

## **Reproducing Art: Walter Benjamin's "Work of Art" Essay Reconsidered**

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Walter Benjamin's '*Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner Technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*' ('The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility') offered challenges, on its first publication in Germany in 1936, not only to Fascist appropriations of art, but also to conventional Marxist aesthetics as well as to phenomenological theorisations of art. These challenges were repeated and reworked in different ways in the essay's influence on the turbulent intellectual scene in Europe and America in the late 1960s, and in its continuing prominence in debates in subsequent decades in various disciplines about cultural production and politics. The essay's dissemination across the German and (in translation) the English and French academic worlds has contributed significantly to the development of both Marxist and postmodernist theorisations of culture, as well as to the continual art-historical reassessment of the art work and its roles in contemporary media-dominated societies, constituting an important element of the development of art historic, cultural and literary academic enquiry. Benjamin's essay offers a major, if (or because) continually contested, contribution to debates about modernism and postmodernism and their respective cultural productivities, debates that retain their currency in the age of digital reproduction.

The aim of this special issue, published to coincide with the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of the first English translation of Benjamin's essay by Harry Zohn in 1968, is to offer a series of explorations and applications of and responses to the arguments, positions, potentialities and problems suggested, touched upon, outlined in or adumbrated by the essay. The essays presented here address and examine the actuality, critical and theoretical, of the various versions and translations of Benjamin's essay, and trace its influence across a range of modern and contemporary critical, cultural and artistic practices.

Benjamin's essay constitutes a major intervention in debates in Germany in the 1930s on the efficacy of thought to counter and challenge the threat of fascist politics. It offered a culmination to, and also a new development in, the trajectories of

Benjamin's own thought about art and the place – even the possibility – of aesthetic production, trajectories traced by Andrew Benjamin's essay. Some of the essay's internal philosophical tensions and potentialities, particularly those centring on the key concept-term *aura*, are mapped out and explored in Colin Lang's essay. The convoluted and sometimes confused history of the essay's publication and translation is unravelled and considered by Jennifer Way.

The arguments of Benjamin's essay provide crucial frameworks for thinking the productions of new digital and media technologies, as discussed in the essays by Graeme Gilloch and Kirk Pillow. These arguments open spaces for the examination of the continued critical significance of photography and its histories, understood as narratives of the development of a medium of both aesthetic and documentary representation, and considered in relation to painting, as indicated in the essays by Randall Van Schepen and Lauren Weingarden. They enable the possibility of new comprehensions of the varieties and functions of public art and architecture mobilised by modern and postmodern cultural production, as indicated in the essays by Diane Morgan and Richard Lane.

The essays in this special issue explore the potentials afforded by Benjamin's essay for critical analysis. They focus on its canonical status in cultural thought in the twentieth century, and its continuing relevance to and influence over ways of comprehending and imagining artistic production in relation to increasingly rapid and bewildering technological change. This influence, like that of all Benjamin's writing (as indicated in Rajeev Patke's review of two recent publications of critical responses to Benjamin), is immensely wide-ranging, complex and continually innovative. The special issue is, appropriately, an online publication intending to contribute to the continual resituating of Benjamin's essay in relation to current artistic and cultural-critical thought and to test and prove the essay's continued viability in the age of digital reproduction.

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