Room-for-Play: Benjamin’s Gamble with Cinema

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For Lisa Fittko

... What is lost in the withering of semblance [Schein], or decay of the aura, in works of art is matched by a huge gain in room-for-play [Spiel-Raum]. This space for play is widest in film.

—Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility” (1936)

During the past three decades, Walter Benjamin’s essay “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility” may have been more often quoted than any other single source, in areas ranging from new left media theory to cultural studies, from film and art history to visual culture, from the postmodern art scene to debates on the fate of art, including film, in the age of the digital. In the context of these invocations, the essay has not always acquired new meanings, nor has it become any less problematic than when it was first written. Not quite ready to throw in the towel and follow Peter Wollen’s suggestion that the essay should be shelved altogether, I wish to return to it yet once again.1

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More precisely, I’d like to turn to the version of the essay which Benjamin considered his “Ur-text,” that is, the typescript completed in February of 1936 which appeared later the same year, with a few fiercely contested cuts and modifications, in a French translation by Pierre Klossowski. This long-lost second (German) version of the essay—the first was a shorter, handwritten draft—was published in 1989 and is now available in English in volume three of the Harvard edition of Benjamin’s Selected Writings. Whether in response to criticism by Theodor W. Adorno, the unsympathetic reception of the essay on the part of friends such as Gershom Scholem and Bertolt Brecht and the Paris organization of communist writers, or the increasingly grim political situation, Benjamin kept revising the text between 1936 and 1939, hoping in vain to get it published in the Moscow literary exile journal Das Wort. It is this (third) version that first appeared in Illuminationen (1955), edited by Adorno and Friedrich Podszus, and which entered the English-speaking world, in a rather unreliable translation, with the 1969 publication of Illuminations, edited by Hannah Arendt. It is this multiply compromised and, for Benjamin, still unfinished version that has become known all over the world as the Artwork essay.

Benjamin’s second version differs significantly from the third, familiar one, although the basic argument is already in place. A rough sketch of that argument might go somewhat like this: the technical reproducibility of traditional works of art and, what is more, the constitutive role of reproduction in the media of photography and film have affected the status of art in its core. Evolving from the large-scale reorganization of human sense perception in capitalist-industrial society, this crisis is defined, on the one hand, by the decline of what Benjamin refers to as “aura,” the unique modality of being that has accrued to the traditional work of art, and, on the other, by the emergence of the urban masses whose mode of existence correlates with the new regime of perception advanced by the media of technological reproduction. The structural erosion of the aura through the technological media converges with the assault on the institution of art from


within by avant-garde movements such as Dada and Surrealism. In terms of the political crisis that is the essay’s framing condition, two developments have entered into a fatal constellation: one, the aestheticization of political life as practiced by fascism, which gives the masses an illusory expression instead of their rights and which culminates in the glorification of war; two, within the institution of art, the cult of the decaying aura of belated aestheticism, as in the George circle and among individual avant-gardists such as F. T. Marinetti who supplies a direct link to fascism. In this situation of extreme emergency, Benjamin argues, the only remaining strategy for intellectuals on the left is to combat the fascist aestheticization of politics with the “politicization of art” as advanced by communism.

One of several problems with this by now well-worn argument is that it turns on a rhetoric of binary oppositions. This strategy arrests the dynamic of Benjamin’s distinctive—and distinctively productive—mode of thinking in which concepts are hardly ever stable or self-identical; rather, they tend to overlap, blend, and interact with other concepts, just as their meanings oscillate depending on the particular constellations in which they are deployed. In the Artwork essay, however, Benjamin establishes the terms “aura” and “masses” as unequivocally defined opposites that correspond to related dichotomies throughout the essay: distance versus nearness, uniqueness versus multiplicity and repeatability, image versus copy, cult versus exhibition value, individual versus simultaneous collective reception, contemplation versus distraction (significantly, the only term that eludes this dichotomous structure is the concept of the optical unconscious). Building up a crisis at the textual level designed to crystallize the options remaining to intellectuals in the ongoing political crisis, this binary logic culminates in the closing slogan that pits communist political art against the phantasmagoria of fascism.

This conclusion raises more questions than it answers. What did communist art politics mean in 1936 (or, for that matter, in 1939)? What did Benjamin mean by politics? What was his underlying concept of revolution? Which “masses” did he have in mind, the movie-going public or the proletariat? How does the conclusion tally with the argument about the revolutionary role of film in relation to art, sense perception, and technology?

The “U-text” of the essay, while not directly addressing the first, engages with all these questions. Most important, this version complicates the binary opposition of aura and masses, and it does so from both ends. In a long excursus relegated to a footnote, Benjamin offers what is probably the most extensive discussion in his whole work of the problem of “the masses,” which, among other things, should clear him at least partially from the charge of technological determinism. As for the

5. This discussion met with particular approval on the part of Adorno: “...I find your few sentences concerning the disintegration of the proletariat into ‘masses’ [sic] through the revolution, to be
declining aura, he makes the term part of a different conceptual trajectory, defined by the polarity of "semblance and play" [Schein und Spiel].

In the following, I will reopen the Artwork essay from the perspective of Spiel, understood in its multiple German meanings as "play," "game," "performance," and "gamble." Spiel, I will argue, provides Benjamin with a term, and concept, that allows him to imagine an alternative mode of aesthetics on a par with modern, collective experience, an aesthetics that could counteract, at the level of sense perception, the political consequences of the failed—that is, capitalist and imperialist, destructive and self-destructive—reception of technology. Not least, Benjamin's investment in the category of Spiel will help us better to understand why and how film came to play such a crucial role in that project. I will trace this connection with the goal of extrapolating from it a Benjaminian theory of cinema as a "play form of second nature" (Spielform der zweiten Natur).6

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In Benjamin's writings, the term Spiel appears in a variety of contexts, which span the range of meanings attached to the German word. His theoretical interest in Spiel in the sense of play is most explicit in his book reviews and exhibition reports on children's toys (1928). In these articles he argues for a shift in focus from the toy as object [Spielzeug] to playing [Spielen] as an activity, a process in which, one might say, the toy functions as a medium.7 He develops such a notion of playing—whether the child uses toys or improvises games with found objects, materials, and environments—in several vignettes in One-Way Street (e.g., "Child Hiding") and Berlin Childhood (e.g., "The Sock," "The Mummerehlen," "Hiding Places"), as well as the texts on the "mimetic faculty."8 Here the emphasis is on the child's penchant for creative mimicry, for pretending to be somebody or something else: "The child plays at being not only a shopkeeper or teacher, but also a windmill and a train" (SW2, p. 720).

In the playful osmosis of one another, that is, a world shot through with "traces of an older generation" (SW2, p. 118), the child engages with an "alien... agenda

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imposed by adults” (as Jeffrey Mehlman paraphrases Benjamin), though not necessarily in ways intended or understood by them. However, since the child’s mimetic reception of the world of things centrally includes technology, children’s play not only speaks of generational conflict. More significantly, it elucidates the way in which the idea that “each truly new configuration of nature—and, at bottom, technology is just such a configuration—” is incorporated “into the image stock of humanity.” The cognitive experience of childhood undercutts the ideological abuse of technological progress by investing the discoveries of modernity with mythic yet potentially utopian meanings: “By the interest it takes in technological phenomena, its curiosity for all sorts of inventions and machinery, every childhood binds the accomplishments of technology to the old worlds of symbols.”

Benjamin complicates the mimetic, fictional dimension of play (“doing as if”) with an interest, following Freud, in the “dark compulsion to repeat,” the insatiable urge to do “the same thing over and over again” (SW 2, p. 120; GS 3, p. 131). Referring explicitly to an “impulse beyond the pleasure principle,” Benjamin attributes to repetition in play a function at once therapeutic and pedagogic: “the transformation of a shattering experience into habit” (SW 2, p. 120). He thus modifies Freud’s pessimistic slant to some extent by imputing to repetition in play an existential quest for happiness and, as we shall see with regard to cinema, a liberating and apotropaic function.

The notion of play as creative mimicry shades into a second meaning of the German word: Spielen as Schauspielen, that is, performing or acting a part before a specially assembled audience. Both senses of play are evocatively conjoined in Benjamin’s “Program for a Proletarian Children’s Theater” (1928/29). In this text, Benjamin intervenes in ongoing debates on “proletarian education” by giving unequivocal priority to the child’s imagination and improvisation, declaring the child’s gesture a “signal,” not so much of the unconscious, but “from another world, in which the child lives and commands” (SW 2, p. 203f.). While he grants that an instructor is needed to “release children’s signals from the hazardous magical world of sheer fantasy and apply them to materials,” Benjamin foregrounds the child’s gesture as a model of “creative innervation,” one in which receptivity and creativity are in exact correlation. Grounding the performance in a “radical unleashing of play—something the adult can only wonder at” (p. 205), children’s theater could become “truly revolutionary,” as “the secret signal of what is to come that speaks from the gesture of the child” (p. 206).


At first sight, this vision of acting appears to differ from Benjamin's notions of adult acting within a rule-governed artistic institution, be it the traditional stage, the experimental one of epic theater, or the cinema. In both versions of the Artwork essay, Benjamin elaborates at length on the screen actor, who faces his/her audience (“the masses”) in their absence, performing instead before the apparatus and a group of specialists. The discussion of the actor’s performance before the camera foregrounds the connotation the word has in English, that is, performance as an achievement or Leistung, which is being “tested” at both the level of production and that of reception; in other words, it becomes an object of controlled exhibition or, one might say, display. Yet, as I will show, in the earlier version of the essay Benjamin still links the success of that performance to the transformative and apotropaic dimensions of children’s play. What is more, he extends the concept of play to the behavior of the spectating collective in front of the screen, including involuntary, sensory-motor forms of reception.

The third meaning in the complex of Spiel is that of gambling, the game of chance or, to use Benjamin’s preferred term, Hasardspiel. His reflections on the figure of the Spieler or gambler are familiar primarily from his essay “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” (1939/1940), where they conform to that essay’s generally critical, pessimistic tenor regarding the decline of experience—Erfahrung in Benjamin’s emphatic sense—in capitalist-industrial modernity. As a symptom of that decline, the gambler exemplifies a mode of attention ever ready to parry mechanical shocks, similar to the reflex reaction required of the worker on the assembly line and, like the latter, no longer relying on experience in the sense of accumulated wisdom, memory, and tradition.

Conceptually, however, Benjamin’s interest in gambling belongs to a series of earlier efforts, beginning with One-Way Street and continuing into The Arcades Project, to theorize an alternative mode of apperception, assimilation, and agency which would not only be equal to the technologically changed and changing environment, but also open to chance and a different future. If experience had fallen in value, proven useless by trench warfare, hunger, inflation, and massive

11. I am bracketing here another sense of Spiel associated with dramatic art, the noun that forms part of the composite term Trauerspiel, literally play of mourning, which is the subject of Benjamin’s treatise on The Origin of Baroque Tragic Drama (1928). Martin Jay reads Benjamin’s “saturnine attraction to Trauerspiel, the endless, repetitive ‘play’ of mourning (or more precisely, melancholy)” as a rejection of Trauern, the “allegedly ‘healthy’ ‘working through’ of grief”; see Jay, “Against Consolation: Walter Benjamin and the Refusal to Mourn,” in Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan, eds., War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 228. Benjamin’s antitherapeutic insistence on repetition in the endless play of melancholia has a structural counterpart, as we shall see, in his later efforts to redeem repetition as an aesthetic, comedic, and utopian category.

12. “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” (1940), Selected Writings, vol. 4, ed. Michael W. Jennings et al. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), pp. 329–32; crucial to Benjamin’s analysis of the decline of experience is of course the distinction between the concept of Erfahrung, experience accumulated over a lifetime and through generations, and that of Erlebnis, the isolated, incidental experience that corresponds to a mode of perception governed by shock; see ibid., p. 319.
social and political changes, it was nonetheless imperative to conceptualize some contemporary equivalent to that mode of knowledge. A reinvention of experience—experience under erasure—was needed above all to counter the already "bungled reception of technology" and with it the spiral of anaesthetics (the numbing of the sensorium in defense against shock) and aestheticization which, in Benjamin’s (and Susan Buck-Morss’s) analysis, was key to the success of fascism.

A crucial term in this project, entwined with the multiple meanings of Spiel, is the already mentioned concept of innervation. This term broadly refers to a nondestructive, mimetic incorporation of the world—which Benjamin explored, over the course of a decade, through exemplary practices such as writing and reading, yoga, eroticism, children’s play, experiments with hashish, Surrealism, and cinema. In an unpublished fragment written around 1929–30, “Notes on a Theory of Gambling” (. . . des Spiels), Benjamin states that the decisive factor in gambling is “the level of motor innervation” (SW 2, p. 297). The successful contact of the gambler’s motor stimuli with “fate” requires, before all else, a “correct physical predisposition” (SW 2, p. 298), a heightened receptivity that allows “the spark [to leap] within the body from one point to the next, imparting movement now to this organ, now to that one, concentrating the whole of existence and delimiting it. It is condensed to the time allowed to the right hand before the ball has fallen into the slot.” Benjamin insists on the neuro-physiological character of such innervation, which is all the more decisive “the more emancipated it is from optical perception” (SW 2, p. 297).

13. Benjamin’s most radical, New-Objectivist rejection of “experience” can be found in “Experience and Poverty” (1933), SW 2, pp. 731–36; relying to some extent on the same analysis and even repeating a key passage verbatim, he tactically reverses his position in “The Storyteller: Observations on the Works of Nikolai Leskov” (1936), SW 3, pp. 143–66; also see the fragment “Experience” (1931 or 1932), SW 2, p. 553. In a note written ca. 1929, he refers to his early critique of (bourgeois) experience, “Experience” (1913/1914), SW 1, pp. 3–5, as a “rebellious” act of youth with which, given the centrality of a theory of experience in his ongoing work (one may think of the essays on Surrealism, Proust, and Kafka), he had nonetheless remained faithful to himself: “For my attack punctured the word without annihilating it” (GS 2, p. 902). On Benjamin’s theory of experience, see Marlene Stoessel, Aura: Das Vergessene Menschliche: Zu Sprache und Erfahrung bei Walter Benjamin (Munich: Carl Hanser, 1983); Martin Jay, “Experience without a Subject: Walter Benjamin and the Novel” (1993), reprinted in Jay, Cultural Semantics: Keywords of Our Time (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998); and Howard Caygill, Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience (London: Routledge, 1998), a study that productively brings to bear Benjamin’s early writings on perception and color on his theory of experience but fails to see that Benjamin’s concept of aura, developed in conjunction with his shift of attention (rather than simply in opposition) to urban-industrial modernity, is indispensable to his project of reconceptualizing the possibility of experience in modernity.


In other words, rather than relying on the master sense of vision, say, by "reading" the table, let alone an "interpretation" of chance (AP, p. 513), gambling turns on a "bodily presence of mind," a faculty that Benjamin elsewhere attributes to "the ancients."17 In marginal cases of gambling, this presence of mind becomes "divination—that is to say, one of the highest, rarest moments in life" (SW 2, p. 298). The ability to commune with cosmic forces, however, is mobilized in the register of play, of simulation: "gambling generates by way of experiment the lightning-quick process of stimulation at the moment of danger" (SW 2, p. 298); it is, as it were, "a blasphemous test of our presence of mind."18 The moment of accelerated danger, a topos in Benjamin's epistemology and theory of history, is defined in the realm of roulette by a specific temporality: "the tendency of gamblers to place their bets...at the very last moment" (AP, p. 513). Accordingly, the danger is not so much one of losing than one of "not winning," of "missing [one's] chance" or "arriving 'too late'" (SW 2, pp. 297–98).19

With a view to Benjamin's concept of cinema, it is significant that he seems less interested in pursuing analogies with assembly-line work or the stock market than in linking the game of chance to the gambler's ability to seize the current of fate, related to ancient practices of divination that involve the human being in his or her material entirety. Whether or not we are persuaded by this linkage, it represents one of Benjamin's more daring (and, as history would demonstrate, most desperate) efforts to trace an archaic, species-based faculty within a modern, industrial-capitalist context in which mimetic relations (in Benjamin's sense) seem to have receded into "nonsensuous similarity."20 The rare gift of proper gambling, pursued—and misused—by individuals in a heretically isolated manner and for private gain, becomes a model of mimetic innervation for a collective that seems to have all but lost, literally, its senses; which lacks that bodily presence of mind that could yet "turn the threatening future into a fulfilled 'now'" (SW 1, p. 483). At this

17. Benjamin, "Madame Ariane: Second Courtyard on the Left," One Way Street, SW 1, p. 483 (emphasis added). The isolation of the successful gambler from the other gamblers as prerequisite to a telepathic contact with the ball is emphasized—and illustrated with a drawing—in the fragment "Telepathie" (1927/28), GS 6, pp. 187–88.
19. This temporality, Benjamin speculates in The Arcades Project, is a crucial dimension of what constitutes the "authentic intoxication" of the gambler (AP, p. 512), a state of passion, of delirious trance, an obsession not unrelated to eroticism. Thus, he compares the winner's happiness of having "seized control of destiny" to a man's receiving the "expression of love by a woman who has been truly satisfied by [him]" (SW 2, p. 298); he complicates this analogy in Convolute O 13.4, which questions the ability of the gambler as a type to ever "satisfy the woman. Isn't Don Juan a gambler?" (AP, p. 513). Benjamin justifies the pairing of prostitution and gambling in the same Convolute with the claim that casino and bordello have in common "the most sinful delight: to challenge fate in lust" (AP, p. 489). Also see the fragment, "In Parallel with My Actual Diary" (1929–31), trans. Rodney Livingstone, SW 2, pp. 413–14.
20. This does not mean that the category of "nonsensuous similarity" is a lapsarian one; on the contrary, it allows Benjamin to link the "earlier powers of mimetic production and comprehension" to his own medium—language and writing. "Language may be seen as the highest level of mimetic behavior and the most complete archive of nonsensuous similarity" (SW 2, p. 722; also p. 721).
point in history, with traditional political organizations on the left failing to mobilize the masses in their own interest (that is, against fascism and war), Benjamin wagers that the only chance for a collective, nondestructive, playful innervation of technology rests with the new mimetic technologies of film and photography—notwithstanding their ongoing uses to the contrary. As early as 1927, Siegfried Kracauer had designated the turn to the photographic media as the "go-for-broke game" [Vanbanque-Spiel] of history.21 By 1936, the political crisis had forced the literary intellectual himself into the role of a gambler, making his play, as it were, in the face of imminent catastrophe.

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Benjamin’s reflections on Spiel belong to a genealogy that he was clearly aware of. In one of his articles on children’s toys, for instance, he makes a plea “to revive discussion of the theory of play” that had its last major contribution in Karl Groos’s 1899 work Die Spiele der Menschen (The Play of Man).22 For a recent contribution to such a revival he cites the “Gestalt theory of play gestures” by Willy Haas, founding editor of the journal Die literarische Welt in which Benjamin’s own article was published. The far more significant touchstone for him, however, is Freud’s 1920 essay Beyond the Pleasure Principle, a thread I will resume later.23

Freud’s essay discusses infantile play, famously the “fort/da game,” in the context of traumatic neurosis as precipitated by mechanically caused, life-threatening accidents, an illness that considerably increased due to the barely concluded


"terrible war"; accordingly, his more general speculations on the repetition compulsion and his assumption of a death drive are often read in light of that recent catastrophe and its legacy.\textsuperscript{24} Two of the most widely known theories of play, Johan Huizinga's \textit{Homo Ludens} and Roger Cailliois's \textit{Man, Play, and Games}, were written in the shadow of the following war, shortly after the French publication of Benjamin's Artwork essay.\textsuperscript{25} Since the configuration of play, technology, and war will have some bearing on our understanding of the latter, let me briefly sketch the relevant positions of the former.

For Huizinga, World War II only culminates the decline of the "play-element" in contemporary civilization. "Until quite recently"—that is, in preindustrial, premass society in which play was linked to the sacred—"war was conceived as a noble game—the sport of kings," an agonistic ritual in which fighting was bound by rules and international law. Without these limitations, warfare deteriorates into "barbaric," "criminal violence": "It remained for the theory of 'total war' to banish war's cultural function and extinguish the last vestige of the play-element."\textsuperscript{26} In other words, the fascist war is cast as an aberration that is both symptom and executor of the decline of the ludic dimension in modern culture. Cailliois goes along with Huizinga's narrative of decline to some extent, but draws a clearer line between earlier forms of ritualized agon and modern, unbounded war: "War is far removed from the tournament or duel, i.e., from regulated combat in an enclosure, and now finds fulfillment in massive destruction and the massacre of entire populations."\textsuperscript{27} More than Huizinga, Cailliois stresses a causal link between the decline of play—which he describes as a "corruption of games" (chapter four)—and the emergence of total, genocidal war.

Both Huizinga and Cailliois define play as a free activity—and source of freedom—inasmuch as it is separated from "ordinary" or "everyday life" ("reality"), diametrically opposed to work, drudgery, necessity, and associated with leisure and a life of luxury. Huizinga in particular stresses the "disinterested character" of play, its lack of material purpose, which he considers necessary for play to fulfill its civ-


\textsuperscript{26} Huizinga, \textit{Homo Ludens}, pp. 208, 90; the whole of chapter 5 is devoted to "Play and War."

\textsuperscript{27} Cailliois, \textit{Man, Play, and Games}, p. 55.
ilizing function. Not surprisingly, he accounts for play’s tendency to create a perfect order—“to [be] order”—in the language of idealist aesthetics, “terms with which we try to describe the effects of beauty: tension, poise, balance, contrast, variation, solution, resolution, etc.”28 Again, Caillios follows Huizinga up to a point, but takes him to task for viewing play “as action denuded of all material interest,” thus effectively excluding bets and games of chance.29 He amends this omission not only by offering a detailed discussion of gambling and lotteries and their function in Western societies, but by delineating gambling within a differential typology of games, in which chance, alea, figures in relation to—and partial combination with—forms of agon (competition, test), mimicry (simulation), and ilinx (vertigo).

Unlike Huizinga, Caillios admits economic and social factors into the discussion of play, yet ultimately he too blames them for the “corruption of games.” The professionalization of sports, the pathological, obsessive character of gambling that deteriorates into speculation on the stock market, and the overall commercialization of leisure represent an intrusion into the closed universe of play—its “[contamination] by the real world.”30 Still, if Caillios to some extent shares Huizinga’s elitism and idealism, he differs from the latter’s techno-pessimism. In a passage that echoes a more radical argument in the Artwork essay, he observes that “industrial civilization has given birth to a special form of ludus, the hobby.” He classifies the hobby with a number of other occupations that function primarily as “a compensation for the injury to personality caused by bondage to work of an automatic and picayune character.” By engaging machinery in playful ways (by building models, collecting, inventing gadgets, etc.), “the worker-turned-artisan . . . avenges himself upon reality, but in a positive and creative way.” The hobby thus responds to “one of the highest functions of the play instinct.” Caillios concludes, “It is not surprising that a technical civilization contributes to its development, even to providing compensations for its more brutal aspects.”31

29. Caillios, Man, Play, and Games, p. 5.
30. Ibid., pp. 44–45.
31. Caillios, Man, Play, and Games, p. 32; see also his positive remarks about technological contraptions inducing vertigo at amusement parks and traveling carnivals (p. 50) and his inclusion of the cinema among legitimate forms of mimicry to be found at the margins of the social order (p. 54). These are not the only affinities between Benjamin’s and Caillios’s theories of play. Indeed, it is striking how Benjamin’s elaboration of the various meanings of Spiel parallels Caillios’s fourfold classification of games in terms of agon, alea, mimicry, and ilinx. While not aiming at classification, Benjamin traverses the whole range of play from what Caillios calls “paidia,” the spontaneous and inventive type of play, to the more calculating, rule-governed “ludus.” As certain as it is that Benjamin was familiar with, and ambivalent about, Caillios’s work on mimicry or mimetisme, it is more than likely that Caillios had firsthand or secondhand knowledge of Benjamin’s Artwork essay and perhaps even his work on Baudelaire. (The French translation of the Artwork essay’s original version, though, does not contain the footnote in which Benjamin develops his concept of play in relation to semblance, and the concept of Spielraum [room or scope for play; field of action] is translated as champ d’action.) The two men were introduced by Pierre Klossowski, the essay’s translator and member of the famous Collège de Sociologie, organized by Georges Bataille, Michel Leiris, and Caillios from 1937 to 1939. According to Klossowski, Benjamin “assiduously” attended meetings of the Collège and was scheduled to present a lecture on Baudelaire (or, as Hans Maier claims, on “fashion”) in the fall of 1939 which was preempted by the outbreak of the
The imbrication of play with technology, along with the large-scale industrialization of leisure and amusement (in the West) since the mid-nineteenth century, complicates any clear-cut opposition of play and work or, rather, play and (alienated) labor. As play became an object of mass production and consumption, as sports and other recreational forms grew into technologically mediated spectacles (not unlike war), the ideal of play as nonpurposive and nonproductive frequently came to serve as an ideological cover for its “material correlative, commodified amusement.” At the same time, this development produced, in the words of Bill Brown, “conflicting economies of play, conflicting circuits through which play attains new value”—in which the transgressive, transformative potential of play and the transformation of such excess into surplus value cannot always be easily distinguished.

For Benjamin (and, for that matter, his friend Kracauer), that very ambiguity presented a point of departure, rather than a token of decline—a chance (to paraphrase Kracauer) to determine the place of the present in the historical process. In the “U-text” of the Artwork essay Benjamin transposes his reflections on Spiel from the children’s room and gambling hall to the public arena of history. More precisely, the essay spells out the political and cultural constellation that motivated his interest in the category of play in the first place—a constellation defined, on the one hand, by the rise of fascism and the renewed threat of a technologically enhanced military catastrophe and, on the other, the false resurrections of the decaying aura in the sphere of art (aestheticism), the liberal-capitalist media (star cult), and the spectacularization of political life.

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The category of Spiel figures in this constellation as an aesthetic alternative to Schein or semblance, in particular the concept of “beautiful semblance,” which finds its fullest elaboration in Hegel. However, Benjamin argues, the German idealist version of “beautiful semblance” already had some “derivative qualities,” having relinquished the “experiential basis” that it had in classical antiquity—the

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32. Brown, Material Unconscious, pp. 11–12; see also pp. 106–08.
aura. He proposes a genealogy of both terms, "semblance and play" [Schein und Spiel], by projecting them back, past Hegel, past Goethe and Schiller (and even past classical antiquity) onto ancient practices of mimesis, the "Ur-phenomenon of all artistic activity" (SW 3, pp. 137, 127; GS 7, p. 368). In mimetic practice, semblance and play were two sides of the same process, still folded into one another: "The mime presents what he mimes merely as semblance [Der Nachmachende macht, was er macht, nur scheinbar]," which is to say he evokes the presence of something that is itself absent. But since the oldest forms of imitation, "dance and language, gestures of body and lips," "had only a single material to work with: the body of the mime himself," he does not merely evoke an absent other, but enacts, embodies what he mimes: "The mime presents his subject as a semblance [Der Nachmachende macht seine Sache scheinbar]." One could also say, he plays [or performs] his subject. Thus we encounter the polarity informing mimesis." In mimesis, he sums up, "tightly interfolded like cotyledons, slumber the two aspects of art: semblance and play" (SW 3, p. 127).

In a related fragment, Benjamin observes that in traditional art and aesthetics semblance and play continue to be entwined in varying proportions; he even postulates that the polarity of semblance and play is indispensable to any definition of art: "Art (the definition might run) is a suggested improvement on nature: an imitation which is, in its hidden core, a demonstration," a model or instruction to the original. "In other words, art is a perfecting mimesis" (SW 3, p. 137; GS 7, pp. 667–68). Yet to the dialectician, Benjamin asserts, the polarity of semblance and play is of interest only if historicized. In his genealogy of Western art, this polarity has been tipped toward semblance, autonomized and segregated in the aesthetics of beautiful semblance which has dead-ended in aestheticism (phantasmagoria, false resurrections of the aura). By the same token, however, he discerns an increase of "elements of play" in recent art: "futurism, atonal music, poésie pure, detective novel, film" (GS 1, p. 1048; Marcel Duchamp might be added to that list, cf. ibid., p. 1045f.).


36. A similar observation, which more explicitly seeks to bridge the gap between "art" and mechanically mediated "arts," can be found in an earlier text, "Moonlit Nights on the Rue La Boétie" (1928), in which Benjamin emphasizes the "dimension of play" as the point in which the so-called practical arts—
Benjamin correlates these two developments through an economy of loss and gain (see epigraph): “What is lost in the withering of semblance, or decay of the aura, in works of art is matched by a huge gain in room-for-play [Spiel-Raum]. This space for play is widest in film. In film, the element of semblance has been entirely displaced by the element of play” (SW3, p. 127; GS7, p. 369).

Of course, there is a rather basic, if not trivial, association between film and play in the period’s term for cinema—Lichtspiele, or games of light—and one should not underestimate Benjamin’s penchant for literalizing abstract compound nouns into their elements. But there is clearly more at stake in his decision to situate film on the side of play, rather than the cult of illusion. In view of major tendencies in actual film practice of the early 1930s, whether fascist, liberal-capitalist, or socialist-realist, this move appears, at the very least, counterintuitive. The argument begins to make sense, however, in the context of the Artwork essay (which, at any rate, rather refers itself to early cinema as well as montage or otherwise nonclassical, marginalized film practices), if we consider it in relation to Benjamin’s larger effort to theorize technology.

In the essay’s familiar version, technology primarily figures in its destructive, “liquidating” effect on traditional art, summed up in the erosion of the aura, and its concomitant potential for democratizing culture, based on a structural affinity between the new reproduction technologies and the masses. In the “Ü-text,” however, the concept of technology is grounded more fully in the framework of what Benjamin refers to as “anthropological materialism.” In his 1929 essay on Surrealism, he had invoked that tradition (Georg Büchner, Johann Peter Hebel, Nietzsche, Rimbaud) as an alternative to more orthodox Marxist, “metaphysical” versions of materialism in the manner of Vogt and Bukharin.37 It is indicative that Adorno, in a letter of September 1936, chose the term “anthropological materialism” to sum up all points on which he found himself disagreeing with Benjamin. The bone of contention for Adorno was what he considered Benjamin’s “undialectical ontology of the body.”38 While Benjamin’s concept of the body no doubt has roots in theology and mysticism, this does not prevent him from thinking about the body in both historical and political terms.39 He does so, however, by situating the

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38. Adorno and Benjamin, Complete Correspondence, pp. 147, 146.

39. For Benjamin’s theologically oriented speculations on the body, see “Outline of the Psychophysical Problem,” SW 1, pp. 393–401. In this early fragment, he makes a distinction between Leib and Körper (not quite convincingly translated as “body and corporal substance”) which has important implications.
fate of the individual body (and the bodily sensorium) in bourgeois society within a larger history of the human species, and this entails thinking about humans in relation to all of creation and about human history in relation to that of the cosmos. Likewise, as we shall see, he relates the temporal individual body to the constitution of a—metaphoric—collective body, or bodily collective, which is both agent and object of the human interaction with nature. Within this anthropological-materialist framework, then, technology endows the collective with a new physis that demands to be understood and re/appropriated, literally incorporated, in the interest of the collective; at the same time, technology provides the medium in which such reappropriation can and must take place. Such a reflexive understanding of technology makes visible a different logic—a logic of play—in Benjamin’s conception of the historic role of film.

This role is determined, along with the polarity of semblance and play, by what he calls “the world-historical conflict between the first and second technologies” (SW 3, p. 127). The distinction between first and second technology is developed in the Artwork essay’s original section six, which sets up the distinction in art between “cult value” and “exhibition value.” Like art, Benjamin states, the first technology emerges in the context of ancient magical procedures and rituals. In the effort to make an overpowering nature serve human needs and ends, the first technology “made the maximum possible use of human beings”; the second technology, by contrast, involves the human being as little as possible. Hence, he asserts, “the achievements of the first technology might be said to culminate in human sacrifice; those of the second, in the remote-controlled aircraft which needs no human crew” (SW 3, p. 107). Yet, where a contemporary reader might associate the latter with the latest in American-style electronic warfare (drones, cruise missiles), Benjamin makes an amazing turn. If the first technology is defined by the temporality of “once and for all” and “the irreparable lapse or sacrificial death,” the second technology operates in the register of “once is as good as never” since it works “by means of experiments and endlessly varied test procedures” (SW 3, p. 107; GS 7, p. 359).

for his conception of politics up and through the 1930s. Leib refers to the body as it belongs to and augments “the body of humankind” and as such is able, thanks to technology, partly to include even nature—the inanimate, plant, and animal—into a unity of life on earth. Körper, by contrast, refers to the individuated, sentient, and finite being whose “solitariness is nothing but the consciousness of its direct dependence on God” (p. 395; GS, p. 6, pp. 80–81). On the significance of this distinction, particularly in conjunction with technology, for Benjamin’s understanding of the political, see Uwe Steiner, “The True Politician: Walter Benjamin’s Concept of the Political,” New German Critique 83 (Spring-Summer 2001), pp. 43–88.

40. The most striking example of this juncture—or, at this point in time, disjuncture—between human and cosmic history can be found in the eighteenth and last of his theses, “On the Concept of History,” SW 4, p. 396. The idea appears in other contexts as well; see especially his essay on Franz Kafka (SW 2, pp. 794–818) and work relating to Fourier (Arcades Project, convolute W and passim). See also Beatrice Hanssen, Walter Benjamin’s Other History: Of Stones, Animals, Human Beings, and Angels (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

41. I have retained a literal translation of the German proverb, Einmal ist keinmal, not only because of its pairing with Ein für allemal, but also because of Benjamin’s fascination with the phrase; see his short piece “Einmal ist keinmal” (1932), GS 4, pp. 433–34.
origin is to be sought at the point where, "by an unconscious ruse, human beings first began to distance themselves from nature. In other words," he concludes, "its origin lies in play" (SW3, p. 107).

Unlike Frankfurt School critiques of technology from Dialectic of Enlightenment through the work of Jürgen Habermas, Benjamin does not assume an instrumentalist trajectory from mythical cunning to capitalist-industrialist modernity. Instead of "mastery of nature," which the first technology pursued out of harsh necessity, the second "aims rather at an interplay between nature and humanity." Rehearsing this interplay, Benjamin contends, is the decisive "social function of art today." Hence, the particular significance of film: "The function of film is to train human beings in the apperceptions and reactions needed to deal with a vast apparatus whose role in their lives is expanding almost daily" (SW3, p. 108).

We could easily read this statement as a behaviorist conception of adapting the human sensorium to the regime of the apparatus or, in the tradition of play theory, as a version of training theory or Einführungstheorie (Groos). And there is no reason not to, considering Benjamin's interest, thanks in part to Asja Lacis, in the Soviet avant-garde discourse of biomechanics (Eisenstein, Kuleshov, Meyerhold) and his strategically belated endorsement of Productivism and Operativism (Tretyakov). But it would be a mistake to read the statement as simply an inversion of an idealist or aristocratic hierarchy of play and work (such as Huizinga's), to the effect that film, as a "play-form" of technology, would be instrumental to the goal of increasing industrial productivity, albeit on behalf of a socialist society. Notwithstanding Benjamin's advocacy of positioning art in the relations of production of its time, he was interested in labor primarily within the larger (anthropological-materialist) frame of humanity's interaction with nature.

42. This notion echoes the famous last section of One-Way Street, "To the Planetarium," where Benjamin qualifies the notion of "mastery of nature" by comparing it to education: "Is not education, above all, the indispensable ordering of the relationship between generations and therefore mastery (if we are to use this term) of that relationship and not of children? And likewise technology is the mastery not of nature but of the relation between nature and man. Human beings as species completed their development thousands of years ago; but the development of humankind as a species is just beginning. In technology, a physi is being organized through which humanity's contact with the cosmos takes a new and different form from that which it had in nations and families" (SW1, p. 487; GS4, p. 147). See also Lindner, "Zeit und Glück," pp. 137-40.


44. On Benjamin's reception of biomechanics, see Hansen, "Benjamin and Cinema," pp. 317-18; see also Alma Law and Mel Gordon, Meyerhold, Eisenstein, and Biomechanics: Actor Training in Revolutionary Russia (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1996). For his endorsement of Tretyakov, see "The Author as Producer" (1934), SW2, pp. 768-82; on the significance of this essay in relation to both the Soviet and German politics of socialist realism (made official doctrine in 1934) and the (Communist-front) Paris Institute for the Study of Fascism (INEA), to which it was originally addressed, see Maria Gough, "Paris, Capital of the Soviet Avant-Garde," October 101 (Summer 2002), pp. 53-83. Benjamin's polemically belated invocation of Tretyakov (whose experimental, modernist aesthetics was anathema to the champions of proletarian art and cultural heritage [Becher, Bihalji-Mérin, Lukács] and who was to die in the Gulag in 1939) is echoed by a similar gesture in the third version of the Artwork essay—his positive invocation of Dziga Vertov years after the latter had been denounced as formalist and constrained in his ability to work.
negotiated in the medium of technology. If he understands (children’s) play as “the
 canon of a labor no longer rooted in exploitation,” this notion is less indebted to
 Lenin than to (early) Marx and Charles Fourier. The latter’s notion of “work inspi-
 rated by play,” Benjamin asserts, does not aim at the “production of values” but at a
 more radical goal: “the amelioration of nature” (AP, p. 361; GS 5, p. 456). And lest
 we think here of gradual improvement, let alone progress, the idea of a “better
 nature” for Benjamin entails another Fourierist maxim, at once more violent and
 more humorous—the idea of the “cracking open of natural teleology,” which
 dislodges anthropocentric hierarchies (AP, pp. 631, 635).45

 What this might mean becomes a little clearer in a remarkable note elaborat-
 ing on the statement quoted above concerning film’s social function in the
 adaptation to—innervation of—technology. It is the aim of revolutions, he
 argues, “to accelerate this adaptation.”

 Revolutions are innervations of the collective—or, more precisely, efforts
 at innervation on the part of the new, historically unique collective which
 has its organs in the new technology. This second technology is a system
 in which the mastery of elementary social forces is a precondition for
 playing [das Spiel] with natural forces. Just as the child who is learning to
 grasp stretches out his hand for the moon as it would for a ball, so
 humanity, in its efforts at innervation, sets its sights as much on presently
 still utopian goals as on goals within reach. [SW3, p. 124; GS 7, p. 360].46

 In other words, as they seek to resolve the problems of second nature through the
 systematic transformation of social, economic, and political conditions (as in the
 Soviet case), revolutions also assert a “different,” more species-oriented “utopian
 will” (SW3, p. 134). The utopian impulses that manifest themselves (qua excess, as
 it were) in historical revolutions concern the still unresolved revolutionary
 demands “of the first, organic nature (primarily the bodily organism of the indi-
 vidual human being)”; they give voice to the “vital questions affecting the
 individual—questions of love and death which had been buried by the first technol-
 ogy” (SW 3, pp. 135, 124). (Since Benjamin, in a related fragment, cites de Sade
 along with Fourier as instantiating these impulses, I would suggest translating the
 word Liebe here as eros, if not sex.)

 Two arguments seem to be in play here. One concerns the reconfiguration
 of the relation between collective and individual made possible by the second

 45. Benjamin’s examples are hybrid creatures such as Fourier’s “long-tailed men” and Mickey
 Mouse, “in which we find carried out, entirely in the spirit of Fourier’s conceptions, the moral
 mobilization of nature. Humor here puts politics to the test” (AP, p. 635, W8 95). See also Hansen, “Of Mice
 27–61; 47.

 46. See also “A Different Utopian Will,” fragments associated with the composition of the Artwork
 essay, SW3, pp. 134–36; and Benjamin’s invocation of early Marx in the Arcades Project: “On the doctrine
 of revolutions as innervations of the collective: ‘The transcendence of private property is . . . the complete
 emancipation of all human senses. . . .’” (AP, p. 652, X1a.2).
technology. Vis-à-vis more orthodox Marxist concepts of revolution ("metaphysical" materialism), Benjamin insists on the interdependency of, on the one hand, the constitution of the masses, as the "historically unique" collective that has a chance to innervate the second technology as "its organs," and, on the other, the fate of the individual, whose bodily, sensorial, psychosexual being is more than ever an object, witting or unwitting, willing or unwilling, of transformation. The other argument, folded into the former, concerns the disjunctive temporalities of the utopian imagination and the actual state of development, which is not least a question of how to mediate species-historical politics with a contemporary crisis that has its origins in the nineteenth century. Here Benjamin, as so often, resorts to an image. The utopian aim of the second technology—"the unfolding of work in play" (AP, p. 361)—functions not unlike the moon for which the child reaches as it learns to grasp. The child's gesture may be based in motor-perceptual misconjuncture; but for Benjamin (unlike Piaget or Lacan, for instance), that misconception is a creative one, anticipating an alternative organization of perception that would be equal to the technologically changed environment. The child may not reach the moon, at least not in its own generation, but it nonetheless learns to grasp.48

Benjamin elaborates the contemporary implications of this cognitive hiatus with recourse to the term Spielraum, which has to be read in both its literal and figurative, material and abstract meanings.49 "Because [the second] technology

47. Much has been written about Benjamin's concept(s) of history and temporality; particularly relevant here are discussions of Benjamin's experimental intersecting of modern (social, political, cultural) history with "other" histories, be they mythical (U-history), "natural," cosmic and/or messianic; see, for instance, Hanssen, Walter Benjamin's Other History; Buck-Morss, Dialectics of Seeing, esp. chs. 5 and 8; Irving Wohlforth, "Re-Fusing Theology: Some First Responses to Walter Benjamin's Arcades Project," New German Critique 39 (Fall 1986), pp. 3–24; Peter Osborne, "Small-scale Victories, Large-scale Defeats: Walter Benjamin's Politics of Time," in Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience, ed. Andrew Benjamin and P. Osborne (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 59–109.

48. In The Arcades Project, Benjamin refers to "the idea of revolution as innervation of the technical organs of the collective (analogy with the child who learns to grasp by trying to get hold of the moon)" as one of "two articles of my "politics," the other being [Fourier's] idea of the "cracking open of the telology of nature." The image of the overreaching child has a less sanguine precursor in a fragment written ca. 1920/21, where he illustrates the problem of the discrepancy between corporeal motor ability and visual perception with reference to "the case of a child who would develop his visual world without prehensile organs and marooned in one place: different hierarchy of distances" ("Wahnnehmung und Leib," GS 6, p. 67). Gertrud Koch persuasively brings this fragment to bear on the Artwork essay in a commentary that elucidates Benjamin's messianic investment in cinema as a "technical apparatus which permits one to forget anthropological lack." "Cosmos in Film: On the Concept of Space in Walter Benjamin's "Work of Art" Essay," trans. Nancy Nemko, in Benjamin and Osborne, eds., Walter Benjamin's Philosophy, pp. 205–15; 209.

49. Benjamin himself suggests as much when he hyphenates the word, "Spiel-Raum," in the note on semblance and play (SW 3, p. 127). A similarly self-conscious use of the term can be found in a technopessimistic piece by Karl Wolfskehl, member of the George circle and the Munich "Kosmiker" group, whom Benjamin admired notwithstanding ideological differences; see "Spielraum" (1929), in Wolfskehl, Gesammelte Werke, vol. 2 (Hamburg: Claassen, 1960), pp. 431–33. Also see Karl Kraus's 1912 statement that the ability to distinguish "between an urn and a chamber pot" is what provides culture with "Spielraum"; lacking this distinction contemporary culture is "divided into those who use the urn as a chamber pot and those who use the chamber pot as an urn," that is, in Hal Foster's reading, "Art
aims at liberating human beings from drudgery," he asserts, "the individual suddenly sees his scope for play, his field of action [Spielraum], immeasurably expanded." In this new space, however, "he does not yet know his way around" (SW 3, p. 124). In the note on semblance and play cited above and in the section on the "optical unconscious," Benjamin explicitly links this expanded space to the emergence of film. But this linkage does not take a direct route. It mandates a detour through another set of terms, "image-space" [Bildraum] and "body-space" [Leibraum], in particular Benjamin's effort to theorize the increased imbrication of both as a signature of urban-industrial modernity.

Beginning with One-Way Street, Benjamin traces the emergence of a new type, and different organization, of space in both art and everyday life. In the transformations of writing and the changed economy of distance and nearness in the new media of advertising and film, he discerns a paradigmatic reconfiguration of physical space—the space of the body, the space of lived experience—in relation to perceptual space, the space of images. Just as script has entered a new phase of "eccentric pictoriality" and graphic mobility, he argues, images, instead of hanging on museum and collectors' walls, have come to inhabit a three-dimensional and public space, the space of the collective. The gigantic objects touted by advertisements, cars careening out at us from the screen and hitting us between the eyes, the fiery-red pool reflecting a moving neon sign—such things place the perceptual subject not vis-à-vis the image as object but within a dynamic visual, sensorial environment.50

The cinema in particular, with its techniques of variable framing and montage, exemplifies this new regime of perception defined by nearness, shock, and tactility. It also brings home the fact that the reconfiguration of body- and image-space is inextricably tied to the interpenetration of human physiological and mental functions with heteronomous, mechanical structures. In this regard (as well as others), the film that one might expect to have provided a touchstone for Benjamin is Dziga Vertov's Man with a Movie Camera (1929). Discussing Vertov briefly in a 1927 article on Russian film, he begins to develop a para-Vertovian film aesthetics (with a distinct Surrealist inflection) in a companion piece devoted to Eisenstein's Battleship Potemkin (1925), a work that does not exactly belong to the

Nouveau designers who want to infuse art (the urn) into the utilitarian object (the chamber pot)" and, conversely, "functionalist modernists who want to elevate the utilitarian object into art." Foster, Design and Crime (London: Verso, 2002), pp. 16–17. This is precisely why Marcel Duchamp, "trump[ing] both sides with his dysfunctional urinal" (Foster), provides a case in point for Benjamin's observation of an increase of "elements of play in recent art."

50. See, for instance, "Attested Auditor for Books" and "This Space for Rent," OWS, SW 1, pp. 456–57, 476. The reconfiguration of corporeal and perceptual space under the sign of technology reaches a troubling climax in the closing piece of One-Way Street, "This Way to the Planetarium" (Zur Planetarium), SW1, pp. 486–88; GS 3, pp. 146–48. Here Benjamin shifts the scene from urban modernity to the "immense wooing of the cosmos" (or "unprecedented mating with cosmic powers") that he perceives to have fueled, albeit disastrously misguided and miscarried, in World War I. See Irving Wohlfarth's magisterial discussion of this piece, "Walter Benjamin and the Idea of a Technological Eros: A Tentative Reading of Zum Planetarium," Benjamin Studies 1, pp. 65–109.
city film genre Benjamin evokes in its defense.\(^{51}\) Film is “the only prism,” he argues, “in which the spaces of the immediate environment—the spaces in which people live, pursue their avocations, and enjoy their leisure—are laid open before their eyes in a comprehensible, meaningful, and passionate way.” This prismatic work of film involves a double structure of technological mediation: it refracts a world that is already shaped by heteronomous structures that have become second nature to us. By bringing this world into visibility, film creates a “new realm of consciousness”; it enables human beings to represent to themselves their technologically altered physis. By doing so, it “explode[s the] entire prison-world”—our “offices, furnished rooms, saloons, city streets, train stations, and factories” which, in themselves, “are ugly, incomprehensible, and hopelessly sad”—and makes their scattered ruins available for “journeys of adventure”; in other words, for play (SW 2, p. 17; GS 2, p. 752). When he resumes this passage, almost verbatim, in the Artwork essay’s section on the “optical unconscious,” the preceding sentence spells out the dual, at once cognitive and liberating function of film in more specific terms: “On the one hand, film advances insight into the necessities governing our lives by its use of close-ups, by its accentuation of hidden details in familiar objects, and by the exploration of commonplace milieus through ingenious movement of the camera; on the other, it manages to assure us of a vast and unsuspected field of action” (SW 3, p. 117; GS 7, pp. 375–76).

Benjamin’s writings on the reconfiguration of space in urban modernity range from the phenomenological register through constructivist enthusiasm to an anthropological-materialist, if not messianic, vision of the revolutionary potential of that reconfiguration. The latter dominates in the 1929 essay on Surrealism, whose visionary language harks back to the final section of One-Way Street and still animates parts of the original Artwork essay. In the poetic and political practices of the Surrealists, Benjamin discerned the discovery of a “one hundred percent image-space” as the site for political action (SW 2, p. 217). In contrast with the cultural politics of the organized left, the Surrealists acted on the recognition that this site, the habitat of the masses, was being crucially redefined by the expanding image-space (no less, one might add, a space of sounds, scripts, and things) that had opened up with modern technologies of reproduction. This image-space,

\(^{51}\) Benjamin discusses the opening montage sequences of Vertov’s The Soviet Sixth of the Earth in “On the Present Situation of Russian Film” (1927), SW 2, p. 13; for his defense of Potemkin see “Reply to Oscar A. H. Schmitz,” SW 2, pp. 16–19. Also see his reference to Vertov’s Three Songs of Lenin (1934) in the third version of the Artwork essay (SW 4, p. 262). Major concerns of the Artwork essay—the reflexivity of (second) technology, playful innervation, an experimental aesthetics of self-conscious repetition, the optical unconscious—seem to call out for Man with a Movie Camera as an intertext. I have not been able to ascertain whether or not Benjamin saw Man with a Movie Camera, but it is more than likely that he had read Kracauer’s remarkable review of that film, “Mann mit dem Kinoapparat,” Frankfurter Zeitung, May 19, 1929, reprinted in Kracauer, Kino, ed. Karsten Witte (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1974), pp. 88–92. Benjamin’s affinity with Vertov also suggests itself by reading Jean-Louis Comolli, “Mechanical Bodies, Ever More Heavenly,” trans. Annette Michelson, October 83 (Winter 1998), pp. 19–24.
Benjamin observes, is no longer separate from the "space of the body"; it cannot be grasped from a position of contemplative distance characteristic of bourgeois high culture ("what we used to call art begins at a distance of two meters from the body").52 In their artistic and living experiments, the Surrealists at once act upon and enact, if not embody that transformation: "where an action puts forth its own image and exists, devouring and consuming it, where nearness looks at itself with its own eyes, this long-sought image space opens up, the world of universal and integral actuality" (SW2, p. 217; GS2, p. 309).53

This convulsive collapsing into each other of body- and image-space assaults traditional boundaries between subject and object, making both into elements of an at once perceptual and material environment. It also short-circuits the dialectics of distance and nearness which is so crucial to Benjamin’s thought elsewhere, in particular the concept of the aura and the speculations on the mimetic faculty. By the same logic, it entails a "dialectical annihilation" of the individual: in the new image space "political materialism and physical creatureliness share the inner man, the psyche, the individual . . . with dialectical justice, so that no limb remains untorn." But the demolition of the autonomously, organically conceived individual remains incomplete without an analogous transformation of the collective. "The collective is a body, too. And the physis that is being organized for it in technology can, in all its factual and political reality, be generated only in that image space to which profane illumination initiates us" (SW2, p. 217; GS2, p. 310). It is at this point that Benjamin first formulates the notion of revolution as "innervation of the collective," and as contingent upon the collective innervation of technology.

Only when in technology body and image space so interpenetrate that all revolutionary tension becomes bodily collective innervation, and all the bodily innervations of the collective become revolutionary discharge, has reality transcended itself to the extent demanded by the Communist Manifesto. For the moment, only the Surrealists have understood its present commands. They exchange, to a man, the play of human features for the face of an alarm clock that in each minute rings for sixty seconds. [SW2, pp. 217–18]

The closing image of the essay, which fuses human face and mechanical device, "mimetically performs" (in Sigrid Weigel’s reading) the "leap into the apparatus," the idea of a radical crossing of the human bodily sensorium with the new physis.
organized by technology. And the incessant striking of the alarm which culminates the accelerating movement of the text performs the very transformation of avant-garde revolt into revolution that the essay seeks to produce—or, to resume the language of the Artwork essay, the realization of the expanded perceptual-aesthetic Spielraum as a space of political action.

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In the Artwork essay, the imbrication of body- and image-space, of human perceptual-physiological impulses and mechanical structures, and the related logic linking the démontage of the individual to the idea of collective innervation are exemplified in the figure of the screen actor. Like many early writers on film, Benjamin contrasts the screen actor’s performance with that of the stage actor. Not only does the former forfeit the aura of live performance, as well as the rapport with a corporeally present audience; his or her performance or accomplishment is to a much greater degree determined by a team of experts, from the director and cinematographer to the sound engineer and editor. The morcelization and recombination of the actor’s being, the welding of his body into image-space, requires on his part a total bodily presence of mind (not unlike that of the successful gambler). For the screen actor faces a unique kind of mechanized test, similar to the aptitude tests to which the capitalist labor process subjects individuals daily and without public accountability. By exhibiting the actor’s test performance, by turning the very ability to be exhibited into a test, film becomes an allegory of the social (mis)adaptation of technology:

To perform in the glare of arc lamps while simultaneously meeting the demands of the microphone is a test performance of the highest order. To accomplish it is to preserve one’s humanity in the face of the apparatus. Interest in this performance is widespread. For the majority of citydwellers, throughout the workday in offices and factories, have to relinquish their humanity in the face of an apparatus. In the evening these same masses fill the cinemas, to witness the film actor taking revenge on their behalf not only by asserting his humanity (or what appears to them as such) against the apparatus, but by placing that apparatus in the service of his triumph. [SW 3, p. 111]

In other words, inasmuch as the screen actor’s composite performance achieves an individual innervation of technology at the level of production, it may spark collective innervation at the level of reception, in the corporeal space of the audience assembled in the theater, through processes of mimetic identification specific to cinema. (This conception, as one may recall, is diametrically reversed in the

54. Weigel, Body and Image-Space (see n. 3, above), p. 16. In this otherwise highly perceptive study, film and other technological media are hardly ever mentioned.
canonic version of the essay, in which the audience is assumed to side, in a more Brechtian fashion, with the testing gaze of the camera.)

Benjamin's conception of the screen actor is not as heroic as it may seem. The triumph of the actor's "humanity" is, after all, that of an "eliminated" human being, as he writes elsewhere, the human being "as the fifth wheel on the carriage of its technology." Benjamin's efforts to imagine a different relationship between humans and technology are motivated, fundamentally, by the insight that the reception of technology had already failed on a grand scale: the nineteenth century's dream of technology, fettered by capitalist relations of production, had met a terrible awakening in World War I, the "slave rebellion" of advanced technology. War, inflation, and capitalist rationalization have aggravated the human being's self-alienation, a Marxian category (derived from Hegel) that Benjamin updates by emphasizing the effects of the "bungled" reception of technology on the human sensorium and capability of experience (the spiral of shock and anaesthetics). Importantly, however, he gives that concept a dialectical twist that distinguishes his use of it from merely pessimistic critiques of modernity. For one thing, grounded in secular Jewish messianism and literary gnosticism (Kafka, Freud), Benjamin's concept of self-alienation does not involve the assumption of an originary unalienated condition or a more identical, unified self. For another, he valorizes film for making self-alienation materially and publicly perceivable, in other words, quotable and available for action: "In the representation of the human being by means of an apparatus his self-alienation has found a highly productive utilization" (SW3, p. 113; GS7, p. 369).

The screen actor whom Benjamin extols as a preeminent performer of self-alienation is, not surprisingly, Charlie Chaplin. A descendant of the figure of the

55. Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Third Version" (1939), SW4, p. 269. A remnant of the earlier pathos survives in the later version in section 11, where Benjamin extols the highly artificial production of the "vision of immediate reality" in film as the "Blue Flower in the land of technology": "The presentation of reality in film is incomparably the more significant for people of today, since it provides the equipment-free aspect of reality they are entitled to demand from a work of art, and does so precisely on the basis of the most intensive interpenetration of reality with equipment" (SW4, pp. 263, 264).

56. "Theater and Radio" (1932), SW2, p. 585. The image of the "eliminated" or exiled human being also appears in the Artwork essay, where it is attributed to Luigi Pirandello (SW3, p. 112).

57. "Theories of German Fascism" (1930), SW2, p. 312. See also above, n. 14.


59. In draft notes relating to the Kafka essay, Benjamin repeatedly paired Chaplin with Kafka. As a figure of self-alienation, diasporic displacement, and historical ambiguity, "Chaplin holds a genuine key to the interpretation of Kafka" (GS2, p. 1198); see also GS2, pp. 1256-57.
eccentric, Chaplin ranks as one of the first provisional dwellers in the “new fields of action [Spiebräumen] that emerged with film” (SW 3, p. 118; GS 7, pp. 377–78). Chaplin’s exercises in fragmentation are a case in point:

He dissects human expressive movement into a series of minute innervations. Every one of his movements is composed of a series of chopped-up bits of motion. Whether you focus on his walk or the way he handles his little cane or tips his hat—it is always the same jerky succession of tiny movements, which applies the law of the filmic sequence to that of human motorics.60

By mimicking technology’s fragmenting effects on the human body—a signature celebrated by the contemporary artistic avant-garde, famously Léger and Soupault—Chaplin “interprets himself allegorically” (GS 1, p. 1047). This is to say, he renders self-alienation productive by making it visible, thus enabling, in Michael Jennings’s words, “the mass of humans to see their own alienation, to recognize the fragmented, oppressive character of history.”61 Such cognition, however, depends upon a double process of bodily innervation—the interpenetration of the performer’s physiological impulses with the structures of the apparatus, and the audience’s mimetic, visceral assimilation of the product in the form of collective laughter.62 (In terms of film practice, such innervation can of course work through widely varying styles: stoic, whimsical, hysterical—think of performers as diverse as Buster Keaton, Jerry Lewis, and Jacques Tati.)

For Benjamin, the preferred genre of second technology is comedy (the other being science fiction, as evidenced by his lifelong enthusiasm for the writer Paul Scheerbart).63 Already in his defense of Potemkin, Benjamin had attributed the superiority of American slapstick comedy, like that of Soviet revolutionary cinema, to its engagement with technology.64 “This kind of film is comic, but only in

60. Draft notes relating to the Artwork essay, GS 1, p. 1040; SW 3, p. 94.
63. Benjamin read Scheerbart’s novel Lesabéndio (1913) in 1917 and subsequently wrote a review that he never published, “Paul Scheerbart: Lesabéndio,” GS 2, pp. 618–20; his second, major text on Scheerbart, which was planned as the conclusion to a large-scale work on politics (beginning with two sections respectively entitled “The True Politician” and “The True Politics”), is unfortunately lost; see Steiner, “Benjamin’s Politics,” pp. 61, 75–77. Benjamin returned to Scheerbart, who had also written a book on the architecture of glass, Glasarchitektur (1914) and worked with the Bauhaus architect Bruno Taut, in the 1930s; see “Short Shadows (II): To Live without Leaving Traces” (1933), SW 2, pp. 701–02, and his celebration of the new “culture of glass” in “Experience and Poverty,” pp. 733–34. In a late text written in French, Benjamin resumed Scheerbart’s utopian politics of technology, aligning him with Fourier’s cosmic fantasies and mockery of contemporary humanity: “On Scheerbart” (late 1930s or 1940), SW 4, pp. 386–88.
64. In his Moscow Diary (December 30, 1926), Benjamin is less sanguine about Soviet cinema’s reflexive possibilities: more than for the stage, he observes that censorship of films considerably restricts the range of subject matter and criticism. There is not even room for American slapstick comedy
the sense that the laughter it provokes hovers over an abyss of horror” (SW2, p. 17). Such language still harks back to Bergson, whose famous essay links laughter to the dread of the mechanical, the threatening loss of the élan vital.65 In the Artwork essay, however, anything resembling a techno-pessimistic, lapsarian stance is dialecticized by the paradigm of play. Comedy and play are linked through their antonym—Ernst, in its double meaning of both seriousness and earnestness.66 Ernst corresponds to the logic of once-and-for-all (the irreversible human sacrifice, the discus or shot that kills, tragedy, fascism). Spiel, on the other hand, enacts the logic of “Einmal ist keinmal,” drawing on the “inexhaustible reservoir of all the experimental procedures” of second technology (SW3, p. 127). We can easily think of a wide range of film comedies, not necessarily all silent (consider the Marx Brothers), which exemplify that logic by playing games as much with the order of things as with the order and meaning of words.

Comedy and play have in common the principle of repetition. As many writers have pointed out, comic modes—irony, parody, satire, sight gags—work through quotation and reiteration. Benjamin considers it essential for a new theory of play “to explore the great law that presides over the rules and rhythms of the entire world of play: the law of repetition.” For the child, “repetition is the soul of play”; nothing makes him happier than “doing the same thing over and over again.” Benjamin invokes Freud—only to depart from him in a crucial way. Comparing the child’s compulsion to repeat with the sexual drive in erotic passion, both “powerful” and “cunning,” he agrees with Freud’s claim that there is indeed an “impulse beyond the pleasure principle.” But he proceeds to read that “beyond” rather ambiguously, if not deviously, through Goethe. “In fact, every profound experience longs to be insatiable, longs for repetition and return until the end of time, and for the restitution of an original condition from which it sprang.” Repetition thus understood is not only an effort to domesticate trauma; “it also means enjoying one’s victories and triumphs over and over again, with total intensity” (SW2, p. 120). Freud dismisses repetition in pursuit of the pleasure principle as infantile (adults don’t laugh at a joke the second time around) and attributes the neurotic compulsion to repeat in the adult to the drive inherent in the living organism to restore a prior state of equilibrium, in other words, the death drive.67 While Benjamin retains the linkage of repetition and trauma—play as “the transformation of a shattering experience into habit” (SW2, p. 120)—he reconfigures it in terms of a utopian notion of repetition as difference, one that does not privilege traumatic experience as a primal event but makes it

66. See Huizinga, Homo Ludens, pp. 5–6, 8, 44–45, for an extended reflection on the interrelations between seriousness or earnestness and play.
productive of a future. Whether fueled by trauma or triumph, the emphasis is on the nexus of play and habit and, conversely, an understanding of habits as “petrified forms of our first happiness, or our first dread, deformed to the point of being unrecognizable” (SW2, p. 120; GS3, p. 131).

In Benjamin’s philosophy of history, repetition belongs to those ambivalent, if not antinomic categories that he nursed so stubbornly, and it is inseparable from his politics of happiness and historical redemption. Reductively speaking, Benjamin’s concept of repetition oscillates between two extremes: one, Nietzsche’s eternal return congealed in the law of the commodity, with fashion as both disguise and perpetuation of the ever-same (Baudelaire); two, dialectically embedded in the former, repetition as the striving for a past happiness that Proust pursued to the point of asphyxiation—a repetition that Deleuze has taught us to read as the production of that past in the very movement of repetition. The latter, turning on similarity and hence difference, also recalls Kierkegaard’s notion of repetition as a memory in the direction of the future—or, in Benjaminian terms, repetition in the mode of the “yet-once-again” (it might work this time) linked to the messianic idea of repairing a history gone to pieces.

When we turn to cinema as a medium of repetition, we find both poles of the antinomy present though not elaborated or, rather, submerged in the assumption of an Umschlag or transformation of quantity (sameness, massness) into quality (similarity, difference). In a quite basic sense, Benjamin regarded film as the medium of repetition par excellence on account of its technical structure: mechanical reproduction as replication that lacks an original; infinite reiterability and improvability at the level of production (numerous takes) as well as that of reception, that is, the seemingly unlimited distribution and exhibition of prints of the same film (an argument that, we would argue today, ignores the variability


of both exhibition practices and demographically diverse, public events of reception). At the same time, and because of both its technological and collective status, he invested the cinema with the hope that it could yet heal the wounds inflicted on human bodies and senses by a technology bent on the mastery of nature; the hope that film, as a sensory-reflexive medium of second technology, that is, rooted in play, offers a second, though perhaps last, chance for reversing sensory alienation, the numbing of the human sensorium in defense against shock and the concomitant splitting of experience. "In the cinema," Benjamin writes in One-Way Street, "people who are no longer moved or touched by anything learn to cry again" (SW1, p. 476; GS 4, p. 132).

The Artwork essay resumes this motif and gives it a more concrete—and rather more violent—elaboration. In the section on the "optical unconscious," originally entitled "Micky-Maus," Benjamin tries to make a case for film as the form of play that could at the very least neutralize, on a mass basis, the traumatic effects of the bungled reception of technology. Echoing and complicating his earlier statement about it being film's task to train human apperceptions and reactions for dealing with the apparatus, he asserts: "The most important social function of film is to establish equilibrium between human beings and the apparatus" (SW3, p. 117). Film is capable of doing so not only because of its technological foundation but also because it addresses itself to a collective subject; more precisely, because it makes psychic states that are normally confined to individual experience (dreams, fantasies) available to publically shared perception. This is the case, he argues, less with literal representations of dreams "than by creating figures of collective dream, such as the globe-encircling Mickey Mouse." The dream world that Mickey innervates, however, is more likely one of nightmares, in particular modern ones induced by industrial and military technology. In the transference between the electrified subject on screen and the audience, Benjamin locates an antidote to the violent return of modernity's repressed pathologies—through a "therapeutic detonation of the unconscious":

If one considers the dangerous tensions which technification and its consequences have engendered in the masses at large—tensions which at critical stages take on a psychotic character—one also has to recognize that this same technification has created the possibility of psychic immunization against such mass psychoses. It does so by means of certain films in which the forced articulation of sadistic fantasies or masochistic delusions can prevent their natural and dangerous maturation in the masses. Collective laughter is one such preemptive and therapeutic eruption of such mass psychoses. [SW3, p. 118; GS 7, p. 377]

The films provoke this laughter not only with their "grotesque" actions, their metamorphic games with animate and inanimate, human and mechanical traits, but also with their precise rhythmic matching of acoustic and visual movement—through a series of staged shocks or, rather, countershocks that effect a transfer
between film and audience and, hopefully, a reconversion of neurotic energy into sensory affect.\(^71\)

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The rest is history: Mickey Mouse disappeared from the final version of the Artwork essay and with him the concepts of innervation and play. Benjamin may have dropped them not only at Adorno’s insistence that the collective laughter at the cartoons was nothing but petit-bourgeois sadism; he also might have lost the courage of his convictions in the face of an increasingly grim reality. (Besides, in a note to the passage above, he himself observed a growing tendency, in the more recent Disney films, to put up comfortably with “bestiality and violence as inevitable concomitants of existence,” a tendency that renews the old “tradition inaugurated by the dancing hooligans to be found in depictions of medieval pogroms, of whom the ‘riff-raff’ in Grimm’s fairy tale of that title are pale indistinct rearguard” [SW 3, p. 130].)\(^72\) Still, even if Benjamin, for understandable reasons, withdrew from imagining film as a play-form of technology and cinema as a site for collective and homeopathic innervation, he was willing to wager the possibility of a technologically mediated aesthetics of play capable of diverting the destructive, catastrophic course of history.

The significance of this moment, if not its aberrancy, is thrown into relief by a brief glance at the ways in which the key terms of Benjamin’s wager—play versus semblance, film as (second) technology, collective innervation—are configured in two other critical theorists, Herbert Marcuse and Adorno. Marcuse’s 1937 essay “The Affirmative Character of Culture,” published in the Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung (the journal in which the French version of the Artwork essay had appeared the previous year), has often been read, not only as an effort to redeem the idealistic substratum of bourgeois culture against its affirmative reality, especially in its fascist-heroic version, but also as a response to—or, rather, evasion of the issues raised in—Benjamin’s essay.\(^73\) Like Adorno, Marcuse attempts to rescue an aesthetics of semblance or Schein (translated here as “illusion”), as the only mode in which a nexus between art and happiness can be maintained, and both invoke Nietzsche quoting Stendhal’s statement that beauty is “une promesse de

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72. This observation points to Caillois’s more systematic analysis of the dangerous combination of minircy or imitation with ilinx or vertigo: in the fusion of mimetic identification with vertiginous ecstasy, Caillois discerns symptoms of split personality and self-alienation which, as mass phenomena, link the medieval Children’s Crusade to the “orchestrated vertigo of the Nazi rallies at Nuremberg” (Man, Games and Play, p. 126).

73. A first systematic comparison of the two essays can be found in Jürgen Habermas, “Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Criticism: The Contemporaneity of Walter Benjamin” (1972), trans. Philip Brewster and Carl Howard Buecher, New German Critique 17 (Spring 1979), pp. 30–59.
bonheur." Unlike Adorno, Marcuse does not deal with modernist art, nor does he engage the historical crisis of "beautiful semblance" within the institution of art itself. Where he criticizes the affirmative function of the aesthetic illusion of happiness in the present—the fact that the satisfaction produced by "happiness in illusion" has entered "the service of the status quo"—he remains at the level of a critique of ideology grounded in political economy: except for the latter, there is no discussion of the material—technological, social, cultural—transformations that have rendered the status of art as beautiful semblance, its aura, problematic.

Marcuse returns to the concept of semblance in *Eros and Civilization* (1955), where he attempts to rescue what he considers the political radicality of Schiller's notion of the *play impulse*, with its objective of beauty and its goal of freedom. Aesthetic semblance or *Schein* (here rendered as "dis-play" or "show") is the utopian mode of a reality of scarcity and labor transformed in and through play. This transformation is enacted in the freedom of the imagination to "[trace and project] the potentialities of all being." Marcuse correlates the projected liberation of human beings (into sensuousness or *Sinnlichkeit*) with that of nature (into abundance and an object of aesthetic contemplation); but he says little about the historical interaction between humans and nature, let alone the role of technology in that interaction. The liberation and "self-sublimation" of human "sensuousness" and the concomitant "de-sublimation of reason" (which Marcuse considers one element in his own project of a "reconciliation between pleasure principle and reality principle") remain the object of a classical "aesthetic education," in Schiller's ahistorical humanist sense, rather than an education of the senses in modernity.

Where Marcuse does take on the question of technology, as in his 1941 essay "Some Social Implications of Modern Technology," he presents a critique of the instrumentalist conception of technological rationality as spreading across the whole of society and "almost" the whole realm of thought—a critique that, in one version or another, runs through much of Frankfurt School thought. Like Benjamin, though, Marcuse also invokes the Marxian axiom that the same social apparatus that ties technology to the perpetuation of scarcity has as well "released forces which may shatter the special historical form in which technics is utilized."

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75. Ibid., p. 121.
Among other things, he speculates that technology may one day lead to "new forms of individualization," which, in contrast with individualism grounded in property, are grounded in physiological functions: "the machine . . . allocates the work to finger, hand, arm, foot, classifying and occupying men according to the dexterity of these organs." By "meet[ing] a 'natural' individuality" in the human being, the external mechanisms of standardization come to "lay bare the ground on which a hitherto suppressed individualization might develop." It is "insofar as this natural uniqueness moids his thoughts, instincts, emotions, passions, and desires" that the technological process "may become the foundation for a new form of human development." 79 It would not be farfetched to consider this process a form of innervation, albeit a more functionalist one based strictly in production, yet compared to innervation in the Benjaminian sense, it lacks the dimensions of mimetic reciprocity and play—as well as the dialectical relation between a rediscovered, reconfigured individuality and a technologically constituted new collectivity—which Benjamin saw as the potential of second technology.

It is not until An Essay on Liberation (1969), written in the wake of the protest movements of the 1960s, that Marcuse can imagine an alliance or "union of liberating art and liberating technology." 80 The utopian concept of socialism he evokes "envisages the ingress of freedom into the realm of necessity" (that is, of play into work), which entails "passing from Marx to Fourier," as well as a "union between causality by necessity and causality by freedom," which entails passing "from realism to surrealism." He considers the Surrealists a model for "the new sensibility" of the 1960s inasmuch as they projected an aesthetically transformed world that "could (in a literal sense!) embody, incorporate, the human faculties and desires to such an extent that they appear as part of the objective determinism of nature," an imbrication for which Breton's concept of "objective chance" provides the nodal point. Such reconstruction of reality requires "the help of a gaya scienza, a science and technology released from their service to destruction and exploitation, and thus free for the liberating exigencies of the imagination"—in other words, for play. Beyond the Surrealist model, however, the alliance between liberating art and liberating technology remains limited to either the practical arts—"the art of preparing (cooking!), cultivating, growing things"—or is sidetracked into questions of aesthetic technique and form. Significantly, for Marcuse, the "collective practice of creating an environment," which alone could accomplish the Aufhebung or sublation of art into life, does not include technologically mediated and mass-oriented art forms such as cinema—which it certainly did for the Surrealists. 81

81. Ibid., pp. 21–22; 31–32. More precisely put, Marcuse subsumes all technologically mediated aesthetic practice under its capitalist form, the "commercial unification of business and beauty, exploitation and pleasure" (p. 32), or the absorption and neutralization of the desublimating negativity of "black music" by "the market" (pp. 46–47). On the significance of cinema and moviegoing for the
If play for Marcuse remained untouched by technological and aesthetic transformations, and technology in turn did not include the arts of technological reproduction, Adorno engaged both terms at a more concrete level and in conversation with Benjamin. Throughout his work, he again and again returned and—directly or indirectly—responded to the Artwork essay, that is, to the original version (rather than the 1939 version which he himself published in *Illuminationen*). In his posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno explicitly takes up Benjamin’s argument on the historical differentiation of semblance and play, in particular the contention that the “withering” of semblance, or aura, is accompanied by an increase of play elements in contemporary avant-garde art and film.

The rebellion against semblance did not... take place in favor of play, as Benjamin supposed, though there is no mistaking the playful quality of the permutations, for instance, that have replaced fictional development. The crisis of semblance may engulf play as well, for the harmlessness of play deserves the same fate as does harmony, which originates in semblance. Art that seeks to redeem itself from semblance through play becomes sport.\(^{82}\) Adorno in no way denies the basic affinity of art and play, that “element of play without which there is no more possibility of art than of theory” (*AT*, p. 39). Nor does he contest Benjamin’s observation concerning the increase of the play element in modern art, whether in self-referential permutations or in the greater emphasis of art on its own agency, from Debussy to Beckett (*AT*, p. 198). It is rather that Adorno turns the “powerful lesson,” which, as Martin Jay rightly insists, he had learned from Benjamin’s essay—“a lesson about the impossibility of reversing the decline of... ‘aura’”—against Benjamin himself.\(^ {83}\) Insofar as art qua play abdicates its responsibility to engage with an antagonistic, heteronomous reality, it merely sidesteps the crisis of semblance that “engulfs” all Western art. In rejecting semblance in the same breath as instrumental rationality, it either regresses into harmlessness (“fun”) or degenerates into sport.

Within the framework of his aesthetic theory, Adorno assimilates Benjamin’s concept of play to a tradition of experimental art and, more generally, to art that, qua play, “seeks to absolve itself of the guilt of its semblance” yet, doing so, results in a “neutralization of praxis” (*AT*, pp. 39, 317). To be sure, semblance, for Adorno (and no less for Benjamin) is more than referential illusionism; he considers most striking the extent to which the crisis of semblance, qua harmony, has affected music, the most nonrepresentational of arts. Still, semblance is the very

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*Footnotes:


condition of possibility for art to engage with reality at all. "The difference of artworks from the empirical world, their semblance character, is constituted out of the empirical world and in opposition to it" (AT, p. 103).

Crucially, for Adorno, this dialectics of semblance turns on the mediation of the unformed material within the internal structure of the work of art, its claim to wholeness, however problematic that claim may have become. Hence, in his view, the weakness of an aesthetics of play consists not only in its alleged refusal to engage with reality but, at a formal level, in its regressive evasion of fictive closure in favor of repetition.84 In one of the paralipomena of Aesthetic Theory, largely a commentary on Huizinga's Homo Ludens (and to some extent Schiller), Adorno spells out the psychoanalytic reservation against the notion of art as play. Looking back toward childhood, "if not animality," art conceived as play can only be regressive and "inevitably stands in the service of restorative and archaizing social tendencies." The mark of ludic forms in art is repetition, inseparable from the (internal) compulsion to repeat, which Adorno reads unequivocally as the (internalized) "compulsion toward the ever-same" and which he, more literally true to Freud than Benjamin, associates with the death drive (AT, p. 317).

The earliest published reference to Benjamin's thesis on play and semblance appears in Adorno's essay "On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening" (1938), his polemical response to the Artwork essay. Although he rejects the idea that there might be "new possibilities" in regressive listening, he still accepts (albeit in the subjunctive mood) Benjamin's basic claim: "One might be tempted to redeem [regressive listening] if one were to imagine it as [a phenomenon] in which the 'auratic' character of the work of art, its elements of semblance, gave way to the playful ones." While he allows for at least the possibility that this might be the case in film, he hastens to assert that nothing of the sort has happened in music: "today's mass music shows little of such progress in [the process of] disenchantment. Nothing survives in it more steadfastly than illusion, nothing is more illusory than its reality." Nonetheless, Adorno still shares Benjamin's valorization of play by insisting that the "infantile play" of mass music "has scarcely more than the name in common with the productivity of children." What is more, he sets off genuine play against the bourgeois business of sport which, in its "beastly seriousness" and purposiveness, surrenders the "dream of freedom" to the treatment of "play as a duty."85

Four years later, in the context of the chapter on the "culture industry" in Dialectic of Enlightenment, Adorno has entrenched himself in the position he was to take in Aesthetic Theory, that is, a critique of Benjamin's aesthetics of play as an evasion of the problematic of semblance—and, worse, as a degradation of art to a form of sport. In the unpublished continuation of that chapter, "The Schema of Mass Culture" (completed in October 1942), Adorno analyzes the mechanisms of mass cul-

84. See, for instance, his remarks on Proust's attempt to "outwit art's illusoriness" by evading the appearance of closure (AT, p. 102).
ture in relation to sporting events from which it borrows certain features, in particular its emphasis on virtuosity of performance and its ostensible abstention from meaning.

Thus sportification plays its part in the dissolution of semblance. Sport is the imageless counterpart to practical life, and aesthetic images increasingly partake of such imagelessness the more they turn into a form of sport themselves. One might well perceive in this the anticipation of a kind of play which, in classless society, would sublate semblance along with the principle of utility whose complement it is.  

Again, although Adorno does not mention Benjamin by name, he clearly responds to claims made in the Artwork essay. After all, Benjamin himself links sports and film repeatedly, most memorably when he evokes the “newspaper boys leaning on their bicycles and discussing the outcome of a bicycle race” to illustrate the way in which film technology makes everyone in the audience a semi-expert (SW 3, p. 114). Given Adorno’s animus against sport under whatever political flag or economic system it might be propagated, Benjamin’s admittedly somewhat uncharacteristic nod to sportivity was just one more of those “Brechtian motifs” that Adorno had recommended for “total elimination.”

Adorno here distorts Benjamin’s larger argument about film as a “play-form” of technology in two ways. First, he reduces Benjamin’s concept of play, grounded in the latter’s theory of the mimetic faculty and philosophy of technology, to one aspect—that of performance under the conditions of a test, developed in relation to the figure of the screen actor. Then he implicitly takes up Benjamin’s argument about the cinema as a site of actually ongoing collective innervation—and innervation of collectivity—(the question being the direction, quality, and usurpation of that process); but Adorno transposes this argument into a utopian “anticipation of a kind of play which, in classless society, would sublate semblance along with the principle of utility whose complement it is.” It is only in a utopian key that Adorno can fathom his friend’s view of technology’s actual reconfiguration and reconstitution of collectivity. Where Benjamin (and, for that matter, Kracauer) traced signs of change in the present and could imagine some mode of mediation toward a different future, Adorno dichotomizes that temporality into one of utopia and the present as hell. Thus, he dismisses any alterity within the notion of play, first by reducing it to sport, and then by reducing both sport and mass culture to their ideological function in monopoly capitalism: “Sport itself is not play, but a ritual in which the subjected celebrate their subjection. They parody freedom in the voluntary character of the service which

87. Adorno, letter of March 18, 1936, Complete Correspondence, p. 131.
the individual forcibly exacts from its own body a second time.”  

As for the spectating collective, the goal is neither semi-expertise nor emulation, let alone an education in solidarity: “mass culture is not interested in turning its consumers into athletes but only into screaming fans in the stands.” By confuting life with a “system of open or covert sportive competition, it . . . even eliminates the tension between the Sunday devoted to sports and the wretchedness of the working week that used to make up the better part of real sport.” This is, Adorno concludes, how mass culture enacts the “liquidation of aesthetic semblance.”

To be sure, Adorno’s conception of semblance and play, especially with regard to experimental art and modern music, is more complex than can be elaborated here. What is curious, however, is that he treats Benjamin’s argument as if the relation between semblance and play were one of those binary oppositions that dominate the Artwork essay’s later version (aura versus masses, distance versus nearness, etc.)—which it is precisely not. When, in his famous epistolary response, Adorno takes Benjamin to task for a supposedly undialectical concept of semblance, he reads the two terms as if they were conceptually independent of each other. In other words, he ignores Benjamin’s insistence on a dialectical relation between play and semblance—a tension in the polarity that persists, through the historical crisis and polemical erasure of aura, in a Benjaminian aesthetics of film.

Adorno’s critique of Benjamin’s theses, skewed as it may be, urges us to take a closer look at how a theory of film as play translates into not only general

88. “Schema of Mass Culture,” p. 77; “Schema der Massenkultur,” p. 328. The passage continues by linking this self-subjectification to the unrecognized sadomasochistic structure of mass-cultural subjection and to repetition compulsion: “One can play the master by inflicting the original pain upon oneself and others at a symbolic level, through compulsive repetition.”

89. “Schema of Mass Culture,” p. 78; “Schema der Massenkultur,” p. 329. As for the “screaming fans in the stands,” also see the already cited fragment in Aesthetic Theory: “The putative play drive has ever been fused with the primacy of blind collectivity” (p. 317). In their discussions surrounding Dialectic of Enlightenment (written up by Gretel Adorno), Max Horkheimer remarkably dissents from Adorno’s indictment of sport for its tendency to lapse into manifest brutality: “In sport, there is something of play, and in play there is something of the dream. Athletic accomplishment and gambling. Mass culture has grasped play. Play has something of unpressed mimesis.—Your concept of mimesis is probably incorrect since real regression is repressed . . . Repressed mimesis is identical with controlled regression.” Max Horkheimer, Gesammelte Schriften, Band 12: Nachgelassene Schriften 1931–1949, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1985), p. 592.

90. See, for instance, Adorno’s chapter on Schönberg in Philosophie der neuen Musik (1949; written between 1940 and 1948), in particular the section “Schönberg’s critique of semblance and play”; in the same chapter, he invokes Benjamin’s argument to address twelve-tone music’s relation to gambling and fate. See Philosophy of Modern Music, trans. Anne G. Mitchell and Wesley V. Blomster (New York: Continuum, 2003), pp. 37–41; 66. It would also be interesting to consider Adorno’s late essays on music, for instance, his effort to come to terms with Cage and Stockhausen, with serial and postserial music, in light of Benjamin’s aesthetics of play; see “Vers une musique informelle” (1961). On Adorno and experimental aesthetics, see Robert Kaufman, “Aura, Still.” October 99 (Winter 2002), pp. 45–80.

91. “I cannot see why play should be dialectical, while semblance—the semblance you once salvaged in the figure of Othilia [in Goethe’s Elective Affinities] . . . —is supposed not to be” (Correspondence, p. 129).
assumptions about the medium, but also a consideration of particular aesthetic practices in the context of the cinematic institution. This discussion will lead me, in conclusion, to reflect upon the significance of Benjamin’s wager beyond its historical moment, both from the perspective of film and cinema in the age of the digital and with a view to contemporary media politics.

First, Adorno’s critique highlights an important difference in the very concept of play: whether in avant-garde art or film, play for Benjamin remains linked to the mimetic faculty, key to his effort to theorize a nondestructive, imaginative innervation of the changed, and ever more rapidly changing, technological environment. As we saw earlier, he is careful to locate the origin of both play and semblance in mimesis, the “Ur-phenomenon of all artistic activity,” emphasizing their interdependence as much as their polarity (SW3, p. 127; GS7, p. 368). This genealogy diverges from accounts that place the concept of play, in both its idealist and modernist versions, in an antithetical relation to mimesis, more narrowly understood as illusionist imitation or representational realism. If Benjamin’s aesthetics of play retains its roots in mimesis, it does so by assuming a wider—anthropological, epistemological, language-philosophical—understanding of the phenomenon, which may manifest itself as much in art as in the behavior of the playing child and the gambler, in astrology as well as graphology.

As a kind of play that both draws on and redefines the mimetic faculty—the ability to perceive and produce similarities—film engages with the material world, though not inevitably in a manner that simply reflects its familiar features. If one speaks with regard to Benjamin of photography and film as “new mimetic technologies,”10 it has to be with the caveat that this does not refer to the (audio-)visual media’s ability to resemble the real, their analogue mode of reference—an ability that used to subtend ideological claims to both documentary authenticity and representational realism in mainstream narrative cinema. Benjamin’s theory of the mimetic faculty is concerned primarily with “nonsensuous” similarities—correspondences that unconsciously or imperceptibly permeate our lives. The mimetic gift that enabled the ancients to read such correspondences from stars, entrails, dances, chance occurrences—“to read what was never written”—has migrated into language and writing, “the most perfect archive of nonsensuous similarity” (SW2, p. 697); it persists as a physiognomic mode of reading for which

92. Spariosu, for instance, traces the restoration of play (“to its pre-Platonic high cultural status”) beginning with Kant and German idealism as a process of divorcing it from and opposing it to mimesis (Literature, Mimesis and Play, p. 9). See also n. 35, above.
93. See Benjamin, “Doctrine of the Similar” (February 1933) and “Mimetic Faculty” (September 1933), SW2, pp. 694–98; 720–22. For a genealogy of the two versions of Benjamin’s essay in relation to, on the one hand, his early philosophy of language and theory of “magic reading” and, on the other, his stance against the totalitarian reduction of mimetic practice in fascist aesthetics (and, I would add, Socialist Realism), see Opitz, “Ähnlichkeit”; also see Josef Furrkäs, “Aura,” in Benjamin’s Begriffe, pp. 95–146.
similarity "flashes up" and "flits past," as an aspect of language in excess of, though not isolated from, its semiotic aspect (SW2, p. 722).

While tracing a connection between archaic and contemporary, "profane" modes of reading, Benjamin considers the mimetic faculty a profoundly historical category: it comes into view only at the moment of its decline, when the perceptual world of modern human beings contains far fewer encrypted similarities or "magical correspondences" (SW2, p. 695): "The question is whether we are concerned with the decay of this faculty or with its transformation" (SW2, p. 721). It is in light of this question that Benjamin explores the aesthetic—formal, stylistic, perceptual, experiential—possibilities of the technological media, in particular, how film might "read" similarities that are no longer, or perhaps not yet, sensuously perceivable, and how such a reading might translate into collective and public experience in the cinema.

He pursues these questions through the much discussed notion of an "optical unconscious," which adds a psychoanalytic dimension to the anthropological, language-philosophical, and mystical underpinnings of the mimetic faculty. Introduced in his "Little History of Photography" (1931), this term refers to the idea that the apparatus might record and store aspects of reality invisible to the unarmed human eye, or moments of contingency and indeterminacy that were neither perceived nor intended by the photographer but might at some later point be released to the searching gaze of the beholder (SW2, pp. 510–12). When Benjamin resumes the notion of an "optical unconscious" in the Artwork essay, his examples shift from the still to the moving image and from the world of plants and bourgeois portraiture to the collective everyday shaped by capitalist-industrial technology. If in photography the optical unconscious harbored a revelatory and cognitive function, in film the cinematic procedures of framing and editing augment this possibility with a destructive, liberating, and transformative function in relation to the depicted world. To recall the famous passage from the Artwork essay, first formulated in his defense of Potemkin:

Our bars and city streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories seemed to close relentlessly around us. Then came film and exploded this prison-world with the dynamite of the split second, so that now we can set off calmly on journeys of adventure among its far-flung debris. [SW 3, p. 117]

The "prismatic" work of film at once unveils and refracts the everyday, thus making it available for play—for a mimetic appropriation and reconfiguring of its ruined fragments.

95. See Opitz, "Ähnlichkeit," pp. 31–41, and Weigel, Entscheider Ähnlichkeit 9–10; Body- and Image-Space xvii, p. 130 and passim, in particular on the distinction between "nonsensuous" and "distorted" similarity. Benjamin borrows the phrase, "to read what was never written," from Hugo von Hofmannsthal's 1906 play Der Tod und der Tod (Death and the Fool). On Benjamin's theory of reading, also see Irving Wohlforth, "Was mir geschrieben wurde, lesen': Walter Benjamin's Theorie des Lesens," in Steiner, ed., Walter Benjamin, pp. 296–344.
The image evoked in this passage—which could itself appear in a city film in the manner of Vertov or Vigo—recalls another, equally cinematic, image: Kracauer's Surrealist vision of a vast general archive of outdated photographic images, the jumbled fragments of "a nature alienated from meaning." "The disorder of the detritus reflected in photography cannot be elucidated more clearly than through the suspension of every habitual relationship among the elements of nature. The capacity to stir up the elements of nature is one of the possibilities of film." If "the game that film plays with the pieces of disjointed nature is reminiscent of dreams," its historic significance is the task of consciousness (which Kracauer sees fulfilled in the works of Kafka) "to establish the provisional status of all given configurations, and perhaps even to awaken an inkling of the right order of the inventory of nature."96 For both Benjamin and Kracauer, it is crucial that film's game with the fragments of nature destroy the spell of facticity, of naturalness, that maintains the given order. But this idea is inseparable from their messianic belief in photography's material bonding with the "far-flung debris" of modern life, as the condition for its eventual, though unimageable, redemption. So pace Adorno, the game that film plays suggests a strong engagement with the empirical world, though that engagement consists precisely in rupturing medium-specific expectations of resemblance by means of (in the Benjaminian sense) allegorical procedures.

This type of film aesthetics obviously depends upon the practice of montage—the composing and assembling of shots on the principle of contrast and discontinuity, which creates meanings the individual shots would not have on their own and that is capable of presenting a world that has no referent in empirical reality. Yet, as we have seen with both Benjamin and Kracauer, this is only half the story. The disruption of the naturalized time-space continuum, its allegorical mortification and disfigurement, already resides in the photographic procedure, beginning with the technical fact of split-second exposure. For Benjamin, this mechanically mediated moment may preserve a "tiny spark of contingency," an element of alterity that speaks to another—and "other"—in the future beholder (SW 2, p. 510).97 In other words, the meaning of the image is determined less by its claim to resemblance than by its material bond with the depicted object (the

97. The technologically based disjunction between storage and release allows for an unconscious element to enter at two levels, the moment of inscription and the time of reading. In the case of the photograph, this disjunction may involve an uncanny sense of futurity (as in Benjamin's example of the wedding picture of the photographer Dauthendey and his wife who was to commit suicide after the birth of their sixth child)—something that was not visible or knowable at the time speaks to the later beholder of his own form of death (one, however, that Benjamin had been contemplating quite intensely during the period [1931-32] in which he wrote the "Little History of Photography"; see Bernd Witte, Walter Benjamin [Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1985], pp. 96-100). It is no coincidence that this particular staging of the optical unconscious has invited comparison with Roland Barthes's notion of the "punctum," the accidental mark or detail of the photograph which "picks," stings, wounds the beholder; Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), pp. 26-27.
camera having been there at a particular point in time, light rays having linked the object with the photochemical emulsion for fractions of a second)—in semiotic terms, its indexicality. As an "imprint of a once-present and unique moment," in Mary Ann Doane's words, the indexical sign is thus essentially a "signature of temporality."98 Benjamin's investment in the indexical dimension of photographic imaging turns on the element of temporality that characterizes the mimetic faculty: the disjunction between the moment of contiguity and the time of reading as well as the fleeting nature or "flashing up" of the perception of similarity. In the case of film, the opportunities for such temporal disjunction—as the pathway for unconscious modes of perception and cognition—are doubled, at the very least, by the mechanical mediation not only of production but also, qua projection, of reception.99

By now it should be obvious that this type of film aesthetics, or conception of film as play, cannot be easily adapted, let alone applied, in the age of the digital. Among other things, the transition from photographic to digital modes of image production has challenged the significance of the indexical, whether as an ideological support for the truth claims of the visual or as an aesthetic point of entry for contingency, unpredictability, and memory. Suffice it here to say that the possibility not only to efface or "correct" unplanned side effects in postproduction but also to "composite" images from innumerable layers of different origins, including purely computer-generated ones, has put into question the epistemology of the material trace and imprint, especially in its traditional association of the photographic record with truth and authenticity.100 Suffice it also to note that televisuul standards of simultaneity have, already prior to digital and satellite delivery, affected the complex time-space relations of cinematic experience, the fictional evocation of a "here and now" in a medium that is "always already a 'there and then.'"101

98. Mary Ann Doane, The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, The Archive (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 16. Also see Philip Rosen, Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001). Centering, respectively, on Charles S. Peirce and on André Bazin, both these studies offer the most thorough and illuminating discussion to date of indexicality in the context of film and the photographic media.


The point of such observations cannot be to measure Benjamin’s “actuality” in terms dictated by the advance of media technology—an idea that he himself would have suspected of an unreflected ideology of progress that distracts us from the things that stay the same (such as, for instance, the persistence of documentary truth claims or, for that matter, of a good deal of classical-narrative verisimilitude within, if not by means of, the digital). Still, to remain with this type of argument for a moment: I don’t think Benjamin would have gone Luddite in the face of digital technology, inasmuch as it opens up for human beings another, dramatically enlarged Spielraum, a virtual space that significantly modifies the interrelations of body- and image-space and offers hitherto unimaginable modes of playful innervation.

After all, there is Mickey Mouse. By invoking an example from animated film, that is, graphic cinema that does not require, or need to pretend to, a preexisting, stable referent, Benjamin bypasses the traditional hierarchy of life-action film over animation. If, during the reign of photographic cinema, animation had been considered a marginal genre, associated with cartoons (thus films made for children) and abstract modes of experimental film, the digital paradigm makes photographic cinema a subcategory of animation. For Benjamin, Mickey Mouse not only undermines the hierarchy of genres but, by defying the laws of gravity along with the boundaries between animate and inanimate, organic and mechanical, disrupts the entire “hierarchy of creatures culminating in mankind” (SW 2, p. 545), thus realizing Fourier’s “idea of the cracking open of the teleology of nature” (AP, p. 635): ‘it/he/she “proves that the creature continues to exist even when it has shed all resemblance to a human being” (SW 2, p. 545; GS 6, p. 144). It could well be said that, as a figure of technologically generated, artificial subjectivity, Benjamin’s Mickey Mouse points toward the general imbrication of physiological impulses with cybernetic structures which, no longer limited to the imaginative domain of cyber-fiction, has become common practice in science and medicine, architecture and design, and a host of other areas.


If Benjamin’s Mickey Mouse is a figure of both simultaneity and futurity, it is not merely on account of the figure’s technical—and relative semiotic—indepen
dence from photographic indexicality. Mickey Mouse belongs to the modernist “culture of glas” (Brecht, Le Corbusier, Adolf Loos, Scheerbart), in which Benjamin saw the potential for a “new, positive concept of barbarism” that would replace a moribund tradition of experience.\(^{104}\) In the world of the (early) Disney films, “it is not worthwhile to have experience.” Enacting the fairy-tale “motif of leaving home to learn what fear is,” Mickey Mouse relies on imaginative improvisation rather than memory. It is the figure’s absolute contemporaneity that accounts for the appeal of these films: “the fact that the audience recognizes its own life in them” (SW\(^2\), p. 544; GS\(^6\), pp. 144–45).

This potentially paradoxical claim once again demonstrates (pace Adorno but also vis-à-vis an unproblematic genealogy of the digital) that Benjamin’s notion of film as play, even in the form of animation, turns on a relation of reference with the material, historical world. But that referentiality is mediated, not only at the level of cinematic inscription but crucially by the dimension of collective reception. In the Artwork essay, as we have seen, the claim that in certain films the audience recognizes its own life is linked to the cinema’s therapeutic and, as Benjamin hopes, apotropaic function vis-à-vis technologically induced violence. Insofar as in the movie theater the reactions of the individual are a priori determined by the matrix of mass reception, collective reception entails the possibility of mutual self-regulation: “No sooner are these reactions manifest than they regulate one another” (SW\(^3\), p. 116). Benjamin’s discussion of Mickey Mouse as a figure of collective dream spells out the psycho-perceptual prehistory that makes this self-regulation politically imperative. By articulating the repressed pathologies of technological modernity, his speculation suggests, these films could preemptively diffuse, through collective laughter, an otherwise destructive potential. In other words, by activating these (individually based) mass-psychotic tendencies in the space of collective sensory experience, in the mode of aesthetic play, the cinema might prevent them from being acted out in reality, in the form of organized mob violence, genocidal persecution, and war.

Three years earlier, Benjamin had presented a more benign vision of Mickey Mouse as a figure of collective dream, a dream that offered “tremendous relief” to “people who have grown weary of the endless complications of everyday living and to whom the purpose of existence seems to have been reduced to the most distant vanishing point on an endless horizon.” Here the emphasis is on the “miracles” that seem to have been “improvised out of the body of Mickey Mouse”—“miracles that not only surpass the wonders of technology, but make fun of them.” In that dream, “nature and technology, primitiveness and comfort, have completely merged” (SW\(^2\), pp. 734–35). In the Artwork essay, Mickey’s dream work is cast as a far more dangerous game, and the dreaming collective—“the people”—as an

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extremely volatile, "compact mass." In both cases, however, Benjamin was able to imagine that the cinema, as a site of collective reception, constituted a sensory-reflexive horizon in which the liberating as well as pathological effects of technological modernity could be articulated and engaged. This is to say that, despite the fact that he was not exactly a moviegoer (unlike Kraus, for instance), Benjamin understood that cinema as a play-form of technology crucially entailed the interaction between films and audience in the public theater space, the aesthetic mobilization of affective and cognitive processes that both depend upon and shape the viewer's memory, imagination, and mimetic capacity.

Benjamin's vision of Mickey Mouse as a cheerful barbarian countering the violence unleashed by capitalist technology with games of innervation fell prey to the all-too-realistic fear that the therapy, for now, had failed; that the collective laughter of the mass audience might indeed turn out, as Adorno had warned, to be a prelude to catastrophe. He not only dropped the anthropological-materialist and messianic impulses of the Artwork essay in favor of a "general and mild politics of distraction"; he also wrote essays such as "The Storyteller" (1936) and "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" (1940) that cast the historical impact of technology and the media of reproduction in a more critical, if not elegiac, key. Yet, if Benjamin's work goes to the heart of media politics today, in particular the largely unsatisfactory debates on violence in and of the media, it is not because of either his techno-utopian or his media-pessimistic stance, but rather his radical ambivalence, his effort to think both positions through in their most extreme implications. In this sense, the question of his actuality for current debates on film and media may ride less on particular prognostications than on the peculiar structure of his thinking and writing. If he shared with Gramsci the call to a "pessimism of the intellect," he did not link it, like the latter, with an "optimism of the will" but, rather, an experimental will to explore and shift between antithetical if not antinomic perspectives.

105. See Benjamin's long footnote on the concept of "the masses," SW2, pp. 123-30.
The antinomies in which Benjamin’s thinking moved still speak to contradictions in media culture itself, and in a political sphere that cannot be thought of as independent or outside of technological mediation. As far as the ascendancy of an aesthetics of play over one of semblance is concerned, one could well argue that the development Benjamin discerned and valorized has culminated in visual digital genres such as video or computer games, television ads, music videos, and a new cinema of attractions. Andrew Darley, for instance, analyzes the shift manifested in these genres in terms of an aesthetics of play, associated with ephemeral, sensuous, and physical distractions and repetitive forms, which displaces an aesthetics of representational meaning, narrative absorption, and interpretation. Drawing on, among others, Caillois and Huizinga, Darley situates this aesthetics of play at that end of the continuum which Caillois characterizes as ludus, a highly regulated, formalized, and institutionalized type of play (in contrast to the opposite pole of paidia, the improvisational and imaginative type of play favored by Benjamin). Darley cautions against overestimating the new ludic aesthetics as politically progressive (the shibboleth of “playful resistance”), pointing out contradictions in the allegedly heightened activity attributed to the spectator in these interactive diversions: “it is not a matter of spectators playing with these texts (insofar as the expressions at issue are texts); rather, “play principles are inscribed already within their different modes of address. . . . Indeed, to a great extent it is not incorrect to say that it is the spectator who is ‘played with.’” If spectatorial activity is focused on the acquisition of skills and memorizing of moves, would this not vindicate Adorno’s verdict against the “sportification of play” as a form of internalized social discipline? Perhaps. But, to stay with Benjamin’s point, the genres discussed by Darley also promote a playful innervation of new technologies, albeit with diminished expectations regarding its utopian, liberating, and even apotropaic significance. The question Benjamin might pose today is to what extent the isolated, private circumstances of such play reduce, if not diffuse, its potential for turning the new configurations of body- and image-space into a space for collective action.

With the rise of the Internet and the World Wide Web, we are dealing with a new type of public sphere, at once infinitely expanded and extremely fragmented. At the same time, new forms of alternative and oppositional publicness are confronted by a dominant public sphere—or whatever one might call the powerful alliance between an oligarchically instrumentalized state and the conglomerated media industries—which is becoming ever more fictitious, disconnected from economic, social, and cultural realities on a global scale. Both Benjamin and Adorno knew that the decay of the aura was propelled as much by its technologically enhanced resurrections as by its “liquidation” in technological reproduction.

110. Ibid., pp. 172-73; see also pp. 176-78.
Today, the "huge gain in room-for-play" inaugurated by the photographic media is more than matched by the industrial production and circulation of phantasmagoria. Techno-aesthetics is not only inseparable from consumer capitalism but ever more essential to political marketing, to say nothing of the marketing of wars. And aesthetic devices honed in film and television do not simply supply phantasmagoric effects to political publicity; they are intrinsic to the very staging of these events. None of this is exactly news, but the degree to which such practices have become naturalized should sound a heightened level of alarm even if the very genre of alarm has long since become part of the game. All the more reason for us, as historians, critics, and theorists, artists, writers, and teachers, to take Benjamin's gamble with cinema seriously and to wage an aesthetics of play, understood as a political ecology of the senses, on a par with the most advanced technologies.
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