that in the film the greatest effects are almost always obtained by acting as little as possible. In 1932, Rudolf Arnheim says, saw the latest trend in treating the actor as a stage prop chosen for its characteristics and inserted at the proper place. So, with this idea something else is closely connected. The stage actor identifies himself with the character of his role. The film actor very often is denied this opportunity." Because it is also about an array of other things. "His creation is by no means all of a piece; it is composed of many separate performances." And we know the process of recording and editing that may need to get processed, that the film goes through before it is finally released. "Besides certain fortuitous considerations, such as cost of studio, availability of fellow players, décor etcetera, there are elementary necessities of equipment that split the actor's work into a series of mountable episodes." Certain movements are captured within the studio perhaps and there are certain outdoor sequences and then the sound which is inserted, it could be dubbed, it could be part of the artificially generated sound.

So, there are various performances which are happening and these performances have to be brought together with a mechanical production and technical interventions. "In particular, lighting and its installation require the presentation of an event that on the screen unfolds as a rapid and unified scene. In a sequence of separate shootings which may take hours at the studio, not to mention a more obvious montage. We all know how complex this entire process



of production and reproduction is, in the case of film. Finally, this is the point that he wants to make: “Nothing more strikingly shows that art has left the realm of the beautiful semblance which so far, had been taken to be the only sphere where art could thrive.” There is a more liberating possibility that mechanical reproduction offers to art, and film is a classic example, a supreme example of engaging in this immense sequence of possibilities.

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so far, had been taken to be the only sphere where art could thrive.

X

The feeling of strangeness that overcomes the actor before the camera^{as} Pirandello describes it, is basically of the same kind as the estrangement felt before one's own image in the mirror. But now the reflected image has become separable, transportable. And where is it transported? Before the public.¹² Never for a moment does the screen actor cease to be conscious of this fact. While facing the camera he knows that ultimately he will face the public, the consumers who constitute the market. This market, where he offers not only his labor but also his whole self, his heart and soul, is beyond his reach. During the shooting he has as little contact with it as any article made in a factory. This may contribute to that oppression, that new anxiety which, according to Pirandello, grips the actor before the camera. The film responds to the shriveling of the aura with an artificial build-up of the “personality” outside the studio. The cult of the movie star, fostered by the money of the film industry, preserves not the unique aura of the person but the “spell of the personality,”



11

And in section 10, he continues to talk about the estrangement that the actor might feel in front of the camera. The reflected image has become separable, transportable and we also realize how that works with mechanical reproduction. The entire persona can be transported to a different space, different time and the performance could be viewed by an audience which one may not even know. This is quite unlike, this is very different from what happens during a stage performance. “But now the reflected image has become separable, transportable and where is it transported? Before the public.”

And the public becomes a more fluid kind of a construct. It is difficult to assess the kind of public to which a certain film, cinematic experience would reach; it is difficult to predict. It could go out of time, out of space and we know that it could even be preserved for future generations. The sense of audience becomes very complex. It is not as simple as it used to be with the stage actor and the audience who is right there at that point of time and the actor whose aura, the character, everything is there on the stage for the audience to experience and to assess.

But in the case of film, with the actor's performance being able to be transported, to be separable, then the entire dynamics, the entire grammar of this criticism also changes. "While facing the camera he knows that ultimately he will face the public, the consumers who constitute the market." So, this is another thing. The camera becomes obviously the first audience. But the one who is facing the camera, the actor who is facing the camera is also very conscious of the fact that the camera is not the sole audience, just a mediator.

There is a public out there; there is a real public out there who will be witnessing this performance. So, without seeing the public, without witnessing an audience right in front of the performers they are also conscious, the camera also makes them conscious of the fact that this is being recorded, this is being transported to a public which you may or may not know. "While facing the camera he knows that ultimately he will face the public, the consumers who constitute the market."

Look at how seamlessly these terms like consumers and market are being introduced over here because that is the way in which the idea of new modes of artistic reproduction also work. "This market where he offers not only his labor but also his whole self, his heart and soul, is beyond his reach." One is very conscious of a market out there but it is also beyond one's reach, quite unlike the stage actor. "During the shooting he has as little contact with it as any article made in a factory."

It is a very beautiful comparison of the actor with an article made in a factory and just like the actor's performance is being processed within the studio, in the same way we know that there are articles which are being manufactured within the factories. Both will go out not necessarily to a predictable set of audience. Both will go out to unknown, unnamed territories. It could be within the timeframe that we understand, it could be outside the timeframe, it could be outside the physical location of where the studio records a performance or where the objects are being manufactured. So, during the shooting he has as little contact with it as any article made in a factory.

I hope this is also helping you to see the link between Marxist criticism and the critique of art and critique of literature—how with the age of mass reproduction, with the age of mechanical reproduction, art also begins to be seen as a commodity. And it makes sense, it makes perfect sense to see art as a commodity, to see art as something which is far removed from its immediate audience and also as something which is being processed, manufactured within factory settings, within studio settings obviously for public consumption.

“This may contribute to that oppression, that new anxiety, which according to Pirandello grips the actor before the camera. The film responds to the shriveling of the aura with an artificial buildup of the “personality” outside the studio. The cult of the movie star, fostered by the money of the film industry, preserves not the unique aura of the person but the “spell of the personality”.” So, the aura becomes transported to something else altogether. There is, of course a diminishing of the aura, the other term he uses here is ‘shriveling’.

There is a shriveling of the aura but there is also sense of transportation which happens over here, where the aura is not entirely about the person anymore. The celebrity status which is fostered by the money of the film industry, look at the material things which are being brought into this discussion quite seamlessly over here. So, the aura is not about the aura of the person, like one used to understand, but it is entirely about the spell of the personality, which is also a produced thing, a manufactured thing just like it happens within factory settings, within studio settings.

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revolutionary criticism of social conditions, even of the distribution of property. However, our present study is no more specifically concerned with this than is the film production of Western Europe.

It is inherent in the technique of the film as well as that of sports that everybody who witnesses its accomplishments is somewhat of an expert. This is obvious to anyone listening to a group of newspaper boys leaning on their bicycles and discussing the outcome of a bicycle race. It is not for nothing that newspaper publishers arrange races for their delivery boys. These arouse great interest among the participants, for the victor has an opportunity to rise from delivery boy to professional racer. Similarly, the newsreel offers everyone the opportunity to rise from passer-by to movie extra. In this way any man might even find himself part of a work of art, as witness Vertoff's *Three Songs About Lenin* or Iven's *Borinage*. Any man today can lay claim to being filmed. This claim can best be elucidated by a comparative look at the historical situation of contemporary literature.

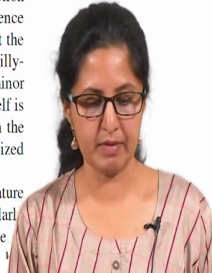
For centuries a small number of writers were confronted by many thousands of readers. This changed toward the end of the last century. With the increasing extension of the press, which kept placing new political, religious, scientific, professional, and local organs before the readers, an increasing number of readers became writers—at first, occasional ones. It began with the daily press opening to its readers space for “letters to the editor.” And today there is hardly a gainfully employed European who could not, in principle, find an opportunity to publish somewhere or other comments on his work, grievances, documentary reports, or that sort of thing. Thus, the distinction between author and public is about to lose its basic character. The difference becomes merely functional: it may vary from case to case. At any moment the



opportunity to rise from passer-by to movie extra. In this way any man might even find himself part of a work of art, as witness Vertov's *Three Songs About Lenin* or Iven's *Borinage*. Any man today can lay claim to being filmed. This claim can best be elucidated by a comparative look at the historical situation of contemporary literature.

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All this can easily be applied to the film, where transitions that in literature took centuries have come about in a decade. In cinematic practice, particularly in Russia, this change-over has partially become established reality. Some of the players whom we meet in Russian films are not actors in our sense but



an opportunity to publish somewhere or other comments on his work, grievances, documentary reports, or that sort of thing. Thus, the distinction between author and public is about to lose its basic character. The difference becomes merely functional; it may vary from case to case. At any moment the reader is ready to turn into a writer. As expert, which he had to become willy-nilly in an extremely specialized work process, even if only in some minor respect, the reader gains access to authorship. In the Soviet Union work itself is given a voice. To present it verbally is part of a man's ability to perform the work. Literary license is now founded on polytechnic rather than specialized training and thus becomes common property.¹³

All this can easily be applied to the film, where transitions that in literature took centuries have come about in a decade. In cinematic practice, particularly in Russia, this change-over has partially become established reality. Some of the players whom we meet in Russian films are not actors in our sense but people who portray *themselves*—and primarily in their own work process. In Western Europe the capitalistic exploitation of the film denies consideration to



modern man's legitimate claim to being reproduced. Under these circumstances the film industry is trying hard to spur the interest of the masses through illusion-promoting spectacles and dubious speculations.

XI

The shooting of a film, especially of a sound film, affords a spectacle unimaginable anywhere at any time before this. It presents a process in which it



And he also talks about the increasing democratization which is associated with it. “Any man today can lay claim to being filmed. This claim can be best elucidated by a comparative look at the historical situation of contemporary literature.” There is a democratization which has happened in all forms of art historically. There was a time when reading and writing were limited to certain communities and certain coteries. And we realized that with the advent of printing or with the intervention of mechanical reproduction again, writing and publishing books became a more democratic project.

“For centuries, the small numbers of writers were confronted by many thousands of readers. This changed towards the end of the last century. With increasing extension of the press which kept placing new political, religious, scientific, professional and local organs before the readers, an increasing number of readers became writers.” The distinction becomes more and more blurred and we also realize that historically it was easier to become a writer in the post printing age than it was perhaps in the earlier times.

“It began with the daily press opening to its readers space for ‘letters to the editor’.” Look at this historical process again, but also how it has always influenced different forms of art. In this case he is talking about literature. “And today there is hardly a gainfully employed European who could not in principle find an opportunity to publish somewhere or other comments on his work, grievances, documentary reports, or that sort of thing.”

There is a possibility for anyone to become a writer, at least an occasional one. And this is a process which has been aided, this is a process which has been made open through the intervention of mechanical reproduction which is primarily printing. “The difference

becomes merely functional, it may vary from case to case. At any moment the reader is ready to turn into a writer.” Whether one is making use of that possibility or not that is a different thing altogether. “As expert, which he had to become willy-nilly in an extremely specialized work process, even if only in some minor respect the reader gains access to authorship.”

This is the kind of transformation which is happening, which is coming home with the advent of mechanical reproduction, the reader gains access to authorship. The specialized function of any form of art becomes a thing of the past. That is what Benjamin is also referring to when he is talking about the shrinking idea of the aura, the decaying of aura, the diminishing of aura, the shriveling of the aura. It is also about being in a more inclusive space, where the reader is being given access to authorship. The same way anyone can get filmed within studio settings. It works very differently from the way it used to work with a stage actor.

“In the Soviet Union, the work itself is given a voice to present it verbally as part of a man’s ability to perform the work. A literary license is now founded on polytechnic rather than specialized training and thus becomes common property.”

How art loses its aura in that sense which was also related to ritual, tradition, cult and it becomes more democratic in multiple ways, it becomes common property. I want you to pay attention to these words, specific words which are used over here about market, about consumers, about property and how art undergoes a change in the face of mechanical reproduction which is made feasible and possible only within this framework. It makes more sense to understand art as a commodity, as something which is produced like an object within factory settings. “All this can be easily applied to the film where transitions that in literature took centuries have come about in a decade.”

That is the usefulness of discussing film at this point of time. With literature it took centuries to reach where we did, in order to understand the implications of this mechanical reproduction. But when we come to that, when you take the case of the film, these transitions which took about centuries to happen in the case of literature, has happened in about a decade.

“In cinematic practice, particularly in Russia, this changeover has partially become established reality. Some of the players whom we meet in Russian films are not actors in our sense but people who portray themselves and primarily in their own work process. In Western Europe, the capitalistic exploitation of the film denies consideration to modern man’s

legitimate claim to being reproduced.” I read this to you again, “In Western Europe the capitalistic exploitation of the film denies consideration to modern man's legitimate claim to being reproduced. Under these circumstances, the film industry is trying hard to spur the interest of the masses through illusion promoting spectacles and dubious speculations.” This is also about a certain kind of a dialogue which is immanent. This is also about trying to make sense of the many bourgeois forms which are being produced over there and also trying to make sense of it through a Marxist critical perspective. Here, he is introducing the claims of capitalism as well.

He is also trying to tell us how capitalism resists the claim of every man to be reproduced by producing spectacles. And there is always a certain attempt from the capitalist segments to reserve categories of art for the elite. And we will move on to more discussions of this in the following sections, where he continues to very pertinently discuss the example of film and how that has positively contributed to the reproduction of art, to the mechanical reproduction of art.

It is important to understand this piece of writing in order to make sense of the many changes which have come about in the field of art and also to appreciate how these historical changes are important in order to understand the ways in which human perception of art, human understanding of art, human notion of art has also evolved. So, with this we wrap up for today. We will continue with the remaining parts of the essay in the next session. I thank you for your time and attention, and I look forward to seeing you in the next class.