

Reading the Secret Signals of Redemption: Benjamin on the Film Gyorgy Markus

"The last intellectual", wrote about Walter Benjamin Hannah Arendt, not known of a particularly sympathetic attitude towards those fellow emigrants from Germany, who - in spite of all the historical experiences - remained captive of the totalitarian ideology of Marxism. The exception she made of Benjamin was, however, not accidental or idiosyncratic. It reflected that charismatic aura which for a long time enveloped not only his person, but also his writings, especially the most significant one, the *Artwork* essay, and not only in Germany. In his case the implied assumption of an organic unity between the personality of the author and his oeuvre, generally quite problematic in our time, is justified. He became a symbolic figure ("the last intellectual") because he made his writings only one (no doubt, the most significant one) aspect and constituent of that practical-social commitment and engagement that he consciously and consistently - through all the dramatic historical changes - followed during his whole life. His tragic death, in all its accidentality, in a sense only brought home the ultimate, extreme consequence of such a life at this dark time of the great historical struggle between opposed policies of modernisation that introduced our era of late modernity. This end provided the last ground of that reverential attitude toward him and towards those of his writings in particular that in a sense remained unfinished, on which he was still working at that time.

Reverence certainly provides a stable basis for attention and respect directed at its subject. In its fundamentally acritical character, however, it in no way can guarantee the adequate understanding of the highly esteemed person or work, even in cases when such an attention is completely deserved. The reception of

Benjamin's ideas in the English-speaking world illustrates this fact particularly well. The *Artwork* essay for a long time has been considered a modern classic constantly referred to – in a translation (still the most familiar one) that disastrously misrepresented already its title and some of its basic ideas. This is a well-known and generally acknowledged fact today that does not demand further commentary.

The productivity of the after-life of a thinker – so much emphasised by Benjamin himself – is expressed partly in that challenge in which, reflecting the changed social and cultural conditions, it critically re-examines the meaning and significance of works that immediately after the death of their author are usually treated with a stunned, sometimes hagiographic respect. This happened certainly with the legacy of Benjamin as well. Fundamental questions of relevance (“systematically failed predictions”) have been raised also in respect of the *Artwork* essay itself. In some cases the very aggressiveness and the seemingly gleeful malevolence of such a criticism (like in the case of the rather infamous paper of Latour and Hennion¹) are, I think, unnecessarily upsetting and rather distasteful, even though one recognises that there is nothing ‘personal’ in this attitude. It is just a conscious strategy that some theorists of culture, unfortunately, borrowed from one of the trends of avant-garde arts – to win the attention of the public through provocation, by being ‘scandalous’ in the intentional defiance of common expectations. In case of a theoretically directed interpretation this truly seems to be merely a case of questionable self-promotion.

Untastefully presented or not, the basic critical point raised by, among others, Latour and Hennion, is *prima facie* not without ground. The *Artwork* essay certainly opens with the explicit statement of the intentions of its author: to disclose, in a broad analogy with the Marxian theory of economy, the developmental tendencies of art under the modern conditions of production. It is,

¹ Cf. A. Hennion – B. Latour: “How to make mistakes on so many things at once – and become famous for it”, In the volume *Mapping Benjamin: The Work of Art in the Digital Age* (ed. by H. U. Gumbrecht – M. Marrinan). Stanford O.P., 2003.

however, quite questionable whether it fulfils, or indeed even attempts to fulfil, such a prognostic end, either generally or in respect to the main subject of its analysis, the film. If one reads this analysis as somehow 'prognostic' in the usual sense of this term, then no doubt it does fail in crucial respects. And one can supplement this criticism with the equally damning observation that also the basic practical conclusion of this paper, its famous demand for the "politisisation of art", as the Communist answer to the Fascist aestheticisation of politics remained quite opaque as to its justification and its meaning. The *Artwork* essay is certainly a strange work, the expression of an unfinished (and perhaps, beyond all the accidentalities of the fate, unfinishable) mental struggle of an exemplary radical intellectual with questions about the vocation of art in modernity - and with the vocation of the intellectual under these conditions. The recognition of its significance (and equally the respect for its author) demands an approach to it that aims not merely at drawing some "objective" balance between its perceptive insights and mistaken assumptions or predictions, but tries to disclose the paradoxical failure in its very successes and its success in its very failures.

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Benjamin as critic and theorist approached the practices and products of arts from a fundamentally practical-revolutionary point of view. This was not merely a subjective attitude for him, a matter of personal interests - he explicitly argued that only such an approach is legitimate, since 'arts' do not constitute a well-defined domain, the boundaries of which are determined by particular aesthetic criteria.² What art is - this is a historical question that can be answered only by disclosing its function. For a radical thinker this question is of genuine, not merely idle-speculative interest when it is related to the great historical task of that redemptive-revolutionary transformation that alone can save humanity from an

² Concerning his views about it see my paper, "Benjamin's Critique of Aesthetic Autonomy" (under publication).

impending catastrophe. Can art in principle contribute to this end? Which kinds of artistic practices can have such an impact, how and in what sense? What can art do both in general and more importantly under our social and political circumstances? What is today the task of radical-revolutionary writers who consciously want to promote this end in their work? These are the fundamental, closely interrelated problems with which Benjamin struggled throughout his whole life.

The exceptional, idiosyncratic and still fascinating character of Benjamin's oeuvre is to a large extent based on the paradoxical character of the way he dealt with this complex of questions, positing it in a much broader social context. For his approach to it was characterised on the one hand by a sober, unflinching social and political realism, suspicious of any easy and rosy solution to the deep social crisis of our existence encompassing also the situation of arts. On the other hand, he was deeply convinced that the possibility of emancipation and redemption is actually and in an ineliminable way present in our depraved situation itself making the idea of a radically different future more than a matter of hope or faith. He knew well that these two attitudes: the disillusioned realism of political expectations and the Messianist conviction of the philosopher, are usually regarded as incompatible. To demonstrate that they can be not merely combined, but must be theoretically comprehended in their unity to be adequately understood at all – this was his conscious intention, the very program of his work. It found its most eloquent formulation in the first of his "Theses on the Philosophy of History". To win against all its enemies, historical materialism (with its scientific prediction of the coming of an emancipated future, based on the causal analysis of the dynamics of capitalism) needs only the services of the wizened hunchback of 'theology'. This is, of course, a purely secular 'theology' that is able to make us aware of the presence of that 'weak Messianistic power' which cannot be reduced to any kind of interests, but as an impulse embedded in our collective dreams is no less real and actual.

It is against the background of these two, *prima facie* so opposed practical orientations which Benjamin programmatically brings to a

theoretical unity,³ that he addresses the question: what can art do in general, and more importantly: what can it do today for the end of redemption and human emancipation?

His direct answer to it is strikingly deflationary: very little. In 1937 he will quote as an “unfailing insight” the statement of Franz Mehring: “Art is unable to intervene significantly into its [that is, the proletariat’s - G. M.] emancipatory struggle”, to add: “The development of art proved him right.”⁴ And he supplements this scepticism concerning the social effectiveness of art, at least for the end of a radical social transformation, with an explicit and sharp rejection of the way its possibility has been usually conceived in the Marxist tradition, through the conception of ideology and its ‘relative independence’.

According to this latter view, all works of art express some kind of ideology, often independently from (or even contrary to) the conscious intention of their author, because every work contains some ‘message’, transmits some view of the world. In a class society this latter is necessarily associated (in coherent or incoherent way) with the standpoint and perspective of one of the classes in this society. Just because of this ideological character, works of art can have a (positive or negative) social impact, influencing how its

³ At the same time one needs to indicate that the presentation of this unity is burdened here by an unresolvable ambiguity. To win over all its opponents historical material needs to enlist the services of the little hunchback of “theology”, that is to take additionally into account the insight into the redemptive impulses that are irreducibly present in our collective dreams, being no less real and actual than the material class interests. But then it turns out that this secular “theology” in fact alone is capable to disclose the genuine, but well hidden unconscious motivating forces that may effectively guide the processes of historical change towards an emancipatory end. Historical materialism, in its uncritical confidence in the power of scientific analysis and reliance on the mechanism of causation, is itself something merely mechanical, a lifeless puppet that can act intentionally only when so directed by such immaterial ends which are in principle unarticulable within its theoretical framework. - The first Thesis that programmatically aims to disclose the necessary unity between the two, seemingly irreconcilable components of genuine radicalism remains unresolvably ambiguous in respect of the actual interrelation between them and their relative weight. This ambiguity - however disturbing it may be for us - may have been actually known and willed by Benjamin. For in his understanding the central principle of dialectics, the unity of contradictions, necessarily involves a radical ambiguity and owes its very productivity to this latter.

⁴ “Eduard Fuchs, der Sammler und der Historiker”; G. S.: vol. II/2, p. 481-482/ S. W.: vol. 3, p. 270.

public conceives itself and its social conditions and environment. To have a radical-revolutionary impact the artwork today ought to express through its means of aesthetic presentation the emancipatory ideology of the proletariat, contributing to its spread among the working masses, raising their consciousness and furthering the recognition of their true (class) interests. This demands the unwavering commitment of their creators, the radical artists-intellectuals, to the interests of the exploited masses, an engagement in and for the cause of the working majority. This is, however, something that they can understand as being in their own interest as well, for in a capitalist society their own position is that of an essentially powerless and dependent 'intellectual proletariat'.

Benjamin essentially opposes this idea of "political art" ("sozialistische Tendenzkunst", "Propaganda-Kunst"). He does not deny in general the possibility of such ideological effects, achieved through the explicit or implicit message expressed by the work.. Under the 'normal' conditions of capitalist stabilisation, however, effects of this kind are as a rule of a negative character: the impairment of proletarian class-consciousness by the bourgeois literary industry (Literaturbetrieb) and film production.⁵ Under such conditions an art aiming at "direct political impact" (unmittelbare politische Wirkung) of radical intent usually represents the irresponsible and ultimately dangerous self-delusion of intellectuals.⁶ "Therefore the concept of [political] tendency in the summary form, in which it usually occurs in debate ... is a completely useless instrument of political literary criticism."⁷

This rejection of political art in its usual sense is based on the very radicalism of Benjamin's that demands a merciless realism when judging our present social-cultural conditions, including the situation of arts in the West⁸. "We are faced with the fact – of which

⁵ Notes to "Das Kunstwerk ..."; G. S.: vol. VII/2, p. 668.

⁶ Cf. "Zur Kritik der 'Neuen Sachlichkeit' (Fragment 143)"; G. S. vol VI, pp.179-180.

⁷ "Der Autor als Produzer" (1034); G. S.: vol. II/2, p. 684/ S. W.: vol. 2, p. 769.

⁸ "Pessimism all along the line. Indeed and thoroughly. Mistrust in the aptitude (Geschick) of literature, mistrust in the aptitude of freedom, mistrust in the aptitude of European humanity, and first of all mistrust, mistrust and mistrust in all reconciliation: between the classes, between

the past decade in Germany furnished evidence in abundance – that the bourgeois apparatus of production and publication can assimilate astonishing quantities of revolutionary themes. Indeed can propagate them, without calling its own existence, and the existence of the class owning this apparatus, seriously into question.”⁹ Leftist literature and art can become an exotic object of entertainment, just as the photographic representations of deep human misery can turn it into an object of aesthetic pleasure. All the more so, because while such ‘tendentious’ art breaks with the idea of disinterestedness, the hallmark of the conception of aesthetic autonomy, in its demand of social commitment, it usually operates with those traditional means of presentation that are inherited from and justified by the standards of idealist aesthetics. Therefore in fact it also continues to immobilise the recipient public in an attitude of contemplative passivity. The great revolutions in the techniques of presentation and reproduction – radio and film – by themselves do not alter this situation as far as the possibility of a direct political impact is concerned. In the selection by their apparatuses “the star and the dictator emerge victorious”¹⁰.

To this criticism emphasising the actual ineffectiveness of such a “political art” Benjamin adds another consideration that draws attention to its dangers. The intermediary social position of intellectuals means for him first of all that they cannot completely break the ties necessarily connecting them to the bourgeoisie. Left-wing artists “will never succeed in eliminating the fact that even the politicisation of the intellectual almost never turns him into a proletarian. Why? Because from childhood on the middle class (Bürgerklasse) provided him with a means of production in the form of education (Bildung), and this educational privilege is the ground that makes him solidary with this class and, even more importantly, the latter solidary with him. This solidarity may retreat from the foreground, become blurred and even disintegrate, but it

the nations, between the individuals. And unlimited trust solely in IG Farben and the peaceful perfection of the Luftwaffe.” (“Der Surrealismus” G. S.: vol. II/1, p. 308/ S. W.: vol. 2, 216-217.)

⁹ “Der Autor als Produzent”; G. S.: vol. II/2, p. 692/ S. W.: vol. 3, p 774.

¹⁰ “Das Kunstwerk ... Dritte Fassung”; G. S.: vol. I/2, p. 492/ S. W.: vol. 4, p. 277.

almost always remains powerful enough to exclude the intellectual from that constant state of alert (*Alarmbereitschaft*), from the existence at the front line (*Frontexistenz*) that is characteristic of the true proletarian."¹¹ Notwithstanding his repeated endorsements of Bolshevik politics, Benjamin essentially preserved the anarchistic orientation of his youth as far as remaining convinced that revolutionary motivations themselves can only arise spontaneously from the life-conditions and experiences of the exploited class itself. The presumption of artists-intellectuals to speak directly *to* and *for* the proletariat, to raise the consciousness of the individual workers to a level adequate to their own class interests, is a dangerous self-delusion. The more importance these intellectuals ascribe to their own activity and to art as the bearer of radical ideology, the transmitter of 'correct convictions', the more they tend to transform themselves into a sect, situated alongside the proletariat as its benefactor and 'ideological patron'. In this way they unwillingly in fact fulfil a "counterrevolutionary function"¹². Intellectuals must realise that their solidarity with the proletariat can only be a "mediated one", that of a "specialist", whose activity is directed at the solution of particular practical, "technical" tasks.¹³ Ultimately, the function of the radical intellectual can be nothing else but "the politicisation of its own class. This indirect impact is the sole one that a writer-revolutionary from the middle-class can claim today."¹⁴

One easily can think then that Benjamin's critique of "political art" at least logically leads not to a deflationary but to an outright negative answer concerning the potential contribution of contemporary art and artists to the cause of an emancipatory transformation. This impression can even be strengthened by his

¹¹ "Ein Aussenseiter macht sich bemerkbar" (1930), G. S.: vol. III, p. 224-225/ S. W.: vol. 2, p. 309. - Cf also: "The intellectual takes on a mimicry of proletarian existence without being even remotely connected to the working class. He thereby seeks to attain the illusory end of standing above the classes." ("Zum gesellschaftlichen Standort des französischen Schriftstellers" (1934); G. S.: vol. II/2, p. 789/ S. W.: vol. 2, p. 753.

¹² Cf. "Der Author als Produzer"; G. S.: vol. II/2, pp. 689-691/ S. W.: vol.2, pp. 772-773.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 700/ p. 780.

¹⁴ "Ein Aussenseiter..."; G. S.: vol. III, p. 225/ S. W.: vol. 2, p. 310.

analysis of the deep cultural crisis that – seemingly without any positive alternative – characterises our time.

Benjamin's radical rejection of the idea of aesthetic autonomy, his destabilising of the very concept of art, necessarily implies that he makes any fixed *normative* distinction between 'high' and 'popular' art collapse. This is certainly one of the most important and also most influential aspects of his legacy for our contemporary discourses. As always, he formulates this point in a particularly sharp-provocative way. "[T]he attempt to fix principal boundaries (grundsätzliche Grenzen) between advertisement (Reklame) and art is an unproductive one."¹⁵ His historically and practically oriented approach to the very question: what is art, implies that for him the strictly 'artistic' qualities of works lose their primary significance, retreat behind their capacity to satisfy other social-functional requirements. This does not mean, however, that he denies the historical-social reality and importance of the internal division of this, in his understanding, open set of works, its instable and ever changing division into 'high' and 'low' (or mass) art, as one of the fundamental characteristics of modern culture. When it comes to the description of its present state of deep crisis, he himself describes it through the characterisation of the historical fate of this division, leading – so it would seem – to an impasse, to the final exhaustion of its productivity.

His views on this matter are perhaps most clearly articulated in a diary note from 1931.¹⁶ The dispute between "art for the people (Volk)" and "art for the connoisseur (Kenner)" persists through the whole history of art from the very beginning of capitalist development. At first glance all the advantages seem to be on the side of high art, able to count on the critical cooperation of the connoisseur, as opposed to an art aiming at the broadest possible popularity by satisfying the undifferentiated need of consumers for entertainment. On the other hand, however, no class or stratum can recognise as its own an artistic presentation of its form of life and

¹⁵ Notes to "Das Kunstwerk ... Erste Fassung"; G.S.: vol. I/3, p. 1044

¹⁶ "Tagebuch vom siebenten August Neunzehnhunderteinundzwanzig bis zum Todestag"; G. S.: vol. VI, pp. 444-446/ S. W.: vol. 2, pp. 503-505.

language that is unavailable and incomprehensible to its own members, which in principle renounces all aspiration to popularity. Therefore in literature there have long been transitional forms between the extremes of the most popular and the strictly esoteric, and the attempts to overcome their antinomy possessed their inner continuity. In particular the decaying ability of story-telling long survived (for example, in the works of Hebel, Gotthelf etc.) as a minor genre of high literature. Moreover, Benjamin specifically points to the tradition of the English novel, from Dickens to Kipling, successfully combining the tradition of this communal-popular art with the modern genre of novel, addressed to the solitary, "cultivated" reader.¹⁷ Today, however, this antinomy appears with extreme sharpness, without any mediation, due to the consistent commodification of both forms. Literary bestsellers (Erfolgsromanen) serve only 'comfort' - the unproductive enjoyment of the broadest possible strata of consumers. 'Serious' literature, on the other hand, became a luxury good for a small segment of the market, and therefore also falls under the dictates of fashion. This development necessarily leads to a general crisis of art, encompassing all of its main kinds and genres (the novel, drama and theatre, easel painting, symphonic music). It finds the sharpest expression in the realm of letters (Schrifttum), journalism progressively occupying the place that once belonged to literature. This is the process of its deepest debasement. A degeneration, however, which, he immediately adds, under changed conditions can be the subject of a dialectical reversal, resulting in the regeneration of the function of letters on a completely new basis.

How can art (more concretely, literature) itself contribute to such a process of self-renewal under the prevailing conditions when both of its now truly opposed forms, 'high' and 'popular' art, are seemingly condemned to social impotence as the consequence of their very disjunction? Benjamin, as a dialectical thinker, finds in this crisis itself the ground, which in a sense allows its overcoming - in the case of a few, true exceptions. The dissolution of the

¹⁷ Cf. "Am Kamin" (1933); G. S.: vol. III, p. 389.

traditional forms and genres, with their socially and culturally stable means of signification and public, with the disappearance of a social mission and commission (Auftrag) for art leaves the artist-writer without any stable normative orientation, beyond the demands of a segmented cultural market. The artist today is just a professional, and the social majority as abstract 'public' is often quite dubious about the 'utility' of his/her work, if it is not confirmed by 'success'. Many artists certainly will reject the identification of the value of their work with such a commercial success among the uncultivated 'masses'. They aim at a 'critical' success, or even at a future one; the significance of their work is to be proven by the 'test of the time'. They may try to ensure it either by the radicalness of their 'message', of what their work 'says', or through the creation of 'novel effects' pursued for their own sake, just for being new and unexpected, perhaps shocking. They actually aim, through willed originality, at self-aggrandisement and self-eternalisation. They reject the tradition in the attempt (often quite successful, as our museums of contemporary art demonstrate) to become the new, modern tradition as the true end of their creativity and for them the only real proof of the value of their work. In the revealing case of the fine arts it is the admiring passivity of the viewer in the museum in face of their painting that actually demonstrates the significance of their art, it is the 'effectivity' of art which they recognise and intend by their creations to achieve.

Artists-writers today necessarily have to rely on themselves, without any normative-guidance transmitted by a community, to make - consistently or inconsistently, intentionally or unintentionally - a choice between the outlined positions. They must in some way decide for or against the market, in addressing this or that group of the potential public, continuing or rejecting the 'musealised' tradition of their art etc. However, whatever their choice, whether their work intends to express some social tendency, be it radical or conservative, it in principle cannot have that practical 'effectivity', cannot contribute to the redemptive task of revolutionary transformation, which alone motivates Benjamin's interest in art.

There are, however, as we know, the so rare, isolated 'exceptions': Baudelaire, Kafka and Proust. This seems to be a rather strange and baffling grouping together of poet/writers, whose oeuvres – to the analyses of which Benjamin devoted some of his most important essays – do not share anything in common. They seem to be 'exceptional' also in the sense that their literary productions are incomparable with each other as well. What then allows him to bring them together into a single group? – he certainly did not offer for this any explanation or legitimation.

True, Benjamin never even suggested that these exceptional oeuvres constitute any kind of a 'group', the members of which would share something in common. He merely offered a list of work having a specific, redemptive significance. This answer, however, is not quite satisfactory. Even a (non-Borgesian) list presupposes the existence of a unique point of reference, to which its members are necessarily related, even if in different ways. And in our case this cannot be the redemptive 'effectivity' of these works, since this quality must be thought as being grounded in their specific character. However incomparably unique they are, there ought to be some ways of categorising them as equal, since they all serve as unintentional responses to the one general cultural crisis.

Formulated in this way, one can perhaps indicate such features silently, maybe unknowingly assumed by Benjamin himself, or at least reconcilable with his approach. The members on his list of 'exceptions' are first of all characterised by the fact that they cannot be conceived as communicating – intentionally or unintentionally – some ideas, having some 'message' for some specific, at least ideal, public. These oeuvres – as far as their genuine significance is concerned – do not 'say' anything, important or unimportant, true or false, that an interpretation then can explicate.¹⁸ They merely disclose, directly 'show' something that is neither old, nor new, which is necessarily familiar to all of us, without ever being formulated, since it is ultimately related to the very preconditions of

¹⁸ Kafka, as Benjamin indicates, who wrote parables necessarily pointing to some moral, at the same time "took all the conceivable precautions against the interpretation of his writings". ("Franz Kafka", p. 422/p. 804)

all languages, to that which makes mutual understanding possible. Their authors, after the dissolution of all communities as bearers of some binding tradition, were able to rely in this crisis only upon themselves. They are neither continuing, nor rejecting that tradition which in this modern age is reified in the idea of 'culture' as the storehouse of 'spiritual values'. Neither are these writings any kind of 'expression' of the self, some lasting monument of the riches and freedom of their creator. Even the lyric poet on this list of 'exceptions', Baudelaire, knew and accepted that in every significant artwork, though it is organically related to what its author is, the 'Moi', the particular creative individual 'vaporises' itself. Their oeuvre was in a sense undivorceable from their life, not something separable from it as an expression or product. Artistic creation was for them the way to live, to struggle – as in one or another manner we all have to do – with its accidentality, hopelessly striving to overcome those alien, objective powers that fundamentally determine our life. If a person is – as both Hegel and Marx thought – ultimately what he/she actively does in the given circumstances beyond its control, artistic activity as actualised in their works was in their exceptional case the fundamental constituent of their life, defining what they as living personalities truly are.

At the same time, paradoxically, this work, inseparable from their life and person, radically transcended it. For it has significance, in a way they never did or could intend, for the coming generations, for us living under at least partly altered social and cultural conditions that they could not have envisaged. These 'exceptional' writings, therefore, with a particular clarity make recognisable that fundamental capacity, which in general pertains to all true works of art: their 'prophetic' character.

"The history of art is a history of prophecies ... But for these prophecies to be apprehended some conditions must mature which the work of art prefigures often by hundreds, or by just a few years."¹⁹ This, of course, has nothing to do with any kind of 'tendency', be it radical or utopian, which their author/creator may

¹⁹ Notes to "Das Kunstwerk ... Erste Fassung"; G.S.: vol. I/3, pp. 1046-1047.

have consciously intended to express for 'influencing' the chosen public/recipients. It is connected with that which makes art at all possible, at least under conditions of modernity – the condition of its existence as art, radically distinct both from propaganda and from all types of commodity. It is rooted in the way any true work of art relates to that general state of consciousness which is determined by these social conditions of atomistic individualism that at the same time tends to subordinate all human interrelations to the impersonal and depersonalising demands of a market 'rationality'. Under these conditions the most decisive, future-directed contents of collective consciousness – as distinct from the conscious ideas and transient aspirations that may be shared at a time by many – retreat into unconsciousness, appear only as involuntary dreams. These repressed wish-images of the oppressed masses, their inextirpable longing for a redeemed future of true community, free from all forms of domination, not only of the powerful over the powerless, but also from the exploitative attitude to nature, can be realised only in the political action of the revolutionary class, the proletariat. Art certainly cannot offer any kind of program or some utopian vision of this ultimate redemptive end. But genuine, significant art is only possible because by its structuring principles it can bring to direct presence images that in an inconspicuous way prefigure this future, even before its realisation became a conscious end. "It has always been one of the most important tasks of art to create a demand whose hour of full satisfaction has not yet arrived."²⁰ Significant works of art do render manifest the signs of a radically other future in the present. It is in this 'prophetic' way that they can contribute, independently of the intentions of their author, to the process in which the masses 'take possession of their own dream', to the process of 'awakening'. It is in a short essay on "children's theatre", written in early 1929 that Benjamin most clearly formulates this conviction. "[W]hat is truly revolutionary is not the propaganda of ideas which here and there spur on to unviable actions and which the first sober reflection after leaving the theatre causes to

²⁰ "Das Kunstwerk ... Dritte Fassung"; G. S.: vol. 1/2, p. 500/ S. W.: vol. 4, p. 266.

evaporate. It is the *secret signal* of what is to come that has a truly revolutionary effect ..."²¹

"There is a place in every true work of art, at which the person, who places himself there, is touched by a freshness like the wind of the coming dawn."²² This certainly provides the answer to the twin problems that Benjamin regarded as the most general and fundamental questions that must be addressed by a thinker whose whole approach to art is motivated and guided by the practical-radical interest in the revolutionary transformation of the world. What is the function and potential effect of art that makes it as a specific form of practice a deserving and important subject precisely from such a standpoint? The unintended 'prophetic' character of great works of art explains and legitimates this interest - but Benjamin is also well aware of the fact that in itself alone such an answer is radically insufficient. It is insufficient both from practical and from theoretical respects.

Concerning the first, during the Weimar years Benjamin considered his own role and task to be the "strategist in the literary struggles" of the time. He wanted to offer genuinely useful advice as orientation for the writers who wanted to serve by their work the cause of revolution. His criticism of political art was part of this enterprise - indicating what a Leftist author/writer as intellectual should not try to achieve for such an end, for his work then will actually have the adverse, counter-revolutionary effect. The prophetic character of the great works of art, which by the 'secret signals' embedded in their very structure unintentionally brings to presence the prefiguration of the redemptive future, certainly discloses how and why a work can have truly revolutionary effect. It offers, however, rather little ground for saying something that could usefully orient the revolutionary writers-contemporaries. "Just write true masterpieces" - this is what they seem to imply, and this may be a good advice, but rather useless practically as orientation.

²¹ "Programm eines proletarischen Kindertheaters"; G. S.: vol. II/2, p. 769/ S\ W.: vol.2, p. 206.

²² *Das Passagen-Werk*; G. S.: vol. 5, p. 593.

The reference to the redemptive significance of great works is, however, also inadequate and insufficient from a much more fundamental, theoretical point of view. Great works of art prefigure the coming dawn of redemption – for all those who are able to take up the appropriate place from which this becomes ‘visible’. Who are, however, those capable of such an understanding, who can read the ‘secret signals’ of redemptive future that they contain? For whom is their true significance available, perceivable? This question about the recipient and the character of reception is, as an historical and social problem, the most important and influential aspect of Benjamin’s legacy, at least in respect of its methodology. His interest in this problem, of course, necessarily followed from the practical-radical character of his whole approach to art, from the viewpoint of which it is the effect of the work that defines it as a work of art.

The importance of the problem of reception has been recognised well before Benjamin, as an important aspect both of the specificity and of the human value of art. However, Benjamin approaches this question in a way that radically differs from the view offered by the idealist tradition of aesthetics, which emphasised the universal appeal, at least in principle, of all true works of art. At the same time he equally rejects the view of the empirical sociology of art which identifies reception with the question: who, which social groups are the statistically prevalent consumers for definite kinds of cultural goods on the market. In his practical-radical approach to art, from the viewpoint of which what art is can only be understood through its (historically changing) social function-effect, the work and its reception constitute an undivorceable unity. The effect of the work, which makes it a work of art, is realised only in its reception, which is indelibly inscribed into it as the way it can be apperceived as a work of art. One of the most important critical concepts of Benjamin, that of the aura (the complexities of which we cannot discuss here at all), represents just the alienated form of this unity: true art necessarily imposing an untranscendable distance to the individual recipient, to which it must submit itself.

Given this fundamental theoretical and practical importance of reception in Benjamin’s whole conception of art, he certainly must

have regarded the question about the possible recipients of the significant, 'prophetic' works of art as a particularly weighty one. Who can 'read' those 'secrets signals' of a redemptive future that they, independently of all authorial intentions, innocuously, but necessarily contain? He answers this question explicitly, with an uncompromising radicality, but also in an unexpected and rather disturbing way. "At no point of time, be it ever so utopian, will one win over the masses to a higher art, but always only to an art that is nearer to them." For "the masses in general demand from the work of art (which for them is aligned with the objects of use) something warming", "the comfort of the heart", something simultaneously useful (*brauchbares*) and blissful (*beglückendes*)²³. For Benjamin, the whole history of the avant-garde movements illustrates this 'ineffectivity' of 'high' art, its impotence to reach the masses, their intended public. Already in the middle of 1933 he pointed out: "Since the end of the war it was the left intellectuals, the revolutionary artists who set the tone for a major segment of the public. In the meantime it has become manifest with complete clarity that this public standing (*Geltung*) was not matched by any deeper social 'effectivity' (*Wirksamkeit*) ... The most advanced, daring products of the avant-garde in all arts - in France as well as in Germany - had only the high bourgeoisie as their public."²⁴

At this point it seems that Benjamin's whole project ends in an ultimate fiasco. What can revolutionary writers do today, if neither works of 'political art' in the usual sense, nor the innovative efforts of the avant-garde can reach at all their intended audience, the masses as exploited majority? In fact Benjamin has a very clear advice: Don't even try to write one more masterpiece, a new great book! Use the new forms offered by contemporary technology to reach the masses: leaflets, brochures, journal articles and placards, forms that allow the combination of the scriptural and the graphical.²⁵ Most importantly, challenge by your own work the

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 500.

²⁴ "Zur gesellschaftlichen Standort des französischen Schriftstellers"; G. S.: vol. II/2, p. 778-779/ S. W.: vol. 2, p. 760.

²⁵ Cf. "Einbahnstrasse", G.S.: vol. IV, p.85/S.W.: vol 1, p. 444.

traditional relation between the author and its public, which in the 'aesthetic' conception of art condemns the mass recipient to submissive passivity. From the late twenties on, Brecht is for Benjamin the example of the effectiveness of this alternative and he takes over also the term used by Brecht to designate it: 'literarisation' (Literatisierung) of art.²⁶

His conception of 'literarisation' was most fully formulated in one of his most famous essays, "The Author as Producer", originally a lecture delivered in early 1934 in Paris and first published twenty-six years after his death. It represents his first elaborate theoretical reaction to the victory of Fascism. It is certainly a problematic text. On the one hand it explicates some of his fundamental and fruitful ideas about the possibilities and tasks of radical writers, especially under these conditions. On the other hand, Benjamin's firm rejection of the idea of the autonomy of art turns here into an unambiguous endorsement of the repressive Soviet cultural policy of censorship of literature (deeply embarrassing even if one may rightfully assume that he had no idea, how 'repressive' this policy was). This text, however, is a problematic one also in the sense that it is unable to resolve some at least implicit contradictions concerning its central idea, the meaning of 'literarisation'.

Benjamin uses this term in two distinct (and well distinguished), but closely interrelated meanings. As 'literarisation of the conditions of life' he refers to an underlying process of great cultural-historical transformation, the spontaneous progress of which even capitalism cannot arrest, is able only to retard. On the other hand, 'literarisation' indicates the correct strategy of radical intellectuals, be they artists or critics, to actively contribute to such a development and to influence it in a direction favouring the realisation of the revolutionary, anti-capitalist objectives.

'Literarisation of the conditions of life' points to a basic tendential change in the relation between cultural producers (authors,

²⁶ It is not without interest that in the very first outline of the *Artwork* essay Benjamin originally wrote in the manuscript: "The technical reproducibility of the work of art leads to its literarisation", and then crossed this last word out, replacing it with "politisation" (G. S.: vol. I/3, p. 1039).

composers etc.) and their recipients. The essence of this transformation, most pronounced in the case of literature, is the progressive erosion, ultimately the liquidation of the division between these two cultural roles: “[T]he number of writers – for these include not only the literati and the poets – is growing day by day, and the technical interest in matters of writing manifests itself with much greater urgency than the interest in edification”²⁷, wrote Benjamin already in 1931. Three years later he emphatically formulates the basic consequence of this tendency: “the distinction between author and public ... begins to disappear in a socially desirable way. The reader is at all times ready to become a writer, that is, a describer or even a prescriber.” The public itself gains “an access to authorship”²⁸.

The main, though unwilling agent of this radical transformation is the *newspaper*, this agent of the “limitless debasement of the word”²⁹. Cheap journalism, supplanting genuine literature with its indiscriminate presentation of ‘sensational’ facts to satisfy the impatience of readers, actually contributes to the restoration of literature, through a fundamental reorganisation of both this latter and the press. For commercial interests even of the bourgeois press force it to contribute to the liquidation of the dividing line between writer and reader. Newspapers must continuously adjust themselves to and open spaces for the questions, opinions and protests of the readers, who want to see, as their right, their own interests expressed. In this way newspapers transform the reader into a contributor, teaching him/her simultaneously how to write.

Benjamin assumes that this process of ‘literarisation’ ultimately will produce a completely new form of *literacy* as a common good. To be literate will then mean and demand more than the simple ability to read and write. It will mean the general capacity to express on matters of common interest a view and standpoint, based on the

²⁷ “Literaturgeschichte und Literaturwissenschaft”; G. S.: vol. III, p. 288/ S. W.: vol. 2, p. 462.

²⁸ “Die Zeitung” (1932-1934); G. S.: vol. II/2, p. 629/ S. W. vol. 2, p. 761. – In the text of “The Author as Producer” Benjamin quotes – as the view of an anonymous author of Leftist orientation – the whole of this short paper in its entirety.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 629/ p. 762.

expertise provided by the individual's place in the world of labour, in a form both capable of and deserving of public attention. With it labour itself, which had always been silenced, "gains access to the word. And its presentation in words becomes a part of the ability that is demanded for its performance."³⁰

The task of revolutionary writers and artists is of course to contribute to this "socially desirable" transformation in ways most directly available to them, that is, through the reorganisation of their own literary-artistic practice. 'Literarisation' as the strategy for radical intellectuals offers the way to realise the task of "refunctioning" (Umfunktionieren) literature and art. This refunctioning actually means to regain a truly social function for art, but a new one: to contribute to an unprecedented revolutionary transformation of social-communal life. It is Brecht's epic theatre (primarily his *Versuche*) that paradigmatically exemplifies for Benjamin the effectiveness and meaning of this radical transformation.

The epic theatre certainly re-established in a sense the supremacy of the word in its employment of on-stage captions as reflexive and distancing comments on the action taking place on the stage. But the radical strategy of 'literarisation' as realised by Brecht cannot be reduced to this direct and restricted sense of the term. It consciously breaks with the basic conventions of theatrical presentation, defining it as a particular kind of artistic practice. This is achieved not only by the employment of written captions, but also through the interruption of the dramatic course of action by songs, through the replacement of usual scenic decorations with projections functioning as posters etc. This 'syncretic' tendency serves the end of refunctioning of art in so far as it aims for and succeeds in dissolving the work-character (*Auflösung des Werkcharacters*) of artistic productions.³¹ In this sense it is fundamentally opposed to that 'purificatory' tendency that characterises most of the trends of the avant-garde, restricting each art form to means of presentation

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 629/ p. 761-762.

³¹ Cf. "Fragment 146"; G. S.: vol. VI, p. 182; further vol. II/2, pp. 661 and 666 etc.

strictly specific to its own medium – for Benjamin the last desperate attempt to preserve the autonomy of art. Through this ‘syncretism’ epic theatre radically changes the relation between production and consumption (Konsumseite) of the theatrical performance. It aims to transform the audience from a “false, veiling totality”, enraptured by a shared, emphatic identification with the fate of the hero, into a critically active and productive one, which debates, takes up positions, makes responsible decisions.³² In this way it creates “a space for party formations that correspond to the real relations”³³, that is it can promote the emergence of the conscious ‘class’ out of the audience as an emotionally unified mere ‘mass’. It does so by consciously destroying the illusionistic character of the theatre, by repeatedly interrupting the ‘natural’ flow of action, by adopting the method of montage for the stage. Instead of presenting a continuous plot leading to closure, it presents a sequence of familiar situations, ‘circumstances’ (Zustände) allowing them to appear in all their strangeness. It is a transposition of “Socratic practice”³⁴ to the theatre – to provoke an enlightening astonishment (Staunen) about what seemed to be most evident and natural

Brecht’s practice de-auratises the scenic happenings – for the sake of bringing what takes place on its physically distant ‘podium’ into the immediate reach of its public. It presents a disjointed sequence of situations (‘circumstances’), together with the usual reactions to them as recurrent postures (Haltungen), encapsulated in quotable corporeal and verbal gestures. These, however, are not offered as the correct answer to this situation – it is the recipients who must decide about the effectiveness of these learnable and testable practical dispositions – this is the conundrum to the solution of which the ‘esteemed public’ itself must find the key.

Epic theatre thus fundamentally differs from political theatre in its usual sense, usually accepted by Leftist writers as well. They still attempted to use the traditional theatrical apparatus, created for the bourgeois audience, for the intended proletarian viewers, with the

³² Cf. “Was ist episches Theater (1)” (1931); G. S.: vol. II/2, pp. 527-528.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 522.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

end of creating through their deep emotional involvement new radical convictions. Brecht, however, does not aim at convincing his public of the validity of any ready answers. His viewer/reader "will be changed less in his consciousness, but rather in his conduct"³⁵. To this pedagogical effect he subordinates all aesthetic requirements and considerations. Brecht's work is exemplary for Benjamin, because he completely subordinates all artistic/aesthetic considerations to the practical effectiveness of his theatre, without taking up the position of an intellectual mentor, teaching his viewers what to think. His works "have first of all a pedagogical effect, then a political one and only finally a poetic one"³⁶.

It is in "The Author as Producer" that Benjamin sums up this interpretation of Brecht's 'dramatic laboratory' as the exemplary realisation of the radical strategy of 'literarisation'. (This has been a topic with which he has dealt already earlier in a number of shorter essays about the epic theatre.) It is when he attempts now to generalise this radical possibility beyond the specific character of its Brechtian solution (and beyond its genre, writing for the theatre) that the problematic character of his views at this time becomes manifest. What must a revolutionary writer do to effectively contribute to this spontaneously on-going process ('literarisation of the conditions of life') eroding the cleavage between the cultural roles of the writer and the reader, and guiding it towards a radical-redemptive end ('literarisation' as radical strategy of 'refunctioning' of literature)? His answer to this question moves almost immediately, without any justification from a truism (having no specific relation to the social 'effectivity' of a work) to a demand whose unrealisability under the prevailing conditions he himself has acknowledged elsewhere.

On the one hand, he states that a radical writer, with his instructive attitude, can and must transform his own productions into a *model*, capable of "guiding other producers to produce" For "an author, who teaches writers (Schriftsteller) nothing, teaches no

³⁵ "Fragment 146"; G. S.: vol. VI, p. 182.

³⁶ "Bert Brecht" (1930); G. S.: vol. II/2, p. 662/ S. W.: vol. 2, p. 366.

one."³⁷ No doubt this is true, but it has nothing to do with the radical social effectiveness of the work in Benjamin's sense. This demand is almost automatically satisfied by any writing having a public success, be it radical or reactionary. In all probability the novels of Karl May served as 'models' for a larger group of imitators than the (inimitable) dramas of Brecht.

This is, however, not what Benjamin truly means here. His point is that the radical writer, operating with an improved literary-technical apparatus, must be and is able to transform the *consumers*, that is, the viewers/readers of his productions into collaborators/producers, this being the way that the revolutionary intellectual can actively contribute to the process of 'literationisation' in its social-historical sense. He simply slides in a few lines from the first, truistic meaning of the model-character of a work to the second, for which he offers no support whatsoever. Nor is it clear how he could argue this point at all. In his Brecht-commentaries Benjamin certainly did write about the epic theatre transforming the viewers/readers into collaborators, but in the specific sense that it activates them, provokes them to take up a critical attitude to what is presented on the stage. That the epic theatre effectively teaches and enables by its own model the common viewer/reader 'to write', conferring a literary competence upon them even in some broad sense, this he never actually maintained, and it is unclear how he could have done so.

But he goes further in this respect. He now demands that through such genuine "improvements" in literary technique the radical writer should promote "the socialisation of the intellectual (geistige) means of production"³⁸. He or she should not supply, but alienate, wrest away - to the utmost extent possible - the productive apparatus of literature from the bourgeoisie. He must actively challenge and change the 'literary relations of production' in the direction of their effective socialisation. But how can a writer/intellectual do that at all?

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 696/ p. 777.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 701/ p. 780.

This unanswered (because never posed) question perhaps reflects Benjamin's uneasiness with his own assumption and unambiguous endorsement of the radical social effectiveness of the epic theatre. He knows of course very well that the "bourgeois apparatus of production and publication" often quite successfully accommodates and assimilates works by radical writers who challenge also the usual 'aesthetic' norms and the expectations of this audience. The commercial success of the "Threepenny Opera" is actually one of the best examples of this fact. It is, however, not this fact, but its 'supplement' corollary which is truly troubling. For one must ask: can artistic productions, in particular theatrical performances, reach, under capitalist conditions, their intended audience, the revolutionary working class?

Under these conditions any artistic institution (such as theatre), involving the collaboration of a number of persons and demanding not insignificant material resources can ensure its relatively longer-term, continuous existence, if it obeys to some degree the framing conditions of the cultural market.³⁹ To visit the theatre, you have to become a 'consumer', in the economic sense of this term, who can 'acquire' a product by paying for it the requested price. It is not necessarily their inability to buy a ticket that makes the idea of a regular proletarian audience rather improbable and rare. It is rather the fact that members of the working class tend to regard, on the basis of their historical experience and tradition, the very institution of the theatre a typically bourgeois one, with the conventions of which they are not familiar, something alien. In fact Brecht's epic theatre never succeeded, neither during Benjamin's life, nor afterwards, under the allegedly 'socialist' conditions of the DDR, to reach a working class audience. This makes understandable Benjamin's emphatic demand: a radical author must effectively challenge and change the institutional "literary relations of

³⁹ Attempts to challenge directly these conditions, undertaken in the radically changed cultural atmosphere of the late sixties - street theatre, early radical forms of "happenings" and performance art - failed just in this respect. The "musealisation" of the productions of performance artists is a particularly telling example of the great surviving power and accommodative capacity of the traditional institutions of art, able to envelop with an aesthetic halo even the most anti-aesthetical.

production" not only by some programmatic statements, by his/her work itself – and at the same time discloses its unrealisability.

"The Author as Producer", with its theory of 'literarisation' contains some of the most fruitful ideas of Benjamin concerning literature. In accordance with his radical-practical approach to what is conventionally regarded as a work of art, it emphasises the potential contribution of literary works to a desirable change in the relation of the work to its recipients, to foster an activity of the reader/viewer in an emancipatory way. At the same time this essay represents in a sense the failure of his own project, to be a strategist in the literary struggles of the time. For in fact, in spite of some rhetorically very powerful positive formulations, he ultimately offers very little that could truly orient the radical writers/intellectuals of his own time, how they could practically contribute to this task. His best known, late great writing, the *Artwork* essay, in a sense represents a retreat. In 1934 he still tried to find out how radical-revolutionary intellectuals as writers (without becoming uncalled for, in fact counter-revolutionary 'mentors' of the working class) could consciously contribute to such a task. In his discussion of the film, however, he explicitly marginalises this question – beyond his criticism of "political art" – as being of no real significance. "We do not dispute", he writes, "that in some particular cases films today can also foster a revolutionary criticism of social relations, even of the order of property. But they are no more in the centre of interest of the present study than they are at the centre of West-European film-production."⁴⁰ This later remark certainly refers not only to the relative rarity of such Western films, because – as we know – in their competition with the mainstream cinema, it is 'the star and the dictator' who necessarily emerge victorious. Without revoking his idea about the 'prophetic'-redemptive capacity of all true works of art, he now underlies not only the unintentional character of such 'secret signals', their independence from all conscious authorial designs, but also their practical insignificance for the broad mass of recipients. For the

⁴⁰ "Das Kunstwerk ... Dritte Fassung"; G.S.: vol. I/2, p. 492/ S. W.: vol. 4, p. 262.

masses, even under utopian conditions, will never have an interest in such works of 'high' art.

Benjamin himself is conscious of the fact that his late writings represent not only a change of topic (from literature to film), but also a definite change of theoretical approach as well. Among the notes to the second variant of the *Artwork* essay there is a very short (and for Benjamin rather uncharacteristic) self-critical remark. "'The Author as Producer' neglects, in favour of the instructive value (Lehrwert), the consumptive value (Konsumwert)"⁴¹, meaning the value of the work for recipients who under capitalist conditions are socially posited as consumers. The question addressed remains fundamentally the same: what can some works, offered on the cultural market as 'art', do under these conditions for the radical transformations of these very relations. But he now raises it from the viewpoint of the average 'consumer' as 'mass' recipient.

No doubt, this change of approach is in some sense a reaction to the victory of fascism which, while radically instrumentalising all art, so successfully and skilfully used its allure for the most reactionary, oppressive ends, simultaneously proving the impotence of radical artists/intellectuals to offer any effective resistance against this social disaster. Benjamin already in 1930, in his essay about Jünger⁴², described the "aestheticisation of politics" as a fundamental characteristic of fascism, partly explaining its mass success. In opposition to such a false allure that actually fixes the masses as a merely emotive and reactive unity aesthetically enjoying its own magnificence, true works of 'high' art demand the hard and sustained labour of adequate understanding from every recipient to comprehend their 'prophetic'-redemptive sense. But the exploited masses have neither the cultural resources, nor the time and interest to undertake such an arduous task. To this rather evident negative consideration Benjamin, however, adds one which is much more important and, for him, positive.

⁴¹ G. S.: vol. VII/2, p. 678.

⁴² C f. "Theorien des deutschen Faschismus", G. S.: vol. III. pp. 238-250/S. W.: vol. 2, pp. 312-321.

The masses, even under the most utopian conditions, in which such considerations necessarily would fall away, cannot be won over to 'high' art and for a good reason that he certainly regards as legitimate. For the masses demand from any work of art "something warming", offering "comfort of the heart" – the pleasure of playful distraction. This is the manifestation of their inextirpable but unconscious hope in and desire of the bliss of a collective future of redemption. In its unconscious character, however, this desire can easily be manipulated by the bourgeois cultural apparatus. This is just the function and also the ground of the mass appeal of kitsch. It is in view of this that Benjamin formulates the basic question to be answered by the *Artwork* essay: Are there such forms of cultural production, made possible by recent technical advances, that share the same mass appeal, but can unintentionally, owing to their technical structure alone, offer another, non-manipulative satisfaction of our Messianistic desire? He answers it in a radical way. "Nowadays perhaps only the film is equal to this task, in any case it is the most ready for such a task."⁴³

"*Only the film*" – this is a sharp verdict, expressing Benjamin's final resignation from the belief in the potential social effectiveness of literature for revolutionary ends. He certainly does not give up the general idea of 'literarisation' as the great historical tendency, undermining any fixed difference between the cultural roles of authors/artists as creators, on the one hand, and readers/viewers, as their recipients, on the other hand. Now, however, it is no more the 'letters', even not their depraved form of the newspaper, that appear as the main agents of this progressive change. It is the film that is truly capable to promote this end – a 'literarisation' without substantive contribution from any type of literature.

In the "Introduction" of the *Artwork* essay Benjamin underlines the radical intentions of his writing, situating it within the Marxist tradition. He intends only to apply to the superstructure the method of Marxian analysis of the developmental tendencies of the economic base of capitalist society, critically disclosing the

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 500.

possibility of its overcoming. His task is to present theses “on the developmental tendencies of art under contemporary conditions of production” that are able to satisfy definite “prognostic requirements”.⁴⁴ This is, however, an unfulfilled promise in the sense that it is not what he substantively does in the essay. True, in the first few sections of the text he outlines the basic process of transformation in the character and understanding of ‘art’, determined by the development of the new techniques of reproduction and reproducibility. He primarily discusses here effect of the wide dissemination of the photographic reproductions of works of (fine) art. It has led to the fundamental destabilisation of the traditional concept of art as an autonomous realm: the destruction of aura and the associated contemplative form of reception, a break with the cultic foundation of art, and the liquidation of the value of tradition reified in the idea of cultural heritage. These are, however, processes that he presents as already accomplished, essentially closed, even if still misrecognised or denied by reactionary theorists. “In so far as the age of technical reproducibility separated art from its cultic foundations, it extinguished forever the semblance of its autonomy.”⁴⁵ This discussion primarily aims to reject as nonsensical and irrelevant the usual question whether film – film in general – is or is not a form of art. In fact his analysis of film concentrates on the *generic and stable* features of its impact as a specific medium upon the audience. He rather clearly assumes that once the fundamental “technical structure” of the classical narrative film has been formed, it does not undergo in respect of this ‘hidden’ social significance any basic changes. In this regard it is quite revealing that he pays no particular attention to that obvious and great transformation which was still a matter of prolonged and heated disputes at this time: the transition from silent to sound film. He directly addresses it only in a footnote that deals solely with the economic (and transient political) causes of this development.⁴⁶ In fact he explicitly states: “in

⁴⁴ G. S.: vol. 1/2, p. 473/ S. W.: vol. 4, p. 252.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 486/ p. 258.

⁴⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 482-483/ p. 273.

this respect [meaning its basic effect upon the recipients - G. M.] the sound film changed nothing essential (Grundsätzliches)"⁴⁷. His whole approach to film is directed at the disclosure of those 'secret signals', which its very medium and technique offer to its mass audience, not only prefiguring the redemptive future, but due to the specific character of this reception in a sense also preparing the masses for its realisation. Benjamin is not concerned at all with the specific *message* of specific films, but with the *medium* of the film in general, from the viewpoint of its potential mass effectiveness.

It is in this respect that the opening discussion about photographic reproductions of works of art serves also a positive function. It introduces the very matrix of the ensuing analysis of the film - the viewpoint of the *masses*.⁴⁸ The widespread use and popularity of such reproductions makes manifest "the passionate striving (Anliegen) of contemporary masses to 'bring closer' the things both spatially and humanly, and equally their tendency to overcome the uniqueness (Einmaliges) of all that is given through the reception of its reproduction."⁴⁹ This twofold predisposition is the symptom and constituent of an historical process of immense significance: "the adjustment (Ausrichtung) of reality to the masses and of the masses to reality"⁵⁰.

Film is not only an art *for* the masses, it is an art *of* the masses as well, and in a double sense. On the one hand, it is the first artistic medium, fully capable of representing the masses as masses, as a collective in motion and change. "Mass movements in general are more clearly captured by the apparatus [that is, the camera] than by

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 489/p. 260. - There are also both silent and sound films among the few that he, without any discrimination, explicitly mentions for illustrative purposes in the texts.

⁴⁸ This discussion in an obvious way continues and radicalises the ideas he first developed in 1931, in the essay on the history of photography. At the same time there is a fundamental change in the orientation of these two writings. The radical expectations concerning the social potential of photography as such are conspicuously absent from the *Artwork* essay. Though in a single paragraph he recapitulates some of the most important points he made earlier concerning the past development of photography in general, his substantive discussion is explicitly restricted to a single, very specific case: photos of works of art. There are, as he clearly states, only two manifestations of the new technologies directly relevant to the fate of art: "reproduction of artworks and the art of the film" (*ibid.*, p. 475/ p. 253.)

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 479/ p. 255.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 480/p. 256.

the eye.”⁵¹ This potential has been truly realised only by some Russian films, in which it is not professional actors who play the role of chief protagonists, but “people who portray *themselves*, and first of all in their process of labour”⁵².

This possibility of the members of the mass to participate – precisely as members of the mass – in the making of films signals the emergence of a new type of mass demand: the legitimate claim of every human being to appear before the public through reproduction. “Any man today may lay claim to being filmed.”⁵³ This is not a claim or right to “fifteen minutes of fame”. Benjamin conceives it as the manifestation within this medium of the already discussed tendency of ‘literarisation’, one of the forms in which the collapse of any fixed divide between the creators (“authors”) and the recipients of a public culture appears today. For ‘authorship’ traditionally meant first of all the legitimacy of a claim to public attention socially conferred upon some persons to the exclusion of others, the members of the culturally passive mass. Every person’s ‘right’ to be filmed is an historically created expectation and the not yet truly realised capacity of everyone to claim the attention of others, of the public.

No doubt, this expectation in the capitalist West primarily appeared in an “infamous form (verrufene Gestalt)”⁵⁴, in the delusionary mass aspiration to become a ‘star’ in Hollywoods. But the enormous interest that the performance of the screen actor evokes in the masses is also something understandable.⁵⁵ For his/her accomplishment has an exemplary significance – exemplary partly in the sense that it makes clear in the most developed and radical form the kind of requirements one must to some degree

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 506/ p. 282.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 494/ p. 262. – In his early paper on Eisenstein’s “Potemkin” Benjamin presented this capacity of filmic representation in an unambiguously positive light. In the *Artwork* essay its dangers, the possibilities it offers for Fascist manipulation and propaganda, are strongly emphasised. However, already the early paper referred to the difference between the “architectonic” presentation of masses in Soviet films and their “monumentalisation” in some commercial (UFA) German film productions (cf G. S.: vol. II/2, p. 753/ S. W.: vol. 2, p. 18).

⁵³ “Das Kunstwerk ..., Dritte Fassung”; G. S.: vol. I/2, p. 493/ S. W.: vol. 4, p. 262.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 503/ p. 267.

⁵⁵ Cf. “Das Kunstwerk ..., Erste Fassung); G. S.: vol. I/2, pp. 450 and 454.

satisfy to legitimately raise the claim "to being filmed". Benjamin begins his substantive analysis of the significance of the filmic medium with the discussion of the specificity of this accomplishment.

Of course, the screen actor, just like the actor on the stage, always plays some role, whereas the claim of the common people is that of presenting themselves. However, as a claim to public attention, it can only be justified if in portraying themselves they also represent some socially significant 'others' as well. A 'reader' can become an author in the socially significant sense only if his/her his voice is that of a 'specialist', expressing knowledge and experiences shared by some others too, by persons who fulfil the same useful function within the social division of labour. So "being filmed" – if it is to mean more than being accidentally shot as a passer-by on a newsreel – demands the portrayal of oneself as a socially recognisable 'character'. Just as the public transmission of one's knowledge as a 'specialist' requires definite literary skills, the satisfaction of (at least minimal) requirements of the given form of written communication, self-portrayal on film also must meet some minimal demands raised by the technique of the film. It is the screen actor who must face these requirements in their full extent, thus his/her performance makes their nature and their radical novelty clear in an exemplary way.

This performance does not only substantively differ from, it is directly opposed to, what is expected from an actor in the theatre. On the stage the actor is present in his/her living personality which is therefore enveloped by the aura that necessarily surrounds each human being in encounters with others as the capacity to return the others' gaze. The performer on film, however, is presented through an apparatus as an image that never can return the gaze of the beholder. It is watched in the darkness of the cinema in a way that would be inappropriate and embarrassing if looking at a living person. Of course, neither does the stage actor reciprocate the gaze of the viewers, he or she, however, can and must adjust the actual performance to the perceived reaction of the audience, can and must remain in contact with it. In film for the first time "man comes into a

situation where he must operate with his whole living person while foregoing its aura."⁵⁶

In the traditional theatre the success of the actor depends on his/her ability to identify with the role: to animate and individuate the appropriate authorial texts and instructions. In general the film actor is denied this possibility. What appears as a unique and unitary performance on the screen is produced by a subsequent, selective assemblage of a multitude of separate, often repeated takes, spread over a considerable time. In such a way not just the performance becomes radically fragmented, but close-ups usually fragment even the actor's body-image. For the realisation of some takes the actor is treated as a mere prop, while in some films inanimate props (such as the unstoppable movement of the hands of the clock) may assume the role of a major protagonist. And each take represents, as it were, an optical test, testing the aptitude of the actor to exhibit for the camera the whole gamut of expressive behaviour and interaction demanded by the script and the director. Benjamin compares in this respect the performance of the film actor with that of the sportsman. The performance of the latter is also tested, however, only according to elementary physical standards, by being measured in seconds and centimetres.⁵⁷ Precisely therefore tests in sport are "extremely primitive"⁵⁸ in comparison with testing the individual vis-à-vis some apparatus. Every industrial worker undergoes incessantly just such a testing in his/her labour with the machine in a factory. This tests, however, only the capacity for an extremely limited and one-sided mechanical performance. It is only in the making of a film that an individual submits his/her whole person to an ongoing testing by an apparatus.

⁵⁶ "Das Kunstwerk . . . , Dritte Fassung"; G. S.: vol. I/2, p. 489/ S. W.: vol. 4, p. 260.

⁵⁷ Benjamin certainly was not a sports-fan and his idea of modern sport is rather peculiar. "The old agonal form is visibly disappearing from modern sport activity. It relinquishes competition that measures man against man. The Olympics are retrograde. It is not without reason that Nurmi is spoken of running against the clock. This statement clarifies the contemporary position of sport activity. It divorces itself from the agon, to take a direction towards the test." (Notes to "Das Kunstwerk . . . , Erste Fassung"; G. S.: vol. I/3, p. 1039-1040.)

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

The performance of the stage actor stands opposed to the one in a film as emphatic integrity, animation and individuation are opposed to fragmentation, reification and self-alienation (Selbstentfremdung). The success of the former consists in becoming in his/her physical presence somebody else for a live audience. The success of the film actor, on the other hand, depends on his/her ability to preserve through all this fragmentation and estrangement before and by the apparatus the image of his/her individuality for the physically absent, virtual collective of the massed audience. "For the film it matters less that the actor represents someone else for an audience than that he represents himself for the apparatus."⁵⁹ Such an achievement is possible because the actor filmed should not (and really cannot) lose sight of what is absent – the audience as the ultimate and solely decisive instance of testing. "While he stands before the apparatus, the film actor knows that in the last instance he must be dealing with the public, the public of consumers (Abnehmer) who constitute the market."⁶⁰ It is the public, beyond his reach, to whom he offers his whole person and of whom he must be aware all the time. By relating to the public through all the intervening apparatus, the actor can attain a "highly productive realisation" of his/her self-alienation, transforming it into a form of objectively mediated self-presentation and self-affirmation. In this consists the fundamental, universal exemplariness of his/her performance. It represents, as a 'secret signal', the possibility of a radically new type of human conduct and activity. It prefigures a way of asserting one's personality through an intentional relation to a collectivity (encompassing also those who are physically distant), while successfully meeting the impersonal requirements of a complex technical apparatus. "To perform in the glare of arc lamps and simultaneously to meet also the requirement of the microphone, this is a test performance of first rank. To accomplish it means to preserve one's humanity in the face of the apparatus. There is an

⁵⁹ "Das Kunstwerk..., Dritte Fassung"; G. S.: vol. 1/2, pp. 488-489/ S. W.: vol. 4, p. 260. – About the significance of playing/portraying *oneself* under conditions when one cannot *be* oneself see also the essay on Kafka (G. S.: vol. 11/2, pp. 422-423? S. W.: vol. 2, pp. 804-805.)

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 492/ p. 261.

enormous interest in this performance. For it is in face of some apparatus before which the majority of city-dwellers must alienate their humanity during the work-day in the offices and factories. In the evening these same masses fill the cinemas to experience (erleben), how the film actor takes a revenge on their behalf, not only by asserting his humanity (or what appears to them as such) against the apparatus, but also by making this apparatus serve this triumph of his."⁶¹

The actor on film achieves this triumph by intentionally relating during the whole performance before the apparatus to the absent public as the ultimate instance of all testing, the sole valid critic whose virtual appraisal should never be lost from his/her sight. This is again an "important social index" distinguishing the new medium of the film from the traditional, 'consecrated' forms of art. As the social impact of the latter, owing to their aspiration to autonomy, declines, there is an ever-growing separation within the public between the attitude of critical appreciation by 'connoisseurs' and that of 'naïve' enjoyment. "In the cinema the critical and the pleasurable (geniessende) attitudes of the public coincide."⁶² In respect to the film no one can legitimately claim specific competence conferring a particular authority of interpretation and evaluation. The (hierarchical) differentiation between the position of the critic and of the 'naïve' recipient here falls away. In this respect there is a further (and now closer) analogy with sport: "It is related to the technique of the film, just as of the sport, that everyone attending the presented performances does so as a quasi-expert (halber Fachman). One needs only once to listen to a group of newspaper boys, leaning on their bicycles and discussing the outcome of a cycle race, to understand this fact fully."⁶³

The general public can take up this role of the valid and decisive critical instance, because it does not stand – in distinction to the theatre audience – in "any kind of personal contact with the actor"⁶⁴,

⁶¹ "Das Kunstwerk ... , Zweite Fassung"; G. S.: vol. VII/1, p. 365/ S. W.: vol. 3, p. 111.

⁶² "Das Kunstwerk ... , Dritte Fassung"; G. S.: vol. I/2, p. 487/ S. W.: vol. 4, p. 264.

⁶³ *Ibid.*; p. 492/ p. 262.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 488/ p. 260.

that is, it is free from the impact of the aura of his/her person. This, however, seems to produce an unresolved paradox. For the liquidation of the aura, as the expression of the striving of contemporary masses "to get closer to things spatially and humanly", means the abolition of the distance dividing the recipient from the artwork. A critical attitude, on the other hand, is necessarily that of mental distancing. Actually those early theorists of the film, like Béla Balázs or Jean Epstein, who well before Benjamin underlined the capacity of the film "to annul the fixed distance of the spectator"⁶⁵, related this to the fact that the technique of the film renders possible the emphatic identification of the viewer with what is represented on the screen. This not only intensifies the film's cathartic effect, but also gives it - in comparison with the theatre - completely new directions. For Balázs this referred primarily to a tendency towards the interiorisation of a plurality of perspectives, for Epstein towards a reanimation of even physical objects, the experiencing of "the soul of things". For Benjamin, however, the collapse of auratic distancing does not result in the intimacy of acritical identification. It does create closeness, but it is the closeness of a particular type, of relaxed scrutiny. Certainly this latter 'dialectically' involves a moment of distanciation as well; this is, however, a distance that does not originate in the cultic character of the art-object to be culturally imposed upon the submissive 'mere' recipient. It stems from the very activity of the recipient. This activity is not something arbitrary, merely subjective, external to the film. Its character and direction are determined by the technique of the film itself that enables and demands such a critical attitude. It is also based on an act of required identification from the side of the viewer - only not with that which is represented on the screen. "The public emphatically identifies itself (fühlt sich ein) with the actor only in so far as it identifies itself with the apparatus [that is,

⁶⁵ This is the formulation of Balázs, B; 1984: vol. II, p. 56. Epstein similarly emphasised the intimate proximity of the spectator to the filmic image: "It is not even true that there is air in-between them." (Cf. Abel, R; 1988: vol. I, p. 239).

the camera - G. M.]. The audience takes over the position of the later: it is testing."⁶⁶

The idea that the position of the viewer in the cinema is (ideally) that of the camera will be taken up again by some of the major representatives of post-war film theory, primarily by Metz and Baudry. In their understanding, however, such a viewing position results primarily in the disembodiment of vision, in the closing of the distance between the accomplishments of the physical eye of the reactive organism and the Cartesian "eye of the mind" of the active, knowing subject. Benjamin's interpretation is radically opposed to such a theory. By taking up the position of the camera, the viewer essentially embodies, *incorporates* the new technology into his/her sensibility and habitual comportment. This changed mode of perception is a necessary constituent of a new type of active bodily relation to human environment. In the first variant of the essay he characterised this form of reception as the "*human innervation*" of the technical apparatus, while in the second variant he emphatically underlined the *collective* character of this innervation.⁶⁷ The true historical function of the film is to offer an exercise for the masses in this new type of interaction between human collectivities and their technology.⁶⁸

Collective innervation - both terms in this complex designation are of decisive importance for Benjamin. The film reverses the centuries' long trend of the evolution of 'autonomous' art towards the pronounced privatisation of aesthetic experience. It reinstates the collective character of the reception of the works. This means for him more than the simple fact that films - already of economic necessity - are and must be played for a multiplicity of 'massed' audiences, assemblages of a relatively large number of otherwise unassociated persons. He conceives the audience of the film at least as an anonymous proto-collectivity. "[N]owhere more than in the

⁶⁶ G. S.: vol. I/2, p.488/ S. W.: vol. 4, p. 260.

⁶⁷ Cf. G. S.: vol. I/2, p. 445 and vol. VII/1, p. 360? This latter in English: S. W.: vol. 3, p. 124. - Concerning the historical background of the notion of "innervation" and its employment in Benjamin's earlier writings see Hansen, M; 1999 and 2004.

⁶⁸ Cf. G. S.: vol. I/2, pp 444-445.

cinema are the reactions of the individual, the sum-total of which makes up the mass reaction of the public, already conditioned by the directly expected massification (*Massierung*) of these reactions."⁶⁹ In this way it is the expected and actual reactions of the others – their laughter, small, involuntary signs of surprise, pleasure or displeasure etc. – that “organise and control” the reactions of the individual, not allowing the viewer to be immersed in the train of his/her private associations. The massed audience thus acts as a collective instance of control, self-organising its response – keeping the viewing of the film essentially in track with the movement of the camera.

The incorporation of the position of the camera into the viewer’s perception first of all results in a great expansion of the human sensorium, most directly that of vision. It makes visible what is invisible to the naked eye, thus it creates a “new region of consciousness”⁷⁰. The fundamental achievement of the film in this respect consists for Benjamin in the conquest of the “*optical unconscious*”⁷¹. Freud for the first time made analysable and recognisable those usually unnoticed, insignificant details of behaviour that actually disclose the unconscious depth of the instinctive and emotive life of the subject. The film created a similar deepening of the perception of the visual world. Its technique rendered directly observable what the perceptual apparatus of the body may roughly register in its overall effect, but cannot consciously notice in its constitutive details. Through close-ups, slow motion, and changes in framing, the film discloses for the first time quite unexpected aspects of bodily behaviour – what is actually involved in walking, in the use of the most commonplace objects, in the facial expression of emotions etc. As a result, “an unconsciously permeated space takes the place of the space permeated by human consciousness.”⁷² The film transforms and transposes the “*tacit*

⁶⁹ “Das Kunstwerk ... , Dritte Fassung”; G. S.: vol. I/2, p. 497/ S. W.: Vol. 4, p. 264.

⁷⁰ “Erweiterung...”; G. S.: vol. II/2, p. 452/ S. W.: vol.2, p. 17.

⁷¹ “Das Kunstwerk ... , Dritte Fassung”; G. S.: vol. I/2, p.500/ S. W.: vol. 4, p. 266. – This notion first appeared with Benjamin in the essay on the history of photography (cf. G. S.: vol. II/1, pp. 371-372/ S. W.: vol. 2, pp. 510-512).

⁷² *Ibid.*

knowledge" of the body into the realm of perceivable images, making it consciously recognisable, something that we can thus master and intentionally change. In this way it promotes - and this constitutes one of its revolutionary functions - "the mutual interpenetration (*Durchdringen*) of art and science"⁷³.

At the same time the film changes also the apprehension of our surroundings. "Film can be characterised not only by the way man presents himself to the recording apparatus, but also by how he presents for himself through its help the immediate environment (*Umwelt*)."⁷⁴ The film shows the depressively familiar and ugly urban milieu, our places of work, leisure and home, in which we are hopelessly enclosed, from a multitude of new perspectives, in their unexpected, hidden details as well as from totalising overviews and in striking counterpositions. It "exploded this prison-world (*Kerkerwelt*) with the dynamite of tenth of a second" and in this way it "enriched, on the one hand, the insight into those necessities which govern our lives ..., and, on the other hand, it comes to assure for us an immense and unsuspected field of action (*Spielraum*)"⁷⁵. It opens up the urban landscape for journeys of exploration and adventure among the debris of what seemed to be unchangeable in its familiarity.

As the very idea of a "bodily innervation of the collective" already indicates, the impact of the film cannot be reduced to this aspect of the extension and deepening of the realm of visual perception and orientation. Though the 'massed' recipients of the film are its 'viewers', the incorporation of the changing positions of the camera into their own perceptive attitudes transcends in its effects the realm of the optical-ocular that ultimately always remains an attitude of contemplation. Some of Benjamin's remarks on this count prefigure the anti-ocularcentrist tendency of later French theorists.⁷⁶ "The tasks which face the human apparatus of perception at historical turning points cannot be solved by means of

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 499/ p. 265.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 498/ p. 265

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 499/ p. 265.

⁷⁶ On this see Jay, M; 1993.

the merely optical, that is, by contemplation. They are mastered gradually under the guidance of tactile reception, through habituation."⁷⁷ The radical possibilities of our times are partly disclosed in "this domination of the tactile (taktile Dominante) in the optical itself"⁷⁸.

This decisive "tactile" element in the collective reception of the film refers partly to its anti-auratic technique, creating the impression of a closeness akin to *touch*. It is, however, not so much 'being touched' that Benjamin's use of this term intends to underline, but rather the active movement of the touching hand that mimetically reproduces and through habituation 'innervates' the salient features of the shape of the encountered physical object. What he calls the "tactile" component of the seemingly purely visual perception, is perhaps more accurately referred to as the *kinaesthetic* element of the audience's experience. By incorporating the viewpoint of the camera, the viewing subject unconsciously develops such perceptive and somatic-motor dispositions that are truly adequate to the encounter with the objects of modern technology and the phenomena of modern urban life. In this sense film is a "true instrument of training (eigentliches Übungsinstrument)"⁷⁹ for the necessary deep reorganisation of human perception and, more broadly, for the creation of a new, collective physis.

This aspect of Benjamin's analysis is particularly underlined by his emphasis upon the similarities between the reception of film and that of *architecture*. Architecture - from early on an object of enduring interest for Benjamin - is the historically first and only truly perennial form of art: "man's need for shelter (Unterkunft) is permanent"⁸⁰. Its significance, however, is primarily based on the way that the art of building is situated in the broader context of human activities. On the one hand, it is the form of art most closely related to the general level and character of technical development.

⁷⁷ "Das Kunstwerk ..., Dritte Fassung"; G. S.: vol. 1/2, p. 505/ S. W.: vol. 4, p. 268.

⁷⁸ "Das Kunstwerk ..., Erste Fassung"; G. S. vol. 1/2, p. 466.

⁷⁹ "Das Kunstwerk ..., Dritte Fassung"; G. S.: vol. 1/2, p. 504/ S. W.: vol. 4, p.268.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

On the other hand, it is the art no less directly connected with, and providing the material framework for, the organisation of everyday life, both in private and public. "The laws of technical construction ... become through dwelling the very laws of life itself."⁸¹ Thus architecture can play the role of a transmitter between technological development and changes in the life-experiences of the masses. For this reason "reception schooled in architecture" possesses – especially in times of great historical transitions – a "canonical value".⁸²

Benjamin emphasises three interrelated features of the apprehension of buildings. First, it has *collective* character⁸³ – an assertion that seems to imply that he is talking about public buildings alone⁸⁴. Second, the predominant component of such an apprehension is not of visual, but of *tactile* modality, in the sense that the multiple visual impressions of a building are organised into a single imagined whole through relating them to, and localising them in its interiorised "tactile" topography. "One can have no idea of such a reception, if one conceives it in the way of that concentration that usually characterises the traveller before a famous building."⁸⁵ "Tactile" does not mean here of course 'touching'. Benjamin elsewhere characterises its distinction from seeing as "feeling through structures"⁸⁶. Such a reception is formed

⁸¹ "Bücher, die lebendig geblieben sind" (1929); G. S.: vol. III, p. 170.

⁸² "Das Kunstwerk ..., Dritte Fassung"; G. S.: vol. I/2, p. 505/ S. W.: vol. 4, p. 268.

⁸³ Cf *ibid.*, p. 504/ p. 268.

⁸⁴ This, of course, represents such a radical restriction of the scope of the discussion that – undertaken without any explication – may well be regarded as a quite questionable sleight of hand. (It is also hardly reconcilable with Benjamin's own analysis of the significance of *bourgeois intérieurs*.) One can make only two remarks on this count. On the one hand, he has consistently argued that the development of the modern architecture of glass and iron leads to, or at least prefigures, the undermining of the division between the public and the private – a tendency that he traced back to the Parisian arcades. On the other hand, as this latter reference already indicates, his discussion of the reception of architecture is equally well, or perhaps even better applicable to the experience of the city by its inhabitants – one the most important topics in his late writings. "Streets are the dwellings of the collective." (*Das Arkaden-Werk*; G. S.: vol. V/1, p. 533). But then one could ask, whether the city as a whole can be treated as an artwork, even in that radically demystified sense in which Benjamin uses this term.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 504-505/ p. 268.

⁸⁶ "Strenge Kunstwissenschaft – Erste Fassung"; G. S.: vol. III, p. 368/ S. W.: vol. 2, p. 670 – My inept English translation actually intends to draw attention to the untranslatability of

by approaching and entering a building as surrounding space (Umraum), by moving around and in it, and thereby gradually acquiring the "spatial sense" (Raumsinn) of its external and internal structure, its complex topography. For, and this is the third point, such an adequate apprehension of an architectural object does not come about through a (perhaps prolonged) act of concentrated attention allowing the recipient to be absorbed by such a work of art. On the contrary, in the case of the normal reception of a building, it is this latter that becomes 'absorbed' by the recipient, is incorporated into the bodily orientation of the moving/acting subject in the course of a 'distracted' *habituation* (Gewöhnung).⁸⁷ It is living in a building or 'using' it in ways appropriate to its public function that one gradually masters, assimilates through the unconscious training of habituation, its architectonics.

According to Benjamin all these features of the apprehension of buildings equally characterise the 'viewing' of a film. This is one of the most important constituents of its historical significance. For even though the sensuous relation to his/her built environment is a necessary and important element of lived experience for any city-dweller, reception of buildings (or of the cityscape) is still a relation to a very particular type and limited range of objects. The film, radically extending the scope and reach of vision, technically recreates within the realm of the optical the same characteristics that up to the present pertained only to our immediate, but active relation to what constitutes, both in a direct and in a broad sense, our 'home'. This is the great redemptive promise of film. It prefigures the possibility of an embodied, practical relation to all that in principle can be made visible, to all that surrounds us, as to a world in which we can be truly 'at home'.

The way in which the film can not only prefigure, but at the same time – as an Übungsinstrument – also prepare for the coming of this radically new relation to the world, is analysed in depth by Benjamin in his discussion of a particular, but also particularly

Benjamin's formulation: *Durchspüren von Strukturen*. "Durchspüren" means both – an ambiguity certainly intended by him – "feeling into" and "searching through" something.

⁸⁷ Cf. "Das Kunstwerk ..., Dritte Fassung"; G. S. Vol. I/2, pp.504-505? S. W.: vol. 4, p. 268.

important case: adaptation to *shock*. Shock is the defining feature of experience in modernity. The individual in the crowd and the traffic of the modern city as well as in his/her work at a machine is constantly exposed to its experience. He/she is constantly bombarded by stimuli that are characterised, on the one hand, by the lack of any organic continuity in their temporal sequence and, on the other hand, by the numbing repetitiveness of this sequence. Benjamin here takes over in a historicised form Freud's theory of consciousness as a "protective shield" against the traumatic effect of shocks. By merely registering them, consciousness prevents their penetrations into the deeper layers of the psyche, their impress on the Ego.⁸⁸ But the shield that protects also isolates – the development of this defensive mechanism necessarily results in the decay and disintegration of *Erfahrung*, of the capacity for the shared and communicable experience of the world. In this respect protection from shock and the experience of the aura have fundamentally similar functions and effects – *defence through self-isolation*.

The technique and the medium of the film both prefigure another form of adaptation to the dangerous conditions of modern life and simultaneously habituate, 'train' the individual to its acquisition. And this is a form freed from all the destructive, desensitising consequences of a self-imposed, psychic isolation.

The actor in the film, as we have seen, provides the model of how an individual can preserve his/her full humanity, express and realise his/her personality in all interactions before and with the apparatus without the protective shield of the aura. The reception of films, on the other hand, points to a way individuals can defend themselves from the potentially destructive, traumatic impact ('shock') of modern life, not through an isolating anaesthetisation but by developing a new form of *aisthesis*, a collective and active *mental attunement* to this world. Montage, the fundamental novel element of the technical structure of the film, exposes its audience to

⁸⁸ Cf. "Einige Motive ..."; G. S.: vol. I/2, pp. 612-616, 629-633/ S. W.: vol. 4, pp. 316-319 and 327-330. On the broader context on Benjamin's views on this problem see esp. Buck-Morss, S; 1992.

a particularly striking sequence of unexpected shocks. And in the practical safety of the cinema, its collective public is progressively trained to react to shocks not with the protective shield of blockage, but with a mental *habitus* that Benjamin designates as “heightened presence of the mind (gesteigerte Geistesgegenwart)”⁸⁹. “Film is the art form corresponding to the increased threat to life that faces people today. The need to expose oneself to shock effects represents an adaptation of men to the dangers threatening them. Film corresponds to profound changes in the apparatus of perception – changes that are lived through on the scale of private existence by each passer-by in the big-city traffic, and on a historical scale by every present-day citizen.”⁹⁰

This *Geistesgegenwart* is a quite particular mind-set. It is distinct both from the concentrated attention that idealist theories of art demanded from the subject of aesthetic experience, allowing it to immerse itself in the singular art-object, and equally from that fleeting and non-reflexive, passive registering of impressions that actually inhibits all attention. It is characterised by the paradoxical combination of relaxation and virtual alertness, or, in Benjamin’s formulation, of distraction and critical acuity. In the cinema “the public is an examiner, but a distracted one”⁹¹.

Distraction, *Zerstreuung* is the antithesis of the attentive concentration, *Sammlung* of the traditional lover of art. It is the relaxed following of the unfolding of things or events. This distraction, however, is equally opposed to absent-mindedness that (defensively) allows things simply to slip away without trace. It goes together with a critical attitude. This latter refers not only to the capacity for an active, global evaluation, which equally characterises – as he earlier underlined – all the recipients in the cinema. “Critical” also designates the ever present, latent readiness of the “distracted” observer or viewer to react sharply and immediately to *krisis*, a turning point when decision must be made. The viewer of the film repeatedly faces such crises: crises of perception, when

⁸⁹ “Das Kunstwerk ... , Dritte Fassung”; G. S.: vol. 1/2, p. 503/ S. W.: vol. 4, p. 267.

⁹⁰ Ibid, p. 503/ p. 281.

⁹¹ Ibid, p. 505/ p. 269.

some perceivable event suddenly interrupts the expected flow of happenings, signalling some general danger, an undreamt possibility or a radically new meaning. As Benjamin indicates, distraction actually goes together with the rapidity (*Schnelligkeit*) of such reactions.⁹²

The reception of the film is the training ground for the development of such a mental *habitus*, because of the fundamental technical structure of the film itself. "Technical structure" refers in this case not only to such particular operations as montage – it concerns the dialectic of continuity and discontinuity that constitutes the very essence of filmic representation. In the cinema any new image, even if it is spatially and/or temporarily discontinuous with the preceding sequence, is perceived as its 'natural' continuation, since its meaning is determined by it: they are the unfolding of the same story.⁹³ At the same time any new sequence of images, however continuous it is with the preceding ones, can always unexpectedly and retrospectively change, throw new light on the whole meaning of what has gone before. This is why film is the adequate art for a world in which the routine/habitual and what is of enhanced and exceptional social significance are no longer distributed among separate social occasions. For in modernity potential dangers and new possibilities of collective import must be alertly apprehended by the individual in that kaleidoscopic change of impacts and impression that is the very routine of contemporary life, demanding only relaxed noticing.

The film *habituates* the individual to this new form of perception and apprehension, since its exercise is the elementary condition of reception, of the ability to follow, understand and enjoy a film. "Even a distracted person can form habits. What is more: the ability to master certain tasks in a state of distraction proves for the first time that their performance has become habitual. The distraction, which art is called upon to provide, offers surreptitiously (*unter der*

⁹² Cf. G. S.: vol. 1/3, p. 1041.

⁹³ "... in the film the apprehension of any single image appears to be prescribed by the sequence of all the preceding ones." ("Das Kunstwerk ...", Dritte Fassung"; G. S. Vol. 1/2, p. 485/ S. W.: vol. 4, p 285).

Hand) a way of checking how far the new tasks of perception have become solvable."⁹⁴ To learn in the course of 'real' life how to solve such tasks demands considerable effort from individuals, the failure of which may create dangers. In the security of the cinema the collective of viewers can 'painlessly' – because unconsciously and imperceptibly – train themselves to this new form of perception as a mental *habitus*.

Such training, however, can be effective on a mass scale only because this experience, the reception of a film, in the course of which it surreptitiously takes place, is self-rewarding: it is enjoyable. *Zerstreuung* means not only distraction in the sense of deconcentration, but also entertainment as 'having a good time'. Film in fact radically reverses the fundamental tendency of artistic development in modernity: the ever-growing, becoming unbridgeable, divide between 'authentic' (destined for the critical reflection of the connoisseur) and 'popular' art (pandering to the need of mere comfort). This is a development in the course of which ultimately both lose any potential social-emancipatory effectiveness. In cinema, on the other hand – as noted earlier – the critical attitude and the attitude of enjoyment, "the pleasure (*Lust*) in seeing and experiencing", coincide.⁹⁵ In its case "educative and consumptive value (*Lehrwert und Konsumwert*) converge"⁹⁶. They fall together because what the film imperceptibly 'teaches' is learned through unconscious, non-deliberative innervation. The comfort of the cinema offers not only a temporary, pleasurable relief from the unceasing and alienating demands of working life, its warming pleasure is 'nourishing', for it allows us to meet these demands in a humanly more fitting and socially more productive way.

Furthermore, this experience of the film is of collective character not only in the sense that one's apprehension of what is unfolding on the screen is steered and controlled by the inconspicuous reactions of the assembled audience. The attraction and satisfaction offered by movies is connected to a significant degree with the

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 505/ p. 268. See also G. S.: vol. 1/3, p. 1049.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 497/ p. 264.

⁹⁶ G. S.: vol. VII/2, p. 679/ S. W.: vol. 3, p. 142.

communicability of this experience. In a world where subjective experiences became increasingly inexpressible and unshareable even within the narrow circle of intimate relations, popular films offer a 'safe' subject to talk about, to retell and discuss even with casual acquaintances. These discussions in principle allow the clarification of one's own immediate reactions, the crystallisation of the first superficial and inchoate impressions and opinions. In this way also a differentiation and polarisation of such views may ultimately emerge along socially significant lines, defined by deeper needs and interests.

Of course, all these pleasures associated with the reception of the films differ radically and in principle from the bliss of happiness. They simply belong to different orders – in a sense they are incomparable. Such pleasures are phenomena pertaining to the depraved actuality of the historical present, while happiness is the ultimate gift that Messianistic redemption, breaking with the catastrophic continuity of history, can offer to a liberated mankind. But in opposition to Adorno, for Benjamin pleasure and happiness are not antithetical. What is more, while they are incomparable, they are not unrelated. For the pleasure that the viewer finds in the cinema is ultimately related – in however restricted and perhaps distorted form – to those 'secret signals' that the film, due to its generic technical structure, sends to all its viewers. This public may be unable to 'read' them consciously, but the viewers find the cinematic experience intrinsically satisfying because it meets their inextirpable desire for redemption, the radical-revolutionary turn of history.

* * *

This is Benjamin's ultimate answer to the question how, in what way and in what sense can art be 'effective', contributing to the cause of human liberation under conditions of late capitalist modernity, and what kind of artistic practices are pre-eminently capable of playing such a role. "Only the film", is his answer, for only films, due to the pleasure of relaxed distraction offered by them, can have a genuine attraction and impact upon the masses,

essentially lost by all traditional forms of art. This is a deeply 'deflationary' answer, since it offers – in opposition to Benjamin's earlier attempts – no advice whatever to radical/revolutionary authors/artists about what they should do to contribute to some degree and in some way to this end. They cannot do anything at all, is what Benjamin seems to be saying to them now. Only the film can have some positive social impact, which is furthermore unintentional from the side of its producers and unconscious on the side of the recipients. More concretely, films are capable of fulfilling such a radical or radicalising function, because, on the one hand, the adequate use of their apparatus inadvertently results in the production of images that bring to direct presence – even if in an unemphatic way – possibilities that can be really actualised only in a radically different future. On the other hand, their reception habituates in an inconspicuous way their viewers to the acquisition of a critical mental *habitus*, enabling them to face situations of crisis in a humanly more satisfactory and promising way. These are the cinema's – rather modest – contributions to the "most difficult and most important" social task of art: "to mobilise the masses"⁹⁷, to mobilise them for the task of human emancipation.

This answer of Benjamin is certainly in accord with his criticism of "political art" and his conception of radical politics. It runs, however, into significant internal difficulties, of which he is aware, but which he does not seem able to resolve even in a schematic way. The very idea of 'mobilisation' involves the formation of a *conscious unity* among a multitude of directly unrelated people in the active pursuit of a deliberately accepted (on whatever grounds) common, collective end. The public of the cinema is, however, socially and culturally quite heterogeneous (predominantly perhaps petit-bourgeois), an accidental agglomeration of people which – in Benjamin's own understanding – is incapable of such a unification, at least for the realisation of progressive-radical ends. It is a 'mere' mass, in the strict and largely negative sense of this word: an amorphous, inchoate, essentially emotive and reactive pseudo-

⁹⁷ "Das Kunstwerk ..., Dritte Fassung"; G. S.: Vol. 1/2, p. 505/ S. W.: vol. 4, pp. 268-269.

community. If it can be 'mobilised' at all, then only by the external, manipulative means of the fascist propaganda of war that imposes upon it an illusory and self-destructive unity. In the *Artwork* essay Benjamin, always a political realist, repeatedly underlines this danger of the modern technologies of communication, before the apparatuses of which it is the dictator who ultimately emerges as victorious. Only the proletariat (certainly only a segment of this public) as a *class* is capable of rational self-organisation that can be the subject of mobilisation in the desired sense. Working on the second variant of his essay, Benjamin raises this question in his notes with complete clarity: how can in the 'womb' of the mere mass of cinema public the self-conscious class emerge. He answers it, however, by the bare assertion that *some* films (and primarily not 'political' films in the sense of propaganda) can promote and strengthen (or alternatively: damage and undermine) the latently pre-given class-consciousness of the various strata of this public.⁹⁸ In the positive case this seems to be, however, that very possibility, the significance of which Benjamin explicitly marginalised, and whose ways and conditions of realisation he does not discuss at all in the different variants of this essay. In fact all those features of films, in which Benjamin locates the possibility or actuality of the progressive 'awakening' of recipients, seem rather to counteract the emergence of the adequate class-consciousness of some segment of their audience. For that demands, as he emphasises, a 'loosening up', that is, the internal differentiation of this public as a mere mass. The effects, however, that he discusses as consequences of the technical structure of the film, are subconscious ones, unrelated to the specific intentions and interests of any group of viewers, affecting all of them seemingly with the same success. Their assumed impact thus would seem actually to result in the *homogenisation* of this public, that is, in its consolidation as a 'mass'.

One can also formulate this criticism in another, perhaps sharper way. In the *Artwork* essay Benjamin presents a convincing argument

⁹⁸ Cf. G. S.: vol. VII/2, p. 668. See also the extensive footnote to the text of the second variant: G. S.: vol. VII/1, pp. 370-371 / S. W.: vol. 3, pp. 129-130.

in support of the view that films can contribute even in an anthropologically significant way to a progressive adaptation to the demands of modern life and technology. Primarily by assisting the historical transformation of human perception, they help and train individuals to face up, in a more adequate, humanly, more positive and fertile way, to the deeply dangerous demands and consequences of modern technology in its existing capitalist form. In itself, however, this hardly provides an argument in favour of their potential to contribute to the collective efforts aimed at the radical transformation of the social conditions of employment of this technology. Rather it would seem that they contribute to the consolidation of these conditions, since they ameliorate their destructive effects, reducing the human costs involved in meeting these requirements. Nothing is further, of course, from Benjamin than such a conclusion. His move from the (potentially pacifying) effects of accommodation to the revolutionary transformation of the existing order is ultimately based on an apocalyptic vision of the present state of the world as the joint result of his combination of the deep pessimism of a political realist with the Messianistic convictions of the philosopher. No anthropologically significant, humanly productive accommodation to this world is possible at all. If there are signs of this latter, they can be nothing but hidden signals of a completely different future to come, in a radical break with historical continuity. In this sense his move from accommodation to redemptive revolution is truly a leap of faith.

This is reflected in the problematic character of his more concrete analyses as well. The mental attitude of *Geistesgegenwart*, to which movies 'train' their viewers, may indeed be very useful also outside the confines of the cinema, allowing the individual to react quickly and alertly to sudden, unexpected changes in their perceivable environment in the city or at the workplace. However, the assumption that it has a similar relevance for situations of *social crisis* is rather doubtful.⁹⁹ For they are not crises in the sense of

⁹⁹ Benjamin certainly makes such an assertion when he connects the salutary effects of the film not only with the experience of the passer-by in the big city traffic, but also with that what

unexpected breakdowns of habitual perceptual expectations, to which immediate individual reactions can be adequate. To apprehend them as crises at all demands relating them to the real possibility of some collective action, which is absent in the present and cannot be effectuated by the deed of any single individual.

In some sense, as objections to Benjamin, these remarks (which could be multiplied) are idle. For at different points in the *Artwork* essay, he himself clearly acknowledges these negative possibilities, and even maintains that they will necessarily prevail under the present, capitalist conditions of cultural production. It is this which makes this text so perplexing, and simultaneously so attractive and such frustrating reading. The general tone of this essay is certainly upbeat and self-confident concerning the capacity of this most modern form of 'art' to have a mass influence contributing to the cause of human liberation. This 'optimism' is, however, repeatedly undermined by short and isolated remarks that actually deny this very possibility. And Benjamin formulates this negation also with uncommon sharpness and generality. "As long as capital sets the standard (den Ton angibt) for the making of film, one cannot attribute any revolutionary merit to contemporary film beyond promoting a revolutionary critique of the traditional conceptions (Vorstellungen) of art."¹⁰⁰ This seems to be a devastating and also perhaps embarrassing conclusion, given Benjamin's ironically hostile attitude to the self-aggrandising habit of intellectuals of referring to all kinds of changes in their own artistic or cultural practices as 'revolutions'.

The famous concluding sentence of the *Artwork* essay, counterposing the communist politicisation of art to its fascist aestheticisation, with its great rhetorical force may temporarily conceal this fundamental ambiguity, but ultimately only enhances it. For what 'politicisation of art' (in its unstated, but necessary distinction from all forms of "political art") means, what the realisation of such an end would require, has not been shown, in

every citizen must face today "on a historical scale". (Cf. G.S.: vol. I/2, p. 503/ SW. W.: vol. 4, p. 281.)

¹⁰⁰ "Das Kunstwerk Dritte Fassung"; G. S.: vol. I/2, p. 492/ S. W.: vol. 4, p. 261.

fact not been discussed at all in this text. What appears as an emphatic conclusion is at best the promise of an answer that remains completely unredeemed.

So Benjamin's great quest, motivating his later oeuvre, to disclose the sense and conditions of the emancipatory effectiveness of art under contemporary conditions, does not substantively reach this end. The verdict: 'Benjamin failed' – independently whether one likes or dislikes the aggressive tone, in which it is sometimes formulated – can certainly be supported by relevant and quite convincing arguments.

True, such a judgment is usually formulated with reference to his 'failed predictions' concerning the developmental tendencies of art, in particular those of the film. And one could answer this criticism by arguing that – in spite of the explicit authorial intention as stated in its "Introduction" – the *Artwork* essay is not predictive in the direct and true sense of this term. Actually it analyses the stable, generic structure of (narrative) film as a form of art, a structure which is defined by the basic characteristics of its technique. This would be, however, a very weak defence. For precisely owing to this character of his analysis, it possesses – as if *modo secundo* – a predictive power in the sense that these features are presented as constitutive of film as such, assumed to preserve their validity for its future development as well. The supposition that even significant technical advances can and will only enhance the impact of these characteristics (as the transition from silent to sound film did, in Benjamin's understanding) seems to be actually in accord with the spirit of his writings.

Thus it is quite legitimate and critically relevant to raise the question whether these 'predictions' or expectations of Benjamin have been confirmed by the subsequent development of art and/or technology. And there is little doubt that in this sense some of the central assumptions of Benjamin's *prima facie* failed.

This refers first of all to the tendency for de-auratisation of works of art with its presupposed consequence, the undermining of the idea of the autonomy of art and the radical de-legitimation of those practices of 'high' art which embody this idea. Benjamin, with

his characteristic self-confidence, asserted the irrevocable victory of this tendency already in his own time as a fact that only (politically and culturally) reactionary theorists can deny. Actually this assumption proved to be wrong even as a long-term prediction. The distinction between autonomous high and popular ('mass') art as a social-cultural fact survived and still survives today. It is fixed and expressed in the differences of their institutionalisation and forms of expected reception. In general a rather convincing argument can be made according to which the factor he regarded as the most important in this respect, the development of techniques of communication and reproducibility, actually had in some of the most important cases just the opposite effect. The culturally and socially most significant among them, printing, did not destabilise and destroy the power of tradition, but actually solidified it and even extended its range. It also rather directly contributed to the privatisation of reception of works of literature. As some of his remarks indicate, Benjamin was not completely unaware of some of these facts, but he never dealt systematically with this problem.

More importantly, the film's technique of "reproducibility" does not constitute, as he may have assumed ("only the film") an exemption in this respect. It is not only the case that, as he himself indicated, the false aura of the 'star' prevails over the supposedly de-auratised presence of the actor on film.¹⁰¹ For in the meantime films themselves have undergone a process of auratisation. Benjamin regarded the exceptionally rapid obsolescence of films as a constitutive feature of works that do not have any 'consecrated' tradition. In the meantime, however, some films became effectively resurrected as 'classics', acquaintance with which is perhaps a more important part of contemporary 'cultural literacy' than familiarity with Homer or knowing who Giotto is. In some countries there are even 'film museums' specialising in their exhibition and there may be separate TV-channels doing the same. Even the idea of

¹⁰¹ Furthermore this "victory of the star" cannot be simply explained, as Benjamin suggests, by the subsequent manipulative build-up of his/her personality outside the studio. It is constitutive to the making of "popular" films (as star vehicles) and to the character of their mass reception as well.

'authenticity' became effectively applied to movies ('the director's cut'). And, of course, to know which cinema theatres regularly show 'art' films as opposed to the current Hollywood blockbusters, this belongs today to the ability of city-dwellers to orient themselves in the topography of that urban space in which they live.

A number of similar objections can be raised also in respect of Benjamin's discussion of the reception of films. Already the initial and perhaps most important step in his analysis appears from our own perspective highly problematic: the emphatically collective character of this reception. For in the meantime further technical advances – films on TV, videotapes and DVDs, now the internet – resulted in a far-going *privatisation* of cinematic experience. To see films regularly in the common atmosphere of a cinema theatre, this has to a large extent become characteristic of a particular age group. In fact the numerically largest segment of the 'audience' views movies in the context of the home/family environment, and the economic success of a film today first of all depends on the actual breadth of its commercial distribution in technical forms appropriate to such privatised reception.

There are thus, beyond the indicated internal strains and lacunae in Benjamin's analyses, also particular and substantive objections radically challenging the prognostic validity of some of his central conclusions, and thereby their relevance for us today. Nevertheless even some of his rather hostile critics may recognise the contemporary significance of his late writings, if no other reason than that their methodologies prefigure important present-day approaches and trends of thought. Benjamin was one of the first who truly paid attention and critically investigated the systematic connection between the historical transformation of artistic practices and the general trends of technical development, on the one hand, and the changes in the modes and regimes of perception, on the other hand. His work shifted the centre of critical analysis to the social pattern of reception of artworks. More generally he disclosed a quite unexpected connection between the progress of commercialisation and the growing aestheticisation of everyday life. He contributed to a new understanding of the very concept of

history, by locating it in the context of the formation of collective memory. All these tendencies of his writings are today broadly recognised as rather exceptional initiatives in his own time that came to full development and fruition only recently. (Let's add: largely independently of those intentions, hopes and expectations that moved Benjamin himself.) So, in spite of all the criticism of his 'predictions', he did become a 'classic', whose name is often invoked – partly legitimately, partly in self-serving ways – by a number of quite differing directions of research and schools of thought: cultural studies and deconstruction, media theory and 'new history'.

The question about the 'actuality' of Benjamin and his late writings cannot, however, be reduced to such a contrast between failed concrete predictions and fruitful general methodological principles. For alongside the sharp criticism of his central 'prognostic' assumptions there are interpretations that particularly underline – and in an equally convincing way – the 'prophetic' character of some of his ideas that could achieve full realisation only in our 'digital age', owing to technical developments that Benjamin certainly *did not and could not have foreseen*.¹⁰²

This first of all concerns his idea of 'literarisation' of the conditions of life: the elimination of the principal distinction between author and reader, the creator and the consumer of culture. This tendency, which he attributed primarily to the impact of the modern newspaper, reaches as it were the "radical endpoint of evolution" with the spread of the electronic media. As Roger Chartier states: "the economy of electronic writing makes possible the simultaneous production, transmission and reception of the text that unites – as never before – the tasks of author, editor and distributor within one person. The ancient distinction of the roles between intellectuals and everyone else, and all the categories that were founded on precisely this distinction, are suddenly stripped of meaning."¹⁰³ The net, with its blogs and chat-rooms, made the

¹⁰² For a short, exceptionally concise presentation of such an appreciative approach see the paper of Roger Chartier, as it were the counterpoint to the essay of Hennion and Latour, in the same volume.

¹⁰³ H. U. Gumbrecht – M. Marrinan (eds); 2003: p. 110.

social-cultural role of author practically available for everyone, sometimes with a reach and impact significantly greater than that achieved by many 'professionals'. It has genuinely created a new type of 'literacy'.

It has also often been argued that the same technical development necessarily results in a tendency towards the de-auratisation even of the 'sacred' treasures of our cultural tradition. Accessing such 'texts' (in the broadest sense of this term) on the net produces a new relation to them from the side of the recipient. He/she now becomes their 'user' who can (and often does) change, cut or rearrange what is presented on the screen to make it better fit his/her specific interest (or just to exercise his whim). This is a new kind of reading or viewing that actually undermines, or even liquidates the auratic distance between the work and its particular recipient.

It would be a rather fruitless enterprise to try to draw a 'fair balance' between these negative and positive evaluations, pro and contra arguments. It is perhaps more worthwhile to observe that some of the central 'predictions' of Benjamin fail because they succeed. In a sense they have been simultaneously verified and falsified. This is most clearly the case with his basic (and most disputed) assumption concerning the de-auratisation of arts in general as their irreversible tendency in late modernity.

It is in respect of the development of fine arts (which are also at the centre of Benjamin's own related discussion in the *Artwork* essay) that this paradoxical situation of failure in success can be best illustrated. De-auratisation, the conscious attempt to undermine and positively overcome the idea, practices and the fundamental institutions of autonomous art – a tendency whose origin Benjamin rightfully connected with Dada – has been a continuous and dominant feature of their subsequent evolution. The Situationists, Fluxus and Arte Povera, ready-mades and installations, performance and environment (Earth) arts, minimalism and conceptualism – all these movements programmatically aimed at the fundamental transformation of the relation between the artwork and its recipients. In some radical instances this involved the

liquidation of the work as a separate and stable object in general. What all these trends, however, shared, was the positioning of the 'viewer' in the role of a participating, sometimes physically engaged, collaborator, instead of its traditional fixation as a distanced, passive contemplator surrendering him/herself to the work as a self-enclosed meaning-totality. This was accompanied by related radical changes in the relation between the work and its environment ('exhibition space') and/or the object and the theory of art. Lastly, they usually rejected in an explicit and radical way – very often in the context of a broader critical-political agenda – the whole traditional institutional framework supporting autonomous art and realising (also regulating) its contact with the potential public. This concerned first of all, on the one hand, the museum and, on the other, the whole network of cultural establishments effectuating the commodification of artworks as particularly valuable collectibles (perhaps: good investments) for private persons or some capitalist organisations.

Thus in the concept of 'de-auratisation' Benjamin undoubtedly captured a truly essential tendency of the subsequent development of art. This 'prophetic' success, however, at the same time represented a perhaps even more decisive predictive failure. For these trends and movements, after many years of derision and neglect, ultimately had their own 'success'. What originally challenged the conceptual and institutional framework of art in general succeeded in extending its boundaries in a way ensuring the inclusion of such works into the haloed canon of modern art. Works intentionally realising de-auratisation by their actual practice became re-auratised, movements of radical-critical destruction became completely accepted 'genres', alongside the traditional forms, within the accepted system of arts. And this took place through and due to those very same institutions that they attempted, *if not to destroy, then at least to avoid at all costs*: the museum and the art-market. Even when the 'product' of such artistic activities in principle could not be permanently exhibited (such as performances), museums became the most frequently used site of their presentation. More importantly, they are also the

systematic repositories of those photos and videos that – though they no longer can be regarded as ‘representations’ – are preserved as their ‘documents’. In such ways radically ‘presentist’ activities become historicised, integrated into the history of art in general. And such photos under appropriate conditions (‘authorial’ signature) can function also as valuable collectibles.¹⁰⁴

This paradoxical coincidence of success and failure is in a sense also the key to the rather peculiar place of Benjamin’s later oeuvre in contemporary theoretical discourses. His significance for us today perhaps can be characterised as success in his very failures. For his becoming a ‘modern classic’ cannot be sufficiently explained by all those aspects of his work that found a direct echo in the present – be they particular diagnoses of the cultural situation, the ‘prophetic’ correctness of which further developments confirmed, or fruitful methodological principles that one can extract from his writings. His ‘actuality’ is intimately connected with the central endeavour of his writings: to find an answer to the question about the character and conditions of radical effectiveness of art in late modernity. But the different, partly irreconcilable solutions which at various times he offered – his ‘wager’ on surrealism, on the Brechtian stance of ‘instruction’, on the consequences of the basic technical structure of the film – certainly failed to realise the expected (and desired by him) radical social effect. In various ways they became painlessly absorbed into that very cultural apparatus that Benjamin challenged at its foundations. But in his relentless, radical quest for a solution, he posed the most fundamental questions about the role and fate of

¹⁰⁴ This is certainly only one aspect of Benjamin’s “failure”. It can equally be argued that presenting deauratisation as the fate of art leads to a “predictive” overvaluation of the weight and significance of the indicated trends and movements in the evolution of modern art. For while they represent one of the most important forms of a consistent reaction to the “crisis of art” in modernity, they are not the sole persisting kind of an artistically significant response. Benjamin himself, in short asides concerning Mallarmé and Gide, referred to another (regarded by him as defensive and retrograde) systemic alternative: the “purification” of art, the tendency of which is perhaps best exemplified in the continuous and continuing tradition of abstract painting (at least in its Greenbergian interpretation). There is, however, also an ever renewed third alternative as well: the reintegration of some of the basic achievements of avant-garde modernism into the artistic tradition of pre-modernist art (in the field of fine arts the post-cubist Picasso and Braque exemplifies it just as well as Francis Bacon or Lucien Freud).

art in late modernity. Are artistic practices today irredeemably condemned either to serve the faddish, fashion-driven preoccupations of a few, of a self-styled cultural elite, or alternatively to provide just mindless entertainment, a distraction for the masses allowing them to forget for a fleeting moment the pains and tribulations of life? How can the universalistic claim of works of 'autonomous' art be effectively transformed into a communal impact, how can a work consolidate to some extent the subterraneously existing communities created by the shared situation of suffering and unconscious common interests, behind the surface of the competitive individualism in modern society? Or is even this claim just an ideological veil to cover up the irreversible decline, the 'end' of art as a humanly and socially 'nourishing' set of practices?

It was this 'crisis of art' whose particular manifestations – the crisis of the novel, of the theatre, of painting, of concert music – Benjamin investigated with great acuity. In his passionate quest for a solution to this crisis he critically confronted the multitude of artistic and theoretical responses that addressed this problem in his time. In this process he disclosed with an admirable richness and depth the many antinomies characterising up to our days the situation of arts in late modernity. The evident failure of his attempts to solve them renders it impossible – at least in my opinion – to simply adopt his ideas and continue his tradition in any direct sense. This may well be attested by the diversity of those often quite contradictory theoretical endeavours that raise a claim to his legacy, usually missing its very practical-radical core. His life-work is neither a completed monument, nor a mine from which one can again and again extract unsuspected new gems. It is rather the broken but resounding voice of alarm reminding us of the catastrophic abyss that not only art, but all of us face. For in all his failures he succeeded in presenting a complex and intense depiction of the contradictions, in which the arts are entangled today, precisely as signals of the dangers we all face. Just this makes his legacy truly significant and disregardable – at least for those for whom the question about the fate of art is itself a social issue, and not merely a matter of some academic concerns.