

*le ritualism.*²⁴ The rituals of political protest movements, youth counterculture, and parareligious self-discovery groups have developed a illness of symbolic forms of expression: from the bodily configurations of common ceremonies, from the clothing to the emblems, cult books, and music by which the "group soul" articulates itself. In a functionally differentiated society, the collective gaze is dispersed and robbed of its directional ability by the multiplicity of media. Precisely because of this, the resuscitation and re-establishment of collective and individual rituals promises an experience of authenticity, a secondary ritualization in a secondary performance culture that connects the ritually oriented, prebook age to the postbook age. Certainly these rituals are transient and are not permanently safeguarded by firm institutions, so that the processes and the objects of auraticization are themselves volatile.

24. Soeffner, "Rituale des Antiritualismus," p. 520.

Walter Benjamin in the Information Age?

On the Limited Possibilities for a Defetishizing Critique of Culture

Benjamin did not have a portable computer or hypertext program at his disposal for his work on the *Arcades* project, but he already thought of himself as living in an information age. He described the characteristics of this age in *The Storyteller* (which bears many resemblances to the *Artwork* essay and was also published in 1936), where he outlined a process within literature akin to that of the withering of aura in the visual arts.¹ Storytelling, he wrote, was disappearing because "experience has fallen in value. And it looks as if it is continuing to fall into bottomlessness" (S 83). Total war and inflation had been the immediate causes of this devaluation of experience, but, over the longer term, the "dissemination of information" had exerted a decisive influence and brought about a crisis in both storytelling and the novel. In the newspapers, "no event any longer comes to us without already being shot through with explanation" (S 89). Whereas the value of a story, deeply embedded in oral tradition, depends upon its leaving events unexplained and thus allowing readers to interpret it over time, "the value of information does not survive the moment in which it was new. It lives only at that moment; it has to surrender to it completely and explain itself to it without losing any time" (S 90). Like mechanically reproduced art, the information media shatter tradition and create new, mass-produced cultural forms that replace not only the old, premodern forms (storytelling as a craft, comparable to the work of art in the service of ritual) but also the modern forms characteristic of the age of the ascendant bourgeoisie (the novel, whose birthplace is the solitary

1. *Editors' Note:* Unlabeled parenthetical references in this essay are keyed to the edition listed in the Bibliography as: Benjamin, "Work of Art." References labeled (S) are keyed to the edition listed in the Bibliography as Benjamin, "Storyteller."

individual, comparable to putatively autonomous art). In both essays, Benjamin sees the present status of art or communication as a result of its emancipation from tradition, its increasingly abstract character (symbolized by the reduction of the role of the "hand" or craftsmanship in its production), and its mass audience.

These processes all seem to involve, for Benjamin, a form of demystification. In *The Storyteller*, Benjamin hints at a complex attitude vis-à-vis this demystification, but in the *Artwork* essay, he celebrates it outright as a form of "emancipation" closely related to the Marxist tradition of defetishizing critique.² The fetish, of course, is the object that people create but then endow with powers independent of themselves. The aim of "defetishizing critique" is to reveal to subjects that perceived objects (institutions, commodities, history, forms of consciousness) actually result from the activities of subjects, and thus are not inescapably "given" facts but processes open to change. Defetishizing critique relies in part on the assumption (today often contested) that if people understood the way in which the world and the social system they have inherited were products of prior generations, they would be in a better position to change that world and that system. Defetishizing critique arises from the Hegelian-Marxist historical schema that claims history is the history of Spirit's (or humanity's) self-objectification in the world and its coming to consciousness of its dual status as the constituting and constituted subject of history.³ This historical schema has come under considerable scrutiny since 1936,⁴ especially for its "unitary" model of subjectivity; that is, its subsumption of diverse subjects under the unitary category of "Spirit" or "humanity" (or "species being"). Nonetheless, defetishizing critique remains an important tool of cultural studies that claim to offer solutions to political problems. It often appears in the guise of the critique of the "social construction of reality," which suggests, in its most schematic form,

2. The starting point for my discussion of "defetishizing critique" in the context of Benjamin's essays has been the work of Seyla Benhabib, although it is impossible to give her analysis adequate attention within the limited scope of this essay. The discussion of plurality and finitude, and the distinctions communicative/objectifying activity and transfiguration/fulfillment in my comments also build on her work, although I use transfiguration and fulfillment in a rather different sense than she. See Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia*, pp. 44-69, 114-23, 163-82, and 327-53, as well as Benhabib, "Critical Theory and Postmodernism." I wish to thank Morris Kaplan for discussing with me both Benhabib's work and certain of the problems posed here.

3. These and related assumptions are summarized under the rubric "philosophy of the subject" in Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia*, p. 54.

4. Starting with Benjamin's own "Theses on the Philosophy of History."

that since society has constructed reality in a given way, it is up to society (or at least *possible* for society) to deconstruct and reconstruct it in a better way.⁵ Benjamin frequently expresses sympathy for the view of the fetishist—as in the almost mystical powers he sometimes attributes to objects, or the positive role of the commodity as dream in the *Arcades* project—but his attitude in both of the 1936 essays is that of defetishizer. He reveals revered objects to be the result of historical processes, and both suggests and proclaims outright the possible transformation of these processes by the proletariat's self-realization.

The historical (or eschatological?) horizon of *The Storyteller* does not place the same emphasis on figures of the fetish as does the *Artwork* essay. If the aura of a work of art originates in its fetish character (its cult or ritual value), the story, in contrast, has no such fetishistic origin, but arises within the context of definite relations among people, and has a use value of its own—it communicates "intelligence from afar" (S 89). Storytelling, "an artisan form of communication," presents itself not as an objective fact but as a social process: "Thus traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel" (S 91-92). In the fairy tale, the story's oldest form, fetishization is held in check by working against myth: "The fairy tale tells us of the earliest arrangements that mankind made to shake off the nightmare which the myth had placed upon its chest. . . . The liberating magic which the fairy tale has at its disposal does not bring nature into play in a mythical way, but points to its complicity with liberated man" (S 102). Benjamin's liberated man, in these concluding pages of the essay, is in harmony with the world of created things yet still maintains an autonomy that depends on recognizing his separation from the natural world. Benjamin can only conceive this utopia by appealing to a collective subject, an image of humanity, whose experience "even the deepest shock of every individual experience, death, constitutes no impediment or barrier" (*ibid.*). Because fairy tales and stories belong to the world of collective experience, they are capable of envisioning a redeemed world.

The Storyteller lays great emphasis on death, which suggests both human finitude and the close relationship of human existence to natural processes: "Dying was once a public process in the life of the individual and a most exemplary one. . . . Death is the sanction of every-

5. Obviously, this is an incomplete representation of the claims of various social constructionists. For an interesting recent elaboration and defense of a much more complex theory of social construction, see Butler, *Bodies that Matter*.

thing the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death. In other words, it is natural history to which his stories refer back" (S 94). As the primary image of a redeemed world, Benjamin cites Leskov's interpretation of the Resurrection, "less as a transfiguration than as a disenchantment, in a sense akin to the fairy tale" (S 103). Disenchantment is, of course, an important metaphor for enlightenment; the redeemed world maintains its plurality and finitude, but in a disenchanted form. The essay presents two versions of utopia: the collective past of village life, and the redeemed (but not transfigured) future of the Resurrection. Here Benjamin may be accused of "nostalgia," but his utopias do leave open certain possibilities shut out by the *Artwork* essay, which seems to attribute an utterly false consciousness to all the believers and worshippers of art, and to condemn all aesthetic theories as priestly conspiracies. The logic of the fetish is the only logic Benjamin grants the work of art. In contrast, to the story he allows the possibility of an imagined world of noncompetitive human interaction, reconciliation with nature, and the creation of value in a social system relatively untouched by the division of labor. It seems that what gives Benjamin a sympathy for the story that he does not have for the work of art is his sense that the former belongs to a mode of intersubjective human interaction, whereas the latter belongs to a mode of objectifying action.⁶

Only with the rise of the novel, isolated from oral tradition, does the historical schema of *The Storyteller* converge with that of the *Artwork* essay, according to which from the Renaissance to the nineteenth century the defenders of art's autonomy "denied any social function of art" (224). The champions of *l'art pour l'art* thus seem to fall under the spell of the fetishism of commodities, described by Marx in the first chapter of *Capital*: "[The commodity] is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things."⁷ The novel, unlike "all other forms of prose literature," depends essentially on the printed book (S 87). Only the conversion of the book into a commodity by the invention of the printing press made "dissemination" of the novel possible. The novel also effectively justifies the capitalist order by making the conditions of life in that order appear natural, the hallmark of the

6. Benhabib has noted a dependence in early critical theory on the "objectifying" model of action, and has proposed (following Habermas) a shift in emphasis toward "communicative" action (see n. 2).

7. Marx, *Capital*, I, p. 165.

fetish. What Benjamin describes in his analysis of the novel is the impossibility for the isolated individual to give counsel in the way that the storyteller could: "The birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual, who is no longer able to express himself by giving examples of his most important concerns, is himself uncounseled, and cannot counsel others" (ibid.). The other, closely related difference between the novel and the story implies the novel's acquiescence in the modern abandonment of plurality and finitude: the perpetuating remembrance of the novelist is dedicated to "one hero, one odyssey, one battle," while the "short-lived reminiscences of the storyteller" are dedicated to "many diffuse occurrences" (S 98). Whereas the storyteller envisioned a disenchantment that would also be redemption and allow integration of the individual in the community and in nature, the disenchantment actually offered by modernity consists in the individual's separation from community and nature. Benjamin borrows directly from Lukács when he writes that the novel is "the form of transcendental homelessness" (S 99).⁸

The modern age of *The Storyteller* resembles that of the *Artwork* essay in its essential alienation, but Benjamin is again kinder to the novelist and the novel-reader than to the artist and the aesthete. When Benjamin writes that "to write a novel means to carry the incommensurable to extremes in the representation of human life" (S 87), he appeals to the idealist language of Lukács's *Theory of the Novel*, but he also seems to point to the solution envisioned by Lukács in *History and Class Consciousness*: a revolutionary proletariat, the identical subject-object of history, able to resolve the contradictions inherent in the structure of modern experience.⁹ The novelist describes these contradictions in good faith as it were, like the idealist philosophers analyzed by Lukács who cannot resolve the "antinomies of bourgeois thought" because only history—and the proletariat—will be able to do so. The artist merely continues to perpetrate the priestly fraud.¹⁰

When it comes to the information age, however, Benjamin sees a similar process at work in both communication and the visual arts. Experience, a positive value in *The Storyteller*, loses its relevance and its communicability and is replaced by a seemingly more objective and verifiable "information." The main criterion for knowledge in the age

8. The primary text is Lukács, *Theory of the Novel*.

9. Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, pp. 83–222.

10. To which we might add the poet, since Benjamin mentions Mallarmé in the *Artwork* essay.

of information, and one that seems to prepare the way for revolution, is verifiability: "It is no longer intelligence coming from afar, but the information which supplies a handle for what is nearest that gets the readiest hearing. . . . The prime requirement is that [information] appear 'understandable in itself'" (S 89). Similarly, mechanical reproduction "detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition" and brings it nearer to its audience (221). The *Artwork* essay specifies the political cause of this change: "[T]he desire of contemporary masses to bring things 'closer' spatially and humanly" (223). In *The Storyteller*, Benjamin sees this process of the shattering of tradition as a necessary stage in human progress: "Nothing would be more fatuous than to want to see in [the decline of storytelling and the dying-out of wisdom] merely a 'symptom of decay,' let alone a 'modern' symptom. It is, rather, only a concomitant symptom of the secular productive forces of history" (S 87). In a sense, the replacement of wisdom by information involves a type of defetishization, since it creates a verifiable, objective world. It entails, for Benjamin, a step in the fulfillment of the project of enlightenment and modernity, although it is a very incomplete fulfillment; another step is clearly necessary and is to be anticipated.

In the *Artwork* essay, this further step consists not in the fulfillment of the processes of enlightenment and secularization, but in their transformation, which the age of mechanical reproduction puts in motion. Benjamin's definition of the aura of a work of art and the conditions for its liquidation illustrate the essay's dependence on the Lukácsian Marxist theory of the reification of consciousness and its inherent logic of defetishization. The aura of a work of art resembles the aura of nature; both involve the "unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be" (222; 243, n. 5). The age of mechanical reproduction destroys the authenticity of the work of art but not that of nature (221). The work of art is, to use more recent jargon, "denaturalized." By "emancipat[ing] the work of art from its parasitic dependence on ritual," mechanical reproduction reveals the true basis of art in social forces: "Instead of being based on ritual, [the total function of art] begins to be based on another practice—politics" (224). That Benjamin sees this process as part of a Lukácsian schema of the defetishization of history becomes clear near the end of the essay, when he describes the process by which "the masses" (also referred to, in a significantly different register, as "the public") come to have a progressive, rather than a reactionary, relationship to mechanically reproduced art: "The pro-

gressive reaction is characterized by the direct, intimate fusion of visual and emotional enjoyment with the orientation of the expert" (234). This fusion of subjective and objective orientations to art suggests Benjamin's striving for a mode of art that would allow the proletariat (transformed into the public) to recognize its identity as the constituting and constituted subject of history, and thus to see in the artwork an objectification of its essence.

In the distracted form of reception that the essay envisions as a revolutionary mode of consciousness, the masses—while they may fuse subjective and objective attitudes—can hardly claim to be the constituting subject of the film that they are, after all, only watching and not producing. To illustrate that this possible fusion of subjectivity and objectivity motivates not only the progressive form of the reception of art but also the progressive form of art's production, Benjamin turns to an example from communication rather than the visual arts. After asserting that "any man today can lay claim to being filmed" (an activity that emphasizes the person as object before the camera), Benjamin goes on to suggest that "this claim can best be elucidated by a comparative look at the historical situation of contemporary literature" (231). Here, Benjamin draws conclusions excluded from *The Storyteller* that suggest some of the implications of the new information age: "Today there is hardly a gainfully employed European who could not, in principle, find an opportunity to publish somewhere or other comments on his work, grievances, documentary reports, or that sort of thing. Thus, the distinction between author and public is about to lose its basic character. . . . At any moment the reader is ready to turn into a writer" (232). Idealists of the Internet and desktop publishing continue to harbor such hopes, but the point is that Benjamin, in order to articulate the utopian potential of the revolution in the reproducibility of art, turns away from the visual arts, which he has tended to explain with an "objectification" model of action, toward communication, an explicitly intersubjective activity.

It seems to me that the distinction between these two models plays an important part in the very different constructions of history in these two essays. The *Artwork* essay foresees in the age of mechanical reproduction the radical transfiguration of the work of art from a fetish, an alienated creation of the human spirit, into a process in the service of humanity. The nature of this transformation, as Benjamin describes it, will be a radical "politicization" that involves essentially eliminating the specificity of the artwork and reappropriating the alienated objects

for the sake of the subject.¹¹ Yet the only meaningful example of such a transfiguration is the conversion of the visual arts into something like information, which serves the subject by communicating its needs. In *The Storyteller*, the story originates as an act of communication, not of objectification, and after passing through a period of noncommunication (the novel), it returns to its original function of communication, albeit in a secularized form for the masses. The trajectory of *The Storyteller* differs from that of the *Artwork* essay in one other respect. In the latter, Benjamin asserts (perhaps against hope) that the changing nature of the work of art will lead to a revolutionary transformation of consciousness among the "public," and he exemplifies this in his account of an Internetlike communicative network. In *The Storyteller*, an essay dedicated to forms of communication, Benjamin recognizes that the claim to objectivity made by the new media may itself be a type of fetish: "Often [information] is no more exact than the intelligence of earlier centuries was. But while the latter was inclined to borrow from the miraculous, it is indispensable for information to sound plausible" (S 89). Benjamin's near-failure to recognize that the products of film and photography could be just as fetishized as the earlier forms of painting and poetry has been the source of the most persistent and obvious criticism of the *Artwork* essay—namely, that aura has not disappeared. Even if mechanical reproducibility destroys the aura of some works of art, it apparently maintains it for others. In fact, old movies, the very subjects of Benjamin's essay, seem almost to monopolize aura, creating it for themselves at the expense of the older works of art that they have "denaturalized." Whether the auratic quality of old movies depends on their distance in time or on some aspects of the technical revolution Benjamin described is too complicated a question to discuss here. However, I would suggest that Benjamin's dependence on a radical logic of defetishization contributed to his misplaced hope in the mechanical reproduction of art.

Benjamin begins with a situation where a subject (humanity) alienates itself by objectifying itself in the creation of the work of art, and whose only solution is the radical transformation of the objectified essence, its liquidation into pure subjectivity. Where he perceives a more fragmentary (but still collective) group as the source of stories (which represent transmissible experience rather than objectified essence), he

11. For a discussion of the various criticisms of Benjamin's allegedly totalitarian logic, see Starkman, "Unaesthetic States."

can imagine—or, given his theory of history, at least predict—a fulfilled, disenchanted version of a secular world, a this-worldly sort of utopia within which individuality and plurality do not imply alienation. I am suggesting that Benjamin's thinking relies on a tacit distinction between communication in language—an intersubjective, nonalienated activity—and artistic production—a form of objectifying, and therefore alienating, activity. My own distinctions in this essay have reproduced such an opposition, yet they clearly face a problem when confronting the questions posed by contemporary philosophies of language. Does not communication imply objectification and alienation, and even *depend* on it? Is it not possible to understand artistic production, and other forms of objectification, as variations of intersubjective activity? as types of language games? To which a further question, directed at understanding and evaluating the work of the Frankfurt School, must be added: if an intersubjective, communicative model of action replaces the objectifying model, how then can the project of redeeming nature, which cannot be considered simply as an intersubjective project, be kept alive? If the project of a defetishizing critique of culture is to be relevant, it must consider a number of key issues: the persistence of the fetish, which implies the utopian character of the goal of the subject's transparency to itself; the plurality of subjects, which implies the utopian character of the collective subject (humanity); the undecidability of objectifying and intersubjective modes of activity; and, especially, the decidedly limited nature of any foreseeable transformation by which the constituted subjects of history will be able to recognize themselves as its constituting subjects. To paraphrase Marx, but here with the emphasis on the often underestimated qualification: people make their own history, but not under conditions of their own choosing.