

Readings/Rereadings

The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction by Walter Benjamin

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More than eighty years after the first draft of *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* [1] by Walter Benjamin [2], the reflections and discussions on the theme of the original, the copy, and reproduction are so relevant today that it is difficult not to recognize the primacy of the German intellectual for having effectively posed some terms of the question. It should be said immediately, however, that the famous essay on *The Work of Art* did not have a linear and definitive drafting. There are, in fact, five versions of the text [3], four in German and one, coeval, published in French, albeit with cuts and revisions not approved by the author. To briefly summarize the history of the important contribution, it can be recalled that its writing began at the end of 1935 and continued up to the last draft of 1939. The only publication during the author's lifetime took place in the month of May following the first draft, in the Frankfurt School's *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, in the French translation by Pierre Klossowski [Benjamin 1936]. In some letters written by Benjamin between February and March 1936 [4] to Max Horkheimer –editor of the journal– the criticisms of the editorial changes and omissions –the “erasures done behind my back” [5], as Benjamin wrote– are documented sub-

stantially due to political opportunities, which were followed by a correspondence [6] also involving the journalists Hans Klaus Brill and Raymond Aron. The essay was published in book form in 1955 [Benjamin 1955]: this was used as the basis for the first Italian translation, published in the following decade [Benjamin 1966].

To understand the objectives that Benjamin pursued during the writing process, it is sufficient to read what the author wrote to Horkheimer on October 16, 1935: “For us, the fatal hour of art has struck and I have situated the point in a series of brief reflections dealing with the following title: *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*” [7]. With extraordinary clarity and expressive immediacy, the author addresses –in a short but content-laden essay– his reflections on the transformation of the work of art in the technological era. It should be remembered that the work saw the light of day after several of the author's own experiences and reflections of a similar consistency: as Antonio Somaini reminds us “in 1923 Benjamin, along with Moholy-Nagy, belonged to the circle of artists and intellectuals that gathered around the magazine ‘G’ (the first letter of *Gestaltung*, ‘configuration’), directed by Hans Richter and strongly committed to the



Fig. 1. Cover of the first Italian edition of the book [Benjamin 1966].

promotion of art forms characterized by a close association with technology” [Somaini 2012, p. 213]. There are also numerous works written by Benjamin before the one examined here with the intention of analyzing the changes that technology was bringing to the production of art: just think, for example, of the *Little History of Photography* of 1931 [8] and to *The Author as Producer of 1934* [9]. And we must also recognize that the period between the two world wars saw the flowering of contributions attentive to the role of the new media forms, many of which were well known to Benjamin himself. Suffice it to recall the book by László Moholy-Nagy comparing traditional and new figurative techniques [Moholy-Nagy 1925]; the essay by Vsevolod Illarionovich Pudovkin on film direction and writing [Pudovkin 1928] [10] and the work by Rudolph Arnheim dedicated to cinema as an artistic form [Arnheim 1932] [11]. To these we could add various writings on the theme of the original and the copy, such as the essay by Erwin Panofsky entitled *Original und Faksimilereproduktion*. Furthermore, this latter essay, published in the journal *Der Kreis* in 1930, from the beginning would suffer, for more than fifty years, a kind of *damnatio memoriae* [12]: it was not cited by subsequent studies, nor did Benjamin seem to be aware of its existence, even if it was antecedent to his essay, and in spite of the fact that some thematics of *The Work of Art* were already precisely delineated there.

There are many topics which the German intellectual found himself dealing with. The text, in fact, has been analyzed in the context of the political, philosophical, sociological, artistic and literary disciplines, including the history of photography, and is often referred to in essays of film criticism, since a large part

of it is dedicated precisely to reflections on the novelties that cinema was introducing to involve the masses. Here we will omit all those aspects that do not regard the issues of our discipline, and we will try to highlight the parts related to general issues concerning mechanical reproduction and, in particular, drawing, also reflecting on the new aspects that digital instruments suggest to those who deal with representation.

The common thread that unites the different Sections lies in the epochal change that took place in the world of technology between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, both for the reproduction of artistic works as well as for the production of new art, as is the case with cinematography. Great space is dedicated to the latter—in particular in the pages between Section VII and Section XI— even if cinema is also spoken of in other parts of the text. In extreme synthesis, the Sections that may be of interest to us are Section I, entitled *Technological Reproduction* [13]; those between Section II and Section V, dedicated to the problem of authenticity, of the aura and of the cultural value of the artistic work; Section XII and Section XV, which deal with the reception of art. There are many other parts, however, of great interest: where, for example, the author deals with the Dadaist experience (Section XIV) and in the previously mentioned Section XI, entitled *The Painter and the Cameraman*. The incipit of the volume leaves no doubt in the reader concerning the subjects that will be addressed [14]: “In principle the work of art has always been reproducible. What man has made, man has always been able to make again” [Benjamin 2008, p. 3], immediately specifying that reproduction in the past used techniques such as founding, casting, woodcut printing, engraving, etching, and, only in the nineteenth

century, lithography. But photography, the author emphasizes, determined the difference: “since the eye perceives faster than the hand can draw” [Benjamin 2008, p. 4], with it “the process of pictorial reproduction was so enormously speeded up that it was able to keep pace with speech” [Benjamin 2008, p. 4]. Thus the principle was immediately established of the ‘quickness’ of the technologically recorded work, which differs from the ‘slowness’ of the hand that traces graphic lines. A quotation from Paul Valéry, present in the essay, strengthens this concept: “Just as water, gas, and electricity come to us from afar and enter our homes with almost no effort on our part, there serving our needs, so we shall be supplied with picture or sound sequences that, at the touch of a button, almost a wave of the hand, arrive and likewise depart” [15]. The profoundness of this phrase can be perceived in the thought of many intellectuals of the twentieth century. Think of Ernst Gombrich and Italo Calvino, for example, who would use similar words to translate the same concept: “We are living in a visual age. We are bombarded by pictures from morning to night” [Gombrich 1985, p. 155], the Austrian scholar said, and the Italian writer dealt with the theme of “visibility” in one of the lectures that were to be given at Harvard in the academic year 1985-1986, and published in 1988: “We are bombarded today –Calvino wrote– by such a quantity of images that we can no longer distinguish direct experience from what we have seen for a few seconds on television. The memory is littered with bits of pieces of images, like a rubbish dump” [Calvino 2002, p. 93]. Tomás Maldonado was to attenuate this concept, applying it in other contexts: “Our society has been defined as a culture of images. We can accept this

definition, even if, on closer inspection, all cultures have been cultures of the image. This definition would be truer if we were to add that ours is a culture in which a particular type of image, the *trompe-l'oeil* image, reaches, thanks to the contribution of new production technologies and iconic diffusion, a prodigious veristic output" [Maldonado 1992, p. 48]. It is not difficult to find confirmation of all these annotations in current experiences; first and foremost, in the systematic iconographic communication that accompanies the owner of a smartphone at all times: the simple gesture that allows you to 'browse' images on the small screen and allows us to fully understand Valéry's prophecy and the Benjaminian interpretation. Furthermore, the French author, in his essay entitled *The Conquest of Ubiquity*, expresses concepts on which Benjamin carefully reflected: "At first, no doubt, only the reproduction and transmission of works of art will be affected. It will be possible to send anywhere or to re-create anywhere a system of sensations, or more precisely a system of stimuli, provoked by some object or event in any given place. Works of art will acquire a kind of ubiquity" [Valéry 1996, p. 107], and adds: "I do not know whether a philosopher has ever dreamed of a company engaged in the home delivery of Sensory Reality. [...] We are still far from having controlled visual phenomena to the same degree [...] That will happen some day" [Valéry 1996, p. 108]. These considerations would be sufficient for understanding the great anticipatory plot unfolding within these sentences. We could highlight all the issues that –for some years now– the discipline of representation has had to deal with: from the digital cloning of an architectural or sculptural work, made possible thanks to the techniques

of stereometric acquisition with laser instrumentation or with digital photo-modeling, to the virtualization of reality, in the form of advanced real-time navigation systems with 3D viewers and datagloves; from remote digital modeling, to rapid prototyping and three-dimensional printing. A great novelty, then, was offered to the mind of Benjamin, which would lead him, in the following Sections, to reflect on the theme of authenticity, that is, the *hic et nunc*. Starting from Section II, in fact, the German scholar approaches another fundamental question: "Even with the most perfect reproduction, one thing stands out: the here and now of the work of art – its unique existence in the place where it is at this moment" [Benjamin 2008, p. 5]. And he adds: "The here and now of the original constitute the abstract idea of its genuineness. [...] *The whole province of genuineness is beyond technological (and of course, not only technological) reproducibility*" [Benjamin 2008, pp. 5, 6]. The concept of authenticity, therefore, begins to be at the center of the observer's attention: "The genuineness of a thing is the quintessence of everything about it since its creation that can be handed down, from its material duration to the historical witness that it bears" [Benjamin 2008, p. 7]. The concept of 'aura' was actually dealt with in the brief historical essay on photography, where at one point Benjamin wondered: "What is aura, actually? A strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close it may be. While at rest on a summer's noon, to trace a range of mountains on the horizon, or a branch that throws its shadow on the observer, until the moment or the hour become part of their appearance –this is what it means to breathe the aura of those mountains, that branch.

Now, to bring things *closer* to us, or rather to the masses, is just as passionate an inclination in our day as the overcoming of whatever is unique in every situation by means of its reproduction. Every day the need to possess the object in close-up in the form of a picture, or rather a copy, becomes more imperative. And the difference between the copy, which illustrated papers and newsreels keep in readiness, and the original picture is unmistakable. [...] The peeling away of the object's shell, the destruction of the aura, is the signature of a perception whose sense for the sameness of things has grown to the point where even the singular, the unique, is divested of its uniqueness – by means of its reproduction" [Benjamin 2005, pp. 518, 519] adding that "uniqueness and duration are as intimately intertwined in the latter as are transience and reproducibility in the former" [Benjamin 2005, pp. 518, 519]. This long digression on the concept of 'aura', written years before *The Work of Art*, surely predisposes the author to consider the differences between the traditional artwork and the new artistic expressions. We could also try to apply this reflection in the idea of 'authorship'. In fact, this connotation surely comes into play if we talk about drawing, which binds the graphic sign to the hand that produced it, ie that of the draftsman. The drawing, especially if done in the form of a sketch, is 'autographic'. Its reproduction by hand, by another subject through a copy, in fact, immediately cancels the value of the copy, amplifying that of the original. The electronic duplication, on the contrary, thanks to the high quality achieved, while not being able to record the aura of the moment in which it was created by the subject, deceives its owner into thinking he possesses the original, as it allows him to scrutinize the most intimate details.

“[Photographic reproduction] is able to employ such techniques as enlargement or slow motion to capture images that are quite simply beyond natural optics” [Benjamin 2008, p. 6] continues Benjamin. In addition, another aspect is analyzed: “[technical reproduction] can also place the copy of the original in situations beyond the reach of the original itself. [...] The cathedral quits its site to find a welcome in the studio of an art

lover” [Benjamin 2008, p. 6]. This last reference – a true hyperbole, if considered in literal terms – is attenuated if we read it in the photographic context to which the author refers, but returns to being symptomatic if we interpret it with the tools of virtual reality that, indeed, allow us to don the guise of a singular *flâneur*, to use a term dear to Benjamin [Benjamin 2000] [16]. It is precisely the advanced 3D simulation tools, in fact, that al-

low carrying out the primary activity of the *flâneur*, described by the intellectual as one who “walks long and aimlessly through the streets [...] like an ascetic animal [who] roams through unknown neighborhoods” [Benjamin 2000, p. 466]. The loss of spatial orientation, given by immersive technology, has something to do, from a certain point of view, precisely with the physical disorientation caused by the perceptive disorientation

Fig. 2. Walter Benjamin at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris, ca. 1933-1935. Photograph by Gisèle Freund.



of the citizen in urban chaos. At the end of the third Section –entitled *Destruction of Aura*– Benjamin paraphrases what was already written in the *Kleine Geschichte*: “Stripping the object of its sheath, shattering the aura, bear witness to a kind of perception where ‘a sense of similarity in the world’ is so highly developed that, through reproduction, it even mines similarity from what only happens once” [Benjamin 2008, p. 10] [17]. But besides the theme of the aura, as we have mentioned above, there are others of equal importance. In Section IV and, above all, Section V –entitled *Cult and Exhibition Value*– the important issue of the change of the experiential register of an art product is tackled. Benjamin is direct in recording analogies and differences in the temporal unfolding: “The oldest works of art, as we know, came into being in the service of a ritual – magical at first, then religious” [Benjamin 2008, pp. 10, 11], but “its being reproducible by technological means frees the work of art, for the first time in history, from its existence as a parasite upon ritual. The reproduced work of art is to an ever-increasing extent the reproduction of a work of art designed for reproducibility” [Benjamin 2008, pp. 11, 12]. As an example he offers the case of film-based reproduction: “From a photographic plate, for instance, many prints can be made; the question of the genuine print has no meaning” [Benjamin 2008, p. 12]. In Section V he is even more explicit: “Artistic production begins with images that serve cultic purposes”. [Benjamin 2008, p. 12] and “Today this cultic value as such seems almost to insist that the work of art be kept concealed: certain god statues are accessible only to the priest in the *cella*” [Benjamin 2008, p. 12]. The display value of a work, we could state with an equation, is inversely proportio-

nal to the importance it assumes from the ritual point of view. A little further on he adds: “With the various methods of reproducing the work of art by technological means, this displayability increases so enormously that the quantitative shift between its two poles switches, as in primeval times, to become a qualitative change of nature” [Benjamin 2008, p. 13]. On these topics Massimo Cacciari proposes a meaningful reflection: “Benjamin insists, and rightly, –affirms the philosopher– on the fact that the work of art in the age of its reproducibility revolutionizes the very forms of its communication and perception. [...] It is the problem of a ‘subjectless’ art, that is, an art that should represent the ‘dynasty’ of the Subject having reached its completion. This is the moment which, for Hegel, marks the “end of art” as such, and the beginning of something new. [...] It is an art that abandons, paradoxically, in its very idea of genius, every immediacy” [Cacciari 2011, p. X]. The value of the artistic object being completely changed, Benjamin is even more direct when he deals with the issue of photographic production: “In photography, display value starts to drive cultic value back along the whole line” [Benjamin 2008, p. 14]. We could say the same of all the other forms of advanced communication, those that make use of more powerful figurative stratagems: from stereoscopic virtualization, to holograms, to mixed reality. In every case, the user is implicated in a different reality that often involves him completely without giving him time for reflection. We are facing, that is, what Maldonado called the phenomenon of “absolute iconization” [Maldonado 1992, p. 61], in which the subject concerned, abandoning the traditional practice of ritual, immerses himself in a new experience: “the modern

(western) shaman dreams of being able to reach the state of trance without having to (personally) suffer the tribulations proper to initiatory practices” [Maldonado 1992, p. 54], and adds: “a state of trance that allows one to venture into the sacred without abandoning the delights of the profane” [Maldonado 1992, p. 54].

The umbilical cord of ritual being completely eliminated, it remains to be understood how –Benjamin wondered– the change in the reception of the work of art takes place. In Section XII he is quite explicit: “A painting always had an excellent claim to being looked at by one person or a small number” [Benjamin 2008, pp. 26, 27], but “The fact is, painting is not able to form the object of simultaneous reception by large numbers of people, as architecture has always been, as the epic once was, and as film is today” [Benjamin 2008, p. 27]. He goes more deeply into the matter in Section XV, where he recalls the concept of ‘distraction’, that is to say, of the approach to the work of art. “The person who stands in contemplation before a work of art immerses himself in it; he enters that work [...] The distracted mass, on the other hand, absorbs the work of art into itself” [Benjamin 2008, p. 33]. Recalling the modes of perception of an architectural artifact, the author adds: “Architecture has always provided the prototype of a work of art that is received in a state of distraction and by the collective” [Benjamin 2008, p. 33], pausing to reflect on the fact that “the art of building has never lain fallow. Its history is longer than that of any other art, and imaginatively recalling its effect is important as regards any attempt to form a conclusion about how the masses relate to art” [Benjamin 2008, p. 34]. He then wondered about the ways of perceiving architecture: “Buildings are

received twofold: through how they are used and how they are perceived. Or to put it in a better way: in a tactile fashion and in an optical fashion [...] Tactile reception does not occur both through the medium of attentiveness and at the same time through that of habit. [...] Getting used to things is something even the distracted person can do. More: the ability to master certain tasks in a state of distraction is what proves that solving them has become a person's habit. Through the sort of distraction that art has to offer, a surreptitious check is kept on how far fresh tasks of apperception have become solvable". [Benjamin 2008, pp. 34, 35]. The distracted, tactile, habitual perception of the object that causes an artistic reaction (be it an object or an architecture) sacrifices its cultural character for that immediately manifest. A brief study present only in the first draft of the essay (before 1936) unequivocally clarifies this concept: "Whoever strives to understand a Romanesque cathedral must first have an idea of what happened to a man of the Romanesque period upon entering it. [...] More or less the same as what happens to a man of our day when he enters into a garage" [Benjamin 2017, p. 151]. A different perceptual register is therefore proposed to contemporary man –to the masses, to put it in the words used by Benjamin– with respect to what happened in the past. Again different is what is offered thanks to the innovative tools of virtuality in which the technological exuberance –in some respects– can counteract the loss of the aura and rituality, although posing countless other problems for users.

Finally, we here point out an aspect that could be defined as evocative. In Section XI, entitled *The Painter and the Cameraman*, Benjamin proposes a comparison between the two dissimilar figures of the *pictor* and the cinematographic operator; that is, of those who work figuratively, with traditional means, and those who intervene with highly technological equipment: "How does the cameraman relate to the painter?" the critic asks, and he adds that to answer this he must take recourse to an analogy with a surgical operation. "The surgeon constitutes one pole of an arrangement in which the other is occupied by the magician. The stance of the magician healing an invalid by laying-on of hands differs from that of the surgeon performing an operation on that invalid. The magician maintains the natural distance between himself and the patient; to be precise he reduces it only slightly (by virtue of a laying-on hands) while increasing it (by virtue of his authority) hugely. The surgeon does the opposite: he reduces the distance to the patient a great deal (by actually going inside him) and increases it only a little (through the care with which his hand moves among the latter's organs). In short, unlike the magician (still a latent presence in the medical practitioner), the surgeon abstains at the crucial moment from facing his invalid person to person, invading him surgically instead" [Benjamin 2008, p. 25]. Therefore, "Magician and surgeon behave like painter and cameraman. [...] The images they both come up with are enormously different. The painter's is an entity, the

cameraman's chopped up into a large number of pieces, which find their way back together by following a new law" [Benjamin 2008, p. 25]. If we were to try to replace the two terms of the Benjaminian comparison, the figure of the traditional draftsman and that of the cameraman, with advanced modeling/visualization tools, the equivalence would probably remain unchanged. In particular, the images in "a large number of pieces" of which he speaks call to mind some procedures, well known to those who work with digital photogrammetry and image processing, such as modeling from photographic sampling and digital photomosaics. A final note concerns the theme of magic, already mentioned by the author, which in the way it is presented, recalls the description proposed by Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz in a book published before the essay was written, entitled *Legend, myth and magic in the image of the artist: a historical experiment* [Kris, Kurz 1934]. The second chapter of this book, in fact, is entitled *The Artist as Magician* and describes the artistic ability of "copying" reality, from Zeuxis to Giotto, from Daedalus to Pygmalion. It is unclear whether this book was known to Benjamin: certainly some reflections seem profoundly anticipatory of ideas elaborated in *The Work of Art* by the German intellectual who, as was his habit, drew the most precious reflections from the 'depths' of the great thinkers of today as well as of the past. So much so that he can be considered an extraordinary "pearl diver" [Arendt 2004, p. 61] [18].

Notes

[1] For the title, the first Italian translation from German [Benjamin 1966] was used, confirmed in later editions. We mention the variation suggested recent-

ly by Salvatore Cariati, Vincenzo Cicero and Luciano Tripepi which replaces the term 'epoca' with the term 'tempo' as a translation of 'Zeitalter' [Cariati, Cicero,

Tripepi 2017, p. CXXVIII, No. 6]. All the citations from *The Work of Art* were taken from Benjamin 2008. The other ones are translations from Italian versions.

[2] The bibliography on Walter Benjamin is vast: for brevity we indicate the bibliography presented in the recent biography: Eiland, Jennings 2016. The bibliographic references are found on pp. 661-676.

[3] See Benjamin 2013; also see the recent Italian edition [Benjamin 2017] with bilingual text (German-Italian), which presents a rich documentary apparatus. In the latter, the list of the five versions is found on p. CXXII and the synopsis of their structure at pp. 206-207.

[4] The letters are those of February 27 and 29, and of March 14, 1936: cf. Benjamin 2017, pp. 326-337 and 342-345.

[5] The sentence is present in the letter of February 29: cf. Benjamin 2017, p. 333. Likewise, the author will also write in that of March 14: "Brill [...] has erased entire passages behind my back": cf. Benjamin 2017, p. 343.

[6] See, for example, the letter from Horkheimer to Benjamin dated March 18, in Benjamin 2017, pp. 346-353.

[7] The quote is taken from Benjamin 2011, p. XLVII. Also see: Benjamin 2017, p. XXIV.

[8] The essay was published between September and October 1931 in the journal *Die Literarische Welt*, in issues 38 (18/9), 39 (25/9) and 40 (2/10):

cf. Benjamin 1931 and the Italian translation in Benjamin 2012, pp. 225-244.

[9] Speech held at the Institute for the Study of Fascism in Paris on April 27, 1934. Italian translation in Benjamin 2012, pp. 147-162.

[10] Quoted by Benjamin himself: cf. Benjamin 2017, pp. 84-85, No. 20.

[11] Also mentioned by Benjamin: cf. Benjamin 2017, pp. 82-85, No. 20.

[12] We can summarize the events related to the publication and dissemination of Panofsky's essay: the first appearance is in the journal *Der Kreis* on the explicit request of the editorial board [Panofsky 1930]. The contribution was then completely forgotten until it was reprinted in *IDEA. Jahrbuch der Hamburger Kunsthalle* [Panofsky 1986] followed by a critical essay by Michael Diers on the topic of art and reproduction [Diers 1986]. Thanks to this rediscovery, the *Eidos* journal proposed an Italian translation of the text [Panofsky 1990] with a brief introductory note by Carlo Bertelli on page 4. In 1998 it was included in a collection of essays by the scholar [Panofsky 1998]. It was then republished, translated into English, in 2010 in the journal *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* [Panofsky 2010] with translation by Timothy Grundy.

[13] The titles of the Sections are only present in

the second edition, dated October 1935, and reported in Benjamin 2017. Also see, in the latter, the index in the *Apparatus Maior* at pp. 171, 172.

[14] We omit the premise bearing a specific political connotation, which determined its exclusion from the first publication.

[15] Benjamin cites from the Section *La conquête de l'ubiquité* [Valéry 1934, p. 105]. See Benjamin 2017, pp. 12-15.

[16] See in particular the Section *M.* entitled precisely *Il flâneur* [Benjamin 2000, pp. 465-509].

[17] The text in the *Little History of Photography* is: "To pry an object from its shell, to destroy its aura, is the mark of a perception whose 'sense of the universal equality of things' has increased to such a degree that it extracts it even from a unique object by means of reproduction" [Benjamin 2012, p. 237].

[18] We borrow the definition of Benjamin given by Hannah Arendt, used to name a chapter of the biography written for him, also present in the text, which we quote in full: "Like a pearl diver who descends to the bottom of the sea, not to excavate the bottom and bring it to light but to pry loose the rich and the strange, the pearls and the coral in the depths, and to carry them to the surface" [Arendt 2004, p. 78].

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