

Benjamin's aspect

Darko Štrajn

A simple example

Form makes a difference. Saying such a thing seems a truism, seems quite obvious, quite easily verifiable in the so-called world of objects, not necessarily only the aesthetic ones. In general terms, »everything« around us has a certain form, which can be seen or otherwise perceived. Our daily experience is full of semiconscious or even unconscious recognitions of many forms. In an urban surroundings »forms« are standing around us in the shape of more or less architectural erections, »forms« are driving in the streets as Alfa, BMW, VW... cars, people's faces are appearing in oval, long, rectangular forms, etc. Any particular form is perceived as being different, that is to say, as being identifiable among all other forms, which we can recognize in a certain »class of forms«. Cars can be identified as the vehicles on four wheels, made of steel, having windows, a steering wheel, etc. But a particular car can be recognized by its form, stored in our memory, as a car, which is different in comparison to all other types of cars. This rather simple example (which is only one among hundreds of possible empirical examples) reminds us that form in general has a prominent function in the world, decidedly marked by the production in series. Most certainly, the usage of different forms helps to prevent confusion, although not rarely it enhances it, because at the same time as meaning a difference, a particular form means a similarity as well. But when we talk about such practical general aspects concerning rather unproblematic, and simple aspects of the question of the form, we should not forget Walter Benjamin and his intervention in the field of the aesthetic discourse.

The mechanical reproduction

»The mass is a matrix from which all traditional behaviour toward works of art issues today in a new form. Quantity has been transmuted into quality. The greatly increased mass of participants has produced a change in the mode of participation. The fact that the new mode of participation first appeared in a disreputable form must not confuse the spectator.«¹ Now our simple examples do not look so simple. Taking into account every known Benjamin text, no doubt quite apprehensible within the framework of its argumentation, brings a certain aspect, concerning a border between objects deemed to be aesthetic

1. Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, *Illuminations*, Schocken Books, New York 1969, p.239

and objects we usually call just »things«. If, as Benjamin has said, the very notion of art gets thoroughly changed by the process of the mechanical reproduction, then we should presume that the world, being mirrored, expressed, articulated... in such an art, was some way changed. Maybe we can risk an assumption that this meaning goes without saying with Benjamin's insight. After all we are talking about a relatively short piece of writing, a glimpse of a genius – as much as one could agree with such an assertion, and yet we are talking about a quite schematic hypothesis, which is rather open in its meaning. Benjamin hasn't expressed any clear idea how the change in modes of the production of the art has really affected »the world«; his intention seems to be much other way around. True, he doesn't omit the question. Before his discourse unfolds, he makes it clear that his starting point was Marx's theory containing »prognostic value« concerning the abolition of capitalism. Although Benjamin himself held this starting point as a theoretical basis of his analysis of the changes of the cultural bias, brought by the development of »the capitalist« mode of production, it has been soon identified by his distinguished reader – namely Adorno – as the »undialectical side« of his approach. As it is precisely reported in Richard Wollin's book on Benjamin, Adorno's criticism has been aimed at all the weakest points in Benjamin's text,² which is not to say that Adorno grasped the full meaning of the article, which could be apprehended only few decades later. Or, in other words, Adorno has been most probably concerned with the aesthetic problems, on which he shared a common interest with Benjamin. And maybe it can be even proved that the »The work of art...« occupies a special place within the context of the whole fragmented Benjamin work. As much as this paper obviously isn't in accordance with Adorno's views, it isn't in accordance with, at least, Benjamin's style and approach in most of the rest of his discourse on aesthetic phenomena of his time.

However, taking into account Adorno's criticism helps a bit in our evaluation of those meanings of the Benjamin's text, which transcend the boundaries of the age in which it was written. Some political motives, the intellectual revolt against fascism most visible among them, clearly belong to historical determinations, which caused Benjamin's strong criticism of the idea of the autonomous work of art. Such a stand could be well understood within the logic of the text itself seeking to define artistic production as a kind of a »material force«, as an agency of the emancipation – not as a product of a

2. Dialectical though your essay may be – writes Adorno to Benjamin – it is not so in the case of the autonomous work of art itself; it disregards an elementary experience which becomes more evident to me every day in my own musical experience – that precisely the uttermost consistency in the pursuit of the technical laws of autonomous art changes this art and instead of rendering it taboo or fetish, brings it close to the state of freedom, of something that can be consciously produced and made. Cf. cit., Richard Wollin, *Walter Benjamin (An Aesthetic of Redemption)*, Columbia University Press, New York 1982.

solitary intellectual effort (which an autonomous work of art is usually supposed to be), but as a consciousness creating force. Benjamin's supposed over-reaction against *l'art pour l'art* is not based on a perception of the fascism as only a »brutal totalitarianism«. On the contrary, the problem is that the... »aesthetic concept of culture (Kulturbegriff) isn't... exterior to fascism, to his cult of the form as the power claim by the privileged Subject, who in his tendency already encircles the totality of the form-able material into the political sphere...«³ So the problem is that fascism makes use of the mass culture, made possible by mechanical reproduction, and Benjamin's intention is to show that, *in spite* of it, the dawn of the age of a new mode of production – the aesthetic products included – brings means of the emancipation through the »transformation of the superstructure«.

Benjamin's »clash with fascism« clearly helped the author to express some views, which could be considered along the lines of Adorno's criticism as a distortion or even as a bit crude reductionism. Nevertheless, a question could be put forward: how really important is this side of the text for its main points? The communication, personal as it may be, between Benjamin and Adorno, reflected two different points of view at the same traumatic problem. Adorno's approach led to problems of »enslaved subjectivity« of the Subject, who »lost his spontaneity«, and autonomy in a subjection to market forces, etc. Consequentially, Adorno's aesthetic theory became a brilliant illustration of the philosophy marked by the pessimism and even nostalgia. Although Benjamin's discourse hasn't been developed in such a wide scope, confined to fragments and not finished more or less short essays, quite often, as already mentioned above, treating rather disparate (and desperate) subjects, especially the »Work of Art...« – along with a few other probes in the same direction – opened some questions, which continue to bother us a long time after the author's unfortunate death.

The mystery of non-mystery

The manner in which the set of questions we have in mind was put forward in the »Work of Art...«, is somewhat schematic, but that is precisely the form of theoretical problems, which most often proves to be very productive for a further development.⁴ The »mystery« of the effectiveness of such a type of

3. Ansgar Hillach, »Benjamins Diagnose des Faschismus«, in *Walter Benjamin (Profane Erleuchtung und rettende Kritik)*, (ed. by N.W. Bolz and R. Faber), Koenigshausen+Neumann, Wuerzburg 1985, p. 257.

4. The same may be said, for example, about the Althusser's concept of the »ideological apparatuses of the state«, which caused a lot of controversy in the philosophical and political debate in the previous decade, but has been also repudiated many times over on the ground of its »schematicism«. But it looks like that especially those Althusser's critics, who tried to eradicate the concept itself, prolonged its life by causing many Althusser advocating counter-attacks. Very often they admitted that a dose of schematism is obvious in the Althusser's theory, but this cannot belittle the fact of »genious« of the scheme.

discourse isn't its depth, much less anything »hidden behind« its obvious meaning. Of course, what could be a »depth« of a »schematic« text, and how could anything be »hidden« under the surface of written words and sentences? So the »mystery« must be elsewhere. To put it simply: the mystery is that there is no mystery, the genius lies precisely in provoking a *deja vu* effect in the reader. Yes, everybody sees that the print, photography, cinema, etc., are the result of an intellectual (or the aesthetic) endeavour, but at the same time they are the products of machinery, the products of the process of mechanical reproduction, and everybody feels that a possibility to bring close many works of art from secluded places means a change in a way. But what way? This is the question, which »just anybody« couldn't feel important to answer. Well, all right, copies of the portrait of Mona Lisa suddenly became accessible and could decorate a wall in a no matter how humble a home, the great novels of French realism are accessible in cheap editions, etc., so what? This is the point, where Benjamin's intervention proved to be fruitful. Simple as his discovery may seem (though in the final analysis it isn't so simple at all), it happened as a finally uttered knowledge of the fact, which had been repressed by the dominant »class culture«. And probably it isn't just a coincidence that Benjamin named this »fact« vaguely the »aura«, which as a notion gets its meaning through the process of disappearing. The aura is, by virtue of »being something through non-existence«, in a full sense of the word, a dialectical notion, which marks a profound change in the symbolic order of things. Aesthetic objects certainly occupy a distinguished place in this order. But, as Benjamin found out, their »aura« secured a special sphere of the effectiveness of their symbolic power, they were a part of an order of the especially divided social imaginary, which continues to be active long after the mechanical reproduction has taken place. The disappearance of the aura through intrusion of the reproduction of the classic works of art, and even more significantly, through a development of the new forms of art, made possible by technical devices, brings a turn into the function of the art itself. Characteristically, the »new forms of art« were dismissed by privileged public as a cheap entertainment for the uneducated.

Let us now take a look into a problem of what happens with the form. The aesthetic views elaborated at the beginning of the modern age (notably within the German philosophy and the movement of romanticism) in general developed the concept of the form in accordance with a concept of the Subject. To put it briefly, subjectivity has been perceived as being inscribed into the difference, which is brought into existence by the form. Although Benjamin does not say so, subjectivity has been seen as a constituent of the aura, participating in the divine or even replacing it. Of course, the problem of the form, much easier explained in a case of visual arts, paintings and sculptures, than in a case of narrative arts, especially in a confrontation with

the problem of the content, in different solutions gave way to the construction of the certain rules providing paths to creating the sensation of beauty, etc. But all the time there was no doubt that the aesthetic creation belongs to nobler human activities, and that it is in possession of the »higher« truth, and there was no doubt that enjoyment of the preciousness of the works of art requires an adequate education, especially for the purpose of perceiving the sublime qualities of different forms. One may object, saying this is an oversimplification, but such an objection doesn't rule out the point, which is, that the form »formed« a separate reality of the works of art. With a gradual transformation of the original (and even revolutionary in their age) aesthetic theories into the ideology of art, the ideology of an »elite« public, the form »as such« became an object of obsession on both sides: the public and the artists. But when this point was reached, it was already obvious that all around emerge all sorts of »entertainment«, and that »unworthy« forms of decoration invade the streets in the metropolitan areas.

Orchid in the land of technology

Benjamin, using the terms of political economy in defining the superstructure, saw the decisive transformation, crucial in attaining a new form of society. It isn't so important as it may seem, that he understood this movement as a way to communism, which had been a lively idea at the time. Much more significant is his conceptualization of the consequences of the perceived properties of what had been going on. »The equipment-free aspect of reality here has become the height of artifice; the sight of immediate reality has become an orchid in the land of technology.«⁵ The results of such an assumption may be taken as sociological, but no less are they significant for the idea of the subjectivity as well. What we may say today is, that Benjamin was on the verge of discovering not only the disappearance of the aura, but the disappearance of the Subject itself, too. Again in Benjamin's »sociological« observation the change concerns the art as much as the »masses«: »To pry an object from its shell, to destroy its aura, is the mark of a perception whose 'sense of the universal equality of things' has increased to such a degree that it extracts it even from a unique object by means of reproduction. Thus is manifested in the field of perception what in the theoretical sphere is noticeable in the increasing importance of statistics. The adjustment of reality to the masses and of the masses to reality is a process of unlimited scope, as much for thinking as for perception.«⁶ What is seen here from the side of object is at the same time reflected by a change in the structure of subjectivity, whose reality must become split in a way as a contradiction of form against form (replacing the old contradiction between the form and the content). The instrument representing the new structure of reality – the movie camera –

5. Walter Benjamin, *Ibid.*, p. 233.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 223.

functions on the level of a new »science«, which ruins the idea of the Subject born to be autonomous: »The camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses.«⁷

Entering mass perception, the new forms of aesthetic *praxis* overturn the whole functioning of the arts in the social imaginary. Although discussing the problems of the form of the aesthetic objects, the products of »technological« arts included, may still be a »noble« task of aesthetic theory, there is no doubt that Benjamin's observations approve an assertion, that the aesthetic production interferes with the reproduction of the society in a much more decisive way than anybody ever dreamed of before the emergence of the mechanical reproduction. (Maybe today we could widen the number of synonymous adjectives, beside »mechanical«, i.e. »electronically«, »multimediatally«, etc.) The recognition of the form became in a broad sense simply functional, and everybody has been trained to recognize forms automatically by being exposed to almost continuous and often unwanted influence of images, sounds, signs, designs, etc. There is no way to sell new »contents« in approved forms. The public must be shocked into perceiving the difference, which is nothing else but the form.

Meanwhile the »subjectivity« turns into a set of »looks« prescribed by the »artists« in the make-up and fashion industries. Declining to be »formed« by them or at the same time not to be affected by images and sounds, now even pouring down from the sky, always neatly packed into a appropriate form, means only acquiring a different form. However, following this path would bring us to another more recent intellectual account of the world foreseen by Benjamin, namely to Christopher Lasch and his »Culture of Narcissism,« and his deciphering the world of forms as a »form of existence«.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 237.