

Works of Artwriting: Some Legacies of Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"

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Writing about Walter Benjamin's *Selected Writings*, a four-volume series then forthcoming from Harvard University Press in 1997, Peter Monaghan mused,

The extent of Benjamin's influence on academe in the English-speaking world is curious, since relatively little of his work has been translated into English. Researchers unable to read the German originals have used two collections of essays edited by Hannah Arendt, Benjamin's cousin by marriage: *Illuminations* (1969) and *Reflections* (1982) (Monaghan 1997: A 16).

Almost thirty years earlier, the American publishing world had acknowledged the importance of the new availability of some of Benjamin's work. In 1968, the Kirkus Service announced, "This first English sampling of [Benjamin's work] is a publishing event of major importance" (Kirkus Service 1968). In 1969, a short notice appeared in the journal, *Choice*: "The present volume is the first publication in English of Benjamin's writings. The chief purpose of this collection – according to Arendt – " 'is to convey the importance of Benjamin as a literary critic' " (Lange 1969: 206). The writers for the Kirkus Service and *Choice* were referring to the collection of Benjamin's essays published in English, in *Illuminations*, by Harcourt, Brace & World during 1968; therein, the statement about Benjamin as a literary critic appeared in Arendt's "Editor's Notes" (1968a: 7). In 1969, Schocken Books republished *Illuminations*. Although the American reception of the book largely emphasized Benjamin as a literary critic, members of the art world would engage the volume, focusing especially on its presentation of "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." Examples of their use of the essay are the concern of this discussion, which seeks to pose as yet unasked questions exploring the relationship of the essay's meaning and status to its distribution, reception and use primarily in the United States.

“[...] [E]ach interesting new style of argumentation in artwriting is linked to a discovery of ways to narrate,” David Carrier wrote about “texts by both art critics and art historians.”(Carrier 1987: 136, 141 n. 1). If we treat “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” as artwriting, as content that cannot be divorced from its rhetorical forms and uses, we can appreciate that the perception of its content involved how readers encountered, understood, represented and used the essay as presented in the *Illuminations* of 1968 and 1969. Did they consider it a translation from the German or as the latest iteration of a series of drafts and publications appearing in French and German and extending into the early twentieth century? Did they come across the essay mentioned in passing in the thick of a text or analyzed as the primary topic, cited in notes or a bibliography, addressed in a review, or included in anthologies of varying themes? Did readers encounter “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” in full or abridged, indeed, how would an appreciation of the essay as a translation complicate an understanding of whether one was reading it in full? Questions like these are meant to suggest that the reception and use of the English-language essay, including its representation as a translation, iteration, reference, note or citation, that is, in relation to techniques of academic representation, actively shape not only the text that historical and contemporary readers have in mind in referring to the essay but also how they/we encounter, understand and use it in processes that may occur singly or interrelatedly. Carrier’s observation helps us to appreciate that each use and its variations narrativized the context in which the essay appeared and also was narrativized by it. Discursively, the English-language essay has become knowable and thus meaningful and significant in these receptions, in other words, within and in relation to its many uses.

A passage from *Mapping Benjamin: The Work of Art in the Digital Age*, 2003, reminds us there is much to learn about these processes, historically:

On one hand, to admit the “failure” of Benjamin’s predictions leads us to reconstruct the historical specifics of Benjamin’s intellectual context (the mid-1930s) within which his prognoses might have been plausible. On the other hand, the direction and

dynamics of our questioning obliges us to rethink our own cultural, technological and media environments at the beginning of the twenty-first century (Gumbrecht and Marriman 2003: xiv).

Between the “intellectual context (the mid 1930s)” and “the beginning of the twenty-first century” lies the English-language essay’s distribution and use. Carrier suggested that “instead of asking, ‘is this account true?’ we might better ask ‘what function does this text serve?’” (Carrier 1987: 13). If the “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” is as important as so many claim, we should not continue to ignore who, what and how it has served since 1968. Claire Farago suggests that “during the last two decades, historiography has become one of, if not the most, prominent subject in the field of art history. Why? Current historiographic research is deeply engaged with epistemological questions.” (Farago 2001: 3-19) Interestingly, reflecting on the English-language version of Benjamin’s essay indicates that art history lacks a historiographic account of how works of artwriting become and remain canonical.

The back cover of *Mapping Benjamin: The Work of Art in the Digital Age* explains that “since its publication in 1936, Walter Benjamin’s ‘Artwork’ essay has become a canonical text about the status and place of the fine arts in modern mass culture” (paperback version) (Gumbrecht and Marrinan 2003: cover blurb). Yet, as indicated, we await an account of the publication, distribution and use of the essay published in English during the late 1960s. If, as Roger Caygill observes, “the reception [of Benjamin’s work] has selectively shaped the œuvre by bringing out a particular feature or phase of Benjamin’s authorship and discreetly tucking away others” (Caygill 1998: xi), we may want to employ an awareness of the distribution and use of the essay to grasp patterns in subsequent scholarship on Benjamin and thus attempt to realize what English-language readers belonging to art worlds knew and meant when they referred to Benjamin’s “Artwork” essay. Caygill takes up the challenge insofar as he compares features of the first version of “The Work of Art in the Epoch of its Technical Reproducibility,” “completed during the Autumn and early Winter of 1935,” and the final version “completed between Spring 1936 and 1939,” which is “reprinted in

Adorno's 1955 edition of Benjamin's *Schriften* and translated in the influential English collection, *Illuminations*" (Caygill 1998: 98). As to that end, in what follows I review the reception of the English-language essay published in New York during 1968 and again in 1969 in *Illuminations*, and raise questions regarding what Stephen Bann calls the "fortune of the essay over the past twenty-five years or so, during which it has been picked over continuously – and begun to glow with a specious glamour" (Bann 2003: 318).

Acclaim and Use

The October 19, 1968 issue of *The New Yorker* printed the "Introduction" essay published in *Illuminations* during 1968 and 1969. In the "Introduction," Arendt explained that in 1955, "a two-volume edition of Benjamin's writings was published in Germany and almost immediately brought [Benjamin] a *succes d'estime* that went far beyond the recognition among the few which he had known in his lifetime" (Arendt 1968b: 65). The publication of English-language versions of essays from the *Schriften* in *Illuminations* would catalyze an appraisal of a writer and his work unfamiliar to most Americans. "Little known during his lifetime Benjamin has achieved considerable fame posthumously in Germany. *Illuminations* is highly recommended for academic libraries," Klaus Musmann wrote in the *Library Journal*, 1968 (Musmann 1968: 3786). In *The Atlantic Monthly*, 1969, Victor Lange explained that *Illuminations* presents "a set of texts that may at times be puzzling but that reveal a cast of mind and critical perspectives by which Europeans have for the past ten years been increasingly fascinated" (Lange 1969: 138). In *The New York Review of Books*, 1969, Frank Kermode summarized,

When he died his work was known to a few; it is only in the past fifteen years or so that Benjamin's name has become well known, and that in limited circles. But they widen, and so do the claims made for him. He is referred to as a great critic, the greatest, perhaps, of his time (Kermode 1969: 30).

Thirty-four years later, the editors of *Mapping Benjamin* affirmed that the significance of Benjamin's work had exceeded his lifetime. In particular, they stated that "the Artwork essay" is "probably the most frequently cited and most intensely debated [...] in the history of the academic humanities of the twentieth century" (Gumbrecht and Marrinan 2003: xiii, xii).

Did the essay's greatness follow from the singularity of its author? Using the descriptor, "unclassifiable," Arendt safeguarded Benjamin and his work from easy assimilation into late 1960s modes of cultural criticism. "Posthumous fame," she wrote, "seems to be the lot of those who are unclassifiable; that is, of those whose work neither fits into the existing order nor introduces a new genre that lends itself to future classification" (Arendt 1968b: 66). To be sure, some reviewers valued *Illuminations* as a departure from contemporary criticism. In *The New Republic*, 1968, Richard Gilman summarized, "We're left with writing that cuts deeply beneath interpretation, exegesis, parallel-hunting, mystery-dispelling and value-mongering: the chief occupations of most of our own writers about literature and culture" (Gilman 1968: 27). However, more common were themes and methodologies that American reviewers thought affiliated Benjamin's essay with current criticism. The reviewer for the Kirkus Service concluded, "Benjamin's critical essays are remarkable...as a forerunner of the new structuralist way of looking at or 'drilling' through literary texts" (Kirkus Service 1968). Categorizing his work as an antecedent of current thought, in *The Nation*, 1968, George Stade quoted Benjamin: "'One of the foremost tasks of art has always been the creation of a demand which could be fully satisfied only later'" (Stade 1968: 729). Much later, Peter Monaghan quoted Miriam Hansen observing that "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" "can throw light on the technologies that have emerged since he died, such as television and digital media"; "The culture has finally caught up with Benjamin" (Monaghan 1997: A18).

According to *The Atlantic Monthly*, 1969, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" is among "the most original and provocative of the pieces in this

volume” Lange 1969: 140). As they did with the entirety of *Illuminations*, during the late 1960s, critics writing for journals and magazines published in the States compared the essay to the cultural writing of their time. Kermode called the essay “the most McLuhanish piece in the book...ostensibly an independent study of how certain superstructural changes had become visible ‘only today,’ half a century after the corresponding changes in the economic base” (Kermode 1969: 34).

In England, following Jonathan Cape’s 1970 publication of the Harcourt, Brace and World *Illuminations* of 1968, articles began to appear, notably Toni del Renzio’s “Art, Photography, Language and Rapid Consumption,” *Art and Artists*, 1973 (del Renzio 1973: 8-10). When T.J. Clark published *The Absolute Bourgeois: Artists and Politics in France, 1848-1851* in 1973, he cited the *Illuminations* published in England during 1970 (Clark 1973: 210). Although Caroline Fawkes’ “Photography & Moholy-Nagy’s Do-it-yourself Aesthetic” appearing in *Studio*, 1975, referenced the American Schocken edition of 1969 (Fawkes 1975: 18-26), not surprisingly, many anthologies published in England drew upon presentations of “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” published there. Frascina and Jonathan Harris’s *Art in Modern Culture: An Anthology of Critical Texts*, 1992, cites the 1936 essay along with its appearance in *Illuminations* published in England during 1970, whereas Charles Harrison’s and Paul Wood’s *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, 1993, along with Jonathan Harris’s *The New Art History*, 2001, cites 1936 and 1973; the latter English-language edition was published in England by Fontana.

In the States, an early essay engaging Harcourt Brace & World, Inc.’s *Illuminations* of 1968 appeared in *Afterimage* during 1970; this was John McCole’s “Walter Benjamin, Susan Sontag and the Radical Critique of Photography” (McCole 1979: 12-14). The essay indicates that shortly after English-language presentations of Benjamin’s essay were distributed, scholars and critics were using it to understand something about art and visual culture. By the 1980s, renowned members of the American art world were mentioning how important the essay was for art theory. Some meant art theory in general while others were

referring to the theory of contemporary art; in the latter group, many had the theory of photography in mind. During 1980, in the journal *October*, Douglas Crimp cited the 1969 publication by Schocken in two essays – “On the Museum’s Ruins” (Crimp 1980a and Crimp 1993: 56 and 64n17) and “The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism.” (Crimp 1980b and Crimp 1993: 112, 113, 125n3, 7.) A year later, in *October*, Rosalind Krauss remarked, “As we have constantly been reminding ourselves ever since Walter Benjamin’s “Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” authenticity empties out as a notion as one approaches those mediums which are inherently multiple” (Krauss 1985: 152).

Interestingly, that the essay was referenced in relation to photography and soon would become a regular feature in publications exploring the history, theory and criticism of photography may have related to observations about the state of the field and dissatisfaction with its prevailing modes of inquiry. In “The History of Photography as Art History,” 1971, Milton Brown identified some troubling ironies. On one hand, “photography has finally attained canonization,” yet on the other, “its accepted forms may no longer be viable and its younger talents are looking elsewhere.” Moreover,

many artists are turning their backs on the pantheon and searching for significance in the popular, less fine, more vulgar and commercial forms of communication, among which are advertising art and the cinema. One wonders whether photography, which is after all intimately related to the cinema, will follow it out into the turmoil of life and grapple with changing forms of expression and communications.

Furthermore, notwithstanding the new aesthetic status photography achieved, additionally, Brown observed,

It is only fairly recently that photography has found currency in college art curricula within the area of studio practice. But it is still extremely rare for the history of photography to be included among art historical studies, either in independent courses or within surveys of 19th and 20th century art, both in courses and books (Brown 1971: 31).

By acknowledging the art world's recognition of photography as an art form while realizing how contemporary photographers were expanding their medium beyond its traditional concerns, and also noting the uneven fortunes of photography educationally (photography was being included in studio education yet was absent from coursework and related survey texts), Brown identified critical and pedagogic themes that may have resonated for readers of Benjamin's essay, insofar as they understood it to consider photographic practices in relation to critical, historical and social interpretive frameworks.

In *Clio*, 1982, Alan J. Bewell explored "Benjamin's unique understanding of the place of images within historical interpretations" and the relationship of photography, perception and modern life (Bewell 1982: 17). A year earlier, in "The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism," Krauss called Benjamin's essay "the most important statement yet made about the vocation of photography" (Krauss 1981b: 3-34). Although Krauss did not cite a specific source for "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," a reprint of the essay in her *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, 1985, did (Krauss 1986: 101). In two other essays originally appearing in *October* during the late 1970s – "Notes on the Index, part 1" and "Notes on the Index, part 2," in volumes 3 and 4, respectively – and republished in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, 1985, Krauss referred to the 1969 Schocken edition of *Illuminations* (1985a). In 1984, in *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, Abigail Solomon-Godeau, in "Photography after Art Photography," referenced the 1969 edition of *Illuminations* (Wallis 1984: 75n1). In *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics*, 1985, Hal Foster cited "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" without identifying a specific source (Foster 1985: 159). References to the essay were not always specified with the source in which it was consulted, although sometimes one can infer the source. For example, although Owens did not provide a source for his references to "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in the same essay he cites the 1969 Schocken version as a source for other remarks. During 1982, Christopher Phillips, in *October* (Phillips 1982: 26-32) and Craig Owens, in *Art in America* (Owens 1982: 9-21 passim) cited the publication of

Benjamin's essay in *Illuminations*, 1969. Owens would discuss "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" but not mention a specific publication date in Anders Stephanson's "Interview with Craig Owens" (Stephanson 1992: 300-1.) During 1983, Sidney Tillim, writing for *Artforum* (Tillim 1983: 67-73) cited the publication of Benjamin's essay in *Illuminations*, 1969.

During the 1980s, via the essay, "Benjamin's unique understanding" also was brought to bear in history of photography surveys published in the States. In *Photography, History of an Art*, 1982, Jean Luc Daval cites a 1955 version of the essay (Daval 1982: 131), presumably the one appearing in Adorno's 1955 edition of Benjamin's *Schriften*. In their *A History of Photography*, 1987, Jean-Claude Lemagny and Andre Rouille cite "The Work of Art in the Age of Technical Reproducibility" published in French in 1936 (Lemagny and Rouille 1987: 112).

During 1984, criticizing Rudi Fuch's curation of *Documenta 7* two years earlier, and citing the English-language essay, Crimp cast the essay as classic.

If not for [Hans] Haacke's work [*Homage à Marcel Broodthaers* exhibited in the *Documenta 7* exhibition of 1982], one would hardly have known that photography has recently become an important medium for artists attempting to resist the hegemony of the traditional beaux arts, that Walter Benjamin's classic essay on mechanical reproduction has become central to critical theories of contemporary visual culture (Crimp 1984: 56).

Also in this issue of *October*, Benjamin Buchloh claimed that the essay "by now [is] rightfully considered one of the most important contributions to twentieth-century aesthetic theory" (Buchloh 1984: 91). Buchloh cited the essay of *Illuminations*, 1969, as did Howard Singerman when, at the end of the 1980s he summarized,

Walter Benjamin's remarkably influential essay...is the footing beneath Crimp's "The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism" and beneath his and others'

nomination of photography as Modernism's historical nemesis and, thus, as Postmodernism's major actor (Singerman 1989: 162).

Singerman amplified that the essay "foresees a criticism that fashions the relationship of art to society not as its reflection [...] but as its product" (Singerman 1989: 162n41).

Diarmuid Costello's recently published comments about the essay's use helpfully summarize some features of its reception. He writes that

Walter Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility" has been familiar to Anglophone art theory since the early 1980s, when it was used by a generation of critics, many of them associated with the journal *October*, for one of two purposes: either to underwrite various photographic and lens-based art practices that had emerged in the late 1970s, or to retrieve the work of avant-garde movements such as Surrealism and Dada from their marginalization by modernist theory – or both (Costello 2006: 165),

– helping to create "the reductive use to which Benjamin's artwork essay has been put within art theory" in "first generation postmodern art theory during the late 1970s and early 1980s," especially in relation to "what has come to be known simply as Pictures after the show of the same name curated by [Douglas] Crimp at New York's Artists Space in 1977," and in regard to which Costello concludes that Crimp "stands out as having made the most philosophically cogent use of Benjamin to underwrite a distinctively postmodern, appropriationist, photographic practice" (Costello 2006: 164, 165, 167).

However, there are more questions to raise concerning why and how critics and scholars associated with *October* engaged the essay. Additionally, there are many questions to pose regarding other aspects of its reception and use during this period. For example, as the needs Milton Brown articulated in regard to the history of photography may have predisposed readers of the English-language essay to find in the essay what was lacking in the field, so also did the essay offer something that may have resonated for art historians eager for critical interpretations and models of analysis exceeding what prevailing models

afforded. According to F. Graeme Chalmers, a problem was that “art history as it is customarily presented in university courses still consists of records of styles, with great emphasis on names of artists, dates, places, and ‘masterpieces’.” Moreover, “categorizing systems exist as man-made divisions which restrict and influence the sorts of knowledge we obtain.” Another problem involved a desire for intellectual tools useful in exploring relationships of art, culture and society: “An analysis of ‘art and culture’ must interpret art in the ‘mass society’.” Art criticism has been confined to the analysis of so-called “ ‘high-art’ which has perhaps become a sort of ‘cloistered virtue’” (Chalmers 1973: 252, 255, 252).

Noteworthy, too, is that the English-language version of Benjamin’s essay was published during a time when efforts accelerated to integrate art with technologies promising greater reproduction and distribution than could be achieved by current practices involving galleries and museums. One example involved Sir Kenneth Clark, who recalled, “The old idea of ‘raise or spread,’ which we used to have a great deal of in the ‘40s, when I was at the [British] Arts Council, that seems to be over; the spreading has been done by books – illustrated books – by television, by dozens of other means” (Clark 1973: 15). 1969 was the year in England and 1970, in the US, when the BBC and PBS respectively aired Clark’s *Civilisation* television series about the history of Western civilisation. In combination with geographic location, it employed works of art and material culture to expound upon civilisation from a humanist perspective emphasizing the achievements of major figures and the effects they had on the intellectual, cultural and social life of a place and time. The relationship of “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” to developments like these has yet to be studied.

Two years before Chalmers published his dissatisfactions with the current state of art history in 1973, W. Eugene Kleinbauer called for *geistesgeschichte*, a history of ideas that “treats the visual arts not as art but as intellectual phenomena” and “reminds us of the function of art history as a humanistic discipline: to try to understand, intellectually, the

visual arts as products in time and space.” He and others knowledgeable about the historiography of art history aspired to crafting methodologies that moved beyond distinguishing between formalist and content-based approaches to engage “social, religious, cultural, and intellectual determinants; even Marxism” (Kleinbauer 1970-1: 153, 148). Correspondingly, in 1975, Hanna Deinhard supported the “interdisciplinary teamwork” then being modeled “among young German scholars, mostly working on the basis of the so-called ‘critical theory’ and that of the ‘critique of ideology’” (Deinhard 1975: 31). Scholars and critics would have found some of this in Benjamin’s essay. Writing in England during 1988, the editors of *Block* proclaimed, “Benjamin’s essay has been the referent for a whole field of cultural theory and practice since the late 1960s” (*Block* 1988: 3).

During the 1990s, artwriters engaged the essay of 1968 and 1969 to address aesthetics, craft, ecology, commodification, Dadaism, photography, visual reproduction, electronic reproduction, digital technology, digital reproduction, the museum, shock, space, and tourist art. As they enlarged the purview of its application, so did they also expand its range of intellectual users. Joining the ranks of well-known academic authors were young scholars and graduate students, which suggested that new generations were becoming familiar with the essay while in school, where also they may have acquired an expectation of being able to treat the essay as something to explore further or otherwise use as an intellectual tool. What also accelerated was the application of the essay to historical problems exceeding the industrial era. As art and cultural histories increasingly associated post-industrial economies with electronic and digital modes of cultural production, they tested the usefulness of engaging “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” with cultures beyond those rooted in an era characterized by industrialism and mechanical production and reproduction. Sometimes they signaled their efforts by slightly modifying the title of the English-language essay.

This last point deserves more explanation. The venerability of the English-language essay was being enforced – and this practice continues to occur – as authors filiated their

work to Benjamin's. Their practice of using the title of the English-language essay as a template for the titles of their own essays can be understood as a technique of filiation. The realization ought to prompt questions regarding what types of roles the result of using the technique conferred upon Benjamin's essay and Benjamin as an author. For example, in this use of this practice historically, have we been witnessing the claiming of lineage, including in the gendered sense in which filiation is understood to involve being the son of someone? In this regard, of what or whom is Benjamin credited with being the father? Some essays having relevance to these questions do not substantively engage Benjamin's; rather, they express a link only in their titles. Two good examples from the 1990s are Yvonne Rainer's "Preface: The Work of Art in the (Imagined) Age of Unalienated Exhibition," 1991, and Barbara Babcock, "The Tribal Artist in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 1995. In fact, the English-language title of Benjamin's essay resonated in the titles of many that situated art in an age having a particular quality, such as David Carrier, "Andy Warhol and Cindy Sherman: The Self-Portrait in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 1998, and Pablo Baler, "The Doors of Expression: The Work of Art in the Age of Quantum Processing Power," 2002, etc.

Not surprisingly, the title of Benjamin's essay also has been invoked in discursive skirmishes. Roger Malina explained that the article he published in *Leonardo*, 1990, "Digital Image, Digital Cinema: The Work of Art in the Age of Post-Mechanical Reproduction," took its title from a session of the same name convened at the Centre for Experimental Arts in Australia. The session chair

chose this title not only in ironic reference to the phrase coined by Walter Benjamin, but as a satirical comment on the other panels at the festival...that dealt at great length with currently fashionable French philosophers (Malina 1990: 37).

Questions of Canonicity and Use

In *Walter Benjamin and Art*, 2005, Andrew Benjamin wrote that “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility”

has had a profound influence on approaches to art that far outweighs its historical particularity. As such the text demands both contextualizing approaches, as well as others that acknowledge its impact and relevance beyond the hold of its initial setting (Benjamin 2006: 1).

The English-language version demands contextualizing approaches that address the development and maintenance of its status as a canonical text, historically – in its formation in a canon, and in its canonical status pedagogically within the contemporary art world, in relation to critical writing published outside the United States since 1968, and as shaped by “ways to narrate” (Carrier 1987: 136) that include shaping what is told by and conveyed about “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” by translation, citation, and edition.

The approbation of the essay’s canonical status is consistent. The back cover of *Mapping Benjamin: The Work of Art in the Digital Age*, 2003, reads, “Since its publication in 1936, Walter Benjamin’s ‘Artwork’ essay has become a canonical text about the status and place of the fine arts in modern mass culture.” Of course, some references, including this one, do not exactly clarify how the canonical status occurred or continued through the publication of different versions of the essay, even if one is to argue that the difference is “only” language – French, German, and English. Instead, they infer that there is a constant “Artwork” text – an ur-text – that underwrites and so informs and thus links all iterations – including the publication of the essay in French in 1936 and its presentation in English in 1968 and 1969.

Interestingly, the significance accorded Benjamin and his work earned its own estimation. In “The Beatification of Walter Benjamin,” 1990, Richard Vine surmised, “It is a peculiar world in which Leonardo and the Mona Lisa are said to have no aura, while Walter Benjamin and ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ are deemed virtually holy” (Vine 1990: 46). In 1987, Jacqueline Baas mentioned “the canonization of Benjamin’s text,” noting, “the quasi-scriptural origin of a way of thinking”; she asked, “Is there any more ‘auratic’ text in contemporary criticism than Benjamin’s essay?” (Baas 1987: 338).

If “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” is canonical, then, as Christopher Steiner asks about canons in art history, we might inquire how it operates as “a structuring structure which is in a continuous process of reproducing itself” (Steiner 1996: 217)? Another way to put this is inspired by the second part of the title of an essay written by Norbert Bolz called “Aesthetics of Media, What is the cost of Keeping Benjamin Current?” (Gumbrecht and Marrinan 2003: 24). The question of interest to me is not just how we keep Benjamin’s essay current, but also, how do we maintain its status as a, or even *the* canonical text? To respond, we might examine the schools and programs that trained artists, critics and art historians. Chronologically, the English-language essay made its appearance there as structuralist, critical theory, and post-structuralist ideas were beginning to provide a platform for analyzing art and visual culture. So were other types of critical positions being brought to bear in the classroom.

The essay is there as a trace in the few publications we have addressing education in the contemporary art world. For example, it is cited in materials relating to what Craig Owens taught from the mid 1970s to the late 1980s. In *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture* (Owens 1992) several items in “Section IV Pedagogy” cite the Schocken 1968 essay, although the citation is slightly jumbled in that Harcourt, Brace & World published the essay in *Illuminations* during 1968, while Schocken followed in 1969. Within “Bibliography: Contemporary Art and Criticism”, under the heading, “IV Spectacle”,

reference is made to Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, published by Schocken in 1968. The “Bibliography: The Political Economy of Culture” cites the Schocken 1968 essay. Writing about his MFA program in *Art Subjects, Making Artists in the American University*, 1999, Howard Singerman refers to the essay of *Illuminations*, 1969 (Singerman 1999: 2, 215n2). In *The Documented Image: Visions in Art History*, 1987, a festschrift dedicated to art historian Elizabeth Holt, Jacqueline Baas based her contribution, “Reconsidering Walter Benjamin: ‘The Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ in Retrospect’,” on Benjamin’s essay published in *Illuminations*, 1969 (Baas 1987: 338). The essay following Baas’, Wolfgang Freitag’s “Art Reproductions in the Library, Notes on their History and Use” also cites Schocken’s 1969 publication of Benjamin’s essay in *Illuminations* (Wiesberg and Dixon 1987: 352n15). Furthermore, as a staple of teaching and research, anthologies dedicated to art and Marxism, modernism, cultural studies, and visual culture reprinted the essay in full or part. Not all specified which edition of *Illuminations* served as the source, or from what other document their presentation of the English-language version came, although some did. Francis Francina and Charles Harrison, *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, 1987, cited *Illuminations*, 1968 (Francina and Harrison 1987: 217).

It is fascinating to realize that faculty in American art and art history programs were using the English-language essay in such a way that it became canonical during a period when canons increasingly came under scrutiny. When the essay was published in 1968 and 1969, members of the American world of art history were about to be introduced to discussions urging the necessity of redressing canonical features of art history, including as greatness. A primary example would be Linda Nochlin’s essay, “Why have there been no great women artists?” (Nochlin 1971) which explored canon formation and social structures underpinning frameworks of power that preclude women achieving greatness. Interestingly, as Ann Landi recently noted, Nochlin’s “essay became something of an instant classic” (Landi 2003: 94). Benjamin’s became an intellectual and methodological foundation for

generations of studio and art history students taught to question the very notions of canon and foundation in their fields.

In regard to canons, Steiner specifies, “It is not [...] what is in or out of the canon that ought to be of concern to us, but rather the social structure of the canon itself that must be reconsidered” (Steiner 1996: 213). In addition to recording its presence in syllabi and textbooks, we must consider how to reconstitute the academy’s contribution to the social structure of the English-language essay as a canon. In other words, is it possible to understand not only the relationship between what students were taught and expected to learn from the essay, but also the effects of these lessons and how the value of the essay was ascribed in the academy as well as elsewhere since, quoting Victor Burgin, “to leave one institutional site is simply to enter another?” (Hollands 2001: 52)

Additionally, we must ask what forms of cultural capital accrued for artwriters whose publications reprinted or analyzed the English-language essay. In the previous section, I raised questions about filiation and gender. We ought to bring these to bear in examining the essay in its status as cultural capital charged with and capable of discharging power. Within the field of contemporary art, the essay exemplifies Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital insofar as its use facilitates a social relation in a system of exchange. That is to say, referring to or otherwise using the essay to establish a framework for interpretation or to introduce analytical techniques coded artistic and cultural work as legitimate to interests in the field and, accordingly, provided the advantage of securing serious attention. One might argue this was the case for what Costello calls the “generation of critics, many of them associated with the journal *October*” (Costello 2006: 165). Further, as cultural capital, we would want to know how the essay facilitates the acquisition of social and economic capital when it brings academic as well as academic-economic achievement, say, through publication.

Inquiry into legacies of using the essay also must take individual response into account, including individual response as it intersects with the academy. In “Confronting

Benjamin,” Stephen Bann “allow[s himself] a brief autobiographical moment to explain the stages of my antagonism to Benjamin’s essay [...]” Bann outlines the presentation of “the remarkably successful and widely diffused English version of Benjamin’s *Illuminations*, with its introduction by Hannah Arendt” in John Berger’s book, *Ways of Seeing* (1972) as “doxa, the brilliant essay transformed into a mesmerizing assortment of half-truths and banalities.” “The point is (or was) that the popular diffusion of these versions of ‘Walter Benjamin for beginners’ resulted in a systematic misrecognition of many of the most important transformations that were taking place, at that stage, in the realm of the visual arts.” Furthermore, “my experience in those years demonstrated the sheer implausibility of Benjamin’s basic distinctions *as regards the art that was being produced*, despite the fact that they chimed in all too well with a particular mood in art criticism and cultural politics.” Era and ideological position constitute a point of departure for studying Bann’s reception of the essay. He writes that during the 1980s, “the polemical needs of that period required adversarial tactics” (Bann 2003: 317-322). To Costello’s claim about “the reductive use to which Benjamin’s artwork essay has been put within art theory” (Costello 2006: 165) and corresponding questions concerning why what happened in the ways that it did, we can add the possibility Bann raises about understanding the essay’s reception as a “systematic misrecognition” of changes in art, and ask to what ends its uses, including its canonical status, are ideological (Bann 2003: 322). Also, if the English-language version has become predictably important, equally, do we observe artwriters having to work harder to reactivate its newness, for example, by inserting it in new domains of generalization or practice? Would this account for the tendency of anthologies about Benjamin’s writing to favor recently published or commissioned essays over those inquiring about its historical reception and use?

Besides the English-language, other versions of the essay require study, such as the one informing the narrative of a “programme made for French television [that] aired on May 8, 1987” that was “interspersed visual material with interviews with Stuart Hall, Yves Michaud, Jean Baudrillard and Paul Virilio” (*Block* 1988: 3). Importantly, although discussions about canon formations often inquire about the extent to which canons address or

preclude non-Western cultures, they have not interrogated uses to which Benjamin's essay has been put to revisit Eurocentric or non-Eurocentric features of modernity or postmodernity. It may be that we have yet to engage the essay in this respect.

Questions of Representation and Use

In this section, I would like to consider techniques of representation, including aspects of translation, citation, and edition. In *Art and its Histories, A Reader*, 1999, Steve Edwards abridges and reprints an English translation of Andre Malraux's "Museum without Walls" published in 1953. When Edwards writes that "One of the principle sources for 'Museum without Walls' is Walter Benjamin's influential essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1936)" (Edwards 1999: 302) we assume he is referring to "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit," which some scholars suggest is correctly understood as "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," and others, "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility." Some argue that the change in language and title is significant and others, insignificant. In "What is Mechanical Reproduction," Robert Hullot-Kentor establishes that questions of the veracity of the phrase "mechanical reproduction" can be resolved by appreciating how successfully the English-language essay represents an original text by translating its opaque phrasing. "Benjamin does not use the word 'mechanical' at any point in the essay, not even in the renowned title, which would literally read, 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility [*technische Reproduzierbarkeit*]," Hullot-Kentor explains (Hullot-Kentor 2003: 158-9). Yet, "throughout the essay, each occurrence of 'mechanical' can be replaced by 'technical.' It is not that the English translator erred. The two concepts – mechanical and technical – broadly overlap...." Furthermore, "as a translation of the original's many variations on the phrase *technische Reproduktion*, the self-evidence of 'mechanical reproduction' – whatever it may mean – recommends itself over the literal 'technical reproduction,' whose weak semantic content oozes fruitlessly" (Hullot-Kentor 2003: 159).

How we might understand the relationship of the essay published in English during 1968 and 1969 to its history, or to earlier versions, and represent that relationship cogently, is complicated. Is the essay an English translation of a German essay on which Benjamin worked during the mid to late 1930s with the intention of publishing it in a German periodical or, as Hullot-Kentor suggests, is it an English translation of an essay first published in French during May 1936? As a translation, how is the essay meaningful in relation to an ur-text or to a series of earlier versions? Questions concerning its status as representational of and within Benjamin's oeuvre seem to monopolize its bibliography and may prevent us from noticing and understanding its uses in the art world. Related questions about how and why authors cited the English-language essay in the ways they did are relevant to this discussion because in contrast to some examples of secondary literature that goes out of its way to identify and treat "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" as a translation of another version, other examples cast the essay as singular and discrete. In "The Hidden Dialectic," 1980, Andreas Huyssen did not mention *Illuminations* as he referred to Benjamin's "famous essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'" and to "Benjamin's Reproduction essay," nor did he do so in an expanded version published in *After the Great Divide* (Huyssen 1986b). In the latter book, Huyssen mentions "Benjamin's Reproduction essay" (1986a: 24). As another example, the editors of *Mapping Benjamin*, 2003, generically refer to "the Artwork essay" (Gumbrecht and Marrinan 2003: xiii). No doubt, some minor errors have been made with the best of intentions. Saul Ostrow was simply mistaken when he wrote that "'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' [...] was not available in English until the early 1960s [...]" (Benjamin 2006: 236).

If understandable, also apt to raise questions are examples of authors (or editors or publishers) citing "1936" in the notes or bibliography for the English-language essay. In *Art of the Postmodern Era*, 1998, Irving Sandler discussed "a 1936 essay, 'Photography in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,' by Walter Benjamin" (Sandler 1988: 346ff). To be sure,

Arendt wrote that the source for the English-language essay of *Illuminations* was published in French in *Zeitschrift fur Sozialforschung* during 1936 (Arendt 1968a: 269). Yet, without adding *Zeitschrift fur Sozialforschung* to “1936,” authors leave readers to intuit these connections.

Further, *Illuminations* of 1968 states that “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” was “originally published in Germany” during 1955, and what Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc. copyrighted was the translation.

Copyright 1955 by Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt a. M. English translation copyright 1968 by Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc. First edition, Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 68-24382. Originally published in Germany by Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt a. M. (1968a).

References to 1955 complicate what we comprehend is the original source for the English-language essay – was it the essay published in French in a German periodical during 1936, or did a 1936 version predate the 1955 essay, and what occurred before 1936? As the work of Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, and Richard Wolin, respectively, demonstrates, if expedient, appending “1936” to the title of the English-language essay elides a morass of related versions and states (Eiland and Jennings 2003: 270n1, Wolin 1982).

Historically anchored by a single year, what has the English-language essay signified in anthologies dedicated to an expansion of the field, including John Walker and Sarah Chaplin, *Visual Culture: An Introduction*, 1997, and Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall, *Visual Culture: The Reader*, 1999, or in books about art history’s interface with critical theory, for example, Anne D’Alleva, *Look Again! Art History and Critical Theory*, 2004? We must ask what meanings the essay promotes when it is included in publications for which contributing authors draw upon a variety of previously published versions. A recent example is the second edition of Robert Nelson and Richard Shiff, Editors, *Critical Terms for Art History*, 2003, which includes essays citing versions from 1936, such as Amelia Jones’s “Body” (Jones 2003: 262) and Joseph Leo Koerner and Lisbet Rausing’s “Value” (Koerner and Rausing

2003: 425); from 1936 and 1968 (Michael Camille's "Simulacrum" [Camille 2003: 39]); and from 1970 in Paul Wood's "Commodity" (Wood 2003: 397, 398).

As cultural capital, how will "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" continue to take shape as art history morphs? In *Visual Culture: The Study of the Visual after the Cultural Turn*, Margaret Dikovitskaya observes that

visual studies is becoming a new historiography. It is a critique of what has been valorized as art. By examining the settings for spectatorship and working against the theory of the universal response, it dispels the illusion that art corresponds to some eternal standard of beauty (Dikovitskaya 2006: 75).

What art history needs is a new historiography encompassing the canonical in visual *and* textual representation. The centrality of Benjamin's essay to artwriting since ca 1968 is a case in point. Dikovitskaya says that Thomas Gunning

identifies the new field [of visual studies] as a research area based on a description of the alteration of modern experience. The source of the definition itself is Walter Benjamin's conclusion in "Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1935) about the change in the perceptions of people living through the historical and cultural metamorphoses of the past century (Dikovitskaya 2006: 79, 173-80).

Conclusion

Underpinning my discussion has been Carrier's idea that artwriters reinvent the boundaries of their narratives by changing their subject (Carrier 1987: 136). This inspired me to consider how using "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" published in *Illuminations* during 1968 and 1969 impacted its meaning and significance while at the same time such uses were shaping the contemporary art world via its institutions, practices, and subjects. I indicated the diversity of ways that artwriters used, including represented the essay. In addition, I argued that we need a history of the reception and use of the English-language essays of 1968 and 1969. For a work of artwriting that much of the Western art

world acknowledges as canonical, we should want to know the discursive contexts in which the work attained and maintains this status, along with what results from iterations or variations in how it is used and represented. At present, how processes of reception and use occurred historically, since 1968, and what they meant for artwriters and, situationally, in locations of use including the academy and the more amorphous yet nevertheless understood “art world,” are questions as yet to be answered.

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