It comes as a shock to that first audience. The street they walked in off just moments before hangs pale on the wall ...

*and their hairs stand on end to a shimmer of leaves or the movement of clouds, and the way the tense has been thrown like a switch, where the land turns to dreams, and where, sad to say, we have been living since.*

(Paul Farley, ‘Electricity’, from *The Boy from the Chemist is Here to See You*

I was witnessing a time when most things, including hard cash and our perception of reality itself, were about to be turned into an idea of themselves ... I began to notice the insistence of image over substance and this insistence began to pester me, like a bad radio station that you can’t afford to turn off.

... we were just that bit too old to buy into the rumble of a world described by advertising and products ... That was the world where everything had turned into an idea of itself, where life no longer had an inner life ... It’s a process which just seems to have built up, like an accumulation of fat around the heart’s weary muscle.

(Michael Bracewell, *Perfect Tense*)
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Chapter outlines
Introduction
The need for more critical engagement with the cultural consequences of the mass media is asserted. It is suggested that contemporary theorists have been too willing to overlook the various alienating and inauthentic aspects of mediated culture in their enthusiasm to detect evidence of proactive interpretive activity within mass audiences. Excessively optimistic faith in such interpretive activities are discussed using the umbrella term cultural populism. A brief critique of cultural populism is provided in preparation for this book’s corrective presentation of an alternative perspective based upon both a historical and a contemporary account of such central critical theory tenets as the culture industry thesis – the argument that mass media culture is disproportionately commodified and systematized.
Part 1 Then
Chapter 1 Walter Benjamin’s ‘The work of art’ essay
Walter Benjamin’s essay, ‘The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction’ (henceforth referred to as the Essay), is presented as a seminal piece from which to better understand the ‘hinge point’ in the development of the mass media. Despite its generally optimistic tenor, Benjamin’s examination of photography and early cinema is shown to contain the roots of a much more pessimistic interpretation of the harmful cultural effects of mass media. We argue that Benjamin’s Essay reveals how technological reproduction is intrinsically aligned with commodity values at the expense of noncommodified
culture.

Chapter 2 Siegfried Kracauer’s Mass Ornament
A contemporary of Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer shared some of the former’s optimism regarding the potentially emancipatory qualities the mass media held for their audiences. However, there is a need to reassess the more critical aspects of Kracauer that lie close to the surface of his treatment of popular culture, particularly his concepts of Ratio, the cult of distraction and the mass ornament. It is argued that the negative implications of these notions remain highly relevant to a critical understanding of today’s media.

Chapter 3 Theodor Adorno and the culture industry
Adorno’s culture industry thesis is defended as a key intellectual resource with which to approach contemporary media. Sharing both Benjamin and Kracauer’s interest in the theme of distraction as a new mode of audience reception in the age of mass media, Adorno’s work is explored for the ways in which it highlights the links to be found between media technologies and the fundamental philosophical underpinnings of Western capitalist culture. It is argued that, far from being unduly cynical and elitist as critics often suggest, Adorno’s culture industry thesis actually underestimated the sophistication and reach of today’s mediascape.

Chapter 4 Marshall McLuhan’s understanding of the media
Despite the apparent optimism with which he analysed media technologies, McLuhan’s work is shown to contain the seeds of a deeply critical portrayal of the media’s social impact. He consistently emphasizes the various ways in which the media profoundly rearrange and disorientate the human sensorium. McLuhan shows how the media promote essentially reactive, adaptive responses to their needs rather than those of the societies they increasingly dominate.

Chapter 5 Guy Debord’s Society of the Spectacle
Part 1 concludes with an account of Guy Debord’s Society of the Spectacle. This brings together the key themes of the previous chapters with Debord’s conception of a mass media society whose cultural frame of reference is dominated by the ubiquitous and defining presence of the spectacle. In conjunction with the previous examination of McLuhan, Debord’s theory is shown to provide a key transition point between the theorists of the then who wrote in the relatively early days of mass media society and Part 2’s treatment of the now and more recent forms of the society of the spectacle.

Part 2 Now

Chapter 6 The culture of celebrity
The origins and current prevalence of celebrity values in mass culture are examined in direct relation to Part 1’s themes of the x Chapter outlines decline of aura and the culture industry thesis. New forms of celebrity are defined and examined in the context of a critical account of their cultural effects. The tautological nature of contemporary fame in which people are frequently famous merely for being famous, irrespective of any other identifiable talent, is analysed as an aspect of industrial production processes that are now applied to culture in an unprecedentedly sophisticated fashion. It is suggested that, from a critical perspective, celebrity now serves to undermine the positive role Benjamin foresaw for distraction then.

Chapter 7 Banality TV: the democratization of celebrity
Part 1’s critique of cultural populism is continued with a critical assessment of theories that find empowering possibilities within the pervasive phenomenon of celebrity. The counter argument is put forward that, as the human embodiment of commodity values, contemporary forms of celebrity represent a further disturbing expansion of the culture industry’s harmful effects. Banality TV is the term used to describe celebrity’s widespread democratization within the increasing conflated genres of lifestyle programmes, Reality TV, and chat shows. These formats consist of predominantly unscripted presentations of everyday life but the idea that this fosters increased audience involvement and empowerment is critically offset against the conception of Banality TV as an ultimately disempowering phenomenon intimately related to the media’s promotion of contingent, superficial detail over substantive thought.

Chapter 8 The politics of banality: the obscene as the mis-en-scène

The final chapter argues that instead of being an exclusively cultural phenomenon, Banality TV has profound political consequences. World events such as 9/11, the Gulf conflicts and the Abu Ghraib controversy are used in conjunction with Jean Baudrillard’s conception of the obscene to demonstrate critical media theories’ continued importance for a fuller understanding of popular culture’s ideological qualities.

Chapter outlines

Introduction: Cultural populism and Critical theory

The new Plato’s Cave

I want you to go on to picture the enlightenment or ignorance of our human condition somewhat as follows. Imagine an underground chamber like a cave, with a long entrance open to the daylight and as wide as the cave. In this chamber are men who have been prisoners there since they were children, their legs and necks being so fastened that they can only look straight ahead of them and cannot turn their heads. Some way off, behind and higher up, a fire is burning, and between the fire and the prisoners and above them runs a road, in front of which a curtain-wall has been built, like the screen at puppet shows between the operators and their audience, above which they show their puppets …

(Plato 1955: 317)

Plato’s allegory of prisoners in a cave is contained within The Republic (approx 375 BC). It was originally used to describe the philosophical difficulty of uncovering truth in a human world that is inevitably error-strewn. From our contemporary perspective we can easily imagine the shadows projected onto the cave wall as a primitive form of cinema projection and thus Plato’s image becomes highly resonant with our own media-saturated society. Citing Plato from the very beginning of this book underlines the key now and then theme of its subtitle. Any novelty in the following analysis stems paradoxically from the relatively unfashionable insistence that the central tenets of critical theories of mass media are still highly relevant despite their relatively marginal position in mainstream cultural/communication studies and the sociology of the media. This book
aims to give these critical theories of the past a fresh impetus from more recent theoretical developments. It is hoped that this will provide an antidote to the present dominance within academic discourse of excessively uncritical theories of mass-media culture that contribute to our staying bound within a new Plato’s Cave – albeit an unprecedentedly comfortable one replete with high-definition plasma screens.

The lack of a critical edge to much discussion of the mass media has profoundly dangerous political implications for two main reasons.

1 The inhabitants of Plato’s Cave lacked the physical freedom to see the unmediated reality beyond the cave entrance that was causing the shadows on the wall. In the new mass-media cave the constraints are all the more insidiously effective for their predominantly immaterial and frequently voluntary nature. To paraphrase Marx – mankind is free yet everywhere he is in chainstores.

We shall see in the following chapters that our mass-media environment is permeated by ideological components that are overlooked – not because they don’t exist, but rather because they are an innate part of how the media functions. Familiarity not only breeds contempt – it also sometimes makes it difficult to spot what is under our noses so that:

2 Even when the mass media’s deeply ideological aspects are recognized, instead of being seen as a source for concern, uncritical theories of the media have a perverse tendency to celebrate such ideological processes as evidence of the rude health of cultural life and agency within mass media society.

In the following pages it is repeatedly pointed out how this tendency constitutes a particularly disturbing variation upon Plato’s allegory of the Cave. At least the original dwellers could claim the mitigating circumstance of enforced imprisonment: frequently, their counterparts in the contemporary media cave (and their apologist theorists) appear to connive actively at their own oppression.

The trouble with being critical: in defence of pessimism

To complement the above two main political dangers, there are also two basic problems faced by critical theories of mass media.

1 It is difficult to gain the necessary analytical distance to properly understand the social implications of the mass media. Marshall McLuhan compared the difficulty of seeking an objective perspective upon the media to explaining the notion of water to a fish, while Friedrich Kittler (1990, 1997, 1999) argues that we can only begin to understand media configurations from a suitably long historical perspective, thus questioning the possibility of meaningful contemporaneous analysis. In Plato’s Cave (1991), John O’Neil describes the additional problem of developing a critical perspective in relation to the media:

One is either a player, a committed commentator, or a fan – but hardly ever is a place kept for the contemplative mind. To claim to know more than what is going on in the media than the media allow for, however, is to be out of joint with the form and content of the media. Critics of the media are exiles, or else they are allowed to strut their brief moment among life’s killjoys, as a reminder of those higher things for which we have neither the time nor the taste.

(O’Neil 1991: 21)
Implicit in O’Neil’s complaint is a sense of the overwhelming immediacy of the media environment that successfully displaces any attempt to obtain a more considered vantage point. But, rather than producing critical engagement with this situation, difficult as that may be, the dominant response from current media theorists tends to be one of excessively optimistic celebration. They laud the media’s powerful ability to produce environments predicated upon the untrammelled pervasion of immanent flows of information and images but fail to consider how much genuine empowerment can be gained from engagement with such heavily pre-processed content, no matter how imaginative and proactive that engagement attempts to be. This book’s assessment of the possibilities for empowerment is much more straightforwardly pessimistic.

2 Critics of mass culture are often accused of being conservative, out-of-touch elitists. In relation to the vexed question of optimism versus pessimism, this book seeks to:

+ rectify the situation whereby critical theory has been unfairly neglected simply because of its downbeat tone – there seems little intellectual basis for the common tendency to automatically prize positive interpretations over more negative ones, especially if the Old Testament (a foundational cultural text of then if ever there was one) is correct in claiming: ‘For in much wisdom is much vexation; and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow’ (Ecclesiastes 1:18).

+ suggest that even amid theories generally accepted as optimistic, there is frequently ample evidence for a more critical rereading. Consistently, valid grounds for critical engagement with the media seem to be unduly passed over in preference for Panglossian analyses. At certain crucial points, commentators wilfully either step around, or even over, those negative elements that early theorists did in fact identify but which they thought could be overcome. Such optimism is more understandable in the early days of the mass media but our benefit of historical hindsight makes uncritical repetitions of these interpretations, at best, untenable, and at worst, disingenuous. This book explores past thinkers who are explicitly critical thinkers (Adorno and Debord) but also those we label critical based upon our against-the-grain reading of their underlying critical credentials (Benjamin and McLuhan). A common quality that unites both optimistic and pessimistic sets of thinkers is their shared belief that the media is deeply disruptive to prior forms of social organization. There is a surprising amount of agreement on the basic social processes of the mass media but radically different conclusions as to their ultimate cultural consequences.

Cultural populism: the paradox of conservatism

Past and present critical media theories emphasize the negative consequences that stem from the innately commodified nature of such mass cultural phenomenon as Reality TV (for example, Andrejevic 2004) and lifestyle Television (Palmer 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007). New audience theory, reception studies and cultural populism are, among others, all terms used to describe those studies of the media that tend to emphasize the empowerment enjoyed by mass audiences. In relation to the media’s content, they focus upon audiences’ productive emotional investments, imaginative interpretations, and the generally active, non-passive nature of their counter-hegemonic reading strategies. Although the relevant literature in this field is
rich and diverse, the term *cultural populism* is used in this book as an umbrella term to create a dichotomy between these approaches and much more obviously negative critical theories. While producing a dichotomy risks simplifying matters for the sake of a clear contrast, there are obvious characteristics that do distinguish the two approaches.

Contemporary rejection of critical media theory is largely based upon varying degrees of post-structuralist sensitivity to the ways in which the audience can re-appropriate the meanings imposed upon them by the owners and producers of media content. Rather than seeing media audiences or commodity consumers as simply passive consumers of the products of an overarching culture industry, cultural populists (broadly defined) prefer to emphasize the way in which audiences actively reinterpret or ‘read’ programmes or products using alternative meanings better suited to their own particular, localized environments (McLaughlin 1996). Fiske (1987, 1989a, 1989b, 1993, 1996), is a particularly radical proponent of the notion that rather than being passive dupes of the culture industry, mass-media audiences are in fact skilled interpreters of media content. He forcefully argues against the culture industry’s focus upon the manipulation of audiences and uses concepts such as polysemy and heteroglossia to discuss how audiences apply a large and adaptable range of interpretations to the media content they consume. Other typical features of cultural populism include an emphasis upon the performative (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998) and the participatory (Livingstone and Lunt 1994) aspects of audiences. More recently, while some recognition has been given to its underlying commodity values, the notion of the ordinary in media content has been presented as a site of potentially empowering interpretive contestations for equally ordinary audiences (Brundson et al. 2001; Giles 2002; Taylor 2002; Kompare 2004; Bonner 2003).

In recent years there have also been various critical accounts of lifestyle and Reality TV programmes (brought together in this book under the term *Banality TV*) that allude to the relationship between media form and content but which mostly concentrate upon the discursive and persuasive aspects of the latter. For example, Lorenzo-Dus (2006) examines the manipulative aspects encoded within British property shows, Dunn (2006) adopts a similar approach to the personalized voyeurism of holiday programmes that concentrate more upon presenters and particular participants than the destinations themselves, and Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer (2006) explore the ideological components of a new spate of make-over shows (involving a range of targets from participants’ property to their bodies). This book concentrates more upon those critical thinkers who see the negative cultural effects of the media as an innate part of their mode of operation. The fact that their theories are consequently pessimistic about the possibilities for any media content being significantly re-appropriated and reinterpreted in a particularly empowering fashion, often results in the charge that they are traditional conservatives or ‘elitists’.

This is a charge typically levelled at the Frankfurt School, who laid much of the groundwork for contemporary critical theories. This is an accusation misapplied to those who are actually criticizing the ultimately conservative consequences of the pervasively and invasively commodified nature of mass-mediated social life despite its often superficial presentation as ‘edgy’ and counter-cultural. Ironically, a
paradox of conservatism arises from the fact that the real conservatives are those cultural populists who act, either openly or inadvertently, as apologists for the deeply alienating and reactionary qualities of the mass media’s output. Critical theories of media do not so much flatly deny the basic findings of cultural populism as argue that specific evidence of audience interpretive activity needs to be judged in terms of the deeper political significance of that activity. The brief, illustrative, examples below suggest that the desire of cultural populism to find evidence of audience empowerment risks, at best, gilding the evidentiary lily and, at worst, actually producing its own form of conservative and elitist values. A patronization of the masses in a theoretical form of noblesse oblige occurs if the content consumed in mass culture tautologically becomes evidence of audience empowerment irrespective of its quality.

With due respect to O’Neil, only killjoys would object to cultural pleasure in and of itself, but a failure of intellectual duty takes place when theorists fail to point out when such pleasure becomes its own justification and vulnerable to excessive manipulation for profit and ideological ends – in the process excluding any other social considerations. The critical aspect of this book’s account of various media theories is repeatedly emphasized. It highlights and sympathetically reassesses those theories that are conventionally labelled and (unfairly) dismissed as somehow elitist for their stubborn insistence that popularity does not prove culture’s ultimate worth. Less obviously critical authors are reread for their generally underacknowledged negative attributes. For example, Benjamin, Kracauer and McLuhan have all been viewed as predominantly optimistic interpreters of the positive cultural potential of mass-media technologies but there are strong reasons to re-evaluate this reputation.

The main difference between proponents of the culture industry thesis and cultural populists is their contrasting view of the framing function of the media. The Frankfurt School are accused of investing media with a malign agency, in other words, fetishizing the frame into an oppressive monolithic structure. The weakness of cultural populism, however, rests in the various theoretical overcompensations it makes in order to find examples of audience empowerment. These compensations take three main forms of argument:

1. The media frame is at worst neutral, and at best, positive
2. Inadvertently counterproductive evidence
3. The content of the frame is open to radical reinterpretation.

1. The media frame is at worst neutral, and at best, positive

In contrast to the culture industry’s perspective of the media frame as a negative circumscription of the public sphere, Scannell (1996) sees it as a predominantly neutral or even positive constitutive part of contemporary life. In a misleadingly selective reading of Heidegger that ignores his specific analyses of technology, the media’s pervasive and durable presence in the lives of the audience is claimed to provide a ‘world-disclosing’ function. In a similar vein, Couldry presents a neo-Durkheimian interpretation of media rituals (2003) and an enthusiastic account of the role of visiting pilgrims that soap fans adopt at the set of Coronation Street (2000). He nonironically states that the programme has over its nearly forty year life span, ‘offered a continuous fictional reality, operating in parallel to
viewers’ lives. For some, it may serve as mnemonic system for events in their own life... For such visitors... visiting the set has a temporal depth connected not just with the programme’s history, but with their own lives’ (Couldry 2000: 76). In such readings, it is claimed that the media provides mediation for the inevitably large amount of para-social relations that exist in contemporary society and helps to ground them in the audience’s lived experience. This process is viewed by cultural populists as predominantly positive – despite poor supporting evidence. The media’s construction of a whole realm of social discourse that provides much needed sense and orientation in the disorientating flux of mass-media society is, in terms of this book’s argument, part of the problem rather than a comforting solution. The central point made throughout this book is that a la Heidegger, Ellul, McLuhan et al., technological form is itself content and this form/content hybrid has disturbing not reassuringly constitutive powers. As Couldry himself acknowledges, ‘the media process does not merely interact with the rest of society; it has a major impact on how the rest of society understands and imagines itself’ (Couldry 2000: 54). Critical theory throws into sharp relief such concepts of empowerment as media-pilgrims, drawing as they do upon group-models that are more obedient, gullible and pliable than meaningfully empowered.

2 Inadvertently counterproductive evidence

The misplaced optimism of uncritical media theorists is repeatedly revealed in the use of evidence that is frequently counterproductive and which critical theorists such as Adorno would be hard put to better as illustrative material for their own much darker critiques. Couldry (2000), for example, seeks to show how pilgrims to the actual site of media production sets are freshly empowered by the fillip a physical ‘seeing it with their own eyes’ provides for their deconstructive abilities. In making this argument, however, Couldry’s rich fieldwork material provides strong evidence of stubbornly disempowering attitudes. For example, there is the bathos/banality, of a mother and daughter’s dialogue subsequent to a purportedly enlightening tour of Granada Studios Coronation Street set:

Mother: ... I just wish I could have met a star [...] or if I’d gone round a studio.
Daughter: It’d be nice if somebody came up the Street and wandered around, one an hour, one an hour, one an hour, a different one every hour.
Mother: Oh, it would have been lovely.
Daughter: Just to see one.
(Couldry 2000: 97)

Similarly, in an otherwise critically aware text, Inglis (1990) supportively cites Morley’s attempt to document the empowering aspects of television in his work Family Television (1986). From a critical perspective, however, this attempt meets with limited success. Morley portrays a working-class patriarch who watches certain programmes to a tight regimen and assiduously videotapes any other programmes that clash. This is a man loathe to leave the private realm of his living room. He appears avant la lettre (ahead of his time) remarkably
similar to the character Jim from the BBC series *The Royle Family*. Morley describes: ‘the bottomless pit of this man’s desire for programmes to watch’ (Morley 1986: 71). Inglis, nevertheless, refers to him as ‘a fascinating folk-figure’ and claims that ‘His unstoppable soliloquy must do here to suggest just how various are the needs and purposes working themselves out in audiences’ (Inglis 1990: 154). In such misguidedly optimistic evaluations, we can see clear illustrations of a widespread risk that theorists bend over backwards not to see personifications of the culture industry thesis in their own subjects of enquiry. Indeed, ironically, it is likely that if material of the same tone was found in the work of culture industry theorists it would in all likelihood be rejected for its overly selective, exaggeratedly patronizing, and generally unrealistic depiction of alienated consumption. Inglis claims that Morley ‘speaks up for and documents the sociable and sociable uses of television’ (Inglis 1990: 153). This is an aim that is consistent with the cultural populism approach, but which in fact fails to take us far from a contemporary manifestation of Plato’s Cave to the extent that: ‘in going out to a public place this man experiences a loss of the total power which he has established within the walls of his own home’ (Morley, cited in Inglis 1990: 153). Emblematic of cultural populism’s lack of critical edge, borderline agoraphobia is represented as personal empowerment. Further illustrations of counterproductive evidence of audience empowerment are evident in the work of Radway (1984) and Barker and Brooks (in Dickinson et al. 1998) and more recently Poster (2006) and Jenkins (2006a, 2006b). Radway’s much cited study explored the purportedly empowering way in which women read Harlequin series romances. She argued that the act of carving out personal time to do this reading amongst the otherwise pressing demands of their families meant that the women were effectively resisting the patriarchally imposed, gendered roles conventionally assigned to them. Barker and Brooks, meanwhile, attempt to find evidence of empowerment in the way fans consume the comics and 1995 film of *Judge Dredd*. Such approaches tend to overemphasize the extent to which such activities constitute ‘empowerment’ in any deeper sense as understood by critical theory. Little, if any, evidence is provided that cultural populism’s version of empowerment involves the ability of the audience/media pilgrim to challenge or even question the fundamental nature of the media’s structuring of their social conditions. Greater access to the sites of media production (Couldry 2000, 2003) or more regulated pluralism (Thompson 1995) in the ownership of the means of media production, will not solve the innately alienating features of the media framework itself. For example, Barker and Brooks fail to see the irony in their choice of the term *investment* to ‘summarize all the ways in which audiences demonstrate strength of involvement to a social ideal of cinema’ (Dickinson et al. 1998: 225). Although they openly acknowledge that: ‘This concept of “investment” is a key one for us’ (1998: 225), it appears much better suited to describing the deep overlapping of cultural values with a pervasively commodified cultural setting as set out in the culture industry thesis than it is to representing ‘a social ideal’. Similarly, Jenkins and Poster’s accounts focus upon the immersion of consumers within a commodity life-world with little recognition that this could be anything other than an ultimately liberating experience.
There may be a sense in which culture industry advocates and their opponents are arguing in parallel monologues. Those seeking to emphasize audience empowerment concentrate upon the ways in which a cultural commodity is consumed with various degrees of gusto, whereas culture industry theorists question that very gusto. For the Frankfurt School et al., the very consumption of a commodity is part of the underlying problem rather than a possible solution. Summarizing this debate Alasuutari suggests that active audience notions of consumption represent: ‘a move away from the sphere of aesthetics to the political, or one could say that it politicizes the aesthetics of everyday life’ (Alasuutari 1999: 11). This represents a now version of the similar then argument that, using very similar language, Benjamin makes for the positive potential of mass culture explored in detail in the next chapter. A perennial caricature of critical theory’s position is that it represents an elitist defence of highbrow against lowbrow art. This is a misrepresentation that leads to the further misleading implication that the culture industry thesis is rooted in the aesthetic (rather than the political) because arguments against the cultural industry thesis are purported to represent ‘a move away from’ the aesthetic sphere. In fact, the opposite of Alasuutari’s conclusion can be argued because the very juxtaposition of the term industry next to culture in the Frankfurt School’s term makes it an already politically rooted statement. Critical theory argues that attempts to see political meaning in acts of consumption actually serve to aestheticize the everyday further rather than politicize it. The deeply conservative properties of uncritical consumption are glossed over. Aesthetic appreciations of commodity culture are fuelled by often impressively imaginative interpretations – but they frequently fail to recognize the true political implications of its essentially commodified nature. According to Ang (1985), it is misguided to debate whether cultural products are inherently progressive or conservative because this approach fails to appreciate fully the independently important nature of pleasure as a distinct, politically neutral entity. In relation to the US television series Dallas, Ang argues that, ‘pleasure is first and foremost connected with the fictional nature of the position and solutions which the tragic structure of feeling constructs, not with their ideological content’ (cited in Alasuutari 1999: 11; emphasis in original). Again, this represents a fundamental point of departure from the culture industry thesis which is not anti-pleasure per se but which highlights the manufactured, manipulative ways such pleasure is produced in commodify form. Ang’s argument is premised upon the possibility of separating out the enjoyment of fictional forms from their underlying commodity form. What she fails to address in her claim that appreciating fictional forms is politically neutral is the depth and complexity of the links between the culture industry’s deliberate commodification of the fiction process itself. Thus, in terms of celebrity culture:

The entertainment-celebrity model takes over because it is a rational one, one that meets professional and commercial needs. The blurring of fact and fiction is not a conspiracy but a practicality; the uncoupling of merit and notoriety, hardly new or complete but certainly very advanced, is the result of the routine pursuit of profit.

(Gamson 1994: 191)

Against Ang, Part 2 of this book explores the political consequences
of this blurring of fact and fiction and we show that such pleasure in fiction can indeed still be ideological because it serves to embed the consumer further within the commodified matrix of celebrity production.

3 The content of the frame is open to radical reinterpretation

central to the Post-structuralist approach is the notion that star images are inflected and modified by the mass-media and the productive assimilation of the audience. Thus a dispersed view of power is articulated in which celebrity is examined as a developing field of intertextual representation in which meaning is variously assembled. Variation derives from the different constructions and inflections vested in the celebrity by the participants in the field, including agents, press officers, gossip columnists, producers and friends.

(Rojek 2001: 44)

Cultural populism tends to underplay the extent to which nominally independent readings are inevitably shaped, a priori, by the pervasively manufactured nature of the content being interpreted. Rojek’s (2001) notion of a dispersed view of power, for example, while seeking to assert audience agency actually concedes a significant degree of circularity: variations in the interpretation of celebrity are constructed by various participants, but they are all still intrinsically part of the industry that produced the celebrity they are interpreting. When the content itself is looked at for evidence of material that can be used to undermine the dominant meaning system, the effort can seem forced, producing extremely tenuous results. Hermes, for example, sees radical potential in The Sound of Music: ‘At its most abstract, The Sound of Music is about the dialectic between freedom and order. Andrews embodies the two in her singing and her acting: while her singing is unparalleled, her acting is stilted’ (Hermes, in Alasuutari 1999). Similarly, in their paper exploring the behaviour of Judge Dredd fans, Barker and Brooks claim that: ‘In giving scope for imaging the future, even a dark and fearful one, the comic made a space within which they could keep social and political hopes alive’ (Barker and Brooks, in Dickinson et al. 1998: 229).

This tendency to find grounds for optimism in otherwise dispiriting examples of commodified culture has continued with the rise of Reality TV. Brundson et al. point out that the trade magazine Broadcast has three prize categories for Reality TV programming – documentary programme, documentary series, and popular factual. They recognize the growing conflation of entertainment and documentary modes but choose to see it as an opportunity for fresh interpretations rather than a worrying sign of dumbing down: distinctions between such categories have become increasingly difficult to ascertain. Factual is no longer synonymous with ‘serious’, issue-based programming, but now forms a strong and central part of the entertainment schedules. What these programmes invite, therefore, is a reconsideration of the terms under which we evaluate both ‘entertainment’ and ‘documentary’, rather than being dismissed out of hand as examples of the debasement of factual television.

(Brundson et al. 2001: 44)

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Bratich also applies this perspective of optimistic opportunism to Reality TV:

Ultimately, I argue that RTV [Reality TV] is about power as it is configured in the new society of control and communication.
Thinking of this as reality programming, we can dislodge reality from its status as authoritative source of representation. This milieu of transmutation (not stability) can be harnessed for various purposes and interests; it is bound to the historical changes in power and sovereignty. By understanding this, we can envision the potentials these changes offer. (Bratich 2006: 66)

Finally, still in this optimistic vein, Lisa Taylor makes positive claims for the cultural effects of lifestyle programming:

Analysis of lifestyle programming undoubtedly reveals that lifestyle ideas hold a measure of educational value for citizens. They might also offer people the opportunity, within the context of the commonplace routines of their everyday lives, to mould the strategies and sites of lifestyle in ways which help them to navigate their own relationship to social change. (Taylor 2002: 491)

The rest of this book pursues a critical response to these types of arguments, but at this point it is sufficient to point out how such examples illustrate the risk of promoting the act of interpretation while excluding considerations of what constitutes meaningful empowerment. Purportedly radical interpretations may leave the media’s conservative effects largely unchallenged, if not ultimately reinforced. Hermes, for example, seeks to use even the naturally conservative personality-based coverage of the British Royal Family as evidence of counter-hegemonic potential. Previously, the audience’s appreciation of news coverage was hindered by its unduly ‘abstract’ nature. Personality-based news such as reporting on Princess Diana, according to Hermes, can literally put a face on the issues of the day. He conceptualizes the role of the celebrity as an embodiment of abstraction as an empowering development towards the creation of ‘a wider world of cultural citizenship’ (Hermes, in Alasuutari 1999: 83). Finding the personal in the abstract becomes, not a negative development, but a positive means of breaking open ‘the modernist discourse of quality news’. Hermes cites the media coverage of Charles and Diana’s marital breakdown as an example of this breaking open, but it is interesting to note what replaces modernist discourse in this model: ‘the breakdown of their marriage has spawned many a discussion of infidelity, personal freedom and anorexia’ (in Alasuutari 1999: 83).

12 Critical Theories of Mass Media

Only the second of these categories can easily be construed in radical political terms likely to challenge the dominant meaning system. Even the ‘personal freedom’ issues embodied in Charles and Diana’s failed relationship needs some further translation before it can be used to illuminate the social conditions of those markedly less privileged. Indeed, despite attempts to represent the audience’s response to media coverage of Diana’s death as a challenge to the Royal Family, the sum total of its political effects was a temporary disturbance to Royal protocol with two unprecedented (but hardly revolutionary) events: the lowering of the flag to half-mast at Buckingham Palace and a round of applause during Diana’s funeral service both outside and inside Westminster Abbey. The media’s personalization of the Charles and Diana saga can be viewed more cynically than Hermes as a good example of Baudrillard’s (1983a) notion that media coverage of the superficial rupture of hegemonic structures (for example, Watergate), in practice, reinforces the status
In actuality, such apparent ruptures serve only to simulate the presence of real accountability and provide an opportunity to display equally superficial responses from those in power.

**Conclusion**

Illustrating O’Neil’s previously cited claim that contemplative thought is disproportionately excluded from discussions of the mass media, critics tend to beach themselves on the rocks of either the Scylla of excessively celebratory cultural populism or the Charybdis of reactionary conservatism. The former approach tends to overcompensate for the weak quality of the mass-media’s content by praising the inherent worth of any content that requires any interpretation, while the latter promotes cultural exclusivity for its own sake. *Critical Theories of Mass Culture* attempts to steer a middle ground. It argues that the mass media need to be engaged with on a much more critical and less accommodative basis. It should be noted that those least willing to adopt a critical perspective and most willing to lay the charge of cultural elitism on others are frequently those whose work exacerbates rather than ameliorates the disenfranchised condition of large sections of the mass-media audience – an audience that frequently does not share the same levels of access to cultural capital enjoyed by their purported champions. Cultural populists thus risk celebrating the nature of the life of the enchained prisoners in the Cave while their intellectual capital at least gives them the opportunity to leave it.

There is a distinct possibility of an inverse relationship between the enthusiasm with which the arguments of cultural populism are put forward and the likelihood of improvements to the cultural conditions of those upon whose behalf those arguments are proffered. Unable to envisage a genuinely empowering mass culture, cultural populists tend to disingenuously find virtue in the culture industry that does exist. The consistently critical aspect of this book is its stubborn rejection of this uncritical accommodation. It repeatedly emphasizes how a more oppositional response to the culture industry should be based upon an informed recognition of the continuing importance of those critical theorists unfairly dismissed as elitist for desiring a more nuanced and sophisticated mass culture. Having provided a short critique of cultural populism, it is now time to introduce the critical corrective.

14 *Critical Theories of Mass Media*

**Part 1**

**Then**

**1** Walter Benjamin’s ‘Work of art’ essay

**Introduction: the politics of aura**

Walter Benjamin’s (1892–1940) ‘Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner
technischen Reproduzierbarkeit’, written in 1936 and known in English as ‘The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction’ (referred to in subsequent pages as the Essay) is one of the most important texts in media theory. In the space of a few pages it provides perhaps the first systematic account of the mass cultural effects of the media technologies that emerged in the first decades of the twentieth century. It is particularly significant within the context of this book’s analysis of critical media theory because it relates directly to the themes of Kracauer and Adorno’s writings and lays much of the theoretical groundwork for later thinkers such as Debord and Baudrillard. The Essay focuses upon the way in which the nature of a work of art is irretrievably altered with the advent of the mass media and it concerns itself with the wider social effects of this fundamental development. Earlier writers failed to address the full nature of this change because they limited themselves to exploring the implications of individual media technologies on particular art forms and so failed to consider the broader implications for the whole cultural environment of a mass-mediated communicational infrastructure. In contrast, Benjamin attempted to identify the general underlying structural conditions of aesthetic production in the opening decades of the twentieth century. He takes the whole of society as his target and seeks to understand the lived-in experience of a mediated world.

Of critical importance for Benjamin’s reading of art and its mediatization is the physical component resident in all forms of aesthetic production. This physicality is traditionally regarded as mere matter – material to be moulded in accordance with wishes of the artist. Benjamin’s Essay is a seminal piece of work for the way it prefigures McLuhan’s the medium is the message. It fundamentally questions this assumption that the physical manner in which media content is transmitted is essentially neutral – to be determined by the artist. In Benjamin’s Essay we encounter the radical (and we suggest essentially critical) notion that a particular medium has a specific grammar, a way of structuring meaning and this occurs irrespective of the artist’s intentions. Perhaps the best way to express this conceptualization of the non-neutral nature of new media technologies can be found in the Essay itself when Benjamin claims that, instead of arguing whether photography is an art form or not, the real question to be asked is the extent to which art itself has been fundamentally transformed: ‘Earlier much futile thought had been devoted to the question of whether photography is an art. The primary question – whether the very invention of photography had not transformed the entire nature of art – was not raised’ (Section VII). Thus, it is not physical matter that must serve art, but art that must be transformed in keeping with the new nature of im/materiality in an age of industrial (re)production. As Valéry points out in the epigraph to the Essay, ‘neither matter nor space nor time has been what it was from time immemorial’. This is how Benjamin sees mass-media technology – as a fundamental, revolutionary force. He seeks to develop a Marxist interpretation with which to make best use of such tradition-shattering power. His analysis is therefore much more than merely a matter of aesthetic theory – it relates directly to political action.

His analysis is political because, writing at the time of German fascism, he opposes the way in which reactionary social forces misuse and subvert the traditional artistic notions of creativity, individual
genius and the timeless mystery of the artwork. According to Benjamin, the drive by fascism to uphold these traditional concepts occurs in the face of technological developments that should actually undermine that tradition. By contrast, he sought to establish principles in the Essay that, fully sensitive to the social implications of these technological developments, could lead to a politics of emancipation. This new strategy is to be found within the account

Benjamin provides of the historical formation and function of the work of art. In particular, the radical political potential to be found in his key notion that traditional aura is evacuated by the media to be replaced by a new, more empowering, relationship of the masses to an unprecedentedly mediated reality. In its most general definition, aura is understood in terms of singularity, uniqueness – all that is that is irreproducible:

What is aura, actually? A strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close the object might be. While resting on a summer’s noon, to trace a range of mountains on the horizon, or a branch that throws its shadow on the observer, until the moment or hour

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become part of their appearance – that is what it means to breath the aura of those mountains, that branch.

(Benjamin 1985b: 250)

While the experience of aura in Nature is identified with the singularity of the instant and directly experienced moment of reality, within the more restricted context of the artwork, aura refers to the elements that comprise the unique history of a given artefact – its production at a particular moment in time, its occupation of specific space, its provenance, and the manner in which these are woven into the very fabric of the object itself.

Benjamin states that the ‘uniqueness of a work of art arises from its being embedded in the fabric of tradition’. In this manner the work of art and the traditions of society are involved in a dialectical relationship – an ongoing process of mutual modification and reformulation of which aura is an index. For Benjamin the contemporary form of this ongoing interrelationship or ‘dialectic’ consists of the steady decline of traditional forms of cultural power. Owing to the mass mediation of society, the social significance of aura decreases. He suggests that this situation gives rise to another dialectic: a positive, empowering, socialist dialectic. The rise of mass-media technologies necessarily and intrinsically coincides with the rise of the masses. For Benjamin, the dialectical consequence of a new mode of artistic production was the emergence of new social relations. From the critical perspective of this book, however, Benjamin’s optimistic interpretation of this close alignment between the mass and the media is deeply problematic. The following chapters demonstrate how he correctly identified the central social processes at work, but he failed to foresee their profoundly negative cultural consequences – he did not adequately envisage how the masses would become the malleable target of the culture industry rather than a self-empowering new social body. Benjamin wrote the Essay in the historical context of the rise of Nazism; the loss of art’s traditional aura thus provided a welcome antidote to the fascists’ fetishistic use of images. In relation to contemporary media, however, subsequent chapters suggest that this fascist form of fetishism has merely been replaced by the sophisticated re-creation of fetishism in the much more subtle form of a pervasively commodified
mediascape – a friendly fascism of unthinking consumption (akin to Marcuse’s notion of surplus repression [1964] 2002). In the sections that follow the aspects of the media technologies that inspired Benjamin’s hopes are considered in more detail, before turning to the reason why ‘the phoney spell of the commodity’ (that even the optimistically minded Benjamin recognized as a downside to the loss of aura) has not been broken, but instead, has tightened its hold over the masses.

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From ritual to mechanical reproduction

Different values are subscribed to the artwork at different periods throughout history. Benjamin identifies three major stages:

1. Art as ritual
2. Art as exhibition
3. Art in the age of mechanical reproduction.

1 Art as ritual

Some of the earliest known art (for example, the cave painting) is deliberately located inaccessibly. Benjamin thus asserts that the primordial value of art was its ritual value – not how many people could see it. The act of creation itself was paramount and carried out for the gaze of the gods rather than other humans: ‘the elk portrayed by the man of the Stone Age was an instrument of magic. He did not expose it to his fellow men ... it was meant for the spirits’ (Section V).

2 Art as exhibition

The ancient origins of art as ritual continued in the Western tradition of organized religion but there is shift from the act of creation to the artefact itself. The artwork begins to assume a new value of exhibition. Thus, within Renaissance churches, although the artwork is tied to its location within a place of worship it is designed to be seen by the congregation. Artworks also become objects of veneration and pilgrimage, initially in their role as religious artefacts, but increasingly in their own right as objects to be admired for their artistry (for example, the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel). The secular cult of beauty in today’s art world inherits many of these religious functions – the artist as saint, the critic as priest and the gallery as temple.

3 Art in the age of mechanical reproduction

Benjamin argues that the ability to mechanically replicate a work of art has historically been limited. In the art of classical Rome and Greece, for example, the only means of reproduction were casting and stamping, and thus only a small class of artefacts were reproducible. Later, woodcuts and lithography, in combination with the printing press, extended the domain of reproducibility. Nevertheless, then they left the auratic function of art largely unaffected since the relative crudity of the copies confirmed the apparent distance between profanely reproducible and sublimely singular art. The artwork’s ritual function bequeaths its aura. Tradition animates the work of art such that ‘to perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return’ (Benjamin 1973: 187). But the age of mechanical reproduction announced by the photograph, profoundly alters this ability of the artwork to dominate its viewer. For the first time, art is liberated from its parasitical relation to ritual and a radically new social atmosphere is
created by an unprecedented wealth of easily reproduced media content. This release involves a major revaluation of art and its very nature and function.

The cultural implications of mechanical reproduction

Benjamin's Essay lends itself to a critical reading that cuts directly across its own optimistic tone. It can be argued that Benjamin seriously underestimated the negative implications of the way in which the exhibition quality of art is fundamentally altered by the rise of mechanical reproduction. The quantitative increase of artistic reproductions creates an environment in which the whole act of exhibition becomes irrevocably devalued, diluted – whichever critical term one wishes to use. The roots of this process of devaluation can be seen in Benjamin's own description of the evolution of art from highly symbolic religious and ritualistic sites to the more functional art galleries that accompanied the early rise of capitalism. Formerly, there was an intimate and inextricable link between an artefact and its symbolic relationship to its particular location (an aspect of Benjamin's aura) such as a Bible and its placement upon a church altar. Thus, in distinguishing between mediated signs and more culturally grounded symbols, Baudrillard refers to the latter's bonds of unbreakable reciprocity with their social setting (Baudrillard 1983a: 85).

With the advent of mechanical reproduction, this intrinsic connection an artwork formerly held to a particular site of religious veneration (the cave wall, the cathedral ceiling) is broken in favour of its ability to circulate freely beyond a physical home. The rise in importance of the quality of exhibition over and above these previously unbreakable bonds of reciprocity threatens the symbolic, ritualistic quality of artwork. The simple act of viewing becomes more important than its much deeper original religious purpose. In the early historical stages of this process, however, even this diluted form of consuming an artwork still required some substantial effort of consumption. For example, one does not need to be a devout Catholic to view the Sistine Chapel but, even as merely an art aficionado, one still needs to make a significant physical effort to see it in person. In the move from ritual to exhibition status and the dislocation and dilution of symbolic grounding so implied, the rise of mechanical reproduction takes the process a major stage further. The domain of reproducibility swamps traditional aura-based society so that accessibility strips out all symbolic freight from the act of consumption. This is what Valéry meant when he observed: ‘Just as water, gas, and electricity are brought into our homes from far off to satisfy our needs in response to a minimal effort, so we shall be supplied with visual or auditory images, which will appear and disappear at a simple movement of the hand, hardly more than a sign’ (Essay: Section I).

First-time readers of the Essay may feel somewhat confused because Benjamin's account of aura seems to emphasize its decline and fall and it is not immediately obvious why this is a development to be welcomed. Indeed, this book is devoted to arguing that the optimism Benjamin attempts to bolt onto his critical analysis of aura's decline was unfounded in the light of the subsequent history of mass-media society. Benjamin’s hopes for this technologically sponsored process lay in the new opportunities that arise once aura is deposed. Thus, Benjamin describes quite literally the ruin of traditional artistic aura: ‘Then came the film and burst this prisonworld
asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go travelling’ (Section XIII). Aura is inextricably bound to a unique position in time and space. The sophisticated form of reproduction that arises with the mechanization of images, however, liberates the object from these physical/temporal constraints. The camera frees reproduction from being merely derivative or subordinate to an original artwork. The quasi-independent gaze of the auratic artwork (it almost appears to look at the viewer rather than just being the passive recipient of the gaze of the person viewing it), is a condensation or personification of its history. As such it is a form of inadvertent memory and consequently it is diminished in the face of reproductive media that can preserve and return a representation at any chosen moment – with mechanical reproduction, it is no longer tied down to a unique point in space and time. This alone represents a profound shift in human experience.

The age-old role of human memory is significantly undermined (a theme pursued by Kracauer in the next chapter) with the arrival of media technologies that effectively become prostheses for not just our physical abilities, but also our consciousness (McLuhan’s notion of media technologies as an electronic nervous system for humankind is dealt with in Chapter 4). Time itself is no longer the same. As with time, so with space, the artwork as a reproducible object has no proper location; its place is wherever a reproduction is encountered.

Although Benjamin hoped for empowering freedom from the inhibiting qualities of tradition, critical readings of the mass media stem from this dislocation of the artwork from its previously unique point in space and time. While the artwork and its public are now freed from a dependence upon location, a reduction in the particularity of the artwork occurs as it loses part of this singular locationspecific context. It is now usurped by a simulacral copy that can never encompass the totality of the original. In the subsequent chapters, we examine the full consequences of a society in which the simulacral increasingly contributes to a society of the spectacle manifested in various forms of pseudo-events (Chapter 5) and simulated cultural categories (Chapter 6 – the democratization of celebrity forms; Chapter 7 – Reality TV; and in both Chapters 7 and 8 we see the decline of aura revisited in the form of a decline in the discourse of sobriety and a corresponding rise in pseudo-news – the Other News). Benjamin believed the quantitative shift in the amount of mechanically reproducible artworks newly available for consumption by the masses was an opportunity of momentous qualitative importance. It represented the subordination of all previous dimensions of art to the value of exhibition – art after mechanical reproduction becomes, first and foremost, what is exhibited. New media of reproduction de-localize art, and place it directly in front of the masses, thus ‘today, by the absolute emphasis on its exhibition value the work of art becomes a creation with entirely new functions, among which ... the artistic function, later may be recognized as incidental’ (Section V). However, in subsequent pages, the betrayal of Benjamin’s hopes is demonstrated as the process he analysed in its early stages has proceeded beyond his optimistic projections to produce the commodified disempowerment of the masses. In Part 2 we analyse in detail how the decline of aura has tended to evolve closely with ever more sophisticated commodity forms. The freeing
of the masses from their dependence upon aura is shown to have broken through the previously unbreakable bonds of reciprocity Baudrillard saw in symbolically grounded cultural practices. The decline of aura gives free rein for the commodity form to create its own ersatz aura based upon the inevitably shallow, made-for-manipulation, and therefore ultimately disempowering/alienating, social bonds of commodity culture – the culture industry.

Benjamin and McLuhan

With the different methods of technical reproduction of a work of art, its fitness for exhibition increased to such an extent that

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the quantitative shift between its two poles turned into a qualitative transformation of its nature.

(Essay: Section V)

Benjamin’s analysis of aura prefigures certain elements of McLuhan’s thinking. Although Benjamin does not read media history as a grand narrative of the human body’s externalization in quite the same way, his thesis that mechanical reproduction results in fundamental and traumatic derangement of the senses anticipates certain aspects of McLuhan’s idea that media technologies constitute new extensions of the sensory organs of man – outerings of the body. In addition, Benjamin’s emphasis upon qualitative social changes stemming from technologically inspired quantitative increases prefigures a crucial aspect of McLuhan’s work – his argument that the major effects of a medium are ‘the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs’ (McLuhan [1964] 1995: 8). From Benjamin’s earlier perspective, the human sensorium is not a trans-historical, unchanging structure but, rather, it is historically determined and delimited by a combination of social and technical constraints that are also subject to radical overhaul when new innovations arise. In keeping with his Essay’s opening exhortation, Benjamin builds upon Marx’s observation that ‘the forming of the five senses is a labour of the entire history of the world down to the present’ (Marx 1988: 108) by considering the contribution of his particular historical moment to this ongoing project of the senses and their development. Benjamin shows that it is in photography that the nature of a profound shift in our mediated sense of the world around us finds its first expression, before its yet further and fuller realization with the advent of cinema. Photography initiates a radical alteration in the scale of perception, it reveals a new realm of novel images, previously too fleeting, above or below the spectrum of a perception unaided by artificial means, a new realm that Benjamin terms the *optical unconscious*.

The *optical unconscious* describes those aspects of the natural world inaccessible to the naked eye and which the camera allows us to see for the first time. Examples include the corona of drops that can be seen rising up from the surface of a liquid that is broken and filmed in slow motion, the exact manner in which a horse’s hooves move over the ground when it is running at full speed, bird’s-eye views of cities, and so on: ‘photography, and later film, revealed an entire realm, thus the latter destroyed the world of ordinary perception with ‘the dynamite of the tenth of a second’ (Section XIII). It parallels Freud’s discoveries about the mind’s unconscious nature to the extent that:

Fifty years ago, a slip of the tongue passed more or less unnoticed. Only exceptionally may such a slip have revealed
dimensions of depth in a conversation which had seemed to be taking its course on the surface. Since the Psychopathology of Everyday Life things have changed. This book isolated and made analyzable things which had heretofore floated along unnoticed in the broad stream of perception.

(Section XIII)

This terrain is not simply a source of aesthetic novelty but also one of shock, assault, and radical de-familiarization. A life-world previously self-contained and familiar has now become threatening. In this respect it partakes of a wider process of perceptual disruption that accompanies the historical shift from the countryside into the industrial metropolis. The optical unconscious revealed by film and photography represent the most visible expression of this much broader alteration in the nature of perception.

Of the countless movements of switching, inserting, pressing and the like, the ‘snapping’ of the photographer has had the greatest consequences. A touch of the finger now sufficed to fix for an unlimited period of time. The camera gave the moment a posthumous shock, as it were. Haptic experiences were joined by optic ones, such as are supplied by the advertising pages of a newspaper or the traffic of the big city. Moving through this traffic involves the individual in a series of shocks and collisions. At dangerous intersections, nervous impulses flow throughout him in rapid succession, like energy from a battery. (Benjamin 1973: 177)

This is a critical (in both senses of the word) feature of Benjamin’s analysis – the notion that media technology serves to acclimatize people for life within a heavily technologized society can be read in much more negative fashion than he chooses. For example, in the next chapter Kracauer exhibits more sensitivity than Benjamin manages in relation to the negative social impact of these perceptual shocks. He describes how they are caused by the sheer proliferation and contiguity of images stemming from the combination of media technologies and the rise of urban centres. Thus, Kracauer talks in terms of ‘a strike against understanding’ and describes the disempowering, alienating features of such shock effects. Similarly, Adorno’s extremely critical account of the culture industry is largely premised upon his perception of how the values and needs of advanced industrialization colonize and undermine competing social and cultural values. Unlike Benjamin, the fact that the media serve to prepare people for the similar perceptual shocks of industrialized life can be seen as evidence of the damagingly pervasive nature of the culture industry’s influence upon peoples’ lives. Benjamin is only able to see new media as empowering by being unduly reluctant to ask – empowerment in terms of what and in whose ultimate interest?

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The alteration in the pace and scale of perception is imposed upon the masses as the condition of their emergence as a new political force. The masses do indeed arise as a force but one that is born into a heavily commodified and rationalized world. Benjamin’s new ‘haptic experiences’ result from increased levels of technological mediation and contain within them a major element of disempowerment despite his best hopes. For example, prefiguring later active audience studies approaches, the audience for Benjamin is active but often in the form of the self-controlling behaviour required to suit the needs of industrial society:
technology has subjected the human sensorium to a complex kind of training. There came a day when a new and urgent need for stimuli was met by the film. In a film, perception in the form of shocks was established as a formal principle. That which determines the rhythm of production on a conveyor belt is the basis of the rhythm of reception in the film. (Benjamin 1973: 177) The film is the art that is in keeping with the increased threat to his life which modern man has to face. Man’s need to expose himself to shock effects is his adjustment to the dangers threatening him. The film corresponds to profound changes in the apperceptive apparatus – changes that are ... experienced by the man in the street in big-city traffic ...

The ‘shock’ of the modern urban environment is figured in terms of a welter of new micro-perceptions, disorientating cuts and contingent images – a realm of experience that also characterizes the cinematic experience. Cinema thus trains the sensorium and helps the subject adapt to this new technological social reality. Below the surface-level optimism of Benjamin’s account, is the basis of a critical analysis very similar to Adorno’s scathing observation that the culture industry uses even leisure time to prepare workers more efficiently for their work lives. One reason for Benjamin’s stubborn optimism resides in the fact that while photography and film extend ‘our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives’ (Section XIII), at the same time, they also expose the manner in which modernity creates the masses, and transforms them into labouring bodies. This is a sentiment shared by Kracauer for whom the camera, despite its alienating effects, at least forces humankind to consider the mediated nature of its relationship to a heavily technologized world. Benjamin’s interpretation suggests that the dialectical nature of this relationship between media technology and the mass audiences it produces serves to create the possibility for an empowered, non-passive mass – 26 Then a self-determining body, fully adapted to the environment capital has imposed on them and thereby capable of making its own changes to that environment. The camera requires both a complex education of the sensorium, and at the same time provides a means of anatomizing, revealing and deconstructing the specific training involved in that education. The problem with this argument, however, is contained within Adorno’s basic insight that knowledge of the culture industry’s workings is not sufficient guarantee of empowerment. In fact, as Goldman and Papson (1996, 1998) point out in their detailed studies of contemporary advertising, the culture industry often builds into its content deliberate signposts to its manipulations of consumers for whom compensation is to be found in recognizing the ‘knowing wink’ and thereby feeling part of a sophisticated joke.

A major element of Part 2 is its updated account of Adorno’s notion that consumers tend to connive at their own oppression – they work the magic of commodities upon themselves. As Žižek (1989) has put it much more recently, the problem with the ideology of the contemporary mediascape is not Marx’s notion of false consciousness in which the masses do not realize what they are doing, but, rather, the way in which ideology now resides in various forms of ideological manipulation that are readily apparent to the masses – but they continue to do
what they are doing anyway (a notion we return to in our conclusion).
Benjamin foresaw the revelatory properties of the media technologies
but failed to see how ideological manipulation can still occur
despite (and often because of) such a realm of apparent openness.

The political implications of the decline in aura
for the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction
emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence
upon ritual ... the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to
be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is
reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based
on another practice – politics.

(Essay: Section IV)
From Benjamin’s perspective, conditions of aesthetic production and
reception are of great political significance. In the Essay’s epilogue
Benjamin maintains that the failure of society to accommodate the
productive forces of technology results in the latter’s distorted
expression in the form of war:
Imperialistic war is a rebellion of technology which collects, in
the form of ‘human material,’ the claims to which society has
denied its natural material. Instead of draining rivers, society
directs a human stream into a bed of trenches; instead of
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dropping seeds from airplanes it drops incendiary bombs over
cities; and through gas warfare the aura is abolished in a new
way.

(Essay: Epilogue)
Industrialized warfare is for Benjamin the inevitable result of a
failure to culturally align technology and the masses. It furnishes
‘proof that society has not been mature enough to incorporate
technology as its organ, [and] that technology has not been sufficiently
developed to cope with the elemental forces of society’

(Essay: Epilogue). Benjamin saw the First World War and the
increasing dominance of fascism in European politics as a direct
result of this arrested development, and thus defined fascism as a
strategy for organizing the masses born of industrial capitalism into
a collectivity while leaving untouched the traditional distribution of
resources and power so that: ‘only war makes it possible to mobilize
all of today’s technical resources while maintaining the property
system’ (Essay: Epilogue). This accounts for the peculiar mix within
fascism of traditional stereotypes and mythical figures and the very
latest in technological developments. Fascism’s political project calls
both for an active exploitation of mechanical reproduction, but
simultaneously, the firm repression of its emancipatory potential –
fascism seeks to use today’s tools to perform yesterday’s work.
Fascism clings to, and accentuates the auratic function of art. The
concentration and contemplation required for traditional aesthetic
forms, in conjunction with its ritualistic elements, is a powerful tool
for recruiting the masses. The early twentieth-century artistic movement
of Futurism prefigured fascism’s reactionary aestheticism in
relation to industrial technology. Futurism declared:
War is beautiful because it establishes man’s dominion over the
subjugated machinery by means of gas masks, terrifying megaphones,
flame throwers, and small tanks. War is beautiful
because it initiates the dreamt-of metalization of the human
body. War is beautiful because it enriches a flowering meadow
with the fiery orchids of machine guns. War is beautiful
because it combines the gunfire, the cannonades, the cease-fire, the scents, and the stench of putrefaction into a symphony.

(Essay: Epilogue)

Futurism thus embraced and celebrated the qualitative shift in perception brought about by new media, while refusing the political changes that Benjamin saw as the natural outgrowth of their interaction with the masses they helped create. The Futurist mentality ushered in an era in which the destruction of humanity became a pure spectacle staged for the predilection of humanity. In Benjamin's estimation this was not an unavoidable consequence of media technology but the product of their fascistic misapplication. His Essay aims to expose the true character of aura whose 'uncontrolled' (and at present almost uncontrollable) application ... lead[s] to a processing of data in a fascist sense' (Essay: Epilogue). Benjamin is motivated by a profound belief in socialism's ability to realize the productive power of new technologies and the masses through authentic cultural forms, thus avoiding Futurism's reactionary nihilism. Like the proletariat's role for Marx, Benjamin saw the masses as at once both the product of industrial technology and the only force capable of truly realizing technology's true potential. As we have already seen, however, his analysis contains the seeds of its own critique.

The role played by the masses in the new appreciation of art, in addition to being interpreted as a politically enabling phenomenon, can also be seen as containing the roots of art's total envelopment in a commodity culture that re-creates a new, but still reactionary, aesthetic. This new aesthetic based upon the decline of aura is less overtly horrific than the Futurists' worship of war, but it still undermines the radical political values Benjamin hoped to find within the masses. While fascism, and its hideous manipulation of aura for political purposes, was defeated, critical theory would suggest that the Futurist mentality has reappeared within the contemporary mediascape – the life-world is no longer regimented by military oppression but by commodified affluence (again, Marcuse's *surplus repression*). The current relevance of the unacknowledged criticality within Benjamin's Essay is aptly indicated by his description of the extent of the Futurists' nihilism in which: 'Mankind, which in Homer's time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order' (Essay: Epilogue). This evocative quotation is repeatedly highlighted in Part 2 as a disturbingly accurate summary of the latest developments in our contemporary *society of the spectacle*. 'Destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order' is evident both in terms of the physical carnage of war presented for passive viewing (the heavily televised Gulf conflicts) and the socially pervasive phenomena that exhibit the same basic processes of self-alienation and reactionary aesthetics that Benjamin was perceptive enough to fear, but did not live to see – *Banality TV*.

The *optical unconscious* that accompanies the advent of technological reproducibility marks a qualitative change not only in the way society views the physical world, but also in the way it views its own cultural products. The spread of technical values now extends into the realm of culture and its representations. Photography and particularly cinema's obliteration of aura represents a highly effective
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Vehicle for the seamless integration of technological thinking into ever deeper levels of society. In the next chapter, Kracauer argues that traditional artistic expression and modes of its reception are premised on the production of objects ‘permeated by cognition’ – a contemplative form of artistic appreciation. This type of relationship to art is fatally undermined and displaced by mechanical reproduction’s creation of a largely autonomous realm of standardized objects pre-designed for mass consumption. For Benjamin who saw the roots of fascism’s aesthetic manipulations in the contemplative attitude, this was a good thing. It meant that the masses now had a much better access to art beyond the control of traditional elites. In Benjamin’s eyes, the potential of film as a means of awakening the masses resides in the receptiveness it encourages towards contingency. The traditional work of art was completely overdetermined, every detail and element assembled with a view to its reception through applied contemplation. As such it dictated its own conditions of appreciation, it imposed its terms upon its audience. For Benjamin, art after the advent of its technological reproduction contains elements that escape the control of its creators. This results in its capacity to make the masses confront their historical condition – ideology is to be unveiled by the stresses the new media create in the traditional forms of communication used to maintain that ideology: ‘Film is the first art form capable of showing how matter interferes with people’s lives. Hence, film can be a means of materialist representation’ (Hansen 1987: 203). This exposure of the material conditions of mass existence takes place outside of the media’s explicit content, it is part of the medium’s essential mode of operation – the manner with which it highlights the contingent.

The contingency of media

Each former fragment of a narrative, that was once incomprehensible without the narrative context as a whole, has now become capable of emitting a complete narrative message in its own right. It has become autonomous ... in its newly acquired capacity to soak up content and to project it in a kind of instant reflex. (Jameson 1998: 160)

In their analyses of photography, Benjamin, Kracauer, and later Barthes, emphasize the manner in which the internal logic of the media privileges contingency – the rise to prominence of incidental detail. Thus in Benjamin’s account the optical unconscious designates an inexhaustible ream of random features: ‘No matter how artful the photographer, no matter how carefully posed his subject, the beholder feels an irresistible urge to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency, of the Here and Now, with which reality has so to speak seared the subject’ (Benjamin 1985a: 243). Likewise, in Kracauer the genius particular to photography is to be found in the ‘tiny spark of accident’ that captures a ‘moment of futurity responding to the retrospective gaze’ (Kracauer, cited in Hansen 1987: 209). Barthes ([1957] 1973) describes this quality of photography using the terms punctum and studium. The studium designates the general environment portrayed in a photograph – a family scene, the military associations immediately understood from the picture of a soldier and so on. The punctum is the contingent, inessential detail whose particularity overspills the bounds of the...
studium’s more general message – the fact the soldier may have a large ear lobe and so on. Benjamin viewed this interruption of the traditional processing of meaning through cultural associations and contemplation as a liberating political development. According to the culture industry thesis, it has proved to be the exact opposite. As Jameson points out above, the rise of the punctum in the age of mechanical reproduction creates an instant reflex that undermines sustained thought. The state of distraction that underwrote Benjamin’s revolutionary faith in the new media of his time appears deeply naive in the face of a current mediascape that prides itself upon the generation and clever manipulation of such instant reflexes.

Koch suggests that Benjamin’s assertion that film offers the audience the chance to become active in relation to what they are witnessing: “is dubious because it excludes the possibility that the apparatus itself might be perceived to be a naturalized fetish with which the audience identifies – less on the level of an instrument with which to test the actor than on the narcissistic level of an enormous extension of the perceptual apparatus” (Koch 2000: 207–8). In other words, the ability of media technologies to act as an extension of our senses (as explored by McLuhan in Chapter 4) becomes an end in itself – it creates a culture of greedy eyes. It is in such a scenario that the actual content of programmes diminishes in importance and not only are images mechanically reproduced, but so too is their subject matter:

Take the truly awful Dallas-Dynasty family of programmes ...
They are etherealized characters whose simple binary oppositions – family/non-family, men/women, sex-power/moneypower – may be the vehicles for any fantastic perambulation.
And their circle is closed: each opposition complements the other and resists the other. There is no synthesis, and therefore no exit (and therefore as we’ve found no end to the series).
(Inglis 1990: 152)

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This type of criticism is frequently dismissed (along with many of the Frankfurt School’s insights) as ‘elitist’. What such a refutation misses, however, is the extent to which these banal formats embody the true message of the medium rather than its nominal content. This is the negative, critical alternative to Benjamin’s faith in the social possibilities created by mechanical reproduction – the basis of Part 2’s analysis of Banality TV.
Inglis’s key insight here relates to the role programmes like soap operas play in fostering a general social climate amenable to commodity values. They create a closed, tautological circle of interpretation: like commodities they are made for circulation. In terms of the culture industry thesis their complete lack of artistic merit stems from the fact that they inherently lack any potential for provoking ideas that transcend the dominant social value of consumption, as Inglis puts it, they are incapable of providing a synthesis upon which non-commodified meanings can be constructed. Whereas Benjamin saw radical possibilities in the endless reproducibility of representations, in practice, the commodified format of contemporary television actually extinguishes them. Inglis proceeds to argue that this repetitive content actually constitutes a form of psychosis. The cultural danger it poses stems from the fact that, just as the Frankfurt School (and theorists such as Mellencamp)
argued, consumer culture fosters an arrested emotional
development at the level of either the infantile or the adolescent
according to the severity of the critical judgement. For Inglis the
cultural harm results from a:

return to the mechanical rhythms of the libido, with no help
from the alter ego. Psychosis designates a rhythm of compulsion
and gratification of a regular but unregulable kind in
which the play of fantasy upon experience is such as to
preclude rational reflection or the direction of action towards
diverse ends. In countless narratives on American film and
television, the circuit of action is closed to reflection in this way.
(Inglis 1990: 152)

Benjamin’s positive notion of distraction as habit (see next section),
albeit in a much revised, more pessimistic form, is pertinent to
Inglis’s concerns. The habit of distraction in contemporary media
now relates to an unthinking familiarity with inherently uncritical,
emotion-based forms of expression – explored in Part 2 as the emo. A
wealth of substantive issues become ‘naturally’ excluded by editorial
standards driven by either overt celebrity values or closely related
libidinal requirements for personality-driven features. In addition to
these forms of censorship by exclusion can be added the preponderance
of material whose suitability is defined in strictly pictorial terms.
Over-reliance upon the charge of elitism by the critics of the culture

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industry thesis, means that, despite often being left-leaning commentators,
they frequently fail to engage critically with the full extent of
the political implications of the conceptual banality produced by the
media (a failure examined in Chapter 8). To this extent they often
risk patronizing the working class they seek to represent with
ill-conceived notions of empowerment. The negative aspects of mass
reproduction insufficiently developed by Benjamin are the basis of
the much more critical accounts of the subsequent chapters. The
true dialectic is one in which disempowerment of the masses is
produced by industrialized distraction.

In this more critical context, Jameson (1998) identifies the
Enlightenment’s forces of secularization and realism as the first stage
of an ongoing historical evacuation of aura in a process he distinguishes
from Benjamin’s notion of empowerment. Jameson prefers
to talk of a dialectic of reification which:

seizes on the properties and the subjectivities, the institutions
and the forms, of an older pre-capitalist world, in order to strip
them of their hierarchical or religious content ... what is
dialectical about it comes as something like a leap and an
overturn from quantity into quality. With the intensification of
the forces of reification and their suffusion through ever
greater zones of social life (including individual subjectivity), it
is as though the force that generated the first realism now turns
against it and devours it in its turn.

(Jameson 1998: 148)

This identification of a transformation from quantity into quality
recalls Benjamin’s similar description of the quantity/quality transition
induced by the mechanical reproduction of images. Jameson
argues that this process, which drives modernity’s liquidation of
traditional hierarchical society, results in its own demise in the form
of a postmodern undermining of modernist values. The quantitative
increase in mechanical production is achieved only at the price of
the implicit and widespread acceptance of cultural outputs in
overwhelming commercial terms. It is at this point of cultural alignment between media technologies and commodity values that previous barriers between the cultural and economic spheres dissolve (in Marx and Engel’s words ‘all that is solid melts into air’) on an unprecedented scale – the commodity’s social role significantly expands as it simultaneously becomes an economic and culture-defining concept.

From this perspective, the transformation of art’s reception from one of contemplation to a ‘state of distraction’ is important, but for reasons directly counter to those offered by Benjamin. Mechanical Walter Benjamin’s ‘Work of art’ essay reproduction does not so much destroy tradition as ossify it in the constant repetition of the individualized commodity form aimed at the socially alienated consumer:

The culture industry consists of repetition. That its characteristic innovations are never anything more than the improvements of mass reproduction is not external to the system. It is with good reason that the interest of innumerable consumers is directed to the technique, and not to the contents – which are stubbornly repeated, outworn, and by now half-discredited. The social power which the spectators worship shows itself more effectively in the omnipresence of the stereotype imposed by technical skill than in the stale ideologies for which the ephemeral contents stand in.

(Adorno, in Duttmann 2000: 40)

Repetition for the purposes of consumption becomes its own raison d’être. This may seem quite an abstract issue at this early point in the book but the remaining chapters explore the various forms such repetition takes and the profound cultural harm it causes. In Part 2, for example, we see how Adorno’s blanket statement ‘the culture industry consists of repetition’ can be seen at both a micro and macro level. From the former perspective, the increasing prevalence of pseudo-pornographic modes of representation is shown to utilize the innately repetitive voyeuristic tendencies of the camera (see Chapter 7’s analysis of the gas porn of the US television’s Food Network). At a macro level, Chapter 8 shows how the media’s coverage of global politics has become fatally infected by repetitive and uncritical modes of expression and representation (for example, the endlessly repetitious showing of the 9/11 plane crash and the toppling of the Saddam statue in Baghdad in the second Gulf conflict).

Benjamin and distraction

While Benjamin’s Essay is perhaps the most significant early statement on the emancipatory potential of modern media, it suffers from a dearth of evidence as to how such emancipation might occur in practice. For example, towards the end of the Essay, Benjamin presents the concept of distraction as positive force that emerges in the wake of the liquidation of aura that he has detailed, however he remains reticent as to the precise relation between distraction and emancipation. Gilloch has argued that Benjamin’s identification of film as an intrinsically emancipatory medium, resides in the medium’s instantiation of two closely related aspects of distraction – habit and non-contemplation:

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1 The media user can learn from the unconscious effort of habit which is, ‘not forgetfulness as such, but rather a form of
accomplishment amidst amnesia.

2 Distraction is ‘not to be understood as simple inattention. Distraction involves paying attention elsewhere’. (Gilloch 2002: 191; emphasis in original)

In Benjamin’s account the person experiencing traditional auratic art is invited to contemplate the piece in a highly structured fashion and a controlled environment. This is true whether it be in the ritualistic forms of early religious art or the later secular, but still essentially ritualistic, form of an art gallery. According to Benjamin this leads to the viewer’s absorption by the work. In contrast, with the advent of media such as film, the critical appreciation of the work takes a much more natural and enjoyable form – the masses absorb the artwork. For Benjamin this shift from auratic concentration to reproductive distraction can be illustrated by considering the different processes involved in the reception of a painting and a building. The individual artwork in a gallery or church is removed from the stream of common life, contemplating it represents a suspension of ordinary physical and mental processes and their conscious redirection. Its removal from daily life means that access to it is strictly limited, the space/time restrictions that characterize the auratic artwork are such that (historically) it can never be fully present before the mass. In this manner the singularity of aura is controlled by those who regulate access to the artwork and aura incorporates within itself the distinction of the class that possesses it (think of the stereotypically goateed and pony-tailed gatekeepers of the contemporary art market).

For Benjamin, architecture provides the model for a radically different and more empowering mode of appreciation, it is by its very nature a public art (or at least the clearest prototype of an art of the masses). Architecture is not subject to the same short-term cultural fads that determine the rise and fall of other cultural forms, rather it is (like the poor) always with us (and as the proletariat slumbers within the poor so within architecture there resides a hidden potentiality). The historical and environmental presence of architecture’s buildings results in quite a different means of appreciation from that of traditional art. Architecture is absorbed through use and perception, by a process of ‘tactile appropriation’. Unlike the total but circumscribed contemplation of the artwork, a building becomes known through everyday use that slowly and almost unconsciously leads to an understanding of the whole. Like the media of reproduction, and in distinct contrast to the auratic work of art, architecture constitutes an environment. When media become ‘environments’ immediately accessible to all, it thus follows that their

Walter Benjamin’s ‘Work of art’ essay 35

characteristic mode of apprehension would display a proximity to the existing environmental apperception already to be found in architecture. In this manner, the tactile appropriation encountered by the masses and their buildings anticipates the state of distraction that exemplifies the consciousness of the masses in the age of media technologies. For Benjamin this new mode of consciousness is no mere somnambulism, but a form of sensory instruction. It bypasses the conscious mind and acts directly on the sensorium. But why should tactile appropriation in the guise of distraction assume such importance? Because, we are told, there are ‘tasks that face the human apparatus of perception … that cannot be solved by … contemplation alone (Essay: Section XV). The task is that of adjusting to these novel affects, the new realm of the senses generated by
reproductive media.
Film is exemplary in this respect since the ‘characteristics of the
film lie not only in the manner in which man presents himself to
mechanical equipment but also in the manner in which, by means of
this apparatus, man can represent his environment’ (Section XIII).
This re-presentation of man, media and environment is what defines
Benjamin’s *distraction*. The external environment is figured in terms
of ‘shock’, the previously cited welter of new micro-perceptions,
disorientating cuts and contingent images that characterizes both the
built environment and the cinematic encounter. In this situation,
‘film is the art that is in keeping with the increased threat to his life
which modern man has to face. Man’s need to expose himself to
shock effects is his adjustment to the dangers threatening him. The
film corresponds to profound changes in the apperceptive apparatus
– changes that are ... experienced by the man in the street in
big-city traffic’ (Essay: note 19). The kind of distraction that commentators
such as Duhammel had seen in terms of a theft of thought ‘I
can no longer think what I want to think. My thoughts have been
replaced by moving images’ (a sentiment cited in Section XIV of the
Essay and also present in Kracauer’s notion, explored in the next
chapter, that the ‘image-idea drives away the idea’), is perversely the
source of Benjamin’s optimism. Distraction’s emancipatory potential
allegedly resides in its ability to educate humanity en masse –
bypassing the hierarchies encoded in traditional knowledge. Cinema
imposes shock, but in training the sensorium of viewers it provides
them with the means to deal with the wider social environment of
shock, and thus provides the foundations for an authentic mass
culture.

Conclusion: Benjamin today
ideology is intrinsic to the mechanical reproduction of art, to
destruction, and not only to the tradition or what remains of it.

36 Then
In the age of the mechanical reproduction of the work of art,
ideology is never simply that which remains of a tradition which
is being progressively destroyed, nor does it simply exhaust
itself in the reanimation of a tradition in the midst of destruction.
Ideology is also that destruction itself, but as that which
remains, as pure innovation, even as pure repetition without
content.
(Duttmann 2000: 39)
Rather than the empowered distraction Benjamin sensed, ‘pure
repetition without content’ is a good description of the endless
circulation of commodified fragments that characterize the contemporary
mediascape. Benjamin’s previously cited observation that
mankind is now an object of contemplation for itself fits well with
the current cultural climate of Reality TV shows, celebrity trivia, and
the mechanically reproduced emotion that accompanies such largescale
media events as the funeral of the Princess of Wales, *Live 8*,
and so on. In opposition to the fascists’ deliberate misappropriation
of aesthetics, Benjamin called for the politicization of art. For
Benjamin, fascism represented a systematic aestheticization of politics
that necessitated suppressing the intrinsic tendencies of new media,
however, he failed to grasp capitalism’s flexibility – its apparently
uncanny ability to co-opt and exploit the potentialities in which he
had such faith. Quoting Benjamin’s description of life in the Weimar
Republic, Gilloch could equally be providing a concise summary of
the social atmosphere that has resulted as a failure of Benjamin’s
hopes for the media: ‘the most selfish narrowest private interests
combine with the dullest instincts of the mass ... The radical
potential of the optical unconscious is reduced to the situation
where: ‘everyone is committed to the optical illusions of his isolated
standpoint’ (Gilloch 2002: 97).
Despite his good intentions and hopeful analysis, Benjamin’s
analysis has proved an inadvertent, albeit important, guide to our
understanding of aura’s decline and its negative cultural consequences.
In television coverage of mediated events that Benjamin
did not live to see (such as the Gulf conflicts) we have witnessed
how Benjamin’s desire for a media-radicalized mass with which to
confront fascist tendencies has been co-opted by the corporate, CNN
model. Fascism on a mass scale has been transformed into the ‘thrill
of technomastery’ by the individual viewer as a ‘fascistic subject’
(Meek 1998: n.p.). Society now has a hollow core due to the
superficially neutral, but in reality deeply ideological, nature of the
media technologies themselves. Benjamin hoped that media such as
film would explode like dynamite our ‘prison-world’, ‘so that now, in
the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously
go travelling’ (Section XIII). In practice, the wide-eyed ramble
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has become a ghoulishly voyeuristic trip manifested in a diverse
range of examples including the surreal game-show video-clip element
of some of the US military briefings in the Gulf conflicts and
the outpourings of public emotion at the death of Princess Diana,
for whom (to all but a tiny minority of the mourners) she was just a
screen image. At present it seems that the most likely impact of the
media’s explosive properties is that its ruins and debris will block
our exit from Plato’s Cave.
38 Then
Siegfried Kracauer’s *mass ornament*
Introduction