

# Transcript: Defending Walter Benjamin against his devotees?

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*“More and more it appears to me, that the launch of sound film must be seen as an action of the industry that was intended to break the revolutionary primacy of the silent film, that brought forward reactions that were hard to control and politically dangerous.”*

## **Part I**

Europe 1936.

The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.

Author: Walter Benjamin.

The last pages of the essay are the darkest ones. They begin with chapter XIV. There Benjamin starts with thoughts on dadaism and architecture. But at the same time he develops a theory of film in this few columns.

Characteristic for dadaism was the attempt

*To generate the effects that people now look for in film, but using the tools of painting (sometimes literature)*

Concerning the works of art dadaism aims at the

*ruthless destruction of the aura of their output.*

Directly after that: an inconspicuous and cryptic sentence. It already anticipates the key point, which is totally incomprehensible at that early point totally.

*Immersion, which in the degeneration of the bourgeoisie became a school of asocial behaviour, stands over against diversion as a variety of social behaviour.*

This mode of diversion is represented by film; contrary to painting.

*[A painting] invites the viewer to contemplate; he is able in front of it, to give himself up to his chain of associations. Watching a film, he cannot do this. Scarcely has he set eyes on it before it is already different.*

Before this Benjamin had spoken about immersion and diversion in that cryptic sentence. Now he apparently reconsiders the same point using the terms *contemplation* and *distraction*.

*The person who stands in contemplation before a work of art immerses himself in it; he enters that work [...]. The distracted mass, on the other hand, absorbs the work of art into itself. Buildings, most obviously.*

*Buildings are received twofold: through how they are used and how they are perceived. Or to put it in a better way: in a tactile fashion and in an optical fashion.*

Tactile... touching, related to the sense of touch.

We are now already on the last page before the afterword.

On the tactile side there is no counterpart to contemplation. Its function mode is habit.

*Tactile reception does not occur both through the medium of attentiveness and at the same time through that of habit.*

This tactile dimension - and that the baffling explosiveness of the text – now becomes significant for human history.

*The tasks that at times of great historical upheaval the human perceptual apparatus is asked to perform are simply not solvable by visual means alone – that is to say, through contemplation. They are gradually mastered, on the instructions of tactile reception, by man's getting used to them.*

## **Part II**

Again and again I read in Benjamin texts that they are about *materialistic aesthetics*. And in a letter he has characterised his essay on the reproduction of the work of art, that it

*closely links the history of modes of reproduction with the masses.*

Materialism and mass. Materialism and Benjamin. An idiosyncratic relationship. Master of observation and recording singularities.

*He insisted on looking so close at all things, that they became alien. And as alienated they revealed their secret (Adorno on Benjamin).*

Materialism and film.

*This makes film the first artistic medium capable of demonstrating how matter acts along with man. Film can therefore constitute an outstanding tool of materialistic representation.*

So the film as an instrument of materialistic presentation... but back to the mass.

*The fact that the work of art can now be reproduced by technological means alters the relationship of the mass to art. From being very backward (faced with a Picasso for instance), it has become extremely progressive (given Chaplin, for instance).*

In the pre-television age, in the cinemas, film meant collective reception. In his essay Benjamin writes about Chaplin, but isn't he thinking about the soviet film instead all the time? Isn't this *also* a point that separates him from Adorno?

On the other hand, it nearly looks like as if something is driving Benjamin beyond his analysis. And maybe exactly that characterises him as a marxist of the early twentieth century. Already Marx - and later especially György Lukács - tends to set something outside of his analysis, which isn't supported by it. Yes, maybe that's how to understand Benjamin's insisting on the fundamental progressiveness of the form film.

*Yet this progressive response is characterized by the fact that in it the pleasure of looking and experiencing is associated, directly and profoundly, with the stance of passing an expert judgement.*

Adorno – at that time already in England – seems to have noticed that. He criticised Benjamin's position in a letter to him as *blind faith in the self-mightiness of the proletariat in the historic process. A proletariat that itself is bourgeoisly produced.*

From the perspective of our time it seems like that Adorno was right with his opinion. He confronted Benjamin's hope in the *form* of film with *content* analyses of American television series and films. With an disillusioning result: culture industry.

But isn't that point of view covering many important things? Therefore: Defending Walter Benjamin against his devotees.

### **Part III**

From our perspective it's hard to imagine how groundbreaking film was seen in the time of its appearance. Isn't film for Benjamin a completely new possibility to look on society? That's exactly what the terms *tactile, shock, distraction, habit* are pointing to.

In practice Sergej Eisenstein worked on the same topic. Today his *montages* sometimes appear crude and the idea to bring new insights to the audience with them to be naïve, if not even dangerous. And still – film always claims to be a unique form and to be able to show and produce something that no other form of art can do.

Benjamin got that point. And Sergej Eisenstein too.

For Eisenstein the theory of film is defined through montage. For Benjamin the crucial elements are *shock, tactility, distraction* and *habit*.

Both develop an emphatic theory of film. The reception of films is a tactile one. It's relation to the audience is different to that of paintings or in theatre. Compare how you look on a painting and how on a film. What a painting shows and what a photography. Or a theatre play or a film. What they *can* show.

### **Epilogue: Society and documentary film**

The film theory of Eisenstein and Benjamin is a theory of society. Every film wants to change society. But how does society change? Not through the conventional documentary film. The conventional [explaining] documentary film sees itself as a painting. It aims at alertness, immersion, concentration.

*Program for documentary film that wants to change society:  
shock, distraction, habit, casualness*

*The tasks that at times of great historical upheaval the human perceptual apparatus is asked to perform are simply not solvable by visual means alone – that is to say, through contemplation. They are gradually mastered, on the instructions of tactile reception, by man's getting used to them.*