This collection, *Illuminations*, published in 1968, includes the essay on mechanical reproduction, and is the basis of Benjamin's worldwide reputation today.

*Illuminations* contains selections made from the two-volume German *Schriften*, edited and introduced by Theodor Adorno and published in 1955. Arendt's "chief purpose" in making her selection was "to convey the importance of Benjamin as a literary critic" (Benjamin, 1968, p. 267). Most of the essays in the collection are about either literature (Baudelaire, Proust, and Kafka) or related topics (translation, book collecting), with the exception of the celebrated "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (pp. 255–66). "Mechanical Reproduction" thus stands in some isolation from the rest of the collection. What makes it distinctive, apart from its subject matter, are certain aspects of Benjamin's interests and concerns, notably a political engagement with questions concerning art and commodity production from a (loosely) Marxist perspective. That perspective provides the thread that links the text with its resurrection, several decades later, in circumstances hugely different from those in which, and for which, it was originally written. This essay thus has two tasks: first, to account for the original circumstances that gave rise to "Mechanical Reproduction" and the debate to which it made a central contribution, and second, to explain briefly the reasons for its posthumous fame when it became available to English-speaking readers nearly 40 years later.

**Art and politics in the 1930s**

The period between World Wars I and II was one of profound economic, political, and cultural change in Europe and North America. What we now call "consumer capitalism" was decisively established in the West in the interwar period, when mass markets were created for a whole new range of domestic and leisure consumer goods. Intimately linked to this was the wide social penetration of new electronic forms of communication (telephone and radio) and of "mass" entertainment (cinema and the record industry). "Mass society," "mass politics," "mass production," and "mass culture" were key concerns in contemporary political, social, and cultural debates. On the whole, European intellectuals were hostile to the masses (the urban, industrial working classes) and to the new forms of mass culture that catered to their tastes. Artistic modernism, buttressed by theories of the avant-garde, ensured that the arts were "difficult" and beyond the grasp of the great mass of ordinary women and men whose "low-brow tastes" threatened to swamp and destroy "high-brow" standards of taste and ways of living — or so it
seemed to many artists and intellectuals at the time (Carey, 1992). This was one aspect of the debate around the role of art and its relation to the masses to which Benjamin’s essay contributed. But it had a more urgent political dimension in light of the deepening political crisis that grew directly from the economic crisis of 1929, which triggered the rise of Fascism in Europe in the 1930s and ultimately the outbreak of World War II.

A crucial issue concerned the implications of mass culture. Was mass entertainment yet another instance of the exploitation of “the masses,” or was it a potential means for their emancipation? The effect of economic and political crisis was to politicize culture and raise again the question of whether art could, or should, be directly involved in contemporary life and affairs. The question of political commitment for art and for the artist was intensely debated throughout Europe and the United States. In the Soviet Union, writers and intellectuals were called upon to be “engineers of the soul”; to throw themselves wholeheartedly behind the new Communist society and produce artistic representations of the men and women of the new Russia. A whole new genre of “socialist realism” in art and literature came into being to celebrate the achievements of the socialist revolution. In Britain, the intellectuals marched sharply to the left. They were deeply concerned with the prolonged social fallout of the economic crisis that created long-term unemployment in the industrial heartlands of the United Kingdom. They espoused new popular movements: for peace, for the republican cause in the Spanish Civil War (Hynes, 1966). In the USA, intellectuals became enthusiastic recruits to the New Deal administration and made films, photographed, and wrote about the impact of the Depression and the heroic efforts of the New Deal to counter it (Stott, 1986).

In Germany, those intellectuals who were hostile to National Socialism, or whose lives were threatened, fled when Hitler came to power in 1932. Among them was a group of academics who were members of the Institute of Social Research, an independently funded research center attached to the University of Frankfurt, later known universally as the “Frankfurt school.” Two of its leading figures were Max Horkheimer (the institute’s director for most of its history) and his close friend Theodor Adorno. Attached to the institute as an associate fellow on a tiny stipend was Walter Benjamin. Shortly after Hitler came to power in 1933, the institute’s offices were searched by the police, and were later seized and confiscated for being “Communist property” (Wiggershaus, 1994, p. 128). Adorno and Horkheimer eventually reestablished the institute in the USA, attached to Columbia University. They remained in the United States, German-Jewish émigrés in exile, until after the war, when they returned, with much honor, to Frankfurt. Benjamin left Germany, but remained in Europe. He was in Paris when the German army invaded France in 1940, and fled south to the Spanish border hoping to escape capture.

It was this situation – the apparently irresistible rise of Fascism, the impact of mass production on art and culture, the accompanying new forms of art and entertainment (film, photography, radio, and gramophone records) – that Walter Benjamin addressed in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” I consider his essay here, not as an autonomous text, but in relation to what inspired it and the responses to which it gave rise. Thus I argue that Benjamin’s essay makes a persuasive case for the emancipatory potential of new forms of “mass culture,” but also present Adorno’s powerful criticism, “On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression in Listening,” which was written in direct response to Benjamin’s essay and published two years later, in 1938. My aim is not to adjudicate the outcome of this interchange, but rather to show the complexity of the issues it raised about the social and political role of art and its enduring relevance; for it was the return of this question in very different circumstances four decades later that prompted the resurrection of the texts under review here. I also present some key sources of inspiration drawn upon by both sides in the argument. In particular, I will show the importance, for Benjamin, of his friend Bertolt Brecht, whose ideas about theater and politics underpin his thoughts about the contemporary situation of art. I will likewise highlight the contribution that the concepts of Georg Lukács made to Adorno’s response. In all this I aim to show how and why the question of art and politics mattered at the time. Far from being of merely academic interest, the issues that concerned Benjamin and Adorno, Brecht and Lukács, were compelling ones that intimately and fatefully touched their lives in different ways.

Art, reproduction, and the loss of aura

The central thesis of Benjamin’s essay is that in modern conditions, art has lost its aura, which is destroyed by mechanical reproduction, or mass production. The meaning of “aura” is central to understanding the essay and to Benjamin’s thinking in a wider sense. The Latin word aura means “breeze.” It is used as a metaphor for the subtle emanation that things give off as the mark of their distinctiveness. In European painting, for instance, the aura of sanctity is represented by a halo around a saint’s head, or a subtle glow around the figure of the Madonna. For Benjamin, Art is invested with and surrounded by aura, a halo of significance that
distinguishes it from non-auristic, everyday things. In modern societies
art proclaims itself as Art by its _unicity_ and _distance_ from daily life
and its affairs – the two key marks of auristic art. There is only one
_Mona Lisa_, for instance, and its significance as Art is caught up to
a considerable extent in its status as a unique, singular thing. Art is also
marked by its distance from everyday life, retreating into the museum,
the gallery, the theater, or the concert hall.

In pre-modern times this was not the case. Art was embedded in the
very fabric of society. It embodied and expressed a society’s most intimat-
ate values and beliefs, its sense of its history and place in the world. As
such, what we now call Art had a very different function then, and was
closely linked to religion, magic, and ritual. In a beautiful essay called
“The Storyteller,” Benjamin (1978) reflects on the decline of storytelling
in modern societies, displaced on the one hand by the novel, and on
the other by the newspaper. The former testifies to the collapse of tradition,
the latter the extent to which experience has been displaced by _information_.
Storytelling, Benjamin argues, is at the heart of traditional societies.
It embodies and expresses the tradition; indeed, it is the tradition. The
authenticity of the tradition (its living quality, its aliveness, its aura) is
preserved in the practice of storytelling. But modern, secular rationality
destroys tradition, ritual, magic, and religious beliefs. The Age of Reason
invented a new thing, Art, which it invested with an invented tradition
– _Creativity, Genius, Beauty_ – to stand as timeless reminders of the
human spirit. The aura of, let us call it, “Gallery Art” (which is what we
mean by Art in modern times) is a secular mystique, and the “worship”
of great art is a secular ritual practiced largely by the European bour-
geoisie and its intellectuals.

Mass production destroys Art’s aura, because it destroys its twin char-
acteristics of unicity and distance. Photography and cinema multiply
the image _ad infinitum_. There may be one _Mona Lisa_, but there are
umpteen photographic reproductions of it in all sorts of contexts,
including the downright vulgar. At the same time, mass reproduction
destroys the _distance_ of the art object. No longer the unique original
to which we must all go in reverence if we wish to see it, it is prized from its
shell. It goes out into the world, where it circulates in many forms. It
comes to us. The sense of reverence for the auristic art object is shattered.
In the concert hall or at the art gallery we display our reverence by our
concentrated and silent attentiveness to the performance or exhibition.
But the mass publics for new forms of mass culture take a more relaxed
attitude. They do not have to concentrate on the auristic experience.
They can watch in a state of distraction. They can listen to music on the
radio or gramophone and do other things at the same time.

What are the implications of the destruction of aura? For Benjamin, it
is the _democratization_ of art. What was once for the select few is now
available for the many. Modern technologies of visual reproduction
(Benjamin had in mind photography and cinema in particular) can
become art forms for the millions. Moreover, they bring about trans-
formations in how we perceive reality, offering us new perspectives on
the world. The camera is deeply enmeshed in the web of reality. It can go
to places that were hitherto inaccessible to most of us. Movement can be
speeded up or slowed down to reveal the beauty of things not available
to ordinary perception – say, the moment of impact of a drop of water.
The cinematic close-up creates a new kind of intimacy in public, allowing
millions access to the look on a human face that was formerly reserved for
lovers or for parent and child. In all this, what Benjamin calls the “theology
of art” – its ritual or cult value as a thing of beauty and a joy forever, the
_adoration_ and canonization of art by its ideologues, the intellectuals – is
put in question. Mass reproduction destroys the unique authenticity of
the original work, which can no longer be worshipped as such. “The total
function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to
be based on another practice – politics” (Benjamin, 1978, p. 226).

Like many European intellectuals at that time, Benjamin still believed
in the revolutionary potential of the “masses.” His views on the relation-
ship between the masses and new modes of production were spelled out
in a 1934 lecture he gave in Paris to the Institute for the Study of Fasc-
ism, published three years later in essay form as “The Author as Pro-
ducer.” Here Benjamin argued that the revolutionary potential of new
technologies depended on the role in the production process of the intel-
lectual (writer, author), who must align himself with the masses. It is no
use invoking the autonomy of the poet, his freedom to write whatever
he pleases (Benjamin, 1978, p. 255). Art is not about _self-expression:_
the author must serve the interests of the people. At the same time, in
new “mass” forms of writing such as newspapers, there is a greater
opportunity for readers to play an active part, rather than being mere
consumers. They can write letters and influence editorial opinion. In the
new, post-revolutionary Russian cinema, Benjamin points out, ordinary
Russians are used instead of actors to portray “the masses.” Thus, new
forms of mass communication may transform consumers into active par-
ticipants. Benjamin is arguing for a new relationship between authors,
products, and audience. Not the worship of the author (as Genius) or of
the work (as Truth and Beauty) by an adoring audience, but a more
equal and collaborative relationship in which the author gets down from
his pedestal and aligns himself with the audience (the masses), takes their
point of view, and gives it expression in his work.
This was the kind of theater that Bertolt Brecht tried to create. For Brecht, the dominant theatrical tradition – the whole commercial business, or “apparatus” of theater – served primarily to confirm middle-class audiences in their good opinion of themselves. It did nothing to make them confront contemporary reality or question their own social attitudes and values. Brecht thought of this kind of theater as “culinary consumption” – pleasant, bland food dished up for bourgeois audiences who wanted nothing more than a comforting, self-affirming, emotional theatrical experience. He, by contrast, wanted to create theater for new, non-bourgeois audiences who did not ordinarily go to the theater. He wanted a theater that a working-class audience would enjoy, where people would feel at ease and not constrained to be “on their best behavior.” Going to the theater could be fun. It could also be a learning experience, inviting audiences to think about the contemporary world and their position in it. It should therefore be realistic in a double sense: with respect to what is actually going on in the world, and how this affects those for whom the tale is told (i.e. working-class audiences). To do this, Brecht argued, the new theater must employ new techniques and methods: “Reality changes; to represent it the means of representation must change too. Nothing arises from nothing; the new springs from the old, but that is just what makes it new” (1978, p. 110). In all this, the aim was to achieve a new kind of involvement for a new kind of audience – not the cozy, self-affirming emotional involvement that bourgeois theater offered its audiences, but active, conscious political involvement. Theater that would make people think, that might change their attitudes; theater that could play a part in social change rather than merely reaffirming the existing order.

Brecht’s ideas about theater underlie much of Benjamin’s thinking in both essays under discussion here. In “The Author as Producer,” Benjamin makes the links between his and Brecht’s ideas explicit (Benjamin, 1978, pp. 261–2, 265–7). He also makes clear that he is discussing the role of art in relation to class struggle. The instruments of production are in the hands of the enemy – the newspaper, for instance, “belongs to capital” (p. 259). The new technologies have no revolutionary potential in themselves, but are put to reactionary use in reactionary hands. Consider the case of “art” photography: “It is unable to say anything of a power station or a cable factory other than this: what a beautiful world!... It has succeeded in making even abject poverty, by recording it in a fashionably perfected manner, into an object of enjoyment” (pp. 262–3). This is what Adorno meant by “the barbarism of perfection” (1978, p. 284). Technically perfect images dished up for culinary consumption, that aestheticize the world and thereby close off the possibility of any critical perspective on a less-than-perfect reality. In “The Author as Producer,” Benjamin calls on intellectuals (writers, journalists, photographers, etc.) to work within cultural institutions to subvert their functions. They must change their practices and use the new instruments of communication for politically progressive purposes, making them work in the interest of the masses rather than against them: “Technical progress is for the author as producer the foundation of his political progress” (1978, p. 263).

In “Mechanical Reproduction” Benjamin takes a less explicitly political line. He no longer calls on intellectuals to change the apparatuses of cultural production from within. Rather, in contradiction to his argument in “The Author as Producer,” he seems to see the technologies of mass cultural production as having an intrinsic emancipatory potential. By transforming the scale of cultural production and distribution, he argues, they play a democratizing role, bringing culture to the millions and shattering the aura of culture as something for “the happy few.” And by transforming the nature of perception, they offer new perspectives on contemporary reality that were hitherto unavailable.

This begins to sound like technological determinism, a questionable line of thinking that treats technological innovation as an instrument of social change irrespective of the uses to which it is put. In “The Author as Producer,” Benjamin argued (quite rightly) that photography, when put to modish use, had a flatly reactionary social function. In “Mechanical Reproduction,” however, he appears to believe the camera per se can change perceptions of reality. But Benjamin is alert to the possibilities of fake aura, by which he means the reappropriation of mass culture for ritual purposes:

Fascism sees its salvation in giving the masses not their right, but instead a chance to express themselves. The masses have a right to change property relations. Fascism seeks to allow them expression while preserving property. The logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life. The violation of the masses, whom Fascism, with its Führer cult, forces to its knees, has its counterpart in the violation of an apparatus which is pressed into the production of ritual values. (1978, p. 243)

A socialist politics is committed to revolution on behalf of the masses, in order to eliminate the inequities of property relations in capitalist societies. It therefore seeks to rouse the masses to the overthrow of the existing social and political order. Fascism, by contrast, is committed to preserving unequal economic and social relations. It recruits the masses to politics, not to mobilize them for social change, but to allow them to
express themselves, “to let off steam.” This is why Fascism aestheticizes politics. It transforms politics into theater, a spectacle in which participants can participate directly in political life, but cannot effect change. It does this through the fake aura of the mass rally with its ritual pomp and pageantry, and the cult of Führer worship which is given charismatic expression on such occasions. The forms of mass culture (cinema, radio) are harnessed to the purposes of propaganda and the cult of the event. All this leads to one thing: war. Against the aestheticization of politics by Fascism, socialism responds by politicizing art. This was the objective of Brechtian theater, and the final point of Benjamin’s essay.

The fetishization of music

Benjamin sent a copy of “Mechanical Reproduction” to Adorno for comment. He hoped that Adorno would publish it in the institute’s journal, Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung (Journal for Social Research). Adorno, however, was displeased by two aspects of the article: first, the “flatly reactionary position” assigned to aural art and the progressive role assigned to new technologies of mechanical reproduction; second, and relatedly, the presence in the essay of Brechtian themes concerning art and politics.

Adorno set out his immediate responses in an exchange of letters with Benjamin and, in a more considered way, in an article entitled “On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening” (1978), which put forward a detailed counter-argument to the case for mass culture that Benjamin had advanced. In his essay, Adorno attacked the impact of the industrialization of music on contemporary musical life. Two related technical developments at the end of the nineteenth century had an enormous impact on every aspect of musical life in the early twentieth century. These were sound recording and the radio, both major instances of the mechanical reproduction of sound. Before the gramophone and the radio, music was necessarily a live art, in which the performance itself was central to the experience. It was thus a social activity, involving players and audience in the production and experience of the musical event. But the record and the radio shattered the immediate social relations of musical life by their destruction of the performed event. Music now had two separate and unconnected moments: the moment of production (the recording, the radio transmission) and the moment of consumption (listening via radio or gramophone). What connected these two moments was the musical “product.” These two new “social technologies of sound” had the effect, Adorno argued, of reifying music.

This concept was drawn from Georg Lukács’s influential essay entitled “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat,” written in 1923, which aimed at expanding the implications of commodity fetishism outlined by Marx in 1867 in a famous section of Capital, “The Fetishism of the Commodity and its Secret” (1976, pp. 163–77). A fetish is an object endowed with magical properties—for example, a charm purchased to protect oneself from harm or misfortune—and fetishism is the worship of such objects. Marx treated commodities, especially money, as fetish objects. The magic of money is the riddle of the commodity fetish (p. 187). The fetishization of commodities (manufactured goods) is the objectification of the social relations of production into relationships between things. This process displaces and devalues human social life. When manufactured commodities realize their value as commodities in exchange for the universal commodity (money), they do so at the expense of those who made the commodity but have no control over the objects of their labor and derive little benefit from it. If labor is, as Marx claimed, the expression of our common human nature, then the fate of labor under capitalist conditions indicates that “[t]he devaluation of the human world grows in direct proportion to the increase in value of the world of things” (Marx, 1992, pp. 323–4).

Lukács extended the implications of Marx’s analysis to include all aspects of social, cultural, and intellectual life, via the concept of reification. “Reification” is rooted in the Latin word res (“thing”) and means, literally, “thingification.” Lukács argued that the commodity structure had penetrated all aspects of society, both inner and outer, and remodeled it in its own image. Thus, the reified commodity-thing becomes “the universal category of society as a whole.” Adorno, in turn, applied Lukács’s analysis of the reified world to contemporary musical life. It was not simply that music was reified as a marketable commodity-thing in the form of a gramophone record. It was fetishized (glorified, worshiped) in all sorts of ways that combined to conceal the fact of music in modern times—namely, the loss of its social, sociable character and, with that, the accompanying possibility of true musical pleasure. The first part of Adorno’s essay explores the many ways in which reified music exhibits its “fetish character” through the fetishization of performance, the stylization of production, and the fetishization of consumption. All three aspects—production, product, and consumption—bear the stigma of reification.

The fetishization of performance shows up in various ways. First, there is the worship of “the beautiful voice.” Then there is the fetishization of the great composer or conductor, particularly the latter. Finally, there is the notion of the authentic (great, “true”) performance, a tendency greatly enhanced by the professionalization of music playing and the
notion of the "definitive" recording. This shows up in popular as well as classical music, as has been astutely analyzed by Simon Frith (1986). The fetishization of authenticity (the great voice, the great performance, the great conductor) is an aspect of a total standardization and conformity that allows no place for imperfection. The professionalization of music (itself an accelerated consequence of new technologies) devalues all other music making, which is now relegated to the inferior status of "amateur" performance. In a telling phrase borrowed from Eduard Steuermann, Adorno wrote of "the barbarism of perfection," which he regarded as the definitive reification:

The new fetish is the flawlessly functioning, metallically brilliant apparatus as such, in which all the cogwheels mesh so perfectly that not the slightest hole remains open for the meaning of the whole. Perfect, immaculate performance in the latest style preserves the work at the price of its definitive reification. It presents itself as complete from the very first note. The performance sounds like its own phonograph record. (1978, p. 284)

The stylization of production means its standardization into something like an assembly line sound. Adorno detected this development in the emergence of the pop song. The standardization of music meant its transformation into "easy listening," something that was instantly and effortlessly consumed, epitomized by the catchy tune or refrain and the standardized rhythm (four beats to the bar). This mass-produced music pointed, Adorno argued, to the fateful separation of music into two distinct categories, "serious" and "popular." He traced this division back to the eighteenth century, claiming that Mozart was the last composer who effortlessly combined both elements in his music. Thereafter, music diverged increasingly in two separate directions, a tendency finally sealed by its commodification as the three-minute recording aimed at maximizing profit in the quest for a hit.

All this loses sight of the intrinsic pleasure of music, which is in performance. It has regressed to an isolated pleasure for an isolated listener, who fetishizes the act of listening but loses sight of what is listened to. This shows, Adorno argued, in the peculiar obsessions of equipment freaks who fetishize sound as an abstract thing independent of what is being played. Adorno pointed to radio hams as an instance of this process. We might point to hi-fi freaks and the fetishization of perfect acoustics. It also shows in the phenomenon of the fan who knows everything there is to know about the fetishized object, who writes to radio stations demanding more airtime for the object fetish, and who is lost in fake ecstasy at live performances. In all such ways the fan is in thrall to the "star" fetish object.

Yet no one really listens to music any more, Adorno argued. More music is available on a daily basis than was ever possible in earlier times. In fact, thanks to the music industry, it is almost impossible to escape from music nowadays. But the more there is, the less people listen. The reification of music is indicative of music's regression from a worldly, social pleasure to an inner state of mind, a matter of subjective taste ("I know what I like"). Reified music is, first and last, in the head of the isolated, individual consumer of music.

Adorno saw all these aspects of reified, fetishized music as indicative of the regression of listening. This term, taken from Freudian psychoanalysis, means a reversion to an earlier childlike state. What Adorno meant by this is that listening to music no longer has an adult character; it has lost any critical, rational function. "Regressive listeners behave like children. Again and again and with stubborn malice, they demand the one dish they have once been served with" (p. 290). The reification of music produces a kind of mass infantilism in listening publics, who no longer listen any more. What is thus lost is the possibility of resistance or criticism and, beyond that, the possibility of autonomous art: art as the expression of human autonomy, independence, and freedom.

Autonomous art

Adorno believed in the redemptive possibility of what he called "autonomous art." "Autonomy" (Greek: autos, "self"; nomos, "law") means self-government. In a philosophical sense it means that human beings, by the exercise of their will, are self-determining. Human freedom, in principle and in practice, presupposes individuals as autonomous, self-ruling agents who are free from heteronomous constraint (the constraints of externally imposed law or rule). Autonomous art is thus the free expression of a self-determining, creative "author" who produces the art work. More crucially, this integral artistic freedom is embodied in the autonomy of the form and content of the art work itself. Art, in other words, obeys its own laws. As such, it stands in opposition to mass culture, which is governed by heteronomous factors, most obviously the profit motive. The heteronomy of mass culture reveals itself in the search for mass audiences. In order to reach large and diverse audiences, the form and content of cultural products must be simple, accessible, and easy to understand. Thus, the forms of mass culture are determined by heteronomous factors. It follows that the autonomy of autonomous art must reveal itself in forms and content that resist the pull of heteronomous forces.
If heteronomous culture offers easy, accessible, simple pleasures, then autonomous art can be none of these things.

Adorno accepted and defended autonomous art as “difficult.” It is meant to be. That is how it resists easy “culinary” consumption. Autonomnous art demands real effort and commitment on the part of the reader, listener, or viewer. Benjamin might defend the “distracted attention” of mass audiences, but Adorno would have none of it. The concentration demanded by modern art was the mark of its negation of the culture market. In an exchange of letters on the topic, Benjamin tactfully conceded, “I have tried to articulate positive moments as clearly as you managed to articulate negative ones” (Taylor, 1980, p. 140).

But Adorno also rejected the political stance of Benjamin and Brecht. Art for art’s sake, he declared, was in need of defense and rescue from “the united front which exists against it from Brecht to the [Communist] Youth Movement” (Taylor, 1980, p. 122). Adorno (1978) made his views on this matter plain in an essay on “Commitment” written many years later, criticizing Jean-Paul Sartre, Lukács, and Brecht, all of whom defended the position that writers should be politically “engaged” and express this commitment in their work (Taylor, pp. 300–17). Adorno does not wholly reject their position. But he points out that Lukács’s defense of socialist realism against modernism served to prop up the dreadful Stalinist tyranny. As for Brecht, it is easy to prove the discrepancy between his ideas about theater and his theatrical practice. Indeed, Brecht himself conceded that what he really cared about was the theater itself, irrespective of politics. The case against commitment is that it can too quickly collapse into heteronomy. When it turns into propaganda, as it so easily does, it betrays it own cause and commitment – namely, truth. That was the sticking point for Adorno. He defended to the last the autonomous work of art for its stance against its betrayal by contemporay economic and political life. If it offered few pleasures, if its appeal was limited, it was nevertheless true to itself. Its negativity exposed the essentially negative character of dominant forms of economic, political, and cultural life, even as they thought of themselves as affirmative.

Aftermath

When Benjamin’s work became available in English in the 1970s it played into a time in which, as in the 1930s, culture was repoliticized – not by a downturn in the global capitalist economy and its political consequences, but by the new social movements of the 1960s, especially civil rights and feminism, and the American war in Vietnam. The French “cultural revolution” of May 1968 had ramifications throughout Europe, which showed in concerted attempts to repoliticize mass forms of entertainment, particularly cinema (again) and the newer mass medium of television. In this context Brecht’s ideas for a revolutionary theater were taken up again and applied to filmmaking and television drama production. Benjamin too appeared in these debates, but usually as a supporting player (Harvey, 1980; Walsh, 1981).

In the 1970s, British cultural studies was redefining itself under Stuart Hall’s directorship of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University. In its concern to retheorize the meaning of culture, the center looked outside Anglo-American empiricism, of which it was deeply suspicious, and turned to Continental theory for support. As part of this general process, the newly available work of Benjamin was taken on board within the overarching frame of Western Marxism (New Left Books, 1977), as Hall (1980) noted in a synoptic review of the development of cultural studies:

It was therefore of the utmost importance that at precisely this moment [the early 1970s] many of these long-forgotten or unknown “Western Marxist” texts began to appear in translation, largely through the mediation of New Left Books and Merion Press. English Cultural Studies thus had to hand, for the first time, an alternative source of theorizing within Marxism about its characteristic problems: in Lukács’ literary historical work, Goldmann’s Hidden God, the first translations of Walter Benjamin, the early texts of the “Frankfurt School” (known previously only because American “mass society theorists” were taken to have successfully refuted Adorno’s pessimistic critique), Sartre’s Question of Method. (p. 25)

Yet, within this essentially political agenda, whose primary objective was to rethink Marxism, Benjamin was, at best, a warmly admired but marginal figure (McRobbie, 1994, pp. 96–9). He was always a somewhat eccentric Marxist (he had little faith in “progress”), and his overtly political writings of the 1930s, with their Brechtian motifs, reflected only one strand in the thinking of this complex, melancholy “man of letters.”

In the post-Marxist 1980s, attention turned to other aspects of Benjamin’s thinking, and he was read as a pioneering cultural analyst of “modernity” (Frisby, 1985), this problematic now being raised in debates about its supersession by “postmodernity.” A long-term project, uncompleted at his death and largely unpublished, was the study of nineteenth-century Paris and its culture – the everyday life of a great city – as emblematic of the experience of modernity. Benjamin’s notes on this topic were published in German in the 1980s and made available in English by Susan Buck-Morss in 1989. Literary and cultural theory
became increasingly interested not only in the subject matter of Benjamin's project, but also in how he went about it: the fragmented, allusive style of writing; the concern with the meaning of history as crystallized in everyday experience, in marginal things, and in exemplary urban types, most famously the flâneur who strolls the city streets (McRobbie, 1994).

In the 1990s "Mechanical Reproduction" had another rebirth, this time in relation to the impact of digital media and the rise of the Internet. Benjamin had emphasized the impact of new technologies on the visual arts. The digitization of the image re-opened old questions about the "truth" and "authenticity" of the original, especially in relation to photography. Out there in cyberspace, students in film/TV programs write essays on "Art and Authenticity in the Age of Digital Reproduction," while contemporary artists explore the convergence of text, sound, and visual images. Today, references to Benjamin's essay crop up all over the place. It has become an essential reference in an increasingly diverse set of academic discussions concerning cultural and media studies; feminist writing, film, photographic, and art theory; literary and social theory; history and technology. It is interpreted in a variety of ways, with less emphasis on its overtly Marxist concern and more on the general questions it raises concerning art and the political and cultural implications of today's new technologies. Clearly Benjamin attempted a redemptive reading of the then new media of film and photography, arguing against the grain of prevailing intellectual opinion so forcefully expressed in Adorno's critical response. Those who see the Internet as offering the possibility of the "global" rather than the "mass" democratization of politics and art invoke the spirit of "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."

In his own time, Benjamin sought to find a framework and a vocabulary with which to make sense of newly emergent technologies and their social and political potential. This could only be done, as he well understood, within the context of the tradition in which the present is, at any time, embedded. A canon serves, in part, as a collective aide-mémoire, a reminder that what we encounter today was once experienced by others and, at the same time, as a resource for making sense of the enigmas of the future as they emerge into the present light of day.

References