

## **Digitization and the Transformation of Art**

**Douglas Kellner, UCLA**

Art has long been dependent on and even a product of technology. The first cave drawings required drawing instruments and materials that would produce lasting colors that could decorate walls and communicate to later generations. Written culture required the technology of paper, writing instruments, and ink, of which Korean and other Asian cultures excelled in and led the West. Sculpture, painting, photography, and architecture were all dependent on technologies from the beginning.

Hence, one could write the history of art from the standpoint of technology and today I want to reflect on the changes of the work of art in a digital culture. My argument today is that the digitization of culture has changed the nature, sites, distribution, and reception of art. To provide perspective, however, I first want to reflect on art and technology and how mechanical reproduction changed the nature of art from the 19<sup>th</sup> century into the twentieth century. Building on Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," I will discuss the transformation of art in the age of

mechanical reproduction and will analyze Benjamin's positive appraisal of film and new forms of culture made possible by mechanical reproduction. Then I will discuss the potential transformative effects of digitization and appraise the extent to which the digital revolution changes the nature of art, examining in conclusion the specificity of digital art and its potential aesthetic effects, as well as how digital technology changes the nature of news, information, and journalism. These comments will attempt to answer the questions posed by the conference organizers: "what is media art?," "What is the difference between traditional art and media art?." I will answer that media art is first constructed by techniques of mechanical reproduction and will also address the conference questions of: "What changes in art have been caused by this?" and "What kind of effects will this bring?"

The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction (with special emphasis on Benjamin and Film)

Opera was arguably the great art form of the 19<sup>th</sup> century combining the breakthroughs in classical music, theater, dance, stagecraft, and spectacle, generating, potentially, what Wagner called a "Gesamtkunstwerk," a

complete work of art. The expense in mounting opera made it primarily an elite art for the bourgeoisie and aristocracy, a fact that horrified a young Friedrich Nietzsche when he experienced upfront and personal the philistine reception of Wagner's operas at Bayreuth. While Nietzsche thought that Wagner's operas had transformative potential to create a great new German culture, he was severely disappointed at the ways that the Bayreuth opera festivals were used to promote Wagner and a banal German nationalism.<sup>1</sup>

If opera were the highest and most complete form of art in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, one could make a case for film as the distinctive art of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Film drew on previous art forms, that were often statically reproduced in early films that clumsily reproduced a stage drama or staged a popular novel, but film technology soon yielded new aesthetic forms and potential and film became both a popular form of entertainment and potentially a great art form, in the works of such artists as D.W. Griffith, Sergy Eisenstein, Abel Gance, the German Expressionists, or the Japanese filmmaker Ozu.

Film provides moving pictures, a kinetic experience of motion and action with cinematic images that accentuate, highlight and intensify certain moments of experience, emotions, and conflicts. As McGinn notes (2006: 10ff) films

provide perceptual, cognitive, and emotional experience that enables us to see, think about and interpret, and affectively undergo moving experiences. The great filmmakers created a cinematic language of close-ups, lighting, two-shots, long-shots, zooms, editing and other technical devices, and with sound montages of image and voice, in larger-than-life Technicolor when color film stock arrived, cinema could paint its distinctive panorama of moving images.

Film's resonant images capture formally moments of aesthetic and philosophical significance, illuminating experience and enlarging one's sense of life. The world viewed in movies allowed a seeing into character, plot, society, and life itself, as film brought to life a 1001 stories from the world's cultures. The images, scenes, and complex narratives involve one in resonant images, engaging scenes, and sometimes profoundly meaningful stories that illuminate life in a particular place and time, or even the human condition itself.

It is not just the formal aspects of cinematic form and the film experience that makes film such a powerful and important medium. Film involves one in the panorama of life ranging from the embeddedness in nature to moments of spiritual transcendence, as well as the dynamics of one's

own culture and society. Many films ground themselves in social reality enabling audiences to more deeply experience the emotions, thoughts, conflicts, and events of their era, as well as universal situations and emotions like love, jealousy, hatred, fear, and hope. Film has been since the 1920s an extremely contemporary art, teaching manners, mores, and models for thought and behavior.

Of course, film is a popular art, accessible to masses of people. It is not as expensive or exclusive as opera became, nor does it require the sophisticated literacy necessary to appreciate great writing, painting, or music (although it requires a complex literacy of its own to fully appreciate its multiple dimensions and meanings). Film traditionally has involved, however, a significant capital investment, and the film industry has specialized in producers, writers, directors, actors, and the like who are especially proficient at tapping into their contemporary moment, providing in cinematic form experiences, conflicts, ideas, and complex works that interest and engage audiences of the day. A thoughtful audience watching a resonant film emerges enlarged from their experience, grasping aspects of their life and world perhaps not previously envisaged, or coming to comprehend aspects that were taken for granted or not experienced.

Cinema built on photography just as opera appropriated cultural forms and technologies developed by the theater. This brings us to the reflections of Walter Benjamin, who in a 1934 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," argued that film and its technology of mechanical reproduction was changing the nature of art, as well as the art audience. While traditional art, Benjamin claimed, was distinguished by its aura, its sense of uniqueness and its presence, as we would stand in awe before a painting like the Mona Lisa, Michaelangelo's sculpture of David, or a famous Korean temple. The spectator to the unique classical art work appreciates the genius of the creator and the majesty of the creation in a humble and receptive mode of spectatorship (unless, of course, they are an arrogant critic or student).

Benjamin argued that in an era of mechanical reproduction the work of art lost its aura, its sense of uniqueness and presence as spectators all over the country, or even world, watched the same movie, listened to the same radio drama, or read the same photo-magazine. Unlike the reverent spectator awed by the traditional work of art, Benjamin argued that film, sports, and other forms of mass entertainment were creating a new kind of spectator, able to critically dissect cultural forms and to render

intelligent judgment on them. For Benjamin, the decline of the aura of the work of art -- the sense of originality, uniqueness, and authenticity -- under the pressures of mechanical reproduction helped produce a public able to more actively engage a wide range of cultural phenomena. He argued that, for instance, the spectators of sports events were discriminating judges of athletic activity, able to criticize and analyze plays, coaches, athletes, strategies, and so on. Likewise, Benjamin postulated that the film audiences as well can become experts of criticism and ably dissect the construction of images, narratives, and meanings of film.

Benjamin saw that politics were being aestheticized in the contemporary era, deploying techniques of mystification and cultural manipulation to produce media spectacles to gain mass assent to specific political candidates and groups (i.e. Nazi rallies or spectacular films like Leni Riefenstahl's propaganda masterpiece *The Triumph of the Will*, or Soviet parades and demonstrations of military might, etc). He was one of the first to dissect the new public spheres that were emerging in the period when the fascist party and state used organs of public communication like the film, radio, or political rally to promote their ends. Moreover, Benjamin's work is also important for focusing on the technology of

cultural reproduction, seeing the changes in new media techniques, and carrying out political critique while calling for democratic transformation of media technology and institutions.

Hence, in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1969), Benjamin noted how new mass media were supplanting older forms of culture whereby the mass reproduction of photography, film, recordings, and mass publications replaced the emphasis on the originality and "aura" of the work of art in an earlier era. Freed from the mystification of high culture, Benjamin believed that mass culture could cultivate more critical individuals able to judge and analyze their culture, just as sports fans could dissect and evaluate athletic activities. In addition, processing the rush of images of cinema created, Benjamin believed, subjectivities better able to parry the flux and turbulence of experience in industrialized, urbanized societies.

Himself a collaborator of the prolific German artist Bertolt Brecht, Benjamin worked with Brecht on films, created radio plays, and attempted to utilize the media as organs of social progress. In the essay "The Artist as Producer" (1999 [1934]), Benjamin argued that progressive cultural creators should "refunction" the apparatus of cultural production,



turning theater and film, for instance, into a forum of political enlightenment and discussion rather than a medium of "culinary" audience pleasure. Both Brecht and Benjamin wrote radio plays and were interested in film as an instrument of progressive social change. In an essay on radio theory, Brecht anticipated the Internet in his call for reconstructing the apparatus of broadcasting from one-way transmission to a more interactive form of two-way, or multiple, communication (in Silberman 2000: 41ff.)-- a form first realized in CB radio and then electronically-mediated computer communication.<sup>ii</sup>

Moreover, Benjamin wished to promote a radical cultural and media politics concerned with the creation of alternative oppositional cultures. Yet he recognized that media such as film could have conservative effects. While he thought it was progressive that mass-produced works were losing their "aura," their magical force, and were opening cultural artifacts for more critical and political discussion, he recognized that film could create a new kind of ideological magic through the cult of celebrity and techniques like the close-up that fetishized certain stars or images via the technology of the cinema. Benjamin was thus one of the first radical cultural critics to look carefully at the form and technology of media culture in appraising its complex nature

and effects and its impact on the nature of art and its reception by society at large.

The Work of Art in the Age of Digital Reproduction: Some Thoughts and Speculation

The 21<sup>st</sup> century is now exhibiting a digital culture that is absorbing and transforming all cultural forms and no one knows yet exactly how and how far digital technology will transform photography, film, the graphic arts, architecture, or will produce new forms of art that will replace the power and centrality of painting and forms of visual art. I want to argue in this section that new digital technology makes it possible for everyone to be an art producer and thus artist and that the nature of art and its audience is changing as dramatically in the era of digital reproduction as Walter Benjamin claimed art was changing in the era of mechanical reproduction.

To begin, there has been dramatic transform of film and video production in the age of computers and digital culture. Hollywood and film production throughout the world increasingly use digital cameras and equipment associated with video, and computerized special effects and editing, which have undercut the divide between film and video, and changed the nature of cultural production.

Moreover, new venues for film and video production and distribution are appearing on the Internet, YouTube and other sites, and distributed over a broad array of social networking sites like Facebook or MySpace. As audiences work with digital culture anyone can become a producer, putting their films, music videos or documentaries, images, or writings on the Internet so that audiences have become, not just astute critics as Walter Benjamin noted, but producers as he and Bertolt Brecht long ago dreamed of.

Let us reflect for a moment on the YouTube phenomenon. Young people have become instantly famous with postings and viral distribution of their videos or images, just as some bloggers have gained a national audience. YouTubers can present their own original works, or sample and mix and match for existing works. Some of the most famous US examples involve young people making videos for the Barack Obama presidential campaign. An "Obama Girl" music video is one of the most widely distributed in history and it was followed by a music video by the Black Eyed Peas and others who combined hip hop music and artists with a collage of images from Obama's "Yes, we can" speech.

Another example of how new digital technologies of everyday life are transforming contemporary U.S. politics comes from the role of UT in the debates on US invasion of

Iraq. On September 1, 2007, CBS News had a report on vigorous debate over Iraq with postings getting as many as 350,000 hits. Focusing on a 16-year old anti-Bush and anti-Iraq protester from a small town in New Jersey and a pro-war soldier, the segment demonstrated how ordinary people could participate in contemporary political dialogue via UT and its potential for democratization. (<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2007/09/01/eveningnews/main3227641.shtml>).<sup>iii</sup>

This brings me to an excursion on how digital technology is changing the nature of journalism and politics, as well as art to which I'll return in conclusion.

#### Digital Technology, News and Journalism

The unfolding of the panorama of images of US prisoner abuse of Iraqis in the Abu Ghraib and the quest to pin responsibility on the soldiers and higher US military and political authorities is one of the most intense media spectacles of contemporary journalism. Evoking universal disgust and repugnance, the images of young American soldiers humiliating Iraqis circulated with satellite-driven speed through broadcasting channels, the Internet, and print media and may stand as some of the most influential images of all time.

While the photos put on display the ubiquity of media spectacle and the powerful impact of images, their digital origins and circulation also require consideration. Upon obtaining over 1,000 digital photos shortly after the initial cycle of images was released by CBS and The New Yorker, the Washington Post commented that while many of the images revealed shocking poses of prisoner abuse, many more were of mundane scenes of daily life in Iraq. Moreover, the digital archive was not the work of professional photojournalists, but of young US soldiers. It was as if a generation raised on the media and in possession of digital cameras and camcorders naturally documented its own life, as if one was a participant in a reality TV show or political documentary.

Although there were claims that the images were intended for use to intimidate new Iraqi prisoners and to "soften them up" for interrogation, the pictures also emerged from fascination with taking pictures and the digital documentation of everyday life. They also revealed how quickly such images could leave a foreign country under US military control by way of the Internet and circulate quickly around the world. The Pentagon indicated in the Senate and House Hearings on the Iraq scandal on May 6, 2006 that many, many more photos and video were in play and

would be circulated in the days ahead, as indeed there have been daily revelations of new prisoner abuse and photos.

Whereas the US censored every image and word in the pool system concocted for the 1991 Gulf war and had strict guidelines and control mechanisms for the embedded reporters in the 2003 Iraq intervention, the digital age has made it ultimately impossible to hide the dark sides of the current Iraq occupation. The widespread use of digital cameras and the ease with which images can be shot and disseminated, including direct transmission through wireless connections, demonstrated how media spectacle could trump US military control and circulate highly damaging representations of US abuse of Iraqis. As Donald Rumsfeld exclaimed during the Iraq prisoner abuse hearings on May 7: "people are running around with digital cameras and taking these unbelievable photographs and then passing them off, against the law, to the media, to our surprise, when they had not even arrived in the Pentagon."

The role of media images in warfare and new role of digital spectacle was dramatized further on May 11, 2005 when gruesome imagery of American Nick Berg's beheading was released to the global media. The horrifying shots quickly circulated and made it clear that digital technology was an

asymmetric tool of war that any side could use to sway public opinion and to confront the awful horrors of war.

Yet revelations during the same week that photos of alleged Iraqi prisoner abuse by British soldiers were fakes, and subsequent admission that they were, also reveals the fragile nature of digital imagery, that it can be altered and faked, and that it is hard to differentiate between real images and digital simulacra. This analysis leads me to make some concluding comment on changes in the nature of art, information, journalism, and other forms of culture in a digital era.

#### Concluding Comments: Art and Information in a Digital Culture

I have argued in this talk that digital art is today the new frontier absorbing traditional art techniques, as well as the arts of mechanical reproduction. Digital art is part of a digital transformation of society and culture that changes everything from the way we communicate to how we do research and access news and information. Words, images, sounds, and all of the forms and material of art can be digitized and produced and reproduced in new forms and configurations.

As I have suggested in this talk, in a digital era, everyone can be an artist, journalist, and cultural

producer. Digital culture thus changes the nature of art, cultural production, and audiences. The work of art will be found in new sites, like the Internet, will be produced by new techniques, and will in turn provide material for future works as other cultural producers appropriate existing work and produce something different. Thus, the work of art is much more unstable and malleable than was traditional art where original works were sold for millions of dollars and correctly guarded by police and surveillance technology. Already films, musical CDs, and other material have been subject to mechanical reproduction, thus making intellectual copyright and ownership rights a big issue, as we've seen over the last decades.

But digital reproduction creates an ever more explosive mode of cultural production where anyone can be a producer and distributor of their own work, but can borrow on and use material from other digital products. On one hand, this is a democratizing tendency which destabilizes the power of elites, but on the other hand, it requires new types of aesthetic theory and validation. I have not today provided examples or models of digital art as there are no exiting canons or pantheons although many digital artists have been exhibited locally and even globally. But I am suggesting that we have not yet understand the full



ramifications of the work of art in the age of digital reproduction so I offer my remarks as stimulus for thought and discussion. I am very happy to be at this conference on digital art and look forward to experiencing and learning that will help my own reflections, and hope that we all benefit from the papers, art presentations, and discussion. Thank you for your attention.

Reference:

Benjamin, Walter. 1969. "The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction." *Illuminations*, pp. 217-251. New York: Schocken Books.

Silberman, Mark. 2000, *Bertolt Brecht on Film and Radio*. London: Metheun.

Notes

---

<sup>i</sup> On Nietzsche's hopes for Wagner and opera, see *The Birth of Tragedy*; for his disillusionship, see Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, among other sources.

<sup>ii</sup>. Silberman (2000) collects a wealth of Brecht's texts on radio, film, and the construction of alternative media and culture. Enzensberger (1974) provides a highly influential updating of Brecht's and Benjamin's media activism in his call for a progressive media politics in the contemporary era.

<sup>iii</sup> For the most updated and wide selection of Iraq-related UT videos, see [http://www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=Iraq](http://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=Iraq). For examples of ordinary people's video reportage in Korea, see the coverage of candle-light vigils which lasted more than 100 days protesting a Korean-US trade agreement that had allowed the import of mad-cow beef in May. Videos on the issue are accessible at

---

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sDaBTNPTWCQ>.