
Body, Technology, and Art: On Walter Benjamin's "Work of Art" Essay and Related Writings

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to read Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" by focusing on the conditions that redefine the human being in terms of the interplay between the corporeal and the technological. The discussion starts by exploring Benjamin's concept of the collective body organized in technology. The collective body, as put forward in Benjamin's early writings on anthropological issues, combines the human and the technological. The "Work of Art" essay takes it further by treating film as the kind of modern art based on the necessary technological measurements and operations that open up for the human being a space of expanded experience and altered perception conditioned by the second technology. This leads to a re-orientation of the theory of perception as film, with its tactile/tactical dimension and particular material-technological operations, allows its viewers to get closer to things by incorporating directly what it mediates. In this way, film accomplishes its historical task of turning technology into a first nature for the collective body.

KEYWORDS Walter Benjamin, film, body, technology, art, perception

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Introduction

In his well-known essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,”¹ Walter Benjamin argues that film is exactly the new type of art that manifests the “tendencies of the development of art under the present conditions of production” (*SW* 3: 101), by which he means that, in the capitalist, technological society, works of art can be produced on a mass scale. This factor is so crucial that it compels Benjamin to reconsider and reevaluate the significance of art at the fundamental level, for the change of the medial-technological environment has given rise to a new standard of art:

Around 1900, technological reproduction not only had reached a standard that permitted it to reproduce all known works of art, profoundly modifying their effect, but it also captured a place of its own among the artistic processes. In gauging this standard, we will do well to study the impact which its two different manifestations—the reproduction of artworks and the art of film—are having on art in its traditional form. (*SW* 3: 102)

While film represented the new standard and epitomized art born out of the technology of reproduction in the early twentieth century, it influenced not only the realm of art but also the “way in which human perception is organized” (*SW* 3: 104). This implies that human perception is subject to reorganization once the historical context of the material, medial-technological background changes. In this regard, film reflects the historical stage at which human perception undergoes a transformation imposed mainly by the technology of reproduction, whose effects on the organization of human perception are quite different from those of traditional media of writing.²

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¹ This article discusses the second version of the “Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility” (1936). For the publication history of the different versions of this essay, see Miriam Bratu Hansen, *Cinema and Experience* 307-08. In the pages that follow, Benjamin’s *Selected Writings* will be abbreviated as *SW* and the German collection *Gesammelte Schriften* will be cited as *GS*.

² Friedrich A. Kittler explores the German Arts and Letters around 1800, the so-called Age of Goethe in the history of German Literature, in the first part of his *Discourse Networks 1800-1900*. One important point in this study is that there are specific cultural techniques consisting of practices of language in writing, reading, and speaking as well as of related printing machines, documents, and books, with which a writer or artist is educated to be an independent individual who perceives the world with inwardness (*Innerlichkeit*) and

From the perspective of the development of media technologies, the art traditionally created through writing has to “make do with the grid of the symbolic” (Kittler, *Gramophone* 11), which alienates one’s bodily senses during reading and writing. Under such circumstances, to read is to “hallucinate meaning between lines and letters” (10). By contrast, the new media—equipped with the technology of reproduction and breaking the monopoly of writing from the late nineteenth century onward—escape “all symbolic grids” and address the “bodily real” because they reproduce the object itself with “physical precision” (12). With such new effects and functions, film is not only the medium for transforming human perception but also the art able to shatter the Western aesthetic tradition pertaining to the bourgeois ideology, which tends to alienate the human body and evade bodily senses. Regarding the aesthetic tradition, Norbert Bolz sees in the “destructive, cathartic side” of film (*SW* 3: 104) Benjamin’s intent to “reorient aesthetics to the study of perception” as well as a “liberation from the chains of traditional art appreciation” that presupposes a “sublation of the autonomous areas of humanistic thought” (Bolz, “Aesthetics” 25). Regarding film’s capacity for converting the crisis of art into the “renewal of humanity” (*SW* 3: 104), Susan Buck-Morss in her reading of the “Work of Art” essay suggests that film is the kind of modern art that can be entrusted to “undo the alienation of the corporeal sensorium, to restore the instinctual power of the human bodily senses for the sake of humanity’s self-preservation, and to do this, not by avoiding the new technologies, but by passing through them” (Buck-Morss 5). Both Bolz’s and Buck-Morss’s readings establish the crisis of the aesthetic tradition in tandem with the decline of humanity. However, at the same time, they indicate the way out of the crisis by focusing on the reorganization of perception as well as by assigning art the task of restoring human senses through new technologies. This way, it is possible not only to prevent the decline of mankind but also to renew humanity. Indeed, in Benjamin’s view, film provides a likely space where human beings can train themselves to react to technologies in the modern everyday life, for, as postulated in the “Work of Art” essay, the “function of film is to train human beings in the apperceptions and reactions needed to deal with a vast apparatus whose role in their lives is expanding almost daily” (*SW* 3: 108). It is even possible to “establish equilibrium between human beings and the apparatus” through film (*SW* 3: 117).

Benjamin’s rethinking of art against the emergence of the new media technologies has been engaged by critics in light of the philosophy of art. Rudolphe

contemplation. From there, discourses of subject, consciousness, beauty, and spirit (*Geist*) begin to take shape as the educated communicate with one another through writing and reading.

Gasché, for instance, traces Benjamin's understanding of art "back to motifs in Kantian aesthetics" (183). Eva Geulen argues that "Benjamin's concept of aura and his comments on authenticity participate in [the] Hegelian tradition" (138). Lutz Koepnick notes that the disappearance of aura caused by the technology of reproduction stimulates "new forms of cultural authority" which "have come to full fruition" in the age of digital technology and communication (108). In a similar vein, Krzysztof Ziarek suggests that Benjamin's essay be read as the starting or contrastive point for re-theorizing art and its mutability in the age of internet and globalization (219-25). By and large, research in the past decades has quite often seen "Work of Art" as a key text either in the philosophy of art or in cultural and sociological theories in line with traditional humanism centering on the human individual. This, however, overlooks the de-centering and de-individualizing views on human beings Benjamin presents in *One-Way Street*, the "Surrealism" essay, and the fragments written in the 1920s, where he argues for the concept of "collective body" constructed through technology. Following this revisionist perspective, Benjamin asserts in "Work of Art" a balanced relationship between the technological and the human, calling into question the humanistic understanding of humans as autonomous masters of all things.

In light of the above considerations, this article argues that Benjamin's "Work of Art" essay seeks to redefine human beings by the new condition that involves the interplay between the corporeal and the technological, treating as case in point film and its destructive-reconstructive impact on art in general. Furthermore, Benjamin's writings on the renewal of humanity through technology are now more significant than ever, for they can be regarded as "highly relevant theories" for contemporary discussions on posthumanism, where "the incorporation of technology into the human body is changing the parameters of how human nature should be understood, displacing the traditional conception of what constitutes a human" (Mourenza, *Walter Benjamin* 240). In addition, Mark B. N. Hansen has drawn from his study on Benjamin the conclusion: "If we can succeed in emulating Benjamin's sober responsibility to the technological real, we will begin the crucial task of (re)claiming a distinctly human perspective in the face of material and technological forces that for so many today portend the inevitable dawn of a new, radically posthuman epoch" (263). This means that Benjamin's engagement with technology in relation to the body and art has paved the way for our reconceptualization of humanity within the context of the contemporary posthuman discourse.

Without labeling Benjamin posthuman, this article seeks to conduct an in-depth analysis of his "Work of Art" essay and related writings with a view to bringing to

light his singular insights into the human nature, the role of technology, and the new foundation of art, thus demonstrating the relevance of Benjamin's writings to posthumanism. First, the concept of the collective body organized in technology needs to be examined in that it is a decisive point of departure for reading "Work of Art" in terms of the relationship between body, technology, and art.

**Body, Technology,
and Art**

The Collective Body

Between the late 1910s and early 1920s, Benjamin wrote several fragments on anthropological topics such as the human body, the psychic life, and sense perception. Since these fragments were composed shortly after he wrote "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man" (1916), they to some extent complement his early writings. In "On Language as Such," language is considered a medium that "knows no means, no object, and no addressee of communication" (SW 1: 65). Language in this sense is completely expressive, for it "communicates itself in itself" and is valid as "mediation," which is the "immediacy of all mental communication" (SW 1: 64). The epitome of the language that mediates immediately and expresses itself wholly is to be found in the Bible, in God's word performing the act of Creation where "the deep and clear relation of the creative act to language appears" (SW 1: 68). In this theological-linguistic vein, Benjamin asserts a close relationship between body and language in the fragment "Psychology" (1918): "The relation of the human form [*Menschengestalt*] to language, that is, the way in which God works within the human being, giving him form and shape, is the object of psychology study. Corporeality [*das Leibliche*], in which God works in him linguistically in an immediate—and perhaps unintelligible—way, properly forms part of this study" (GS 6: 66, translation taken from Weigel 24). Insofar as God's linguistic work creates and forms corporeality, the body can act like language and is able to convey expressivity and immediacy. The human existence is pre-conditioned by this body that acts expressively, without there being an autonomous individual with the capacity to act consciously. This bodily foundation determines not only the external human form but also the internal life. On this note, Benjamin writes in the same fragment: "The psychic life [*Seelenleben*] of both the other and one's own is immediate to us; that is, it is always given by the body in a certain connection or at least on a specific basis. In principle, the psychic life of the other is not perceived differently from one's own; it is . . . seen in body that belongs to it as a psychic life" (GS 6: 65; translation mine). This emphasizes the collective being of the humans with the body as their mutual ground that allows the psychic life to be perceived directly despite the individuality that differentiates between

the “I” and the others.³

Since the psychic life is expressed by the body, there is “nothing internal” but rather “something external”: the human being is “only pure, only external, only completely perceptible” (GS 6: 65). Here Benjamin tries to argue for a “pure psychology, which begins at the precise moment when human beings appear exactly as they are” (Fenves 228). It also implies that what is usually considered internal, metaphysical, or spiritual can somehow be concretized in the body, especially when it comes to defining a human being. In the fragment “Outline of the Psycho-physical Problem,” written between 1922 and 1923, Benjamin also posits that mind and body are “identical, and distinct as ways of seeing, not as objects” (SW 1: 393). Here Benjamin makes a distinction between the body (*Leib*) and the corporeal substance (*Körper*), a distinction grounded in the psychology concerning human perception, where the corporeal substance is perceived as substratum while the body is perceived in a limited form:

Everything that a human being can distinguish in himself as having his form as a totality, as well as such of his limbs and organs that appear to have a form—all that belongs to his body. All limitation that he sensuously perceives in himself belongs, as form, likewise to his body. It follows that the sensuously perceived individual existence of man is the perception of a relation in which he discovers himself; it is not, however, the perception of a substratum, of a substance of himself, as is the case with his corporeal substance, which represents such a substance sensually. (SW 1: 394)

In contrast to the limitation in the perception of the body, the corporeal substance manifests itself in two extremes of “pain and pleasure” wherein the perception is “no limitation” (SW 1: 394). Within the corporeal substance, one can exceed the boundary of one’s perceptual faculty without losing oneself. The human being on this basis is particular and limitless in the sense that, in Benjamin’s view, there is a direct link between God’s transcendent order and the corporeal substance whose nature “advances toward its resurrection” (SW 1: 395). It is the context of God to which the corporeal substance belongs.

On the other hand, being perceived as limited in form, the body is the “category of its ‘now’ [*Nu*]” and appears momentarily “as an ephemeral yet immortal being” (SW 1: 393). As such, the body, though it “may be proper to reality in all

³ In their introduction to the book *Walter Benjamins anthropologisches Denken*, Carolin Duttlinger, Ben Morgen, and Anthony Phelan read the fragment “Psychology” as Benjamin’s “critique of the subject-centric psychology” that needs to be re-oriented so as to explore the field of the “pre-individual experience” (23).

its form,” manifests itself “in the light of the historical ‘now’” (SW 1: 393) and therefore serves as the “function of the historical presence in man” (SW 1: 395). Nevertheless, this does not mean that the body is “integrated in the historical process” because it “only dwells in it from time to time; its modification from one form to the next is not the function of the historical process itself, but merely the particular, detached relation of a life to it” (SW 1: 393). What is noteworthy is that when Benjamin holds that there is a life of the body that continues within its transformation, as there are vicissitudes in the historical process, it is not just the body of a single human being but rather the body of mankind that is under discussion:

“Individuality” as the principle of the body is on a higher plane than that of single embodied individuals. Humanity as an individual is both the consummation and the annihilation of bodily life. “Annihilation” because with it the historical existence, whose function the body is, reaches its end. In addition to the totality of all its living members, humanity is able partly to draw nature, the nonliving, plant, and animal, into this life of the body of mankind, and thereby into this annihilation and fulfillment. It can do this by virtue of the technology in which the unity of its life is formed. Ultimately, everything that subserves humanity’s happiness may be counted part of its life, its limbs. (SW 1: 395)

Obviously the body belongs to the context of mankind regarded as an individual whose life is subservient to the worldly order of “both the consummation and the annihilation” in that the body is the function of the historical existence that comes to an end within a certain period of historical time. On the other hand, the body in question is the collective body of mankind whose life is formed by all that can contribute to humanity’s happiness. The idea of happiness is discussed in Benjamin’s “Theological-Political Fragment,” written almost at the same time as “Outline of the Psychophysical Problem.”⁴ Here Benjamin argues that politics, in contrast to the theocracy that has “no political but only a religious meaning” can only be established on “the secular order,” which “should be erected on the idea of happiness” (SW 3: 305). Moreover, what “all that is earthly seeks” in happiness is not immortality but “its downfall” (SW 3: 305). What this happiness consists of is nothing more than the “rhythm of messianic nature” that works by “reason of its eternal and total passing away” for which “the task of world politics” has to strive (SW 3: 306). According to the theoretical considerations in “Theological-Political

⁴ For the close connection between “Outline of the Psychophysical Problem” and “Theological-Political Fragment,” see Steiner 49-59.

Fragment,” politics is based on the secular order with the telos toward the happiness defined in terms of its downfall or passing away, whereas the life of the collective body of mankind laid out in “Outline of the Psychophysical Problem” is meant for practicing such politics since the nature of the body “advances towards its dissolution” (SW 1: 395). Consequently, what belongs to the collective body of mankind is not only human beings but also nonhumans such as “nature, the nonliving, plant, and animal.” This is made possible in technology where the human and the nonhuman can be united to form the life of the collective body. In this light, technology is seen as a profane way to recreate a new humanity that breaks away from the human-centric tradition.

Despite the theological-metaphysical orientation, Benjamin’s early writings already reflect on the significance of technology. Later he would present his view on technology with a more historical-anthropological inclination—for instance, in *One-Way Street* (1928), especially the last session, “To the Planetarium.” Here Benjamin characterizes the historical development from antiquity to the modern time as a loss of “the ecstatic trance [*Rausch*],” an experience in which “we gain certain knowledge of what is near to us and what is remotest from us, and never of one without the other” (SW 1: 486). This loss indicates that man in antiquity “can be in ecstatic contact with the cosmos only communally,” whereas this kind of cosmic experience is regarded in the modern age as “unimportant and avoidable” (SW 1: 486). Nevertheless, the “ecstatic contact with the cosmos” does not disappear in the modern era. Rather, it returns in another form in the First World War as “an attempt at new and unprecedented commingling with the cosmic power” (SW 1: 486). Influenced by Ludwig Klages’s philosophy of life (*Lebensphilosophie*), which discusses substantially the cosmic force of Eros, ecstatic trance, and mystical practices,⁵ Benjamin depicts WWI in “To the Planetarium” as follows:

Human multitudes, gases, electrical forces were hurled into the open country, high-frequency currents coursed through the landscape, new constellations rose in the sky, aerial space and ocean depths thundered with propellers, and everywhere sacrificial shafts were dug in Mother Earth. This immense wooing of the cosmos was enacted for the first time on a planetary scale—that is, in the spirit of technology. (SW 1: 486-87)

⁵ In her article “Benjamin and Cinema: Not a One-Way Street,” Miriam Bratu Hansen remarks in a footnote that “Klages emerges as a significant influence on Benjamin himself, particularly his phenomenology of dreaming and waking . . . and the temporal inflection of distance and nearness as key terms in the transformation of sensory-somatic perception” (326). For discussion on how Klages’s works influenced Benjamin in connection with the concept of innervation, see Charles.

Here WWI is considered the modern instantiation of contact with the cosmos. The catastrophe caused by the war is ascribed to the fact that technology serves to satisfy “the lust for the profit of the ruling class” (SW 1: 487). As long as technology is misused by capitalists and imperialists who teach that the “purpose of all technology” is the “mastery of nature,” man’s communion with the cosmos, described in the text as “the bridal bet,” is turned into a “bloodbath” (SW 1: 487) like that of the First World War. What should be noted is that behind the “cosmic mating fantasy” (Miriam Bratu Hansen, “Benjamin and Cinema” 326) is Benjamin’s criticism of the ruling class’s belief that technology is nothing other than an instrument.

Against the notion that technology should be instrumental for the purpose of mastering nature, an alternative view in “To the Planetarium” proposes that “technology is the mastery of not nature but of the relation between nature and man” (SW 1: 487). As such, technology helps redefine humanity according to a different framework: “Men as a species completed their development thousands of years ago; but mankind as a species is just beginning his. In technology, a *physis* is being organized through which mankind’s contact with the cosmos takes a new and different form from that which it had in nations and families” (SW 1: 487). Similar to what is argued in “Outline of the Psychophysical Problem,” there can be a new humanity founded not on the organic life of the individual structured by families and nations, but on the integrated life of mankind with the collective body, which is a *physis* organized by technology that puts man and nature into a reciprocal rather than a hierarchical relationship.⁶ Aided by technology, man could regain contact with the cosmos in an alternative way. In contrast to that promise, however, WWI ended up in the mass destruction that damaged both nature and man.

Toward the end of “To the Planetarium,” Benjamin describes the wound of the collective body caused by the war as feeling like “the bliss of the epileptic” (SW 1: 487). He believes that the “measure of its convalescence” lies in the “power of the proletariat” (SW 1: 487). Such a consideration implies that a revolution is urgently needed to liberate technology and humanity from the domination of the capitalist system and the bourgeois ideology, but what action would set the revolution in motion?

⁶ In Esther Leslie’s reading, this reciprocal relation can be traced back to the Romantics’ effort to “counter instrumental Enlightenment concepts of nature”; therefore, it is “reminiscent of Novalis’s magic idealism or magic observation, a reciprocally productive process of interaction between subject and object, converted by Benjamin into an interaction between nature, humanity and technology” (6).

The Image-Body Space

The French Surrealist movement played a critical part in inspiring Benjamin to conceive of revolution in a fresh light. In “Surrealism” (1929), Benjamin asserts that “the project on which Surrealism focuses in all its books and enterprises” is to “win the energies of intoxication for the revolution” (SW 2: 215). He ascribes the revolutionary potential of the Surrealist writings to the fact that they are “literally concerned with experiences” (SW 2: 208) that not only break the boundary of the everyday reality but also damage the solid fortress of the *I* that is central to the bourgeois-humanistic identity. The Surrealist writings aim to create a sphere for the energies of intoxication in which the reader perceives the intoxicating powers directly. Not to be equaled with the ecstasy created by religious practices or drugs, the energies of intoxication result from a “profane illumination, a materialistic, anthropological inspiration” (SW 2: 209). When capturing the intoxicating powers, the profane illumination is able to “produce a ‘revelation,’ a vision or insight which transcends the prosaic state of empirical reality” (Wolin 132). With this kind of effect, we are drawn enthusiastically to the concrete real, instead of being seduced to the abyss of the occult, the phantasmagoric, and the mysterious. This way, we are capable of “penetrat[ing] the mystery only to the degree that we recognize it in the everyday world, by virtue of a dialectical optic that perceives the everyday as impenetrable, the impenetrable as everyday” (SW 2: 216). Consequently, the dialectical optic of the profane illumination transforms things in the everyday world into “unmediated, explosive revelations” (Nägele 171) that the Surrealists’ writings try to convey.

From a linguistic perspective, the Surrealist writings do not evoke a “symbolic illumination” (SW 2: 213), which is exactly what the bourgeois literary production tends to accomplish. The literary program of this kind is characterized in the “Surrealism” essay as a “bad poem on springtime, filled to bursting with metaphors” (SW 2: 216). Drawing on Louis Aragon’s “distinction between metaphor and image” (SW 2: 217), Benjamin asserts that words and phrases in the Surrealist writings are free from being symbolic because they are transformed into images that stand for themselves. Such a style of literary writing can even be extended to politics as Benjamin argues that “nowhere do these two—metaphor and image—collide so drastically and irreconcilably as in politics” (SW 2: 217). In this regard, the political praxis is meant “to organize pessimism” and “to expel moral metaphor from politics and to discover in the space of political action the one hundred percent image space [*Bildraum*],” which is not to “be measured out by contemplation” (SW 2: 217) any more.

What really occurs in respect to the image space is “an action” that “puts forth its own image and exists, absorbing and consuming it, where nearness looks with its own eyes” (*SW 2: 217*). The image space gives rise to “a dynamic visual, sensorial environment” (Miriam Bratu Hansen, “Room-for-Play” 21) in which the actual process of our spontaneous action is directly presented to us, and the presented object refers back to the subject that presents it to the effect that the distinction between subject and object is blurred. The image space hereupon mediates “the world of universal and integral actuality” that is ready to dispense with the “best room” (*SW 2: 217*), which refers to the studying room as the locus for acquiring knowledge by reading and writing in the tradition of the bourgeois education for making a person an autonomous individual. What arises from the image space is not the system of knowledge resulting from contemplation but “the state of spontaneous simultaneity of insight and action” (Steiner 81) which Benjamin terms the “bodily presence of mind [*leibhafte Geistesgegenwart*]” (*GS 4: 142*; translation taken from Steiner 81), where body and mind are so identical that thinking is at once bodily action. It is not difficult to see how the anthropological issue concerning the psychophysical problem reemerges within the context of the “Surrealism” essay, conceptualized as the “anthropological materialism” that rejects the abstractness of the “metaphysical materialism” (*SW 2: 217*) and brings instead the observation of the concrete body to the fore.

In this regard, the individual conditioned by knowledge and contemplation undergoes a “dialectical annihilation” in the image space wherein “political materialism and physical creatureliness share the inner man, the psyche, the individual or whatever else we wish to throw to them, with dialectical justice, so that no limb remains untornd” (*SW 2: 217*). This “dialectical annihilation” sees the individual’s body first de-constructed and then reconstructed into a collective body, as described in the essay: “The collective is a body, too. And the *physis* that is being organized for it in technology can, through all its political and factual reality, be produced only in that image space to which profane illumination initiates us” (*SW 2: 217*). The transformation from the body of the individual into that of the collective makes the image space “more concretely a body space [*Leibraum*]” (*SW 2: 217*). By way of the profane illumination, we liberate ourselves from our individual body and get transformed in turn into the collective body to be situated in the image space that is technologically produced as something so close and similar to us that we can hardly distinguish it from our natural life. The body and image, intertwined through technology, transcend reality and experience, giving rise to a new dimension conducive to revolutionary action. As Benjamin asserts: “Only when in technology body and image space so interpenetrate that all revolutionary

tension becomes bodily collective innervation, and all bodily innervations of the collective become revolutionary discharge, has reality transcends itself to the extent demanded by the *Communist Manifesto*" (SW 2: 217). The starting point of the revolution is exactly the collective body organized in technology and produced in the image space, which is a space of immediacy and direct action that cannot be ignored in the future.⁷

"Surrealism" concludes with Benjamin's assertion that the prospective vision of the image-body space is only understood by the Surrealists, for they "exchange, to a man, the play of human features for the face of an alarm clock that in each minute rings for sixty seconds" (SW 2: 218). It seems to suggest an "abrupt transition from the body to the mechanical device" (Weigel 19), which is nothing other than the combination of the human and the technological based on Benjamin's notion of the collective body. Moreover, while conveying immediacy and direct bodily action, the image-body space anticipates an expanded experience and altered perception best manifested by film, as discussed in Benjamin's "Work of Art" essay.

Art, the Second Technology, and Space for Play

Benjamin argues in the "Work of Art" essay that before the advent of the technology of reproduction, what is unique in an artwork is its "here and now—its unique existence in a particular place," which "bears the mark of the history to which the work has been subject" (SW 3: 103). With such a unique existence, artwork is usually viewed in terms of history or tradition that accounts for the core of the concept of authenticity, for "the authenticity of a thing is the quintessence of all that is transmissible in it from its origin on, ranging from its physical duration to the historical testimony relating to it" (SW 3: 103). To be sure, authenticity is inseparable from the "idea of a tradition which has passed the object down as the same, identical thing to the present day" (SW 3: 103). In this regard, an authentic artwork is embedded in "the context of tradition" (SW 3: 105) which gives rise to the uniqueness of an artwork that is to be perceived as aura, defined as "a strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be" (SW 3: 104-05).⁸

⁷ Regarding the image-body space in the "Surrealism" essay as the "realm of political action," Steiner comments that "political action becomes self-aware only in the moment of revolutionary action: namely by creating the revolutionary collective, by literally taking on bodily shape in the revolutionary collective" (81). The relationship between innervation, revolution, and the collective body will be discussed below in connection with the "Work of Art" essay.

⁸ For a general overview of the concept of aura in Benjamin's works, see Lindner, "Benjamin's Aurakonzeption." A more comprehensive discussion of aura in Benjamin's writings can be found in Miriam Bratu Hansen, "Benjamin's Aura."

Art originally belonged to the magical practice and the religious ritual. In prehistoric times, the “auratic mode of existence” of the artwork was always connected with the “ritualistic function” (SW 3: 105) and endowed with the “cult value” (SW 3: 106). Even in the modern age, the “ritualistic basis” can still be recognized as “secularized ritual in even the most profane form of the cult of beauty” (SW 3: 105), which prevails in the tradition of art from the Renaissance to *l’art pour l’art* in the twentieth century. Outside of its presence in magic and religion, art is often considered to be autonomous and pure so as to maintain its aesthetic value associated with concepts like “creativity and genius, eternal value and mystery” (SW 3: 101). Art as such is still produced and controlled by the dominating social-economic-political powers and institutions insofar as it “serves the power interests of the class for which it is produced” (Snyder 168). The so-called autonomy of art and its aesthetic significance are actually illusory and should be regarded as the effect of aura that keeps the recipient of the artwork at a distance.

The artwork in this tradition is “first and foremost an instrument of magic,” produced according to the “first technology” which makes the “maximum possible use of human beings” and not only achieves a huge degree of “human sacrifice, but also seeks to “master nature” (SW 3: 107). In this respect, the first technology is instrumental, abusing nature and risking the humans’ death. However, as the modern technology of reproduction is able to emancipate “specific artistic practices from the service of ritual,” the artwork is appreciated exclusively with the “exhibition value” (SW 3: 106) and thus can be accessed by all people. It is created by way of the “second technology,” which, in contrast to the first technology, reduces the use of human beings “to the minimum” since it originated in “play,” with which “human beings first began to distance themselves from nature” (SW 3: 107). Hence, the second technology does not serve the human intention to lord over nature; rather, it works for “an interplay between nature and humanity” (SW 3: 107). Based on play, the result of the second technology is “provisional” (*Einmal ist keinmal*) because it “operates by means of experiments and endlessly varied test procedures” (SW 3: 107). The artwork produced this way is therefore a construct to be examined from the material standpoint and can be improved repeatedly while being produced.

In Benjamin’s view, film is such a construct or artwork which is “most capable of improvement” (SW 3: 109). It is due to the fact that a film is finished when it is “assembled from a very large number of images and image sequences that offer an array of choices to the editor,” indicating that these images “can be improved in any desired way in the process leading from the initial take to the final cut” (SW 3: 109). This kind of operation involves “the means of montage” by which film is

produced to be an artwork, though “each individual component of this montage is a reproduction of a process that is neither an artwork in itself nor gives rise to one through photography” (SW 3: 110). By observing how a film actor accomplishes his artistic performance, Benjamin explicates this reproduction of a process in film-making that is less artistic than technological. Differing from the stage actor whose performance is carried out before an audience, the film actor performs in front of “a group of specialists” who are “in a position to intervene in his performance at any time” (SW 3: 111) to improve the aesthetic quality of the film. It is similar to the “test performance” applied to the athlete, with the difference that the athlete is “confronted only by natural tests” whereas the film actor’s performance is “produced in a mechanized test” (SW 3: 111). The most excellent test performance, for Benjamin, is where the film actor performs “in the glare of arc lamps while simultaneously meeting the demands of the microphone” (SW 3: 111). This close interaction of the human with the machinery not only is necessary for producing a film but also splits the film actor’s performance into “a series of episodes capable of being assembled” (SW 3: 113). When performing before the apparatus, the film actor—Benjamin cites the words from the Italian playwright Pirandello—feels exiled “from his own person” and “senses an inexplicable void”; after the shoot, he “has been turned into a mute image that flickers for a moment on the screen, then vanishes in the silence” (SW 3: 112). In addition, the scene or action that appears on the screen as “a swift, unified sequence” is actually “filmed in a series of separate takes, which may be spread over hours in the studio” (SW 3: 113). This aspect of film-making is based on the material-technological measurements that are fundamental not only to the film actor’s artistic performance but also to a film’s actualization as an artwork despite having little to do with aura and semblance-based beauty as prescribed by the traditional view of art.

In a footnote seen only in the second version of the “Work of Art” essay, Benjamin holds that semblance and play are not the concepts “foreign to the traditional aesthetics” (SW 3: 127). Since ancient times, they have been “tightly interfolded like cotyledons” in the practice of mimesis as the “primal phenomenon [*Urphänomen*] of all artistic activity” (SW 3: 127). Their polarity can be interesting only if it is viewed from a historical-dialectical viewpoint. The historical aspect is especially shaped “by the world-historical conflict between the first and second technology,” which makes the distinction that “semblance is the most abstract . . . schema of all the magic procedures of the first technology, whereas play is the inexhaustible reservoir of all the experimenting procedures of the second” (SW 3: 127). From the perspective of European art history, the beautiful semblance is constitutive of “the age of auratic perception” (SW 3: 127) around 1800. However,

with the emergence of film, play comes to the fore. About this historical turning point, Benjamin observes

that what is lost in the withering of semblance and the decay of aura in works of art is matched by a huge gain in the scope of play [*Spiel-Raum*]. This space for play is widest in film. In film, the element of semblance has been entirely displaced by the element of play. . . . In film, the element of semblance has yielded its place to the element of play, which is allied to the second technology. (SW 3: 127)

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With all the testing and experimenting procedures in its making, film presents itself as the space for play conditioned by the second technology, which not only has its origin in play but is also regarded by Benjamin as “a system in which the mastering of elementary social forces is a precondition for playing [*das Spiel*] with natural forces” (SW 3: 124). Owing to the element of play, film demonstrates how, within the system of the second technology, the environment in which one lives manages to be expanded and enhanced. It reflects the vision that the second technology “aims at liberating human beings from drudgery” so that the individual can see “his scope of play, his field of action [*Spielraum*], immeasurably expanded” (SW 3: 124). Film as such corresponds to the concept of art mentioned in Benjamin’s fragment “The Significance of the Beautiful Semblance,” a note for his preparation of the “Work of Art” essay. Here art is considered as a “suggested improvement on nature [*Verbesserungsvorschlag an die Natur*]: an imitation that conceals within it a demonstration of what the original should be [*Ein Nachahmen, dessen verborgenes Innere ein Vormachen ist*]. In other words, art is a perfecting mimesis” (SW 3: 137).

With its technological elements, film exemplifies the specific art as “perfecting mimesis” by transforming the physical surroundings into a sphere where everything remains the same but looks more agreeable and better. In the article “Reply to Oscar A. H. Schmitz” (1927) devoted to defending the artistic achievement of Sergei Eisenstein’s film *Battleship Potemkin*, Benjamin describes the “suggested improvement on nature” in film as follows:

To put it in a nutshell, film is the prism in which the spaces of the immediate environment—the spaces in which people live, pursue their avocations, and enjoy their leisure—are laid open before their eyes in a comprehensible, meaningful, and passionate way. In themselves these offices, furnished rooms, saloons, big-city streets, stations, and factories are ugly, incomprehensible, and

hopelessly sad. Or rather, they were and seemed to be, until the advent of film. The cinema then exploded this entire prison-world with the dynamite of its fractions of a second, so that now we can take extended journeys of adventure between their widely scattered ruins. (*SW* 2: 17)

Film is taken as an art that translates the world, which was previously mute and incomprehensible, into something meaningful.⁹ The description of the modern urban world in this article would later appear almost verbatim in “Work of Art,” with more emphasis on the effects caused by the technological measurements used in film such as the close-up with which “space expands,” the slow motion with which “movement is extended,” the “accentuation of hidden details in familiar objects,” and the “exploration of commonplace milieux through the ingenious guidance of the camera” (*SW* 3: 117). Moreover, film makes visible the concealed interior of the natural world that cannot be perceived by the naked eye:

Whereas it is a commonplace that, for example, we have some idea what is involved in the act of walking (if only in general terms), we have no idea at all what happens during the split second when a person actually takes a step. We are familiar with the movement of picking up a cigarette lighter or a spoon, but know almost nothing of what really goes on between hand and metal, and still less how this varies with different moods. This is where the camera comes into play, with all its resources for swooping and rising, disrupting and isolating, stretching or compressing a sequence, enlarging or reducing an object. It is through the camera that we first discover the optical unconscious, just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis. (*SW* 3: 117)

Like psychoanalysis disclosing the “instinctual unconscious” of which people were not aware before, the “optical unconscious” discovered by the film camera reveals the unnoticed or unknown aspects within the human body and its movement as well as the “entirely new structures of matter” (*SW* 3: 117) in the natural world. By showing the hidden and ignored elements in nature, film opens up a space of expanded experience and altered perception that is “inextricably tied to the

⁹ Referring to “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,” which holds that “the translation of language of things into that of man is not only a translation of the mute into the sonic; it is also the translation of the nameless into name” (*SW* 1 70), Joshua Robert Gold argues, “Benjamin’s theory of film owes a great deal to his early account regarding the ability of the human language of names to enable the non-human, inanimate world to express itself” (604). In this vein, the significance of film, according to Gold, lies in its capacity to “vocalize the extremities of modern experience, thereby rendering audible (and hence intelligible) what would otherwise remain mute” (603).

interpenetration of human physiological and mental functions with heteronomous, mechanical structures” (Miriam Bratu Hansen, “Room-for-Play” 21). This way, film works as what art is meant to achieve: a “suggested improvement on nature.”

Second Nature, Innervation, and Embodiment

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Regarding the “optical unconscious,” Benjamin contends that it is “another nature which speaks to the camera as compared to the eye” (SW 3: 117). Film presents a world of another nature that has “the look of the real” but is “in fact a second order reality” (Leslie 138). Whether representing the empirical world accurately or rendering the invisible visible, film is the artifice of the highest degree though it demonstrates “the equipment-free aspect of reality” (SW3: 115), which is exactly the result of “the most intensive interpenetration of reality with equipment” (SW 3: 116) achieved through the technological procedures of filmmaking. In this respect, film mediates a sphere of “the non-technological or the meta-technological” (Lindner 245) based on the necessary technological measurements and operations. As film is the art that conveys the real “according to a new law” (SW 3: 116), it indicates something closely related to Benjamin’s conceptualization of “second nature.”¹⁰

The term “second nature” appears in the first version of the “Work of Art” essay (1935) where Benjamin makes a contrastive comparison between the society of the primeval era and contemporary society:

The subjects for these notations (in the service of magical practices) were humans and their environment, which were depicted according to the demands of a society whose technology existed only in fusion with ritual. This society stood as the counterpoint to contemporary society, whose technology is the most emancipated. This emancipated technology now, however, stands opposed to contemporary society as a second nature and, to be sure, as economic crises and wars prove, as one that is no less elemental than that given to primeval society. Humans of course invented, but no longer by any means master this second nature which they now confront; they are thus just as compelled to undertake an apprenticeship as they were once when confronted with the first nature. (18-19)

¹⁰ Benjamin has a different understanding of “second nature” though he embraces Georg Lukács’s idea of this term, which is borrowed from Hegel and refers to the social world constructed by the humans in contrast to the nature not yet contaminated by man’s intervention. For a comparison between Lukács’s and Benjamin’s understanding of this term, see Mourenza, *Walter Benjamin* 64-69.

While the technology used in ancient societies served magical practices, the modern technology is not only progressive but also freed from instrumentality. However, despite the fact that the humans have invented modern technology, it is much alienated from its inventors. The relation between the two is strained, as the wars and economic crises in the early twentieth century—which witnessed the humans' inability to cope with technological problems—testified. Against this backdrop, film is the kind of art that works as “the play-form of second nature [*die Spielform der zweiten Natur*]” (GS 1: 1045; translation mine), with which the humans in modernity can be trained to know how to interact with technology without misusing it. There is even “an anthropological necessity” (Bolz, “Farewell” 119) for people in the modern world to integrate technology into their life since its force is overwhelming but undeniable. Therefore, Benjamin describes the functional and historical meaning of film in the first version of “Work of Art”: “Film serves to train human beings in those new apperceptions and reactions demanded by interaction with an apparatus whose role in their lives is expanding almost daily. To make the enormous technological apparatus of our time an object of human innervation—that is the historical task in whose service film finds its true meaning” (19). Film is thus assigned the historic task of brokering the relation between human innervation and technology.

According to Miriam Bratu Hansen's study, the term “innervation” in the physiological discourse around 1900 refers to a “unidirectional” process like that discussed in Sigmund Freud's early writings on hysteria, wherein innervation is taken to describe “the transformation of an unbearable, incompatible psychic excitation to something somatic” (“Benjamin and Cinema” 316). Though Hansen does not rule out the possibility of Freud's influence on Benjamin, she is not hesitant to point out Benjamin's specific conceptualization of innervation as a “two-way process,” namely, “not only a conversion of mental, affective energy into somatic, motoric form but also the possibility of reconvertng, and recovering, split-off psychic energy through motoric stimulation” (“Benjamin and Cinema” 317). This bidirectional transaction of psychic energy seems to suggest that there is yet another source of influence on Benjamin regarding the concept of innervation, especially in view of how Freudian psychoanalysis focuses mainly on the psychology of the bourgeois subject toward which Benjamin takes a very critical stance. Indeed, what might have been a more congenial influence for Benjamin is the Soviet avant-garde performance based on the biomechanical training used to overcome “psychophysical tensions through the practice of ‘releasing’ exercises” (Charles 46). This is introduced to Benjamin by Asja Lacis, whose engagement in children's theater in Riga and Moscow in the 1920s is essential to understanding the relationship

between the two.¹¹

Benjamin discusses the two schemes of tension (*Spannung*) and resolution or release (*Lösung*) in “Program for a Proletarian Children’s Theater” (1928), an obvious offshoot of the Soviet biomechanical discourse. Differing from the great bourgeois theater whose goal is “the concentrated collective labor that is performed in the children’s club,” Benjamin argues in this essay that the leader of the proletarian children’s theater is “more interested in the tensions that are resolved” in performances (*SW 2: 203*). The leader should be the kind of educator who exerts only “indirect influence” on children as “mediated by subject matter, tasks and performances” because it is “the children’s collective itself” that undertakes the “moral process of compensating and providing correctives” (*SW 2: 203*). That is to say, education starts with “the mere observation of children’s lives,” for Benjamin believes that “every childhood action and gesture becomes a signal” (*SW 2: 203*) of which “only a few unusually perceptive men” (*SW 2: 204*) are able to catch a glimpse. Therefore, it is the leader’s task to “release children’s signals from the hazardous magical world of sheer fantasy and apply them to materials” (*SW 2: 204*). Thus seen, the gesture in children’s theatrical performance is no longer imaginary or fanciful; rather, it is “an exactly balanced transference” (Charles 47). Benjamin illustrates this point with the example of a painter “who sees more accurately with his hand when his eye fails him, who is able to transfer the receptive innervation of the eye muscles into the creative innervation of the hand” (*SW 2: 204*). Like the painter’s genius, “every child’s gesture” is nothing other than a kind of transference indicating that “creative innervation is exactly proportioned to receptive innervation” (*SW 2: 204*). The “two-way process” of innervation suggested by Hansen has obviously more relevance to the children’s gesture on stage, which is activated physiologically as it releases creative power based on bodily movement.

The physiological ground of innervation considered in “Program for a Proletarian Children’s Theater” remains a key point later in Benjamin’s discussions of film in “Work of Art.” While the historical task of film laid out in the first version of the essay is to “make the enormous technological apparatus of our time an object of human innervation,” Benjamin modifies it in a draft note for the second version: “To make the technical apparatus of our time, which is second nature to the individual, into first nature for the collective, is the historic task of film (*GS 7: 688*; translation taken from Miriam Bratu Hansen, *Cinema and Experience* 139).¹²

¹¹ For an interpretation of the relation between Benjamin and Lacis with the theater problematics as the point of departure, see McGill.

¹² The German original reads: “Die technische Apparatur unserer Zeit, die für das Individuum eine zweite Natur ist, dem Kollektivum zu seiner ersten zu machen, ist die geschichtliche Aufgabe des Films.”

Within “Work of Art,” innervation still takes body as its basis, but with the difference that, first, it concerns the body of the collective instead of that of an individual, and, second, it combines both physiological and technological elements, suggesting a “physiological becoming-technological” (Mark B. N. Hansen, *Embodying* 255) for which film is the training ground. What results from such innervation is that “humanity’s whole constitution has adapted itself to the new productive forces which the second technology has set free” (*SW* 3: 108). Benjamin further comments on this viewpoint in a footnote: “The aim of revolutions is to accelerate this adaptation. Revolutions are innervations of the collective—or, more precisely, efforts at innervation on the part of the new, historically unique collective which has its organs in the new technology” (*SW* 3: 124). Predicated on innervation, revolutions for Benjamin are primarily meant to reconstitute humanity through an integration of technology into the collective body that renders the former an organ of the latter. This is epitomized by film, which makes technology “into a first nature for the collective.”

Accordingly, it is the cinema audience that constitutes “the new, historically unique collective” regarded by Benjamin as the masses whose “increasing emergence” with the “growing intensity of their movements” is the “social basis of the aura’s present decay” (*SW* 3: 105). Like the body-image space explicated in “Surrealism” that demolishes the individual’s body so as to transform it into the collective body, the masses envisioned by “Work of Art” overcome the individual and its uniqueness because they perceive the world produced by film with the “sense of the sameness” comparable to the “increasing significance of statistics” (*SW* 3: 105). As already mentioned, the production and reception of film involves a great number of people and machines without paying attention to any individual’s concern and interest. This is likened to statistics that “drains each of any individuality and comprehends the world in terms of graphs or columns of numbers in which individual cases count, but not as individuals” (Snyder 169). With such a characteristic, the masses reflect the new way of dealing with art based on the transition whereby “quantity has been transformed into quality” (*SW* 3: 119)—this is the form of the mass participation in art, a deviation from the traditional approach to art centering on particular individuals.¹³

Owing to the large number of people in the masses whose desire is to “get closer to things” (*SW* 3: 105), the work of art is no longer approached with one’s

¹³ Fredric Jameson sees in “Work of Art” Benjamin’s “vision of a cultural revolution” in terms of the reception of art by the masses, where there is “unity of the masses, beyond any individual perceptions or personal feelings, which reveals its enormous power—that of the General Will—beyond all particularities or singularities” (205).

concentration. It is rather seen as “a means of entertainment” because what the masses seek in it is “distraction [*Zerstreuung*]” (*SW* 3: 119). Samuel Weber has argued that the German word *Zerstreuung* connotes “far richer than the essentially privative terms ‘distraction’ and ‘absentmindedness’ might lead one to believe” (92), for it indicates the mode of being “fragmented” that gives rise to “the kind of dispersion” which Benjamin believes “constitute an essential quality both of the film itself and of the public, or the ‘mass’” (92-93). With respect to the production of film, it is the technological process of montage that pre-conditions the image of film with the internal structure which is first “piecemeal” (*vielfältig zerstückelt*), namely, torn apart into manifold and dispersed pieces and then “assembled according to a new law” (*SW* 3: 116). Therefore, the image on the film screen is quite different from that in the painting, as described in “Work of Art”:

The image on the film screen changes, whereas the image on the canvas does not. The painting invites the viewer to contemplation; before it, he can give himself up to his train of associations. Before a film image, he cannot do so. No sooner has he seen it than it has already changed. It cannot be fixed on. The train of associations in the person contemplating it is immediately interrupted by new images. This constitutes the shock effect of film, which, like all shock effects, seeks to induce heightened attention [*gesteigerte Geistesgegenwart*]. (*SW* 3: 132)

While there is a totalized image in painting that evokes the train of associations allowing the viewer to contemplate it, the image in film changes so quickly and constantly that the shock effect of film arises from the immediate interruptions of new images. Under such circumstances, film has to be received with “heightened attention” as the cinema audience is distracted by “successive changes of scene and focus” (*SW* 3: 119).

However, this reception in distraction is less a diversion of attention than “a spur to new ways of perceiving” (Eiland 9). It presupposes the “distracted masses” constituted by dispersed individuals who “absorb the work of art into themselves” (*SW* 3: 119). Such absorption takes place as a “diffused, unconscious appropriation” (Rutsky 18) based on “tactile reception,” which “comes about not so much by way of attention as by way of habit” because it “spontaneously takes the form of casual noticing, rather than attentive observation” (*SW* 3: 120). This leads to a new mode of perception, which is not only non-contemplative but also habitual: “For the tasks which face the human apparatus of perception at historical turning points cannot be performed solely by optical means—that is, by way of contemplation.

They are mastered gradually—taking their cue from tactile reception—through habit” (SW 3: 120). In this respect, the reception in distraction involves a reorganization of human perception that turns out to be a habitual mode containing a “corporeal engagement with surroundings” (Kang 127) as tactility is a key to habits.

In Benjamin’s view, film is “predisposed to” the form of the reception in distraction “by virtue of its shock effects” (SW 3: 120). What is more, there is a tactile/tactical quality in film’s shock effects, and Benjamin associates them with the Dadaists in “Work of Art”:

From an alluring visual composition or an enchanting fabric of sound, the Dadaists turned the artwork into a missile. It jolted the viewer, taking on a tactile [*taktisch*] quality. It thereby fostered the demand for film, since the distracting element in film is also primarily tactile, being based on successive changes of scene and focus which have a percussive effect on the spectator. (SW 3: 119)

Actually, the German word *taktisch* can mean both “tactical” and “tactile.” Reading this ambiguity in its German original, Tobias Wilke argues that Benjamin tries to “portray film as the historical fulfilment of Dadaist art and thus as a technological means that performs the tactical function of the avant-garde with even greater intensity (46). Jolting the viewer like Dadaist artworks, the *taktisch* (in the sense of “tactical”) quality of film lies in its shock effects, imposing on the cinema audience a “percussive effect.” The moment this “percussive effect” touches the film viewers, the other *taktisch* quality (in the sense of “tactile”) arises as the image sequences of film stimulate its viewers whose “experiential space” is penetrated by the “purely optical impression” from film (Wilke 47). Concerning the importance of the *taktisch* (tactile/tactical) quality in film, Benjamin writes in the first version of “Work of Art”:

And there, where the collective seeks distractions, the tactically [*taktisch*] dominant element that rules over the regrouping of apperception is by no means lacking. . . . Yet nothing more clearly betrays the violent tensions of our time than the fact that this tactically dominant element asserts itself in optics itself. And precisely this occurs in film through the shock effect of its image sequences. In this respect, too, film proves to be the most important subject matter, at present, for the theory of perception that the Greeks called aesthetics. (34)

In film, the tactile/tactical elements dominate the optics. This fact directly affects the distracted masses in that while viewing a film the mode of their perception is

reorganized according to the “immediate contact of eye and image” (Bolz, “Farewell” 116). It is, drawing on Miriam Bratu Hansen’s reading, more like a “dynamic invasion of ‘body-space’ by ‘image-space,’” indicating that innervation carried out by the film viewer’s reception in distraction involves an “embodied perception” or a “perceptual incorporation” (*Cinema and Experience* 101) initiated by film’s shock effects derived from the technological deployment of montage.

Concerning this physiological factor, Benjamin believes that film is the kind of art that inspires reconsideration of aesthetics as a theory of perception whose basis lies less in the discursive formation or the symbolic representation than in the direct bodily contact. Within the new medial-technological environment, the theory of perception is re-oriented by film, the tactile/tactical dimension of which—following its particular material-technological operations—enables its viewers, the distracted masses *qua* the collective body, to “get closer to things” by incorporating directly what the film and its technological form mediate. Film with its technological peculiarities therefore enables a “reception as embodiment” resulting in a “nonrepresentational experience of embodied physiological sensation” (Mark B. N. Hansen, *Embodying* 261). By this kind of embodiment, film accomplishes its task of making technology into a first nature for the collective body.

Conclusion

In his unfinished monumental work *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin asserts that modernity is determined by forms that “lie hidden in machines” (155). To this reflection on the importance of form he appends the rhetorical question: “But are not forms the true mystery of nature, which reserves itself the right to remunerate—precisely through them—the accurate, the objective, the logical solution to a problem posed in purely objective terms?” (155). Regarding the forms of machines as the very determinative factor of the modern epoch, Benjamin asks further in *The Arcades Project*: “When and how will the worlds of form which, without our assistance, have arisen, for example, in mechanics, in film, in machine construction, in the new physics, and which have subjugated us, make it clear for us what manner of nature they contain? When will we reach a state of society in which these forms, or those arising from them, reveal themselves to us as natural forms?” (396). The questions raised here indicate that the forms of machines with their artificial and material aspects are no longer secondary in the human lifeworld, for both human beings and machines belong to natural forms. In this respect, Benjamin sees in film with its technology of reproduction the “unfolding of all forms of perception, the tempos and rhythms, which lie preformed in today’s machines, such that all

problems of contemporary art find their definitive formulation only in the context of film” (*Arcades* 394). Film as such is the quintessential artwork produced according to “the accurate, the objective, the logical solution” by forms of machines that concern almost every aspect of the human lifeworld in modernity.

With this profound impact of film on the human existence in mind, Benjamin claims in “Work of Art” that film is “the powerful agent” for the “renewal of humanity” (*SW* 3: 104) and that an “equilibrium between human beings and the apparatus” (*SW* 3: 117) can be established through it. This not only suggests a human identity with the nonhuman but also anticipates the posthuman reconceptualization of humanity and its relation with technologies in a non-instrumental and non-human-centric light. From the posthuman viewpoint, it is understood that “human life is embedded in a material world of great complexity” (Hayles 5) and that human beings are not to be conceptualized “as autonomous beings exercising their will through individual agency and choice” (Hayles 286). This impels us to rethink the posthuman subject as “relational” and “constituted in and by multiplicity,” indicating “a strong sense of collectivity, relationality and hence community building” (Braidotti 49). As such, the technological apparatus is not the anthropocentric device instrumentally used for and by the humans; rather, it has developed itself to create an environment that nurtures the “mutual dependence between bodies and technological others” (Braidotti 90). The posthuman body is therefore closely connected with technologies provided that the humans do not reduce the technological to an instrument of domination.

Rereading “Work of Art” and related writings closely, we find that Benjamin’s exposition on technology liberated from human-centric misuse, the technological innervation into the collective body, and the imagination of a new humanity founded on the human body’s merge with technology¹⁴ can shed light on and has even anticipated the posthuman concerns today. While the posthuman discourse is a product of advanced information technology in our highly digitalized age, in the early twentieth century Benjamin has already sought to redefine humanity according to the scientific-technological ethos of his time. His emphases on the collective body and the material-technological forces find their echoes in our contemporary posthuman discussions despite the shift in historical and technological backgrounds. The vision of a de-anthropomorphized and balanced relationship

¹⁴ Recent studies have attempted to read Benjamin’s works from the posthuman perspective, especially in connection with the film figure Mickey Mouse as the embodiment of what it would be like if the humans could succeed in fully adapting to the forces of the second technology. Due to length constraints, this article is unable to elaborate further. For a more detailed discussion on this, see Salzani; and Mourenza, “Posthuman Motifs.”

between the human and the technological, on which Benjamin elaborates in various writings between the late 1910s and the 1930s, remains as relevant as ever. They serve as an illuminating point of departure for rethinking humanity in our contemporary posthuman constellation.

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