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# *A Benjaminian appraisal of mass culture and its technologies of reproduction*

This paper reconstructs the views of Walter Benjamin – with particular focus and emphasis on his analyses of mass culture and its reproductive technologies. This reconstruction is intended to highlight how Benjamin managed to develop a powerful, insightful and multifaceted theoretical platform from where the contemporary technologies of mass communication and modern culture can be assessed and understood. This line of analysis and investigation highlights how the first generation of critical theorists found themselves in a particularly nuanced, antagonistic and dialectically laden position with regard to the technologies of mass communication and the mass culture of the 20th century. It is further hoped that this reconstruction will aid us in our attempts to come to grips with the new communicational technologies confronting the society of the 21st century.

**Keywords:** critical theory, Walter Benjamin, mass culture, information communication technologies, technologies of reproduction

## An alternative view of popular culture and its associated technologies

This study reconstructs the views of Walter Benjamin – with particular focus and emphasis on his analyses of mass culture and its reproductive technologies.<sup>1</sup> Such a reconstruction is intended to highlight how Benjamin managed to develop an insightful and multifaceted theoretical platform from where the contemporary technologies of mass communication and modern culture can be both assessed and understood – particularly when contrasted with the more sombre views of his peers at the Frankfurt School (such as Horkheimer and Adorno ([1944] 1997) as enunciated in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and Marcuse ([1964] 2002) in *One Dimensional Man*).<sup>2</sup> Such a

- 1 For the purposes of this investigation, we will limit our scope to Benjamin's ground-breaking insights which appear primarily in his seminal text titled 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1936). The reason why most of our attention will focus upon this particular text is due to the fact that it is here that Benjamin highlights how and why the modern technologies of reproduction, along with the popular forms of culture with which they are associated, offer society more than an oppressive, hegemonic and one-dimensional universe from which there is no escape.
- 2 While it is beyond the scope of this article to provide the reader with a detailed overview of the critical views pertaining to mass culture and its associated technologies as espoused by either Horkheimer and Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* or Marcuse in *One Dimensional Man*, it is nevertheless essential for the reader to be aware of the fact that – on the whole – for these critical theorists, modern culture along with its associated technologies contained very little emancipatory or edifying potential. Such views are made clear when one reflects upon the comments made by Horkheimer and Adorno who maintain that what was once referred to as 'culture' [*Kultur*] has now become an object of technological reproduction, and as such, has lost a great deal (if not all) of its transformative and emancipatory potential. It is directly in this regard that Horkheimer and Adorno caustically note that within the contemporary era of technological and mechanical reproduction (i.e. the late 19th century, early 20th century and beyond): "Nothing remains as of old; everything has to run incessantly, to keep moving. For only the universal triumph of the rhythm of mechanical production and reproduction promises that nothing changes, and nothing unsuitable will appear" (Horkheimer and Adorno 1997: 134). In conjunction with this powerful critique of mass culture, Marcuse (2002) would later come to develop and further a similar line of critique – particularly in relation to the issues of contemporary consumer culture and new technologies of control such a culture bolstered and facilitated. Marcuse's investigation and polemics regarding these matters would be more fully articulated in *One-Dimensional Man*, which contains a theory of 'advanced industrial society' that describes how: "changes in production, consumption, culture, and thought have produced an advanced state of conformity in which the production of needs and aspirations by the prevailing societal apparatus integrates individuals into the established societies" (Kellner 2002: xii). Marcuse (2002) thus describes and critiques what he refers to as the modern 'technological society', in which mass culture and its associated technologies have come to play a prominent role in the configuration of contemporary life. Marcuse claims that the modern technologies associated with mass culture have managed to inimically restructure the domains of labour, leisure, entertainment and communication. As such, for Marcuse, mass culture has had a direct, and detrimental, influence on some of the most fundamental aspects of life – ranging from

line of analysis and investigation will then highlight how Benjamin offers the contemporary critical researcher with a conceivably optimistic and positive outlook on the emancipatory potential contained within modern mass culture and its associated technologies. Through such a reconstruction it is argued, the contemporary researcher will be well positioned when attempting to come to grips with the nature of the potential contained within the culturally-based technologies currently confronting society in the 21st century.

## Approaching mass culture from a different angle

Unlike many of his more conservative peers at the Frankfurt Institute (such as Horkheimer and Adorno) Benjamin firmly believed that mass culture and its technologies of mass reproduction possessed an *empowering potentiality* that was able to fundamentally alter the contemporary individual's mode of apperception pertaining to the reality and lived situation of the society in which they found themselves (Hansen 2013). According to Benjamin, it was this altered form of apperception that would ultimately present the modern individual with the opportunity to gain a greater understanding of and orientation in the world, while at the same time gaining the ability to become more critical of the lived situation in which he/she may find themselves (Kellner and Durham 2006: xviii).

For the contemporary critical researcher then, one needs to be mindful of the fact that despite Benjamin – and his associated works – being situated in a very different media age from that of our own, his writings can (and should) still be regarded as being fundamental to the task of critically analysing the 'global mediascape' of the present (Kang 2014: 2). According to Kang (2014), there are three main reasons for this:

First, Benjamin was primarily concerned with the intimate relationship between the media, technology, and its connection to capitalist modernity (Kang 2014: 2). This can then be regarded as a situation which is – to a certain extent – similar to the one in which we find ourselves, although the capitalistic system in which we operate has indubitably been altered along with its associated technologies that underpin and reproduce it.

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the organisation of labour to the various modes of thought, behaviour and interaction that one typically finds within modern society. In terms of the outcomes of this study, if the reader keeps the critical and wary positions of the aforementioned Critical Theorists in mind, these will then serve as an effective foil from where to appreciate Benjamin's alternative estimation and appraisal of such phenomenon. Hansen (2013: 83) corroborates such a claim by noting how many of Benjamin's works, in particular his Artwork Essay, became something of a red flag, almost in a literal sense, which was defiantly held up as a revolutionary alternative to Horkheimer and Adorno's pessimistic critique of the culture industry.

Secondly, throughout the scope of his varied works, Benjamin managed to bring into critical focus the intersections of technological innovations and the transformation of human senses, experiences, and orientations towards the world (Kang 2014: 2).<sup>3</sup> These can therefore be regarded as being “intersectional links” that have no doubt intensified since his passing and can thus still prove to be of immense heuristic worth.

Thirdly, Benjamin’s work was “always geared toward exploring the possibilities of communicational technologies and human emancipation” (Kang 2014: 3). Furthermore, as Kang notes, such a form of emancipation was not founded upon a naive form of technocentric optimism, but rather as part of Benjamin’s persistent concern with “regulating and harmonising the complex and convoluted interplay between human beings, technology and nature (2014: 3).

In light of the above, it then behoves the modern media researcher to take seriously what Benjamin has to offer with regard to modern culture and the technologies that underpin it, as it is within his oeuvre that a great deal of useful and critical insights can still be located and appreciated.

## Benjamin’s views on mass culture and its technologies of reproduction

Within his seminal thesis pertaining to technologies of reproduction and their relationship to the contemporary cultural sphere in the 20th century (i.e. *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*),<sup>4</sup> Benjamin (2006: 19)

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- 3 It is interesting to note that according to both Turkle (2011) and Jackson (2008), a major theme to arise within contemporary media/communication/psychology studies is that new social media have fundamentally altered the ontological and existential orientation of children and their relationships within the 21st century, thus adding credence to Benjamin’s original insights.
  - 4 It is important to note that the version of Benjamin’s essay – which from this point onwards shall be referred to as the ‘Artwork Essay’ – that is most widely read and cited (particularly within the English-speaking world) is the third version that Benjamin worked on. As Leslie (2000: 132) notes, ‘... it was this third version that was translated into English as “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, and so gained widespread notoriety and inclusion in numerous art history and cultural theory compendia.’ It is interesting to note that when Benjamin’s title is translated directly into English from German, it reads as: ‘The Work of Art in the Age of its *Technical* Reproducibility’ as opposed to ‘*Mechanical* Reproduction’ (Leslie 2000: 132). The use of ‘technical’ emphasises Benjamin’s fascination with and interest in technology (i.e. the technical) and its increasingly central role in the existential make-up of the modern world. This distinction is important for the present investigation as it highlights from the beginning that Benjamin took note of the increasing role that technology was beginning to play in the cultural sphere of the 20th century along with the numerous changes that were beginning to manifest themselves in contemporary society. As such, it was these social transformations that now needed to be both analysed and understood.

begins by noting how, in principle, a work of art has always been reproducible. However, with the introduction of mechanical reproduction, something new was introduced into the sphere of cultural production and dissemination, along with the reception and appraisal of its aesthetic content. It is directly in this regard that he goes on to note that around the turn of the 20th century, technical reproduction had “reached a standard that not only permitted it to reproduce all retransmitted works of art and thus to cause the *most profound change in their impact upon the public*; it also had captured a *place of its own* among the artistic processes” [emphasis added] (Benjamin 2006: 20).

Thus, as a direct result of the accelerated technological means that emerged in the 20th century to reproduce works of art<sup>5</sup> – particularly with the advent of photography and film – Benjamin (2006) maintains that certain significant changes have occurred within the disseminated artworks themselves along with the audiences who are now able to view them.

In order to make sense of this claim, Benjamin (2006: 21) argues that “even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element”, namely its “locatedness within time and space”, its “unique existence” at the precise place “where it happens to be” – an attribute which Benjamin also refers to as the artwork’s “authenticity” or, more specifically, its “aura”.<sup>6</sup> According to Benjamin’s understanding, prior to modern technologies of mass reproduction, the entire sphere of authenticity lay outside an artwork’s technical reproducibility. Thus, when one was confronted with an artwork’s manual reproduction, which was typically labelled as a forgery, the original managed to preserve all its authority as it was a unique entity. Benjamin (2006: 21) maintains however that this is not *vis-à-vis* the means of technical reproduction.

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5 Leslie (2000: 137-138) provides a cogent summary of this situation by stating that: “[u]ntil the advent of technical reproduction, pictures had been made by hand, parallel to the manufacture of goods before the development of industrial machinery”. As such, “[t]echnical reproduction in art, beginning with *woodcut technology*, advances intermittently, but with accelerated intensity, until it reaches a qualitatively new stage in *lithographic reproduction*. ... The invention of *photography* induces a further speed-up effect, basing reproduction not on the pace of a hand that draws, but on the seeing eye and the machinery of the lens. *Film* is the *culmination of a process that accelerates the activity of perception reproduction*, such that it eventually occurs *simultaneously with speech*” [emphasis added] (Leslie 2000: 137-138).

6 This is a fairly esoteric and idiosyncratic element in Benjamin’s oeuvre. For Benjamin, “an artwork may be said to have an aura if it claims a unique status based less on its individual qualities than on its real or metaphorical distance from the viewer” (Leslie 2000: 145). As such, the “‘auratic artwork’ and ‘auratic perception’ involves a response to an authority that has been claimed on the basis of the artwork’s position within a tradition or in a social order” (Leslie 2000: 145).

At this point in our reconstruction of Benjamin's central argument pertaining to the matter of technical reproduction and its revised relationship to an artwork's aura, it is important to note that his assertions pertaining to the above ultimately hinge on two crucial points:

First, according to his analysis, technical/process reproduction is more independent of the original than manual reproduction, as the duplication of an artwork (particularly via the aid of something like photography or film) means that the original is no longer necessary in order for its aesthetic content to be viewed/appreciated/understood on a wider scale.

Secondly, and very importantly, technical reproduction can actually — for the first time in modern history — effectively place the copy of the original into situations which would be out of reach for the original itself. What this then means, above all else, is that technical reproduction has enabled the original artwork to “meet the beholder halfway” (Benjamin 2006: 20). This then implies that, for Benjamin, a new relationship and form of understanding are now developed between the artwork and its viewer(s) as a direct result of the very technologies that are responsible for the artwork's reproduction and dissemination.

Such a summation then leads Benjamin to elaborate upon the next crucial aspect of his analysis in which he assesses how technologies of reproduction are affecting the manner in which the modern individual perceives, understands and (re)acts to the world surrounding him/her. Benjamin (2006: 22) expands on this position when he argues how, as a direct result of the modern technologies of mass reproduction, the desire of the contemporary masses “to bring things closer” – both spatially and cognitively – has grown tremendously.

According to Hansen, one needs to appreciate the fact that Benjamin – much like his close friend and fellow theorist Siegfried Kracauer – sees the phenomenon of the ‘modern mass’ manifest itself primarily in acts of consumption and reception. As such, Benjamin views the “epochal turn toward the masses” as encoded in the emergence of certain spheres typically associated with modern life, including architecture, fashions, events, and institutions of high-capitalist culture (Hansen 2013: 95). In a draft note for the Artwork Essay, Benjamin (in Hansen 2013: 95) asserts that “[t]he mass reproduction of artworks is not only related to the mass production of industrial goods but also to the mass reproduction of human attitudes and activities”.

As Hansen (2013: 95) subsequently remarks, the importance of this passage is that according to Benjamin's understanding, “the mass circulation of images of human behaviour in film and photography makes the consumers of these images *themselves* into objects of standardization and commodification [emphasis added].

While this observation could then be read as anticipating Horkheimer and Adorno's culture industry critique, it also highlights how Benjamin attempts to understand the role of the mass media in new forms of fashioning personal and collective identity and expression (Hansen 2013: 95). As such, the next section will attempt to show that Benjamin views the mass media as providing the masses with an unprecedented sense of awareness and agency that is both technologically mediated and reproduced.

It is directly in this regard that Benjamin (2006: 22) writes how, as a corollary to the increasing centrality and importance placed upon technologies of reproducibility within the contemporary cultural sphere,

[e]very day the urge grows stronger [on the part of the masses] to *get hold of an object at very close range* by way of its likeness, its reproduction. Unmistakably, reproduction as offered by picture magazines and newsreels differs from the image seen by the unarmed eye. Uniqueness and permanence are as closely linked in the latter as are transitoriness and reproducibility in the former [emphasis added].

For Benjamin (2006: 22), the "adjustment of reality to the masses" and of "the masses to reality" is to be regarded as a process of "unlimited scope",<sup>7</sup> which has invariably had an impact upon both the cognitive and perceptive faculties of the individual residing in the modern world.<sup>8</sup>

Benjamin's (2006: 22) argument regarding how the masses' relationship to reality – via an altered state of perception and cognition that technologies of reproduction have brought about – rests on what he refers to as the increasing importance associated with the 'exhibition value' of contemporary artworks (as opposed to their 'cult value'). In order to substantiate this claim, Benjamin

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7 According to Leslie (2000: 145-146), what Benjamin is explicating here is "both a *technological basis* of the contemporary decline of aura and a *social basis* of the contemporary decline of aura, which are then related to the increasing growth of urban masses and the connected intensity of their movements" [emphasis added]. As such, Benjamin's analysis effectively highlights how "[t]echnological developments in themselves bear certain implications for aura, the reproduced object, producer and consumer". Aura therefore atrophies alongside social and technological change (Leslie 2000: 145-146).

8 Notably, Benjamin argues that during long periods of history, the mode of human sense perception changes with humanity's entire mode of existence. As such, Benjamin maintained that the manner in which human sense perception is organised and the medium in which it is accomplished, are determined not only by nature but by historical circumstances (i.e. new technologies) as well, which are able to bring about a new kind of perception, understanding and cognition – all of which can be regarded as crucial attributes that play an ever important role in determining the course and direction in which a society can potentially develop.

(2006: 22) goes on to assert that “originally, the contextual integration of art in tradition found its expression in the cult”. What he means by this is that the earliest artworks originated “in the service of a ritual – first the magical, then the religious kind” (this is in fact what he refers to as its ‘cultic value’). For Benjamin then, the unique value of the authentic work of art (from a cultic perspective) has its basis in ritual, and it is therefore within the realm of ritual that the location of the artwork’s original ‘use value’ is to be found.

Benjamin (2006: 23) avers that with the advent and introduction “of the first truly revolutionary means of reproduction” – i.e. photography and then later film – art (when viewed from its original, cultic orientation) came to sense an “approaching crisis” which would become evident “only a century later”. According to Benjamin (2006: 23), this “crisis” revolved around an “all-important insight”, namely, that for the first time in world history, technical reproduction had successfully managed to emancipate the work of art “from its parasitical dependence on ritual”. Thus, increasingly, the work of art that is reproduced “becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility”. What this then means according to Benjamin’s (2006: 23) analysis, is that “the instant the criterion of authenticity [as rooted in the original cultic value of the artwork] ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed”. Thus, instead of being based on its value as rooted in ritual and tradition, it now begins to be rooted in another practice altogether, namely, that of *politics* (Benjamin 2006: 23).

In order to make sense of Benjamin’s rather bold claim pertaining to the altered function that artworks have managed to assume as a direct result of modern technologies of reproduction, one needs to remember that for Benjamin (2006: 23), works of art are invariably received and valued “on different planes”. Benjamin elaborates on this matter when he posits how there are fundamentally two ‘polar types’ – or planes of reception and evaluation – which come to the foreground when considering the manner in which an artwork is received by its audience: namely, with one, the emphasis falls on what he has previously referred to as the *cult value* of the artwork, while with the other, the emphasis falls on what he dubs as being its *exhibition value*. Benjamin (2006: 23) states that “with the emancipation of the various art practices from ritual”, comes “increasing opportunities for the exhibition” and display of their products (or what he has earlier referred to as their ‘exhibition value’).<sup>9</sup>

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9 It is directly in this regard that Benjamin (2006: 23) remarks how it has become “easier to exhibit a portrait bust that can be sent here and there than to exhibit the statue of a divinity that has its fixed place in the interior of a temple”.



Based upon this distinction, Benjamin (2006: 23) asserts that as a result of the different methods of technical reproduction that have arisen as developments in science and technology emerged, an artwork's revised aptitude for exhibition value has managed to increase to "such an extent that the quantitative shift between its two poles [i.e. cult value towards exhibition value] turned into a qualitative transformation of its nature [i.e. from a ritualistic function towards a political function].

It is as a result of such a qualitative shift that Benjamin maintains that in the contemporary era, as a result of the "absolute emphasis" which has now been placed upon an artwork's exhibition value, the work of art itself becomes a creation with an entirely new set of (political) functions.<sup>10</sup>

In light of this summation, Benjamin (2006: 25) goes on to assert that with the qualitative transformation that technologies of technical reproduction have brought about with respect to an artwork's function, there has also been a significant transformation which has occurred on the part of the audience. Benjamin follows up on this claim when he argues how technologies of technical reproduction now permit "the audience to take the position of a 'critic' as opposed to that of a passive observer" (Benjamin 2006: 25). This is primarily because, as Leslie (2000: 149) highlights, "technical reproduction can put the copy of the original in multiple new contexts of reception. The copy [thus comes to be] favoured over the original because of its provisionality, its unfixedness from a singular existence and a limited access. Process copy reproduction can [also] continually alter and improve upon the format of 'the original'. It is because of these changes then that "audiences become experts, because they critically measure film against the daily reality that they experience and because they also learn to assimilate new scenarios of potential social and physical ordering" (Leslie 2000: 149).

Benjamin (2006: 27) takes this claim even further when he notes that as a direct result of the technical environment in which film, photography and the camera are required to operate, the "reflected image" has now become "separable" and "transportable" to an ever-widening public sphere. As a result

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10 For Benjamin (2006: 24) – up until and during the period of time in which he was writing this essay, i.e. the early part of the 20th century – he believed that the introduction of photography and later that of film technology proved to be the most 'serviceable exemplifications' of contemporary technologies of reproduction that were able to promote and further this new political function of art. In the 21st century, one is now able to include mediums such as computers, cellular phones, tablets, and the Internet as being contemporised technological advancements (or 'serviceable exemplifications') that have effectively managed to increase the exhibition value of artworks and information (Hansen 2013).

of the images' mobility and increased opportunity for exposure, an increasing number of individuals are thus provided with potentially liberating and empowering opportunities to exercise their critical faculties. It is in this regard that Benjamin insists that everybody who has managed to witness the accomplishments of film, is transported into the role of an 'expert'.<sup>11</sup>

While Benjamin's analysis may seem to be depicting an overly optimistic portrayal of the empowering attributes associated with the new technologies of reproduction, it is crucial to be aware of the fact that Benjamin was well aware of the pitfalls that such technologies potentially – and more often than not, actually do – bring with them. This is made evident when Benjamin (2006: 27) provides us with some cautionary remarks pertaining to this very matter. Subsequently, he states that while film no doubt induces a situation where there is a “shrivelling of the aura” – which can be used to enlighten, empower and edify the public who did not have access to the fairly exclusive artworks of the past – there has nevertheless been a subsequent “artificial build-up of the ‘personality’ outside the studio”. In a manner redolent of the Culture Industry critique that Horkheimer and Adorno would later come to write, Benjamin (2006: 27-28) notes the following:

The cult of the movie star, fostered by the money of the film industry, preserves not the unique aura of the person but the ‘spell of the personality’, *the phony spell of a commodity*. So long as the *movie-makers’ capital sets the fashion*, as a rule no other revolutionary merit can be accredited to today’s film than the promotion of a revolutionary criticism of traditional concepts of art. ... *Under these circumstances the film industry is trying hard to spur the interest of the masses through illusion-promoting spectacles and dubious speculations* [emphasis added].

The above quote leaves no measure of doubt that Benjamin was well aware of the potential manipulative effects that the film industry may have upon the public and how the technologies of mechanical reproduction can be used to further the private interests of capital – thus undermining the emancipatory potential that such technologies possess. As such, we can then acknowledge that Benjamin would have both understood and appreciated the concerns and criticisms raised by the other critical theorists (such as Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse). However, even though Benjamin (2006: 27) is cognisant of the dangerous and soporific effects that such an industry could potentially have on the wider public, he nevertheless goes on to assert that emancipatory and edificatory potential

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11 More on the Benjaminian notions of the distracted critic, expert and examiner will follow soon.

is inherent in the technique of the film. It is directly in this regard that Benjamin (2006: 25) notes that “we do not deny that in some cases today’s films can also promote revolutionary criticism of social conditions, even of the distribution of property”.

What then does Benjamin’s rather positive synopsis portend when one is to consider the civic role that the audience is now potentially able to perform in a public sphere that has been invigorated by the technological developments of film and photography? In order to expand upon such a line of enquiry, Benjamin (2006: 28) asks the reader to reflect – in an historical sense – upon the increasing role that the written word has played in the life of the public, particularly as the various technologies and techniques of reproduction/dissemination associated with the written (and later, printed) word have progressed. By drawing from this historical example, Benjamin notes that with the increasing expansion of the press – which ensured that “new political, religious, scientific, professional and local” opinions were placed before the readers – an increasing number of readers were actually empowered by such a process and became writers themselves (Benjamin 2006: 28).

Benjamin (2006: 28) qualifies this claim by asserting that in its nascent phase, such a process of empowerment began with the daily press opening to its readers a space typically demarcated as being “letters to the editor”. He then goes on to compare it to the (then) current situation in Europe when he states that “today there is hardly a gainfully employed European who could not, in principle, find an opportunity to publish somewhere or other comments on his work, grievances, documentary reports, or that sort of thing”.

In light of the above, Benjamin adamantly maintains that the expansion of the press via the aid of its technologies of reproduction – has indubitably had an *empowering effect* on the ever-widening public sphere by essentially allowing the public to transform themselves from being mere (passive) spectators to becoming *engaged* and *active* participants. Such developments have also reduced the distance between the ‘experts’ and so-called ‘non-experts’, and as a result, significant boundaries impeding the interaction among different echelons of society have now been effectively removed. Benjamin’s position regarding this matter is made clearer when he argues that “the distinction between author and public is about to lose its basic character. [...] At any moment the reader is ready

to turn into a writer. As expert [...] even if only in some minor respect, *the reader gains access to authorship* [emphasis added] (2006: 28).<sup>12</sup>

In light of the above, it is Benjamin's firm conviction that the rapid growth of the newspaper was initially indicative of the growth and predominance of the middle class and its associated "bourgeois public sphere" (as Habermas (1991) would come to define it). While this can indeed be interpreted as a promising turn in terms of the growth of public spaces in which rational, critical discourse could occur, Benjamin makes it clear that with the rapid growth of the publishing industry in the 19th century there was an acceleration in the "industrialisation of literary practice" (Kang 2014: 39). For Benjamin, such an acceleration ultimately led to the introduction of a new form of communication to society which he identifies as being based almost exclusively on 'information'. In a somewhat pejorative sense then, the term "information" is utilised by Benjamin in order to "reflect only quantified experience deprived of the profundity of life" (Kang 2014: 39). It is as a direct result of the qualitative and quantitative shift that has occurred within the communicational realm – as a direct result of the prevalence of the information industry – that Benjamin posits how "despite noticeable increases in the amount of information, over time *knowledge as a whole has become poorer in quality* [emphasis added] (Kang 2014: 39).<sup>13</sup>

Clearly then, Benjamin cannot simply be viewed as a naive optimist with regard to the liberating/empowering effects that he believed the newspaper brought to the public spheres of the 19th and 20th centuries as his analysis seems to echo many of the concerns that Horkheimer and Adorno would later articulate

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12 In relation to the society of the 21st century, one can further Benjamin's analysis by citing the numerous examples in which social networking technologies such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok are empowering individuals with the opportunity to write, direct and star in their own personal narratives and documentaries. Such activity can be engaged in with relative ease, at little cost and on a daily basis. Such engaged activity can also be described as being highly interactive in nature as it allows for multiple actors to engage with one another on a regular basis. For more information regarding the interactive nature of social media platforms, refer to Elizabeth-Bird (2011) and her notion of the interactive 'prosumer' in the digital day and age along with Bruns's (2006) concept of the 'producer' in the domain of the Internet.

13 This point is both reinforced and extended into the domain of the 21st century by thinkers such as Jackson (2008), Dean (2009), Turkle (2011), Morozov (2013), Fuchs (2014) and Stiegler (2016), who argue that just because technologies such as the Internet and social media platforms have resulted in the circulation and production of *increasing quantities of information, this does not imply that the quality of such information has increased*. The modern scenario of 'information overload' that confronts the denizen of the digital day and modern age as a direct result of the contemporary technologies of reproduction has brought with it an array of problems that undermine not only the epistemic credibility and epistemological integrity of these technologies and the information that they disseminate, but also the very individuals making use of them.

in their Culture Industry thesis. Yet, unlike his contemporary conservative cultural critics, Benjamin deviates from the exclusively “admonishing pathway” in order to unravel a dialectical factor hidden in the newspaper’s disruptive function (Kang 2014: 57). This is made evident by the fact that, in a diary entry of his, he goes on to argue how, as a result of the proliferation of information – via the various publications such as newspapers, periodicals and journals – in modern society “as writing gains in breadth what art loses in depth, the separation between the author and the public – a separation that journalism maintains in a corrupt way – starts to be overcome in an admirable way (Benjamin 2005: 505).

In Benjamin’s view then, the newspaper’s function in assimilating readers has managed to produce unintended consequences that can potentially bring about an empowering effect. This line of argumentation is taken further in an essay of Benjamin’s titled ‘The Author as Producer’ (1934), in which he avers that as a result of the proliferation of the newspaper and the information industry that has come to accompany it, the substantial barrier between writers and readers has been weakened (Kang 2014: 57) and furthermore, that such a development actually manages to abrogate “the conventional distinction between genres, between writer and poet, between scholar and populariser but also revises even the distinction between author and reader” (Benjamin 2005: 772).

As such, Benjamin maintains that as a direct result of the emergence of “mass culture” and proliferation of newspapers, along with the accelerating nature of the publishing industry itself, *the everyday lives of ordinary people are increasingly able to become described, reported and presented to the public itself*. Benjamin (1934) actually refers to this transformation in reporting and publication as the “literarization of the conditions of living” and sees within it a great deal of emancipatory potential (Benjamin 2005: 742).

According to this Benjaminian analysis then, the emergence of the “public as writers” signifies that writing was no longer to be viewed as an esoteric activity associated with the elitist, mystic or cultic domains of existence (as it once was when gauged from an historical vantage point) but rather, as *a popular cultural practice*. As such, this revised form of engagement and activity needs to be understood as a form of literary competence which is “now based not on ‘specialized training’, but on ‘polytechnical education’ which allows it to become a ‘public property’” (Kang 2014: 58).

As such, one can posit that via the aid of his analysis of the information industry, Benjamin effectively manages to uncover the material conditions allowing for the “emergence of a new social subject”, which is itself mediated and articulated by mass culture and the modern communication technologies that underpin it (Kang 2014: 122).

In order to augment this rather optimistic and positive stance pertaining to the emancipatory potential contained within the technologies of reproduction that one was able to find in the cultural sphere of early 20th century, in his Artwork Essay, Benjamin raises the crucial question as to how film and photography – as more recent technologies of reproduction – compare to painting when attempting to depict the nature of reality for an audience. In response to this line of enquiry, he maintains that when attempting to undertake such a reproductive feat, the painter maintains in his/her work a “natural distance from reality” whereas the cameraman is able to penetrate “deeply into its web” (2006: 29). As such, Benjamin clearly believes that there is a tremendous difference between those depictions generated by the painter as opposed to those of the cameraman. What according to Benjamin, is able to account for such a significant difference?

When attempting to address this remarkable discrepancy, Benjamin (2006: 30) asserts that film has successfully managed to enrich our field of apperception with methods which can be likened to those of psychoanalysis (which has been explicitly designed to bring into consciousness those elements of the unconscious that may, initially, elude the patient who is seeking therapy). It is in this regard that Benjamin (2006: 30) states: “For the entire spectrum of optical, and now also acoustical, perception the film has brought about a similar *deepening of apperception*” [emphasis added]. Thus, much like the manner in which the psychoanalyst is able to decipher and unravel the mysteries of the unconscious via different techniques, Benjamin maintains that behaviour items (such as gestures, bodily movements and facial expressions) shown in a movie can be analysed much more precisely and from more points of view than those presented on paintings or on the stage.

Benjamin (2006: 30–31) bolsters this appreciative stance towards the new technologies of reproduction when he asserts that the camera has successfully managed to introduce us to “unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses”. For Benjamin (2006: 30–31), this is due to the fact that:

By close-ups of the things around us, by focusing on hidden details of familiar objects, by exploring commonplace milieus under the ingenious guidance of the camera, the film, on the one hand, *extends our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives*; on the other hand, it *manages to assure us of an immense and unexpected field of action* [emphasis added].

What Benjamin therefore finds enormously appealing and revelatory about the cinematographic technology that is so pervasive within modern mass culture is the fact that as a direct result of their reproductive abilities, the hidden aspect of reality – which was once the source of the “magical” value of the image –

is now limpidly elucidated for the individual. Thus, thanks to photographic technology, we are now capable of grasping reality by tearing up the mysterious screen of the image, just as psychoanalysis explains the “magical” nature of dreams (Kang 2014: 119). The optical unconscious therefore yields the effect of disenchantment<sup>14</sup> (as Weber (1964) has previously argued), and a more rational and mechanical perception of human nature and the world emerges. For Benjamin then “photographically reproduced images do not simply reflect the reality but *construct it, leading to new ways of perceiving, reasoning and awakening [emphasis added]*” (Kang 2014: 120).

Based on the position presented above, it becomes clear to see that in his analysis of mass culture’s technologies of reproduction, Benjamin is not only cognisant of – but in fact highly appreciative of – the fact that with the introduction of these new technologies, the apperceptive faculties of the individual have been *altered, supplemented and bolstered*. Unlike his more austere colleagues of the Frankfurt School then, Benjamin is of the opinion that these transformations to the apperceptive faculties of the individual (while certainly being open to manipulation and exploitation on the part of the private interests of the film industry and the destructive pursuits of those who may in some way be affiliated with it) also possess the *potential* to allow for the audience to arrive at a more nuanced, fine-tuned and critical understanding of reality.

To sum up Benjamin’s position pertaining to the contemporary technologies of reproduction located within mass culture and their (potential) impact upon society along with the individuals operating in it, one can assert that what Benjamin’s analysis manages to illuminate for the critical researcher are the following three important pointers:

1. First, as a direct result of the modern technologies of reproduction (film, photography and cinema), for the first time in history, the audience – or mass public – is now presented with the unprecedented opportunity to regularly

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14 Weber liked to quote Friedrich Schiller’s phrase, the ‘disenchantment of the world’, in order to highlight the extent and direction of rationalisation in society which was measured negatively in terms of the degree to which magical elements of thought are displaced, or positively by the extent to which ideas gain in systematic coherence and naturalistic consistency (Gerth and Mills 1946: 51). From Weber’s perspective, the processes of rationalisation and disenchantment are intimately tied and interconnected because of the fact that autonomous modern legal, bureaucratic and economic structures demand calculation, regularity, and predictability of outcome. In addition to this, and perhaps even more importantly with regard to this investigation, at a deeper level, Weber was convinced that the historical development of reason marked a distinctive shift from a substantive concept of reason to an increasingly instrumentalised conception of rationality (*Zweckrationalität*) (Villa 2007: 12).

view and, to a certain degree, critique different depictions of reality as a result of their widespread projection;

2. Secondly, in light of this unprecedented process, it is the masses themselves who now stand in an altered (and no doubt potentially progressive) relation between themselves and the realities that these new technological reproductions are depicting;
3. Thirdly, it is the very nature of the responses that the technologies of reproduction are able to elicit that Benjamin finds so intriguing and potentially liberating, as it is these forms of reactions that are more attuned to the lived reality that individuals now find themselves confronted with.

## Evaluating Benjamin's appraisal of mass culture and the modern technologies of reproduction

From a paradigmatic position, Benjamin proposes that the modern researcher needs to take seriously "the clutter of material existence, and wants expressly to analyse the commodity trash of mass production" (Leslie 2000: ix).

Furthermore, one needs to be mindful of the fact that Benjamin was a media practitioner *before* he was a media theorist. Not only was he a journalist, working on newspapers and magazines, but he also became actively involved in radio broadcasting in the late 1920s and early 1930s, a period when the German radio industry was rapidly expanding and the popularity of radio as a new mass medium reached its peak (Kang 2014: 13). Benjamin thus presciently observed that the bourgeois public sphere, along with its distinctive forms of art and culture, had been *subject to massive revision in the face of the new mass media and its associated technologies*.

As such, Benjamin's approach limpidly elucidates that the rise of new forms of art and mass culture *necessitates equally innovative types of enquiry and criticism* corresponding to the rapid development of the communicational and reproductional technologies with which such phenomena were inextricably intertwined (Kang 2014: 12). In the mass media, he therefore saw such technologies as presenting one with *new opportunities* to go beyond the conventional education system of the past and as such, he came to see radio broadcasting as a possible mediated public sphere in which he could take on the role of, and serve as, a public intellectual (Kang 2014: 12). Furthermore, Benjamin's insights have produced an array of considerable contributions to the contemporary understanding of mediated public spheres – which would now explicitly include



the domains of social media, streaming platforms and the wider internet-based communities which interact on a daily basis (Kang 2014: 63).<sup>15</sup>

Within the 21st century and its associated digital technologies, one of the key issues related to such mediated public spheres pertains to how the enormous amount of available information can effectively be assimilated into people's daily experiences in order to edify and emancipate – as Benjamin once viewed the mass cultural mediums of film, photography and the cinema. In addition to the above, one cannot overlook the fact that the Internet has led not only to the emergence of socially networked media space – as evinced by sites such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram – but also to the reconfiguration and reconceptualisation of digitalised locations in which the 'privatisation of experience' can be reproduced. Such digitalised locations can thus be said to possess the (potentially emancipatory) ability to reproduce the socially disconnected individual, and as such, reanimate the Benjaminian notion of the "literarization of living conditions" in a revised, digitalised format (Kang 2014: 64).

It is in this regard that social networking sites like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and Pinterest – and more recently TikTok – (which can be said to constitute a significant portion of modern mass culture) can be said to possess multiple functions in which the electronic screen, plugged into the digitalised and interconnected network, becomes the "primary window" through which the world of the 21st century is experienced, comprehended and considered (Kang 2014: 64). It is thus here that Benjamin's analysis of the 19th-century information industry can – yet again – be said to have particular relevance with regard to the formation of 'mediated experience', particularly in the digitalised age of the Internet (Kang 2014: 64). Furthermore, Benjamin's insight into the rise of public writers can be considered as being particularly relevant to our understanding of the replacement of conventional newspapers (that have typically been run by trained journalists and editors), with the rise of public newspapers (that are now facilitated by citizen journalists) and mediated through various forms of Internet communication, such as blogospheres and social media (Kang 2014: 64).

In light of the above, one can also assert that Benjamin's insights into the changing nature of the media, mass culture and the public's growing role in the production and reproduction of media content, are highly relevant for our understanding of today's complex media environment. This pointer becomes particularly pertinent when one reflects upon the fact that the recent advent and

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15 To accentuate this matter, Kang (2014: 63) provides the example of how communication that is mediated by the Internet has resulted in new types of 'mediated interaction' that has, according to some, accelerated the 'democratisation of knowledge and information' on a gigantic scale in terms of 'collective intelligence' (Lévy 1998: 70).

prevalence of social media, media streaming services (such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, Showmax, Disney Plus and HBO Max)<sup>16</sup> along with the incessant online interaction that is bound up with day to day Internet usage all tend to “go beyond the limits of one-way communication embedded in mass media and to foster reciprocal communication on an unprecedented scale” (Kang 2014: 148).

There has thus been a wide range of discussions focusing on the increasing possibilities for the development of grassroots movements, more systematic representation of public opinion and direct communication between political powers and the public as a result of modern mass culture and its associated technologies of reproduction.

Yet, as Kang (2014: 149) reminds us, many discussions have been overly preoccupied with the *quantitative transformation* of the public sphere and seem to share both an instrumental perspective on the effective use of mass culture and social media in political mobilisation and an overly optimistic standpoint on the improvement of deliberative democracy driven by advanced communicational technology. Hitherto, a good deal less attention has been paid to the vital question about the *changing nature of democracy itself in conjunction with the development of mass culture and its communicational technology* (Kang 2014: 149). Benjamin’s analysis of the relationship between media, culture, politics and the masses – as elaborated in the Artwork Essay and the associated texts that have been considered above – can thus be said to offer the critical researcher a far more systematic approach to the issue of media and democracy – an issue that has become increasingly significant in the age of social media.

## Conclusion

To sum up then, unlike *the more austere and sombre analyses of his colleagues* at the Frankfurt Institute, Benjamin’s investigations manage to remind us of the emancipatory hopes and dangers that are embedded in the new technologies of the media. Benjamin’s insights are therefore to be understood not merely as an attempt to address theoretical issues alone, but rather, an urgent imperative that illuminates both the possibilities and dangers of the new media associated with modern mass culture. As such, it is these critical insights that then compel the contemporary theorist to not simply ignore or overlook the manifestations of

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16 While it is beyond the scope of this investigation to see how Benjamin’s insights and analyses can be applied to all of the new digital media formats that have emerged in the 21st century, the reader can refer to the following literature to gain a comprehensive overview of the applicability of Benjamin’s work in relation to the various formats of the 21st century: Hayles 2008; Lash 2002; Thompson 2005; Crisell 2005; Wizisla, Erdmut 2012; Isenberg 2001; Rodríguez-Ferrándiz 2012; Friedberg 2006.

popular culture and regard them as being nothing more than modern soporifics aimed at lulling the masses into acquiescence, but rather, that within these various media formats we can learn a great deal about the nature of life in the 21st century. Furthermore, it is these critical insights that can then potentially, serve an emancipatory function, for as Benjamin has so vividly outlined for us, it is as a direct result of the very technologies of mass culture that the contemporary subject is able to frame him/herself, and it is from such a culturally immersive position that the opportunity for real growth and change becomes a possibility.

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