

## CHAPTER 6

# The Work of Art in the Age of Unbearable Capitulation

### *The 'Artwork Essay': Three Different Versions*

Initial notes for the essay 'Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit' were written in the autumn of 1935. The first version was completed at the close of 1935.<sup>1</sup> The second version was a partial and extended rewrite, completed in February 1936,<sup>2</sup> and contains material and various theoretical formulations excluded from the final version. The second version is the one on which Adorno based his critique in a letter dated 18 March 1936.<sup>3</sup> Pierre Klossowski translated the second version of the 'Artwork essay' in the spring of 1936, but he made of it a shorter French version called 'L'Oeuvre d'art à l'époque de sa reproduction mécanisée'.<sup>4</sup> The French translation, which appeared in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* in 1936, was without the first thesis and omitted other references to Marxism. Executing his task with the Institute's full backing, Brill, a supervisor allocated to Benjamin in Paris in order to prepare the piece for translation, had attempted to efface traces of Marxist theory from the second version of the essay. Brill cut the entire first thesis. This thesis set the 'programmatic work' within a Marxist framework. Much to Benjamin's dismay Brill insisted upon a number of other cuts. That something was at stake in the differences between the second German version and the French version might be discerned from the following event. In December 1936 Horkheimer tells Benjamin that Jay Leyda wants a German copy of the 'Artwork essay', so that he can translate it into English for the library of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Horkheimer instructs Benjamin not to comply, in order to avoid the admission of differences between the German and French versions. Divulgence of discrepancies could lead to 'discussions'.<sup>5</sup> The differences are political. In the French version not only are references to Marx cut out, but also all topical political references and passages that divulge political positions. Horkheimer insists on the removal of lines that betray 'political allegiance' or use a 'politically topical formulation'.<sup>6</sup> Horkheimer introduces a new set of references. It is informed by liberal impulses, although at times this language coincides with

Popular Frontist discourse – references to fascism are substituted by reference to totalitarian states, all allusions to communism are turned into the endorsement of ‘constructive forces of humanity’, imperialist warfare becomes modern warfare or modern war, the phrase ‘against the present social order’ is replaced by ‘for a true human order’. Converted into expressions of American liberal progressivism or Popular Frontist class collaboration, whatever the case, all explicit revolutionary language is expurgated. The essay aspired to formulate ‘revolutionary demands in the politics of art’ and also to represent a catalogue of political analyses with ‘informational value for the French avant-garde’. Given this, Benjamin argued that all the omissions, forced upon the text by the executive at the *Institut der Sozialforschung*, had rendered the text incomprehensible.<sup>7</sup> Contrary to his protestations and insistence on the critical, engaged character of the writings, Horkheimer’s editorial suggestions prised Benjamin’s contributions away from leftist political debate and direct political intervention, no doubt as a genuflection to the exiled Institute’s American hosts.<sup>8</sup> He writes:

We must do everything within our power to preserve the journal as scientific organ from being drawn into political press discussions. This would represent a serious threat to our work in this and perhaps other areas.<sup>9</sup>

At every stage of its production the ‘Artwork essay’ is dogged by miscellaneous battles over terminology and content. Conflicts about Benjamin’s work were habitual at the Institute. Very few of his submissions appear in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* in their originally intended form. In 1933, as a response to proposed amendments to his essay ‘Zum gegenwärtigen gesellschaftlichen Standort des französischen Schriftstellers’, Benjamin insinuates in a letter to Scholem that his editors at the *Institut der Sozialforschung* operate an editorial policy that butchers his work through deletions and distortions. He compares the editors’ proposed changes with the advance of fascism in Europe.<sup>10</sup> Editorial interventions do not end with the ‘Artwork essay’ débâcle. The next major work, ‘Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire’ (1939), once it appeared in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, was subject to erasures. Eradicated was the opening discussion of Marx’s evaluation of professional revolutionary conspirators in the 1840s, references to proletarian struggles on the barricades and the politics of putschist Blanqui – all elements that Benjamin had included in his original draft ‘Das Paris des Second Empire bei Baudelaire’.<sup>11</sup>

The third German version of ‘Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit’ was begun during the translation of the second version and was still described as a ‘work-in-progress’ by Benjamin in 1938 and again in 1939.<sup>12</sup> The third version enjoys

a canonic status as the final, definitive version. The third version includes some material not previously used in the other two versions, notably references to Brecht's *Der Dreigroschenprozeß*, and a selection of quotations from Paul Valéry, Alexandre Arnoux, Rudolph Arnheim and Georges Duhamel. In some senses it might be said that the Brechtian elements are amplified, perhaps as an act of defiance against Adorno and his terror of Brecht's sun refusing to sink beneath exotic waters. But other formulations and ideas central to the second version disappeared.<sup>13</sup> It was this third version that was translated into English as 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', and so gained widespread notoriety and inclusion in numerous art history and cultural theory compendia. Benjamin's title translates into English as 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility'. This literal translation may seem to suggest only elusive differences, but it implies conceptual parameters for any interpretation of the 'Artwork essay'. The wider idea of technological-technical, rather than the limited notion of mechanical, situates the essay more directly as part of Benjamin's ongoing investigation into the dialectic of *Technik*. The idea of reproducibility shifts the emphasis of the essay onto a study of the impact of reproduction on all forms of art and creative practice, once those technologies that make mass reproduction a possibility or potential have been developed.

In a letter to Werner Kraft, sent in late October 1935, Benjamin claims a unique status for the 'Artwork essay'. He describes it as an exemplary set of materialist axioms of art theory.<sup>14</sup> The essay, he insists, represents a formalization of conclusions reached during the course of ten years' engagement with materialist poetics. Organizing a new model for the discussion of cultural production and cultural analysis, the second version of the 'Artwork essay' establishes a number of categories, including 'first *Technik*' and 'second *Technik*', semblance ('*Schein*') and play ('*Spiel*'), which are seen to work together with further categories such as 'cult value' and 'exhibition value'. The loss or marginalization of the categories 'first *Technik*' and 'second *Technik*', semblance and play from the final version of the argument, disrupts its intricate dialectical-theoretical framework.

At the beginning of the series of theses on art and technology, Benjamin claims that the various formulations that he has introduced into art theory are unlike usual concepts in art discourse because they are unusable for fascism.<sup>15</sup> They are unusable for fascism because they unmask the ways in which fascism manufactures its confection of false representation. In the essay's epilogue Benjamin explains how the fascists use new technological art-forms. Technological art-forms have emerged because they are demanded by the newly proletarianized masses, who respond

to the teleology of *Technik* and the development of the forces of production. Fascists participate in this aspect of technological modernity. Not for usage by fascists is Benjamin's critical breakdown of *Technik* into component parts, and the indication of various facets to *Technik*, facets that can be weighted and manipulated by practitioners. It is on this basis that Benjamin grounds a strategy for a critical political practice that utilizes technology in a 'truly revolutionary way', that is, in a way that reinvents the relations of aesthetic production.<sup>16</sup> Analytical scrutiny of *Technik* hopes to open up potential for a political-aesthetic strategy useful for the political left.

### *Actual Potential*

Benjamin's letter to Horkheimer of 16 October 1935 places his theses on twentieth-century art in a continuum with his studies of nineteenth-century Paris. These studies trace the 'fate' of art in modernity.<sup>17</sup> The 'Artwork essay' tracks the 'vanishing point' of Benjamin's historical construction of the nineteenth century in the present moment. Outlining nineteenth-century cultural forms is not simply an historically reconstructive exercise, but a gesture towards explanation of what art has become, is becoming and might become for contemporary readers, 'for us'.<sup>18</sup> A remark on Marx's methodology in the opening thesis of the 'Artwork essay' notes that Marx goes back to the 'basic relations of the capitalist mode of production' (*Grundverhältnisse der kapitalistischen Produktion*).<sup>19</sup> The phrasing suggests Marx's working out of the abstract laws of capitalism as they exist in basic form, but also the sense in which Marx is seen to map out an historically embryonic form of capitalism as it was originally, 'at its beginning'. In one phrase Benjamin intimates a methodology that broaches the fundamental composition of relations in the present, as well as the historical nature of the past. Marx is said to work out these 'basic relations' in order to give 'prognostic value' to speculations on future economic formations. Setting past, present and future in planarity, Benjamin assimilates Marx's method into his own intricately connected temporal telescoping. He interprets Marx's model as one that seeks information about the configuration of future production forces and relations in an analysis of present forces and relations. Benjamin's description of the temporality of his methodology in the letter to Werner Kraft employs the device of a telescope whose line of sight cuts through time to envisage a fantastic image of the previous century. This anticipates the way that modern astronomers study the origins of the cosmos by observing events at many light-years distance – an idea that returns us to the nineteenth century when photographers attempted to

photograph the stars.<sup>20</sup> Benjamin claims that his study depicts the mirage of the nineteenth century, seen through a bloody fog, in a future, liberated and non-magical condition.<sup>21</sup> This visioning of the past in a future condition introduces a split between the actual fate of art and the potential direction of art in the twentieth century. The double reading of actual and potential developments in art is contingent on the completed supersession of superstructural misalignment with the base. Intensifying exploitation of the proletariat, through the siphoning off of surplus value from increased productivity, relies on maintaining exploitative relations of production. Simultaneously, Benjamin assumes, the conditions for transcendence of class exploitation through the abolition of capitalism are made possible by the collectivized development of production.

While working on the preliminary stages of the 'Artwork essay' Benjamin began a study of the communist, and erotica enthusiast, Eduard Fuchs. Here Benjamin remarked upon Fuchs' early derivation of implications from the constellation of *Masse* and *Technik*. Fuchs was a member of the illegal SPD in the late 1880s. After opposing the war, he founded the Spartakusbund and the KPD. Later he joined the KPD Opposition. He wrote various cultural histories between 1905 and 1923, on caricature, pornography and etiquette, amongst other things. In 'Eduard Fuchs, der Sammler und der Historiker' (1934–37) Benjamin insists that technology be seen as a product of history and not purely a natural scientific factor. Positivism is a failed intellectual project, according to Benjamin, because it is unable to understand the importance of the social conditions of production in any evaluation of technology.<sup>22</sup> The positivists recognize only the progress of natural science, and not the regressions of society which result from a capitalist organization of the social. Positivists are oblivious to the destructive side of technological development, signalled in the mushrooming fabrication, under exploitative conditions, of fetish commodities and vicious weaponry. Benjamin writes of the 'threshold' at the turn of the century. After this threshold has been crossed the massive energies generated by the development of technology become wholly destructive and used most strikingly for the waging of war and the propaganda of war. Technologies are used to speed up production and massively multiply information in ways that, Benjamin claims, 'outstrip human needs'.<sup>23</sup> This is a fact that the social democrats have been unable to discern, let alone act upon politically. The demand for a detailed specification of *Technik* carries over into 'Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit'. In its epilogue Benjamin reiterates the need to organize the relationship between technical forms of production and social agents of production, familiar from 'Theorien des deutschen Faschismus' (1930):

If the natural utilization of productive forces is impeded by the property system, the increase in technical devices, in speed and in sources of energy, will press for an unnatural utilization and this is found in war, whose destructivity is proof that society was not mature enough to make *Technik* its organ, that *Technik* was not well enough cultivated to master elemental social forces. Imperialist war is determined in its most monstrous features by the discrepancy between powerful means of production and their insufficient utilization in the production process (in other words, by unemployment and the lack of profit sources). *Imperialist war is the revolt of Technik. This recovers, in the form of human material, the claims to which society has denied its natural material.*<sup>24</sup>

In Nazi Germany technology is embraced in order to expand the productive base. At the same time, by ensuring the stabilization of the relations of production, partly through ideology and partly through physical violence and the dismantling of proletarian organizations, the Nazis negate the masses' 'right' to transform those property relations, the legal form of social relations.<sup>25</sup> The impediment of the 'natural' utilization of productive forces erupts in war. War is a diversion, a means to quash the material reality of class struggle by summoning supra-class goals. It is the only way that people can be mobilized not as classes but as masses, and the only way the advance of modern *Technik* can be contained without endangering property relations. This use of *Technik* sends further out of kilter any electively affinitive co-ordination between forces and relations of production. The opening section of the 'Artwork essay', indicating an intensifying pace of technological development, presupposes a discrepant relationship between forces and relations of production. A change in conditions of production makes itself noticeable in the cultural relations of production, subject, however, to a time-lag.

Artistic production is subject here to the same tensions as production in general. But Benjamin twists the specific Marxist category of exploitation into a more general concept of abuse or misuse. Marx too had written about the misuse ('*Mißbrauch*') of *Technik* in *Das Kapital*, and specifies such abuse as both the apprehension of the technical apparatus as a thing, and the use of *Technik* to generate decadent forms.<sup>26</sup> For Benjamin, there is an increasing 'abuse' of art, occasioned by the maintenance of conditions of production, supplemented by the opposing drive towards the self-abolition of art. A technological dynamic pushes for art's dissolution. Benjamin charts a dialectical development of art, depicted as both a possible and a necessary direction for art, in which a quantitative shift in the type of art being produced, due to new conditions of production, turns into a qualitative shift in the nature of art. One statement in a series of preliminary theses

noted during the first stages of work on the 'Artwork essay' contends: 'The technical reproducibility of the artwork leads to its obsolescence.'<sup>27</sup>

The artworks favoured by the bourgeoisie abuse the inherent drive in art to be produced according to new concepts, or, rather, they abuse art's drive towards self-abolition and development into something other. Continuously relations of production institute a countervailing movement to keep art as art, ordered around traditional categories.<sup>28</sup> The superstructure tries to hold back and counter changes in the base, and so attempts to avert the abolition of art that has been facilitated by the changes in the relationship between producers and public. At that moment there were a number of Marxists debating the meaning of base and superstructure in relation to artistic production. Marx's draft introduction to his *Critique of Political Economy* had recently been made available. Max Raphael was one who pondered its implications for art history and theory, and Benjamin was acquainted with his deliberations. Benjamin wanted new thoughts to match a new epoch. Contemporary artworks are conceived by critics and artists in terms of outmoded concepts, such as creativity and genius, eternal value and mystery, 'concepts whose uncontrolled (and at present almost uncontrollable) application leads to a processing of data in the fascist sense'.<sup>29</sup> The obliteration of art is repudiated by a fixing of capitalist relations of production in the art world and, specifically, the film industry. The political evaluation of the relationship between classes and film cannot be possible before film has released itself from the chains of its capitalist exploitation. The capitalist film industry violates new social needs, as does fascism. See this passage:

It is therefore valid both for film capital specifically and fascism in general that an undeniable need for a new social order is secretly exploited in the interests of a possessing minority. The expropriation of film capital is for that reason alone an urgent demand of the proletariat.<sup>30</sup>

Art's commodity status re-envelops 'emancipated' art and its 'shrinking aura' in fetishized notions of its conditions of production and disempowering modes of reception. The star cult, promoted by the capitalist entertainment industry through fan clubs and spectacles, conserves the magic and rotten shimmer of the artificially boosted commodified star personality. Its complement, the cult of the public, a corrupt concept of mass or '*Volk*', attempts to substitute for class.<sup>31</sup> Charismatic stars and swooning masses are common to fascism and the capitalist entertainment industry. Fascist artworks, part of a continuum of artistic production under capitalist conditions, are used to legitimate 'exploitation' of the

proletariat and art. They misuse the 'legitimate demands' of the proletariat, supplanting its political representation with its artistic representation. The idea of art, the *an sich* of art, is negated in the given reality of fascist dictatorship and its impact on social relations, including aesthetic ones.<sup>32</sup>

Benjamin is most interested in artworks that are situated at 'the crossing point of three lines of development'. These he designates as 'formed', due to their having kept in line with changes in the base.<sup>33</sup> 'Formed' artworks are anticipatory, allowing prognosis, because of their supreme sensitivity to the telos of *Technik* and, occasionally, they have pre-empted in art wider technological change. The telos works towards new modes of reception in art. Benjamin highlights the example of the Imperial Panorama moving-picture show, displayed to an amassed, though not yet collective, public. The panoramas of the nineteenth century were a popular art entertainment for the masses.<sup>34</sup> Inherited products of technologically and socially motivated staleness and untimeliness are blasted out of meaningfulness by new popular models lurking in the artificially lit alcoves of the city. 'Formed' art is responsive to the telos of *Technik* artistically, functioning as a testing ground for effects such as will be effortlessly executed in the future by new art techniques. Benjamin's example is the Dadaist attempt to generate certain effects on audiences at Dada events. These effects will later be achieved easily in Charlie Chaplin's films. 'Formed' art is responsive to the telos of *Technik* technologically, working out specific forms through artworks. The example given is automatic mutoscopes or photo-books, flicked by the thumb to produce a rapid succession of images. Such forms materialize as technological pre-emptings of the filmstrip. The technological forms that shadow the transfigurations opened up by artistic forms appear as part of a continuous entelechic unravelling. The illustrated newspaper, according to Benjamin, is virtually hidden in lithography. Sound film is hidden in photography.<sup>35</sup> The products of any present moment are contained in proto-form in preceding technologies. Future developments in art, human evolution and technology are predicted and almost realized in new forms.

Until the advent of technical reproduction, pictures had been made by hand, parallel to the manufacture of goods before the development of industrial machinery. Technical reproduction in art, beginning with woodcut technology, advances intermittently, but with accelerated intensity, until it reaches a qualitatively new stage in lithographic reproduction. Lithographic duplication allows for mass quantities and rapidly changing forms. The invention of photography induces a further speed-up effect, basing reproduction not on the pace of a hand that draws, but on the seeing eye

and the machinery of the lens. Film is the culmination of a process that accelerates the activity of perception reproduction, such that it eventually occurs simultaneously with speech.<sup>36</sup> Drawing on Kracauer's film studies, Benjamin asserts that film's tendency drives at an ever more 'faithful' 'reproduction of reality', or 'the most exact reproduction of nature'.<sup>37</sup> In an essay written in 1936, 'Pariser Brief II', use in art is defined as that which aids an understanding of reality.<sup>38</sup> He reports on the painter André Lhote, influenced by Cézanne and Cubism, who declares that every new *Technik* entails a new optics. New ways of seeing are necessitated by increasingly complex engagements with reality. For Benjamin, the photographic basis of cinematic representation offers a seemingly unmediated doubling of empirical reality through its iconically asserted surface resemblance. A more complete and swifter reproduction of the perceptual constituents of reality is achieved. Photography and film negate the idea of autonomy in art, because they are more and more directly determined by external reality. *L'art pour l'art*, a 'negative theology of pure art', contemporaneous to the first trials in photosensitive art-forms, is a reaction to the photographic threat to art. *L'art pour l'art* attempts to underscore the autonomy of the artist in the face of a crisis in autonomy claims for art.<sup>39</sup> Autonomy claims are threatened in another sense. Benjamin insists that the commodity status of art counters the appearance of artistic autonomy, because the artwork becomes inextricably reliant on the vicissitudes of the market.<sup>40</sup>

In film the artwork is technologically reproducible en masse, and the subject matter, reality, is also technologically reproducible. Benjamin's film theses parallel contemporary Marxist polemics on realism in art. Cultural policy in the Soviet Union insisted on artistic representation of what purported to be actual lived proletarian reality. Under Stalinism, realism is emerging as state-favoured aesthetic mode. Stalinist realism finds theoretical formulation in Andrei Zhdanov's pronouncements on socialist realism. Though the premium is on realism, Soviet socialist realism, given to be the accurate, naturalistic effect of reflection of the social world, exceeds the documentary demand by mirroring an invisible immanent tendency towards the unstoppable victory of the proletariat.<sup>41</sup> In the 'Artwork essay' Benjamin likewise stresses the importance of dense ties between artistic representations and the matter of external reality. In contrast to the short history of photography, Benjamin is less anxious to counter the analogue in representation through recommendation of slogans and juxtaposition. But he is keen to negate the illusion of a direct correspondence between the real and its mediation by film. He stresses rather that film's mediation has the look of the real, but is in fact a second order reality.<sup>42</sup> Crucial to the filmic operation is

that the filmic product appears to be a simple analogical reflection of reality. The masses are 'entitled' to this rendering of the real. This reflection constitutes the basis of their enjoyment of art. But there is a paradoxical trick. Playing film off against painting, Benjamin comments:

*Thus, for the contemporary person, the filmic representation of reality is incomparably more significant, since it ensures an aspect of reality, which is free of all apparatuses, precisely because of the intensive permeation of reality by the apparatus. And that is what the contemporary person is entitled to ask from a work of art.*<sup>43</sup>

This reflection is already highly mediated by technology in a secret way. The secrecy lies in the fact that the various technologies of production are invisible once the film is projected. Film, especially sound film, at its moment of shooting, its moment of production, offers a perspective that has never before been conceivable. In the theatre, Benjamin contends, it is possible to conceive that what happens on the stage is an illusion. Unmediated human display is the obvious counterfeit. Film's relationship to illusion and reality is more complicated. At the moment of production the filmic process does not allow the spectator to adopt a viewing point that would exclude extraneous accessories such as lighting equipment and crew. At the moment of production the illusionary nature of the event is manifest, discounting an exceptional moment of technological and human harmonization when 'the position of the viewer's pupils coincide with the position of the recording apparatus'.<sup>44</sup> Later, when projected, film can appear as convincing illusion of reality – albeit a montaged, speedy reality that induces a spectating that is mobile. This is result of post-production. The illusion of reality is a second order manifestation, dependent on the re-intervention of technology.

Its illusionary nature is a second order nature, a result of cutting. That means: *in the studio the apparatus has penetrated so deeply into reality that its pure aspect, freed from the alien substance of equipment, is the result of a special procedure, namely, shooting by a specially adjusted camera and montaging the shot together with other similar ones.* The equipment-free aspect of reality has become the most artificial; the vision of immediate reality has become a blue flower in the land of technology.<sup>45</sup>

Projected film relies on a secret technology that ensures, if the film-makers so desire, a continuity of lighting and reconstructed chronological time. Film appears persuasively as a completely unmediated objectivity because of its accurate surface recording of reality and because of the effect of gathering its resources for the construction of a realistic look. The complexity of the photo-

graphic artefact resides in its ability to mediate the hoax of presence, through its correspondence to external reality. A comment in the *Passagenwerk* points out the productive confusion between the lens and the objective fabrication of reality in art, whereby the presentation of the immediate is seen as a presentation of the actual. The invention of the lens sends artistic production into crisis.

On the rise of photography – communication techniques decrease the informational merits of painting. And anyway a new reality is furnished, in the face of which no one can take on the responsibility of a personal position. The lens (objective) is appealed to. Painting, for its part, begins to emphasize colour.<sup>46</sup>

For Benjamin, photographic objectivity cuts two ways. The new technological means of representing external reality draw an authority from their copy relationship to the world that they reproduce as ‘the image of a total reality’.<sup>47</sup> But Benjamin cautions that, in fact, the manufactured image of a total reality is ‘smashed up’ by formal means. Acknowledgement of this prevents the misunderstanding of film as flat reproduction of the real. Any aesthetic practice that remains content with an idea of the authority of reflection must be rejected, due to its inability to cut into the real, to jut into it, to interrupt its reproduction, or be cut by the real itself, in the way that bus tickets and cigarette butts introduce reality fragments into Dada art.

Not all film-makers aimed to project moving life-like pictures. Film cameras were developed to break down and cut up the movements of humans and animals, and used then to re-present those movements in continuous single frames. These experimenters, the inheritors of Eadweard Muybridge’s horse-stepping dissecting gaze, were interested less in the fluid representation of movement and more in its analysis. Early film is frequently more concerned with the divisible, than the simply visible. Benjamin emphasizes this potential of film, the capacity for subjecting actuality to analysis. The ruination of physical laws, a devastation roamed over by the camera eye, provides raw material for analysis. An eye armed with a camera can ‘test’ the world.<sup>48</sup> It reveals unsuspected aspects of reality. Film manufactures the possibility of unsuspected representations of reality that are humanly accessed only by extreme modes of non-normal consciousness. Benjamin reiterates his surrealist approach to reality and draws film into the picture. In the two earlier versions of the ‘Artwork essay’ Benjamin locates objective camera vision in the actual subjective human perception of non-rational types, psychotics or dreamers. The amazing fact of film is that it makes an individual – idiosyncratic – perception into a collective, mass one:

For the manifold aspects that the recording apparatus can win from reality lie for the most part only outside a *normal* spectrum of sense perceptions. Many of the deformations and stereotypes, the transformations and catastrophes, open to detection by the world of optics in film, are actually found in psychosis, in hallucinations, in dreams. And so those methods of the camera are practices, thanks to which collective perception appropriates the individual ways of seeing of the psychotic or dreamer.<sup>49</sup>

It is not just a question of being able to analyse reality scientifically, but also of perceiving structures of reality in alternative ways. The strange visions of dreamers and psychotics are recreated in cinematic techniques. The fragmenting, allegorizing, destructive effect of cinematic devices tends to cut through the natural appearance of the everyday landscape like a surgical instrument, counteracting film's capacity to reflect the surface. Camera operators penetrate their apparatuses deep into the material of reality, executing a technologizing of the look, a dissection of the 'total'. Translated into aesthetic terms, this indicates a rejection of simple reflection theory in favour of a new way of representing actuality in its multiple potential modalities. The image becomes 'a multiply fragmented thing, whose parts reassemble themselves according to new laws'.<sup>50</sup> Montage, as avant-garde procedure, acts to eliminate the organic totalities of art categories. Organicism champions the inability to recognize the fact of construction. The montaged avant-garde work proclaims itself an artificial construct, an artefact that draws attention to the strange fact that it is made up of reality fragments. Writing at the same time his polemic on film, the former Dadaist, Hans Richter, extolled the way in which from the early days of cinematic recording:

Everything that happens on earth has become more interesting and more significant than it ever was before. Our age demands the documented fact.<sup>51</sup>

But, at the same time, Richter propounded montage practice and technological intervention. His *Film Enemies of Today – Film Friends of Tomorrow*, written in 1929, construed film's basic nature as the deployment of the camera tricks of slow motion, speed-up, superimposition, lens distortion, animation.<sup>52</sup> Richter's kind of analytical practice is not the mainstream of film production and Benjamin is more concerned to speculate on popular cinema.<sup>53</sup> But all film relies on the technological principle of structuring through editing or montage. This is its thorough permeation by technology and the technical. This permeation necessitates its analytical attitude towards the construction of the real. Film is a synthesis of artificial, constructive procedures and organic

resembling operations. Its synthetic nature makes it a perfect realm for the exercise of modernist realism.

In a fragment written in 1934 Benjamin describes how Dada, operating in the context of a perceived crisis of art, had 'stressed the authentic: combated the illusion'.<sup>54</sup> Negating illusion means in the case of Dada to incorporate, as part of art, the actual matter of social existence. In film everyday social matter, presented on screen and arranged through editing, is alienated from its normal positioning in life. In this act of estrangement film both negates the illusion of the real and represents external reality, extending the comprehension of actual scientific and social 'necessities that govern existence'.<sup>55</sup> Apart from depicting the realm of necessity which is intrinsically a part of the actual physical world, film also tests the limits, pushing back and exploding scientific and natural laws in a utopian gesture, proving that while film is bound up with representing the actual, it does not entirely relinquish the traditional artistic function of representing an ideal real. Film in its movements, twists of time and space, liberates perception through the dynamiting, dynamic power of the fractioned second.<sup>56</sup> Filmic technology mediates the experience of spatiality and temporality by attacking any seemingly natural re-presentation of space and time. Benjamin sees film as presenting a new cognitive potential. In the newly discovered celluloid continent of the 'optical unconscious', minutiae appear, amongst which it is possible, in the moment of viewing, to be free from all constraint. All those actual imprisoning interiors are blown apart by film's stretching of laws of physics and geography. Space and time and movements through space and time are elastic. The possibility of transformation is represented graphically on screen. As Benjamin indicates, in the second and third versions of the essay, using an insight from the film theorist Rudolf Arnheim, film's array of technical tricks allows the revelation of new structurations of material. For example, Arnheim points out, spinning out time technologically through slow motion does not simply slow down movements, but makes movements appear gliding and ethereal.<sup>57</sup> Montage in film, the normal filmic process of editing, reflects back to workers a view of the world as experienced by themselves, but also, simultaneously, a view of the world as malleable. Representation on film does not just mime the reified world. Film is mobilized as that realm where actual constraints are superseded. Film is politically significant, because potential realities are realized actually, but within the realm of representation. The new image world of the camera becomes a new play-space for humanity, authentic but also provisional and blatantly manipulated. Benjamin scissions the heart of the film into two parts: reflection and construction. Reflection refers to the

actuality represented in film; construction is concerned with possibilities offered up by film.

Benjamin allocates three roles to film: film as authentic representation of surface reality; film as research tool, for the probing of invisible physical and scientific laws of the real; film as a medium through which to present potential and utopian transformations of current social and physical reality. Each of these angles is also considered in its relation to audiences, in terms of its 'educative value' (*Lehrwert*) and 'consumption value' (*Konsumwert*).<sup>58</sup>

The 'Artwork essay' speaks of art in relation to social function. The oldest artworks were made for ritual purposes and were believed by their users to be imbued with magic power. The function of objects that operate within ritual is bound up with their existence and not their visibility.<sup>59</sup> Accessibility to these ritual objects is restricted and their worth lies in their sheltering of mystical powers. The emancipation of the artwork from its ritual function leads to increasing opportunities for exhibition. Exhibition art is defined as author-fixated and it elicits contemplative responses. Artworks accrue new value through their ability to be exhibited to increasing numbers of people. People, alone or in small groups, stare at pictures by great artists in galleries. With the perfecting of reproductive techniques, art enters into crisis. A third category emerges – political art. Art based on politics denies authenticity, authorship and contemplative reception. Art grounded in politics does not conspire to disempower individuals or collectives. Politics, true politics, is the dialogic space between subjects and objects or individuals or collectives. Photographs and film are exemplary forms of political culture. They reverse art's traditional function, basing its 'praxis' on a structure that enables the possibility of collective human intervention in both production and reception. Films are not artworks in any traditional sense, Benjamin states, categorically. Through film, art can potentially end. Benjamin's assertion touches on Heine's extension of Hegel's analysis of 'the end of art'. Heine had demanded cognizance of a new relationship between art production, science and politics as part of his critical suspicion of idealism. Benjamin responds to this demand. A binary division within each block complements his sectioning of artistic production into ritual art, exhibited art and political art. This schism attributes shifting emphasis to a series of dialectical polarities at the core of artworks. The polarities are cult value and exhibition value and semblance (*Schein*) and play (*Spiel*).<sup>60</sup> The role and relative weighting of these polarities in any particular artwork determine the character of relations between producer and perceiver. Benjamin complicates the status of these polarities by pointing out that they do not function as mutually exclusive. This intricate structure of shifting and provisional values

at the core of the artwork is necessary for Benjamin to keep in play a flexible approach to actual products of cultural activity within capitalist relations of production. The analysis of any artwork involves evaluating a play-off between its structuring values, cult value and exhibition value, and formal modes, semblance and play. To take one example: exhibited art has not entirely excluded cult value from its core and can summon up its fetishized characteristics under specific social circumstances.

In preference to the traditional idealist philosophical opposition between appearance and essence, Benjamin's core antagonism is between play and semblance. The second version of the 'Artwork essay' differentiates between traditional and technological art according to their relationship to these polar categories of semblance and play. Cult value 'pupates' within semblance. Semblance is bound up with auratic perception.<sup>61</sup> Benjamin summarizes idealist aesthetics' theoretical formulation of the conjoint existence of auratic perception and beautiful semblance (*'schöner Schein'*). He defines semblance in identical terms to aura; it offers up the presentation of a veiled artwork, enveloped in a shell or shroud. Semblance is connected to idealizing representations. In a note for the second version of the 'Artwork essay' Benjamin remarks:

Where it ceases to seem, it ceases to be beautiful.<sup>62</sup>

Semblance is countered by play. That Benjamin is well versed in the idea of play can be seen in his evocation of play, games and toys in various contexts, as well as in his frequent references to childhood and children's experience. He was also an avid collector of toys.<sup>63</sup> Semblance's retreat, equivalent to the shrivelling of aura, is compensated for by a gain in space for manoeuvre or playroom (*'Spielraum'*).<sup>64</sup> Exhibition value counters semblance and begins opening up spaces for play around a de-auraticized relationship to the object. Semblance is further challenged by mass reproduction:

The widest room for play has been opened up in film. In film the moment of semblance has retreated completely to the advantage of the moment of play. Because of this, the positions that photography has gained in respect of cult value are now extremely secure.<sup>65</sup>

Film enacts art's dialectic of semblance and play, interplay of resembling reflection and playful construction. The moment of play dominates. Resemblance, in retreat in film, is not absolutely negated, because of the analogical basis of filmic recording. Film enables the constructed presentation of vast and previously unimagined spaces for manoeuvre and play in ideal and educative form, as it includes the possibility of alteration and provides

provisional images of reality.<sup>66</sup> Film is not a medium for beautiful semblance, but utopian representations of a transformed real inhere in film's reliance on play and provisionality.

Reproductive techniques and the perceptual and reception strategies that they enforce start off the decay of cultic and auratic factors. The uniqueness of the ritual artwork is connected to its embedding in the context of tradition.<sup>67</sup> The definition of aura repeats virtually word for word the phrasing from 'Kleine Geschichte der Photographie'.<sup>68</sup> There Benjamin traced aura to the structure of production of early photographs. In early photography the photographer, immersed in a slow and difficult process, is more like a skilled artist, customarily producing unique prints. The discussion of aura in the context of the 'Artwork essay' once more revolves around the notion of uniqueness (*Einmaligkeit*). A secularized form of aura in the cult of beauty taints much art produced for exhibition. The definition of aura in 'Kleine Geschichte der Photographie' stipulates that the aura apparent in early photographs results from the authentic representation of the represented subject, a comfortable and confident bourgeoisie. It is a socially and technologically prompted physical haze on an artwork. Early photographs incorporate moments of individuality and authenticity, both auratic categories. Their character of reality as analogous representation of the real preserves individuality, the person, the moment photographed. Benjamin reiterates this point in the 'Artwork essay', affiliating the presentation of beauty to cultic, subjective investments in individual personalities on the part of the viewer.<sup>69</sup> But here aura is not a materialist description of an objective attribute, but rather a relational position, an attribute of perception, produced or denied by the interaction solicited between viewer and art object. This sense of aura, located as an attribute of an historically determined perception, is underscored by its definition as illusory appearance.<sup>70</sup> An artwork may be said to have an aura if it claims a unique status based less on its individual qualities than on its real or metaphorical distance from the viewer. The auratic artwork is not immediately accessible to perception, but hidden, removed from the viewer, distant and separate. This distance need not necessarily be a physical space between viewer and painting, but the creation of a psychological unapproachability. Auratic perception involves a response to an authority that has been claimed on the basis of the artwork's position within a tradition or in a social order. Auratic works emanate withdrawal and an unbridgeable absence, undetachable from ritual. Benjamin details both a technological basis of the contemporary decline of aura and a social basis of the contemporary decline of aura, related to the increasing growth of urban masses and the connected intensity of their movements.<sup>71</sup> But aura or auratic perception is

not necessarily negated by photography if certain subject matters continue to be represented and if certain social relations continue to obtain. Aura is permanently in a position to reappear. Non-auratic photographs, such as those made by Atget, depict collective experience or social environments. The new politicized photographer sets out to produce the non-auratic. But, Benjamin points out, intention is not the only factor. Technological developments in themselves bear certain implications for aura, the reproduced object, producer and consumer. Photography, made mass and quick by technological progress, sheds the auratic envelope. The maker of a technologically produced image is no longer an artist, but rather a functionary who acts as a catalyst of a technical production process. A chemical process set off by a catalyst necessarily should produce non-auratic imagery.

Aura atrophies alongside social and technological change – not just advances in photographic science, but in concert with more general technological change. For example, Benjamin mentions that gas warfare is a new means of abolishing aura.<sup>72</sup> Like an out-evolved organ, aura ‘withers away’. Aura’s historical obsolescence is symptomatic of tradition’s propulsion into crisis. But it is not automatic, and it is all too easy to generate a fake aura, unless efforts are made to counter this. The essay’s images detail objects active-consciously prised from their shells, veils stripped away, smashed up aura. The rending of the veil is metaphorically the same activity as montage’s disruption and tearing, sometimes quite literally, as, for example, in the case of Kurt Schwitters’ ‘Merz’, a name procured by ripping strips from an advertisement for the Kommerz- und Privatbank.

Strictly, it is technology that releases the object from tradition. The reproduced artwork can be reproduced over time identically. Its historicity is continually remade. This is tantamount to a repudiation of history. Film signals ‘destructively’, ‘cathartically’, the liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage.<sup>73</sup> Technical reproduction negates uniqueness, defined as the original and singular existence of the artwork in one place at one time. But these terms are anyway undercut. Uniqueness and its pendant genuineness, claims Benjamin, come into being only at that moment when they are faced by the copy and the fake. When historical testimony is jeopardized, the authority, the traditional weight of the object is affected. It is not solely the traceable historicity, a singular uniqueness that the print denies formally. Benjamin uses the example of history films to contend that history as content becomes homogenized and liquidated and embroiled in the logic of standardization and ‘the sense of the equality of all things in the world’.<sup>74</sup> The reproduced artwork shatters tradition, but this shattering is a manifestation of wider socio-historical

processes. It is a result of contemporary crises of political and economic organization and the formation of new political mass movements, equivalent to a 'renewal' of humanity.<sup>75</sup>

Benjamin's discussion and demotion of the value of tradition for a critical aesthetics is an oblique political intervention. To talk about tradition in art at this moment had particular significance for communists. In various programmatic statements on literary policy from 1930 onwards there were disputes about the appropriation of tradition – Brecht, Lukács, Ernst Ottwald all took part. Official communist literary politics was busy recuperating into the canon great artistic monuments created by a rising bourgeoisie. Benjamin is contemptuous of alliances with traditional culture and its representatives. Just such an alliance structured the popular frontist conception of art. The Popular Front strategy was based on class collaboration, and the assimilation of liberals into the ranks of communists. All men of good will, opposed to the extremism of fascism, were to join together, while, in the interests of a common front, patching up any differences between them. Famed individuals, notable artists and writers, had to be attracted, to lend well-bred weight to the movement. This meant recasting slogans and modifying the analysis of just who the enemy is. In order to attract grand intellectuals, flattery was necessary. Culture's value was reasserted by the communist parties, as they turned inwards to seek alliances, rather than to cleave class-wise. Through such nationally focused mobilization the communist parties tightened their grip on national political structures, and were able better to dispense with, by demoting, working-class militants who advanced class demands.

In a letter to Alfred Cohn, written in July 1935, Benjamin alludes to the Congress for the Defence of Culture, the popular front effort to bring together respectable, liberal bourgeois artists and Party members.<sup>76</sup> The conference celebrated the sealing of a mutual assistance pact between France and the Soviet Union. Prior to the conference André Breton had balked at the idea of defending the abstract notion of 'culture'. It signified only the booty of the bourgeois enemy. And the alliance proposed by the conference brought together simply representatives of that enemy and defenders of the purges and trials of Soviet activists and intellectuals in Moscow. The surrealists sent a letter to the conference organizers, denouncing

touching declarations such as those of André Malraux, Waldo Frank and Boris Pasternak – nothing but warmed-over platitudes, childish ideas, and boot-licking. Those who claim to be saving culture have chosen an unhealthy climate for their activities.<sup>77</sup>

Benjamin tells Cohn that he considered his meeting with Brecht the only pleasant one at this meeting designed to bring together anti-fascist intellectuals. Benjamin and friends, with their cultural formulations and intellectual suspicions, were stepping out of line. Their theoretical ventures were not wanted. In another letter to Alfred Cohn, written at the beginning of July 1936, Benjamin evoked the resistance to 'Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit' on the part of émigré writers who were members of the Communist Party.<sup>78</sup> Benjamin had presented ideas from the essay in lecture form. Writers in the audience who were party members, he notes, attempted to block debate, but then fell into silence. Benjamin attributes this behaviour to their instinct for self-preservation. The writers felt their own well-practised literary activity to be under attack, but Benjamin is confident that they were also not up to the debate. He also remarks that the founding of the journal *Das Wort* in Moscow led him to fear that literary policy for the Communist Party would consist in the promotion of belles-lettres.

Great Realism and great artists go hand in hand, writes Romain Rolland. Such a return or restoration of a bourgeois past was accompanied by the reconfiguration of the traditional division between author and public. Culture becomes a heritage and the artists and their administrators expect 'the people' to salvage it. Culture is expensive clutter evacuated and stored in museums. It is the past. It has value for it is special, unlike people. This is illustrated most startlingly by Picasso's message, in late December 1937, to the Second American Artists' Congress, a Popular Front beano. Picasso, the giant of European modern art, was lending his support to the Popular Front, and his statement to American artists made clear just who was expected to save what for whom and at what cost. The grand man of art intoned:

I am sorry that I cannot speak to the American Artists' Congress in person, as was my wish, so that I might assure the artists of America, as director of the Prado Museum, that the democratic government of the Spanish Republic has taken all the necessary measures to protect the artistic treasures of Spain during this cruel and unjust war. While the rebel planes have dropped incendiary bombs on our museums, the people and the militia, at risk of their lives, have rescued the works of art and placed them in security. It is my wish at this time to remind you that I have always believed, and still believe, that artists who live and work with spiritual values cannot and should not remain indifferent to a conflict in which the highest values of humanity and civilization are at stake. No one can deny that this epic struggle for democracy will have enormous consequences for the vitality and strength of Spanish art. And this will be one of

the greatest conquests of the Spanish people. Convinced of our triumph, I take pleasure in greeting the American Democracy, as well as those present at this conference. Salud – Picasso speaking.<sup>79</sup>

The people were to prostrate themselves before national cultural legacies, perhaps sacrificing themselves to art in the process. All of this countered Benjamin's ideas of self-organization, of workers' participation in art, and of the reinvention of cultural practice.

'Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit' does not outline the shape of proletarian art after the seizure of power or in the classless society. Benjamin focuses rather on what is to be done now. Dismissing any interest in partisan affiliation at the level of content, and also any concern with setting up ahistorical models of literary value, Benjamin insists that to analyse the political significance of an artwork, its technical structure must be considered. Celluloid art is created with an eye to mass reproduction or reproducibility and conditions of large-scale distribution.<sup>80</sup> Photographic art fulfils the double criteria of being both reproducible and incorporating the fact of reproduction into its formal make-up. In technically reproduced art there is no longer a significant notion of an originality that is valued for its inviolate authenticity. The reproduction of an object on celluloid stands as a copy of itself, an object of mass reproduction, and no longer a unique representation. Benjamin discusses the effect of technological reproduction on the landscape. The mediated landscape possesses an odd quality of depreciated presence. This can be contrasted with Benjamin's example of the unmediated experience of nature as the experience of aura. Its quality of authentic and singular existence in one place at one time is disparaged.<sup>81</sup> Reproduction loses what Benjamin terms the quality of 'here and now'. Technical reproduction can put the copy of the original in multiple new contexts of reception. The copy is favoured over the original, because of its provisionality, its unfixity from a singular existence and a limited access. Process copy reproduction can continually alter and improve upon the format of 'the original'.<sup>82</sup> Art as was can no longer be in the face of reproduction, and artistry moves from isolated and unique production to a sort of scientific production in front of a number of production experts. These experts intervene ('*eingreifen*') in the new artistic product.<sup>83</sup> This contrasts with Brecht's view of theatre as the realm of the ever improvable and dialogic. As such it is dissimilar to film. Film is fixed and immutable once made. Brecht focuses more precisely on the object than the object in production or reception. Audiences become experts, because they critically measure film against the daily reality that they experience and because they learn to assimilate new scenarios of potential social and physical ordering.

Benjamin claims that technologically reproduced art meets its viewer halfway, in a situation determined not by tradition but by the viewer. The viewer 'actualizes' the reproduced object. Responding to newly forced modes of reception the public is authorized. Contemplative and distanced observation is vetoed. Film negates distance, demanding a reception that is not a form of contemplative submersion in faraway, immutable events, but a more casual, 'distracted' mode. The ground of art is moved from a place of stasis ('*Standort*') to a place of action ('*Tatort*').<sup>84</sup> The masses are described as a matrix or womb out of which traditional behaviour towards artworks is reissued as newborn. These masses demand a bridging of distance between themselves and the objects they produce and consume. A passage from pre-1935 notes in the *Passagenwerk* formulates the importance of this 'bringing closer':

On the political significance of film. Socialism would never have come into the world had one only wanted to enthrone the workers for a better regulation of things. Marx's understanding that they would be interested in a world in which they had it better and which appeared to them to be fair accounts for the strength and authority of the movement. But it is exactly the same with art. At no time, not even the most utopian moment, will it be possible to win the masses for a higher art, but only ever for one that is closer to them.<sup>85</sup>

It is not just the artwork that mutates, but also the relationship of viewer to artwork. The burgeoning quantities of proletarian culture-viewers have grown such that a critical mass is reached: quantity has transformed into quality.<sup>86</sup> For Benjamin, the mass appropriation of art is literally a manhandling of cultural products. The copy can be manipulated. It is 'tactile'. Exhibition, the ability to see and be seen, tactility, the ability to touch, are sensuous concepts that relate new art to the physical presence of the collective receiving body. Benjamin negates any idea of artistic autonomy in his version of art as embodiment of corporeal, material nature. His conception of aesthetics includes categories such as 'tactility' and shock – forces that act on the body. It is dislocated from a bodiless idealist aesthetic based on illusion, the imaginary and fictitiousness. Bourgeois idealist conceptions of art are wound into a narcissistic ideology that argues art is born from itself. Benjamin's approach reinterprets the ground of aesthetics sensuously. For Adorno, such a move is characteristic of Benjamin's behaviouristic anthropological materialism. Adorno labels it a positivism that takes its measure from the human body.<sup>87</sup> Locating sensuous perception as the root meaning of the Greek notion of '*aisthesis*', aesthetics and art are related to the development of the human sensorium, as well as existing in relation

to the proximity of revolution and the re-innervated collective.<sup>88</sup> This idea is echoed in Marx's education of the senses through liberation. In the Paris economic and philosophical manuscripts of 1844 Marx discusses sensuous experience and its curbing under the rule of capital. The man who is starving, says Marx, knows no human form of food, only its abstract form. That is to say, he knows only its crude, restricted form. The man with worries has no fine sense for drama's represented traumas and joys. And 'the dealer in minerals sees only the commercial value, and not the beauty and peculiar nature of the minerals; he lacks a mineralogical sense'. The dealer in minerals sees only money, another hard, inhuman substance, when he views his jewels. But Marx insists that, in freedom, there will be a vision of jewels and minerals that discerns their beauty and their specificity truly and above all. The culinary sense, the aesthetic sense, the mineralogical sense, have all been restricted under capital's dominion. And yet they hold out a promise; the very notion of restriction implies a countervailing force that strives to realize itself. The stony monetary value of minerals coupled with their glorious aesthetic value – their pleasure for the eyes and joy to the touch – reside side-by-side in the object. Abstract – commodity – forms must be filled with sensuous, aesthetic, human meaning.<sup>89</sup> This meaning is a meaning for the senses five. The extent of corporeal delight is the measure of social, human liberation.

Benjamin's re-evaluation of '*aisthesis*' insists on tactility, the haptic, as part of the new techno-enhanced perception. In some sense the physico-spatial 'bringing closer' is a re-approximation and reformulation of pre-bourgeois folkloric spatial relations. Crucial to earlier epic tradition is a reliance on the proximity of a collective of listeners. Industrial capitalist relations erode the oral communicability of experience, but technical reproduction compensates for that change by instituting new potential for a familiarity between receivers and producers, once more in the form of collectivized experience: through mediated mass produced things, such as newspapers or films.

Technology and techniques broach the distance. Closeness, tactility, sensuousness are not to be interpreted as literal presence. In some ways, corporeal disappearance is precisely what is at stake in technological art. In the first two versions of the 'Artwork essay' Benjamin emphasizes the function of filmic reproduction as aesthetic expression of the alienation of self.<sup>90</sup> In all three versions of the essay he examines the role of the actor as depicted by Pirandello:

The film actor, writes Pirandello, feels himself to be in exile. Exiled not only from the stage, but also from his own person.

With a dark uneasiness, he senses an inexplicable emptiness. It arises from the fact that his body becomes a cancelled manifestation, the fact that he evaporates and is robbed of his reality, his life, his voice and the noises caused by his moving about, in order to be transformed into a dumb image, flickering for a moment on the screen, and then disappearing into silence ... The small apparatus plays with his shadow in front of the audience; and he must content himself with playing in front of it.<sup>91</sup>

The film actor becomes a shadow on the screen, only eerily present in a transmission that occurs in a different time to real time. Actors become props and props become actors (people seem like things, things like people).<sup>92</sup> There is an uneasy loss of presence and embodiment involved in the translation of the person into a material object for film. This loss of the human, also a decline of aura, is paralleled by the presentation of an increasing consciousness of alienation in the world. The attempt to close distance between self and object is interpreted as both enabled by new technologies, but also as an ideal resolution of real contradictions. In notes for the 'Artwork essay' Benjamin writes how the 'passionate' inclination of contemporary masses to 'bring things closer' and bridge the distance between themselves and objects may be only the reverse side of the sense of an increasing alienation from things and from the self.<sup>93</sup> In this way, loss of aura becomes a precondition for political action, because it both signals and makes possible a clarified understanding of the alienated relationship of people to things and to themselves.

Film imprints on celluloid the alienated existences of humans. Simultaneous to the forfeiture of aura and the loss of presence of the 'here and now', a sense of a shattered totality of personality is promoted by the stage actor. At the level of production the film actor does not play a coherent role, but rather a disjointed series of fragments, a number of efforts and essays.<sup>94</sup> The camera operator stands in the same place as a supervisor who overlooks recruits in a factory or office. The film apparatus is structured similarly to the mechanism that supervises the work process daily. This mechanism is responsible for ensuring that the overwhelming majority of people working in offices and factories are 'alienated from their humanity'. In the evening the same masses go to the cinema to watch actors take revenge on the apparatus in their place, not only by asserting, in the face of the apparatus, their humanity (or what appears to the audience to be their humanity) but by making that apparatus serve the actors' own triumph.<sup>95</sup> Aesthetic practice carries the scars of human self-alienation. It is a remedial process, the 'curative alienation' of 'Kleine Geschichte der Photographie' (1931) reworked as filmic therapy:<sup>96</sup>

*Through representation by the apparatus, the person's self-alienation has found a highly productive utilization.*<sup>97</sup>

The rebirth of the new collective technoid body emerges out of the complete self-alienation of the representation of the self in front of the apparatus and in front of the mass. Marx's technical anthropic notion of the modern human-machine construct is an influence. Marx, for example, describes the machine as a mega-subject whose human operators 'are conscious organs, co-ordinated with the unconscious organs of the automaton, and together with the latter subordinated to the central moving force'.<sup>98</sup> Film re-enacts the drama of alienation and reification. In some of his notes for the 'Artwork essay' Benjamin concentrates less on the representation of alienation and more on the possibility of sublating alienation during film production through the 'liquidation of the difference between mental and manual labour', the root of alienation. In film production the actor is a sensuous representation of mental reflexion and the operators undertake highly mental efforts. Film functions to counter the trauma of social alienation, in part, by its actual methods of production.<sup>99</sup>

Benjamin assumes the continuous evolution of human senses. Not only does he identify a change in methods of technological reproduction of external reality, but also a change in the structure of human perception itself. The reproduction of reality alters the way reality is envisaged, production in the workplace alters human perceptual organization and necessitates new forms of reproduction of reality. The organization of human perception is determined not only by nature but also historically. That is to say it is determined in line with technological innovation. Film, as representative of a transitional moment in the history of perception, makes clear the historical contingency of vision. New forms of art are compelled by changes in the human perceptual apparatus. Human perception reacts to modern urban life and its scattering of shocks. This necessitates an intensified presence of mind.<sup>100</sup> The moment of legitimacy is essential in Benjamin's identification of a correlation between the subject's demand of both art and social experience: the legitimate demand for forms of entertainment appropriate to actuality and retransmitting actuality. Benjamin posits the iconicity of the filmic artwork's representation of the real, but this is complemented by another borrowing from the world of the real, the structural homology between technological production methods and film's methods of production. Crucial to Benjamin's analysis is the way that, in its organizing principles of mass reproduction and standardization, modern industrial processes inhabit the technologies of cinematic reproduction. An instance of elision between construction in engineering and construction as the technical-formal principle of film is given in an

entry in the *Passagenwerk*. Benjamin writes of the ‘awakening sense in the century for construction’. This first manifests itself in the arts in Cubism.<sup>101</sup>

Film appropriates the structure of contemporary working-class reality in its technological organizing principle. In film ‘discontinuous images supersede one another in continuous succession’. This rapid sequence and tactile thrust of its sounds and images allows cinema to rehearse in the realm of perception what the conveyor belt imposes upon people in the realm of production.<sup>102</sup> Benjamin points out that conveyor belt and filmstrip appear in virtually the same historical moment and the social significance of one is dependent on the other:

the moving belt, which plays such a decisive role in the production process is, more or less, represented in the consumption process by the film strip. Both appeared around the same time. The social significance of one cannot be completely understood without the other.<sup>103</sup>

Benjamin couples the dislocating ruptures of early manufacture and Taylorized work processes with the filmic principle. Through the representation of movement and the activity of the scanning eye as it scrutinizes the edited image, film reproduces reality as evanescent traces of fragmentary perception, a form of receptivity routine for the urban mass. In the cinema and on the conveyor belt, discontinuous images fly past in a continual flow. Benjamin describes this play-off of discontinuity and continuity as the dialectical basis of film. Film corresponds mimetically to the shocking, abrupt, discontinuous external environment of the street and the factory, banal reality.<sup>104</sup>

In an essay titled ‘Über das mimetische Vermögen’ (1933), Benjamin describes the ‘mimetic capacity’ as an adaptation to the environment and to the methods of working with objects in that environment in a relation of acculturation, affinity and reciprocity. Mimesis refers to a flexible interaction with another. Benjamin’s understanding of mimesis contradicts Adorno’s pessimistic sense of the mimetic capacity as the compulsion exerted on culture consumers to conform to the culture industry’s images of themselves.<sup>105</sup> For Benjamin, mimesis is denoted as the original impulse of all creative activity.<sup>106</sup> In the second version of the ‘Artwork essay’ Benjamin determines a polar impulse in mimesis.

In mimesis slumber, tightly bound up in each other like cotyledons, the two sides of art: semblance and play.<sup>107</sup>

Art is semblance and play – both of these are mimetic. The training school for mimetic behaviour is child’s play. The child imitates all products of its social environment. Rather than art as

just a naturalistic mimesis of contents, Benjamin affirms mimesis in practical play.<sup>108</sup> Film's impulse to imitate surface reality, and the way that film is also mimetically aligned to methods of production in its structure, comprise its doubly mimetic existence. In film mimesis as play assumes a critical and corrective function. Film acts as a site of training in order to cope with new perceptual co-ordinates by imitating them and letting audiences practice them.<sup>109</sup> Mimetic reception of the external world in film can be enabling, because of its objectification and presentation of productive processes. This contrasts with the defensive mimetic reflex in the factory, whereby workers co-ordinate their movements to the machine and are protected from shock only at the price of numbing their reflexes. Contemporary mimetic techniques in film tutor the collective in employing this faculty effectively, as defensive shield against the trauma of alienation. Benjamin does not ignore the dangers of mimetic adaptation to the film object. Technicization of imagery can, he warns, conjure up mass psychosis by eliciting tensions in an unconscious struggling against assault by film shocks. But Benjamin values the collective laughter inspired by slapstick comedy and Disney cartoons as an 'antidote', a 'therapeutic detonation' of technologically created mass psychoses. This indicates that 'mimetic capacity' can also be used as a release.<sup>110</sup> The mimetic capacity permits revision of experience in new and befitting ways.

### *First Nature, 'Second Nature', 'First Technik', 'Second Technik'*

Becoming (!) Nature which arises in human history – in the act of engendering human society – is the *real* nature of people, and therefore nature, as it exists through industry – even if in *alienated* form, is true *anthropological* nature.

Karl Marx, quoted in 'Konvolut X: Marx',  
in the *Passagenwerk* (1935–37)<sup>111</sup>

Man, 'the negative being who *is* only to the extent that he suppresses Being', is identical to time. Man's appropriation of his own nature is at the same time his grasp of the unfolding of the universe. 'History is itself a real part of *natural history*, of the transformation of nature into man' (Marx). Inversely, this 'natural history' has no actual existence other than through the process of human history, the only part which recaptures this historical totality, like the modern telescope whose sight captures, *in time*, the retreat of nebulae at the periphery of the universe. History has always existed, but not always in a historical form. The temporalization of man as effected through

the mediation of a society is equivalent to a humanization of time. The unconscious movement of time manifests itself and *becomes true* within historical consciousness.

Guy Debord, para. 25, *Society of the Spectacle*

One of the important social functions of film, states Benjamin in the two earlier versions of the 'Artwork essay', is to establish an 'equilibrium' ('*Gleichgewicht*') between the person and the apparatus.<sup>112</sup> This notion of equilibrium necessarily invests the apparatus with some sort of subjectivity or agency. Benjamin could be accused of fetishism, an anthropomorphization of the apparatus, as he attempts to accredit it with equal rights to human beings. The process of a fetishistic endowment of the machine with subjective power is accentuated by an extension of the 'making human' of the apparatus. This transpires through the notion of the 'optical unconscious'. The 'optical unconscious' substitutes a space consciously penetrated by people for an unconsciously penetrated space seen by the camera eye.<sup>113</sup> A 'new region of consciousness' is conjured up by film, developed only in collaboration with technology:

Space expands in the close-up, slow motion extends movement. The enlargement of a print does not simply render more precise what was already visible but unclear: it reveals rather entirely new structural formations in the material. So too slow motion not only presents familiar qualities of movement but reveals in them entirely unknown ones which, far from looking like retarded rapid movements, give the effect of singularly gliding, floating, supernatural motions. Thus it becomes obvious that a different nature speaks to the camera than speaks to the eye.<sup>114</sup>

The new technological nature that opens up to the camera is an augmented nature. It includes not only the creaturely and physical, but also the man-made, cultural and historical. The nature that exposes itself to the camera is unlike the unmediated (first) nature that displays itself to the eye. The technology of the camera and film, its movements and its editing, substitutes increasingly for human gesture and interpretation. The contents of the psyche become externalized in technological effects. Technology acts to pre-interpret the material on show. The succession of images in film forecloses meaning, because in film the meaning of each single bit is informed by the sequence. Film offers up to the viewer a closure without holes. There are no gaps offering to the viewer snug resting places amenable to contemplative nestling. The machinery dictates the pace and point of view.

One can compare the screen on which the film plays with the screen on which the painting appears. The image on one of them

changes, the image on the other does not. The latter invites the viewer to contemplate; in front of it the viewer can abandon himself to a chain of associations. He cannot do this in front of the film recording. Barely has he grasped it with his eye when it has already changed. It cannot be fixed. The chain of associations of the person watching is immediately interrupted by its transformation.<sup>115</sup>

The intertitle in film or the slogan in the illustrated magazine heighten this effect of pre-interpretation by the apparatus. Benjamin writes of 'directives' that rein in the gaze and make meanings more precise, predetermined, refusing to leave the image free-floating.<sup>116</sup> Any interpretation of a filmic image must, then, be based on collusion with the technological apparatus that mediates it and an acceptance of the machinery's superior consciousness. This endorsement of technological consciousness is the basis for a harmonization or dialectical interpenetration of the person and technology in a techno-consciousness. In the first version of the 'Artwork essay', and in notes for the second version, this interpenetration is interpreted as a realignment of relations between humans, as first nature, and 'second nature'.<sup>117</sup>

Lukács' model of reification had presented the idea of 'second nature'. Lukács' idea of reification implies a politically crippling disarming of the senses and intellect of a humanity confronted by 'second nature'. An uncontrollable domination is permanently threatened by 'second nature'. In the first version of the 'Artwork essay' Benjamin elaborates in detail the way that technology, instead of liberating humanity from myth, confronts it as an uncontrollable force of 'second nature', just as overwhelming as the forces of a more elementary nature in archaic times. Technological productions of 'second nature', despite the fact that technology is now severed from ritual and no longer in the service of magic, still remain uncontrolled and uncontrollable, alienated from management by those who make them. War and economic crisis demonstrate that technology, or 'second nature', is not working in harmony with humans or nature.<sup>118</sup> In Benjamin's contemporary situation, for example, 'second nature' is seemingly subsumed back into (first) nature in the Nazi mythology of 'blood and soil'.<sup>119</sup> The mythology of 'blood and soil' appears to rest on natural categories, but is, in fact, just the discourse that legitimates an actual abuse of nature by technology ('second nature').<sup>120</sup> Their relation to utopia testifies that these technological forms are abusive. Utopias – for Benjamin their devising is a constant in history – always appear as in the form of fantasies about the deployment of technology to humane ends. The Nazi 'blood and soil' ideology transposes utopias of both first and 'second nature' in perverted form. 'Blood', as pure untouched Germanic essence,

negates the utopia of (first) nature. The utopia of first nature would use medicine as a disease-eliminating testing-ground for microbes, in an effort to improve the human body. 'Soil' offends the utopia of 'second nature', whose corrupt Nazi realization is the man who uses technology for military purposes to climb into the stratosphere in order to aerial-bombard the ground.<sup>121</sup> Benjamin is insistent that people need to learn how to use technology or the productions of 'second nature' to work in harmony with nature. The alternative is the permanent substitution of utopia by war-driven, life-denying dystopias, such as the substitution of power stations by human power in the form of soldiers, or the substitution of human transportation by weapons transportation.<sup>122</sup>

Having established that 'second nature' always threatens to run out of control and endanger nature, Benjamin considers its character further. In so doing he hopes to be able to suggest a political strategy for ensuring human parity with 'second nature'. 'Second nature' can adopt potentially what Benjamin terms a 'play-form' ('*Spielform*').<sup>123</sup> Communism is a political form that engages in a playful encounter with 'second nature'. Through play-form, reciprocity and training, efforts can be made on the part of humanity to act out its elective affinity with technical 'second nature'. In notes for the second version of the essay revolutions are identified as attempts to control 'second nature' or 'social elemental forces'. The emphasis here is less on equilibrium and more on a notion of expertise gained through practice, on the part of the collective.<sup>124</sup> The shift in the terms of debate towards ideas of play and training compels a new language. Benjamin abandons the concept of 'second nature' in the reworked second version of the 'Artwork essay', replacing it with 'second *Technik*', a form of *Technik* that is categorized as possessing an open character and a built-in affinity with play.<sup>125</sup> The new category of *Technik* aims to enable a detailed discussion of art production and reception, as well as technological development in general. Benjamin asserts that a 'world-historical battle' with political consequences is fought out between 'first *Technik*' (a category that replaces first nature, suggesting that nature is always already worked upon and so is non-natural) and 'second *Technik*'. Replacing nature by *Technik* emphasizes the extent to which, for Benjamin, increasing distancing from nature is teleologically inscribed in social development:

The origin of second *Technik* is to be sought there where the person, for the first time and with unconscious cunning, set about taking a distance from nature.<sup>126</sup>

For Hegel, reason works its way into history through the desires of unconscious historical subjects. Benjamin identifies a similar unconscious process in social development as humanity imagines

more elaborate technological utopias which are capable of removing humanity from sites of danger. In listing a number of characteristics typical of the two forms of *Technik*, Benjamin appears to be suggesting that technology itself possesses agency, interests and demands. 'First *Technik*' is connected to archaic cultures and is fused with ritual. The productions of 'first *Technik*' are rooted in fixed space and repetition in time, and yet seem to be unique ('*einmalig*'). 'First *Technik*' denotes a specific form of interaction between humans, nature and technology. In 'first *Technik*' humans react to nature's overwhelming powers by abusing it, signifying also a form of self-abuse. 'First *Technik*' is concerned with the domination of nature. 'Second *Technik*', on the contrary, adopts rather a mediating role, allowing play between nature and humanity.<sup>127</sup> 'Second *Technik*' is a form of machine/human interaction, in which humans are empowered to actively control and determine the ways that technology is used, while respecting its essential nature. One difference between 'first *Technik*' and 'second *Technik*' consists in the fact that 'first *Technik*' exposes the person to risk of death, that is, the ravaging of nature, while 'second *Technik*', in a humane gesture, liberates people from vulnerability in the face of nature and protects them from risk:

The great technical deed of first *Technik* is, to a certain extent, human sacrifice. The great technical deed of second *Technik* lies along the lines of remote controlled airplanes that do not need a crew. Once and for always is relevant to first *Technik* (it has to do with mistakes that can never be rectified or the eternally substituted sacrificial death). Once is as good as never is relevant to second *Technik* (it deals in experimentation and a never-tiring variation in the conditions of testing).<sup>128</sup>

The political importance of technological experimentation grounds any understanding of the concept 'second *Technik*'. The opposition established at the core of artworks, semblance and play, is aligned to the two forms of *Technik*. 'First *Technik*' is connected to semblance, and also cultic magic. 'Second *Technik*' is connected to play and scientism:

Semblance is the most removed, but therefore also the most lasting scheme of all the magic processes of first *Technik*. Play is the inexhaustible reservoir of all the experimental methods of proceeding of second *Technik*.<sup>129</sup>

Play and experimentation are the principles that predominate in technological art, by definition closely connected to 'second *Technik*'. Film is the perfect realm for the activity of play and experimentation. The socially decisive function of contemporary art is that it exists potentially as a zone of practice in a co-operative game

between the three terms, humanity, nature, technology, due to its capacity to encourage the aspect of play. Benjamin gropes towards an idea that has its roots in Schiller's *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen; in einer Reihe von Briefen*. Art as a form of play is the sphere where a reconciliation of tensions is practised.<sup>130</sup> Film exercises people in playful apperception and reactions necessitated by the new apparatus.<sup>131</sup> Intercourse with the new apparatus teaches the person that liberation from enslavement will occur only once the constitution of humanity has accommodated itself to the new productive forces opened up by 'second *Technik*', by establishing new social relations and new techniques of intercourse.<sup>132</sup> This was an idea of shake-up well rehearsed by Tretyakov.<sup>133</sup> Film can be slotted into an educative role, whereby practice with technological co-ordinates through art begins to destroy inherited patterns of production and reception, while at the same time, in creating a human-technoid being, recreating the corporeal sensorium. The human being is in the process of adapting itself physically and psychically to new Tayloristic conditions of existence. Industrialization sets in train anthropological effects. The political meaning of the idea of 'play' becomes apparent in relation to the evolutionary adaptation of human social relations to new productive forces. The imaginative connotations of play cancel out any tainting of Benjamin's concepts by a harsh anti-humanist industrial fetishism. Revolutions are intimately connected to the process of syndicating humans and technology. In a footnote to the second version of the essay Benjamin comments on the aim of revolutions to accelerate the accommodation of human beings with 'second *Technik*'. Revolutions are described as innervations of the 'new, historically primary collective'. This collective finds its organs in 'second *Technik*'.<sup>134</sup> The fusion of the collective and technology into a new techno-body is expressed by the concept of 'second *Technik*':

For it is not only second *Technik* that states its demands to society during revolution. Precisely because this second *Technik* wants to go beyond the drudgery of work to achieve the increasing liberation of the person, the individual suddenly sees its room for play [manoeuvre] expand to an unforeseeable degree. The individual does not yet know its way around this play space. But it registers its demands. The more the collective makes second *Technik* its own, the more individuals in the collective will be able to feel how little the previous *Technik*, when they were under its spell, had been theirs.<sup>135</sup>

'Second *Technik*' exposes the alienated nature of first *Technik*, where, in the context of different forces of production, the domination of nature coincided with human sacrifices. What

becomes clear, with this new techno-structure, is how little belonged to humanity when it was subjected to technological processes. The ‘demands’ posed by ‘second *Technik*’ spring neither from humanity alone nor technology, but from both in collaboration.

Benjamin’s comprehension of materialism is literal. It acknowledges the materiality of bodies, and the materiality of the culture they produce and consume – and also the historical nature of sensuous perception. At times, Benjamin’s interest in thinking about bodies might appear as matterism, rather than materialism. He develops a technical anthropology of historically mutable nature. Anthropics itself becomes a matter of technics: reorganizable, transformable. That this reconstruction must be arranged around the new co-ordinates of existence, transmitted through new technologies and ways of operating those technologies, is made explicit in a statement in the ‘Fourier’ file of the *Passagenwerk*. Even revolution becomes a utopian stimulation of the ‘technical organs’ of the collective, its sensuous faculties. That his materialism or matterism is not simply mechanical, but concerned with human activity – innervation of the body – is indicated in this little sketch, illustrating a common idea in his own and Fourier’s politics:

Fourier’s idea of the spreading of the phalanstères through explosions compares with two ideas from my politics: that of the revolution as an innervation of the technical organs of the collective (compare with the child who, in attempting to possess the moon, learns how to grasp), and ‘cracking open natural teleology’.<sup>136</sup>

Technology causes social, human and political change and new technologies have initiated a disintegration of traditional criteria. This move cannot be revoked. But, at the same time, Benjamin demonstrates that consciously organizing art around the new opportunities opened up by ‘second *Technik*’, represents only one possible way of organizing art.<sup>137</sup> In the second version of the ‘Artwork essay’ Benjamin introduces a further opposition between ‘seriousness’ (*Ernst*) and ‘play’ (*Spiel*) or, in other words, ‘strictness’ (*Strenge*) and ‘non-compulsoriness’ (*Unverbindlichkeit*).<sup>138</sup> These oppositions appear in every artwork, though with varying weighting. All art is connected to ‘second *Technik*’, in as much as it can be received playfully, and it is connected to first *Technik*, in as much as it is received seriously. A note for the second version of the ‘Artwork essay’ further connects seriousness to fascism and play to communism.<sup>139</sup> Benjamin implies that all artworks have the capacity to promote fascism or communism, depending on the mode of reception that is enabled. Such an assertion negates what has been often construed as the apparent contradiction of

Benjamin's essay: that technological reproduction in art leads necessarily to communist revolution. Such a claim renders the epilogue senseless. Even technological art, deeply marked by all the categories thrown up by 'second *Technik*', such as play, experimentation, science, is still also informed by first *Technik* and cultism, magic and semblance. This is key in Benjamin's discussion of technologized Nazi art. Nazi film uses technology to promote predominantly the characteristics of first *Technik*.

### *Epilogue: Aesthetics and Politics*

Even though the masses bring it into being, they do not participate in conceiving the ornament. And as linear as it may seem: no line protrudes out of the tiny segments to determine the whole of the mass figure. In this it is similar to the *aerial pictures* of landscapes and towns, for it does not emerge from the interior of a given reality, but rather appears above it.

Siegfried Kracauer, 'Das Ornament der Masse' (1927)140

In the epilogue to the 'Artwork essay' Benjamin writes about the Nazis' recording machine projections. In these the masses seem to look themselves in the face. The latest technological forms are used by the Nazis to produce representations of the masses. The human/machine interpenetration, the industrialized eye, is not abandoned in Nazi propaganda practice, despite their reinvention of a nostalgic nineteenth-century aesthetic in the realm of high art, and their ideological promotion of rural values. Fascist monumental culture is forged for the masses and out of the masses, and it deploys technology to mediate images of these moulded masses. News reports such as the Nazi *Wochenschau* productions, with their bird's eye, dictator's eye, god's eye view, emphasize the vast size of the spectacular shows, the Nazi rallies and sportive-military displays. The dictatorial camera eye surveys the surface areas of the productions, cruising above and across the dramaturgy and tightly controlled choreography of the event. The camera eye transmits aerial views of specific regimented shapes made out of 'human material'.<sup>141</sup> These shaped, ornamentalized masses are bearers of a structure that they do not compose, but into whose order they are made to slot.<sup>142</sup> The references are martial. The mass body is a disciplined material, a phalanx. In the Nazi ornament the mass looks itself in the face, but it is dominated by an authoritarian order that is external to it:

*Mass reproduction complies well with the reproduction of the masses. In the huge rallies, the monster meetings, in mass sporting events and in war, all carried out these days in front of recording machines, the masses look themselves in the face. This process,*

whose import cannot be emphasized too much, is closely connected to the development of reproductive or recording technology. Mass movements appear more clearly to the apparatus than to the human eye. Hundreds of thousands of cadres are best seen from a bird's eye perspective. While this perspective is just as accessible to the human eye as it is to the apparatus, the image that the eye carries away with it is incapable of enlargement, unlike the photograph. That means, then, that mass movements, and, at their pinnacle, war, represent a form of human behaviour that is especially fitted to the apparatus.<sup>143</sup>

War and mass ornamentalism have found an appropriate means of representation in new technological forms. But it is a use of technology that draws only on the characteristics identified by Benjamin as inherent in first *Technik*. These representations use technology as a means of incapacitating receivers. They substitute active receivers, who participate in the production of their own representation, with a deployment of 'human material' by a dictatorial authority. This authority is fixated with the aesthetic patterning of collectives. The representation of regimented collectives demonstrates that those collectives are not called upon to choose their own formations and associations. Nazism superimposes a decadent aesthetics on the political sphere.

*Technik* is used in Nazi aesthetics to cancel out a number of 'rights'. These 'rights' or 'demands' are derived from 'second *Technik*'. Benjamin establishes various 'rights' in the 'Artwork essay': the 'right' to transform property relations, the 'right' to view cultural products that present an accurate vision of reality, the 'right' to be filmed. In the Nazi *Wochenschau* productions a political and a perceptual discourse are skilfully elided, in order seemingly to carry out these 'rights'. Fascism hopes to remain in power by giving expression to the masses in terms of visual representation, but not in terms of their 'right' to political representation. The public satisfies its modern thirst for representation, but in a hollowed-out fashion. This representation is a mockery of revolutionary will. The Third Reich places the executors of its art, as much as the recipients of it, under a paralysing spell.<sup>144</sup> The mass ornaments are staged in order to be represented. The reality reflected back at the masses by the machine provides a presentation of people deployed in scenarios designed for the act of reproduction itself. Representation without 'self-understanding' or self-organization on the part of the masses, is representation of a cult without sense, an expression without right and a body of the collective without the rationality of the collective.<sup>145</sup> Fascism participates in modernity. Its aesthetics respond to the changes in perception wrought by new technologies. Fascism acts upon the new machino-anthropos. It uses film and radio, technologies of

the masses. But it bends these forces of production into an aesthetic form that demands contemplative attitudes. Nazism offers only mimetic representation, not political representation. In (visual) representation without (political) representation, humanity, once an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, is now an object of contemplation for itself, rather than a self-consciously acting, playing and innervated collective. The incapacitated subjectivity, formed in the process of fascist subordination (to the spectacle, to the violence of executive organs), is, according to Benjamin, so alienated from itself, that it derives aesthetic satisfaction from war. Estranged humanity experiences its own death 'as an aesthetic pleasure of the first degree', states Benjamin, referring to the nihilistic consciousness generated by the unsuccessful reception of *Technik*.<sup>146</sup> An abortive reception of *Technik* always issues in the destruction of human life. Destruction and annihilation become important components in the masochistic fantasy of the class that occasions the devastation. In one entry in the *Passagenwerk*, part of the file of quotations on the themes of antique Paris, catacombs, demolition and decline of Paris, Benjamin writes:

Fantasies about the ruination of Paris are a symptom of the fact that technology was not received. From these speaks the dull consciousness that with the great towns the means grew to flatten them to the ground.<sup>147</sup>

The technological fantasy, hazy from thoughts of ruination, goes hand in hand with a secret inkling of the miserable nature of the organization of production. The modern ruin at the nucleus of capitalist civilization gives birth to a consciousness that is still draped with the vagaries of the mythic reception of technology. Benjamin's study of Eduard Fuchs evaluates the destructive consequences of ill-received *Technik* in the twentieth century. The effects are both military and ideological:

The energies developed by *Technik* this side of the threshold are destructive. They foster primarily the *Technik* of war and that of its journalistic preparation.<sup>148</sup>

Benjamin insists on the possibility of a misappropriation of *Technik*. Such misappropriation is shown in fact to be the actual reality of capitalism, and it is continued in the fascist version of capitalism. Technological misappropriation is manifest in varying ideologies, such as petit bourgeois rejection of technology or rarified futuristic-fascistic celebrations of machinery.<sup>149</sup> Benjamin repeats the claim made in 'Theorien des deutschen Faschismus' (1930). Fascist art rests on an aestheticism that brackets out the rational human.<sup>150</sup> The techno-body of the collective, visually represented but paralysed when it comes to self-determined

political action, is abandoned to the clutch of danger. It is forfeited to war. War finds perfect aestheticized representation in film, as the *Wochenschau* and countless feature films attest. A telling anecdote: on 2 February 1933, immediately after Hitler had been appointed chancellor, Ufa released *Morgenrot*, a film about a submarine in the 1914–18 World War. The new cabinet, including Hitler, Hugenberg and Von Papen attended the première.<sup>151</sup> Even at play their technological imaginary was serious.

Benjamin's interest in the ornamental and organized spectacle of fascism coincides with the analysis of pre-Nazi body culture offered by Siegfried Kracauer in 'Das Ornament der Masse' (1927).<sup>152</sup> Kracauer's article appeared on the *feuilleton* pages of the *Frankfurter Zeitung* and it discussed synchronized dancing troupes and acrobatic displays. In his article he argues that the fetishized spectacle of numerous seemingly identical bodies acting in concert, like cogs in a machine, exists as simulacra of the entire logic of the socio-political order. The marshalled body extravaganzas re-enact the alienation of humanity from nature, transmitting evidence of the debilitating grip on the collective of a reified 'second nature'. Such a modern, rationalized organization of bodies and the social body is well represented through new technologies, in aerial and panning views. In the first two versions of the 'Artwork essay', Benjamin suggests that the filmic representation of alienation and rationalization may be curative.<sup>153</sup> It would seem though that the Nazi technological representation of alienated subjectivity is qualitatively different. Benjamin specifies Nazi technologized art as the art practice that debilitates supremely. *Technik* itself, as utilized by the Nazis, exerts a devitalizing grip, precisely due to its misuse. Technology is mis-deployed in the Nazi spectacle. Modern technologies of film and radio are misused in forms that repeat the disempowered relationship of spectator to art-object, familiar from certain trends in bourgeois aesthetics. In the last version of the essay Benjamin stresses the cultic, ritual basis of Nazi ideology, and aligns it with technology-abuse in art:

The rape of the masses, who fascism, with its cult of the Führer, forces to their knees, has its counterpart in the rape of an apparatus that is pressed into the manufacture of cult values.<sup>154</sup>

Benjamin argues that it is through the employment of aesthetic means, by redirecting the technical apparatus to the production of cult values, that fascism displaces the contemporary 'drive' to revolutionize relations of production and property relations. This is backed up by an ideological discourse that promotes flattery of the existing economic order by ahistorically insisting on its eternal features. Fascist art and politics demonstrate the re-entry of cult values, the re-entry of semblance into representation and a

repression of playful production and reception. Fascist aesthetics is the ultimate aesthetics of semblance. Fascist politics is the ultimate politics of semblance. Fascist practice denies the interplay between first and 'second *Technik*'. It negates the functional value of art as training ground for a harmonious machine/human interplay within a socialized productive apparatus. The crucial final formulation in the 'Artwork essay' insists that technology's destruction of tradition and reorganization of space and time is symptom of a crisis. The crisis must culminate in either the rejuvenation of humanity, marked by humanity's adoption of a political relation to art, or its complete destruction, signalled by an aestheticization of politics.

There is a connection made in the 'Artwork essay' between tactility, the quality of having been brought close to the masses, inherent in political art, and tactic, as mode of political operation. Benjamin presupposes that to theorize and make recommendations for artistic practice is also to make theoretical recommendations for actual political practice. Just as alterations in technological and social conditions of production have forced traditional notions of artistic activity into contradiction with inherited relations of production, so they overturn traditional notions of political activity. A footnote details Benjamin's comprehension of class consciousness and his analysis of KPD practice.<sup>155</sup> Adorno believed this passage to be one of the 'most profound and most powerful' pieces of political theorizing since Lenin's *State and Revolution*.<sup>156</sup> Benjamin's point concerns the dialectic of reactivity and activity. This dialectic also informs the terms first *Technik* and 'second *Technik*'. Benjamin establishes an anti-vanguardist critique of the party and stresses the necessity, for successful leftist politics, of self-active masses. As soon as the proletariat engages in class struggle it becomes active, rather than reactive.<sup>157</sup> The revolutionary leader is not a leader in the traditional sense. He is someone who 'does not draw the masses behind him, but lets himself be continually included in the masses, in order to be one of hundreds of thousands for them'.<sup>158</sup> In fascist technologically reproduced scenarios it is specifically the 'compact masses', an abstraction borrowed from Le Bon, who find representational form. Benjamin insists that the quality of the class-consciousness of the proletariat, labelled by him 'the most illuminated', and the proletariat's participation in class struggle, act to loosen its composition as a grouping of compact masses. Because of this, the proletariat's representation in the fascist *Wochenschau* is clearly unsatisfactory. Only reactive compact masses find satisfactory representational form in these productions. Compact masses are the homogenized Nazi fabrication parading in the *Wochenschau*. The petite bourgeoisie is precisely such a

collection of emotional and reactive compact masses, particularly susceptible to panic. Fascism, shouldered by the panic characteristics of the petite bourgeoisie, understands and exploits for political ends the reactive elements of the mass. These petit bourgeois 'compact masses' form an antithesis to the active cadres of the proletariat who are obedient to a collective ratio, and are also conversant with technology. Benjamin contends that communist tacticians, presumably Marx and Lenin, argued for the necessity and possibility of 'winning the petit bourgeoisie' to the side of the revolutionary proletariat. In revolutionary situations, shaken up by their own political reaction and thrown into upheaval by action, the petite bourgeoisie can become radicalized and join a revolutionary movement. Benjamin is criticizing third period theory and practice, which argued for the working-class purity of the vanguard party and, states Benjamin, produced a form of politics which 'promoted illusions that were fateful for the German proletariat'.<sup>159</sup> But, by the time of the essay's first public appearance – in French in 1936 – Communist Party tactics had mutated into Popular Frontism. In any case, this passage was dropped, and Benjamin moved on to a broader, more fundamental critique of the historical and philosophical bases of Marxism.