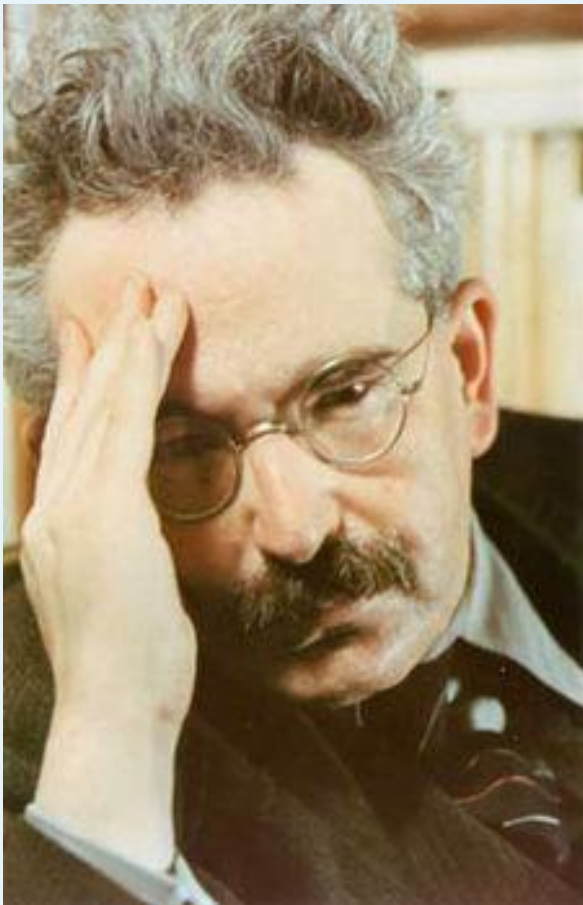


**The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction  
(Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit)  
By Walter Benjamin**



# Early Life of Walter Benjamin

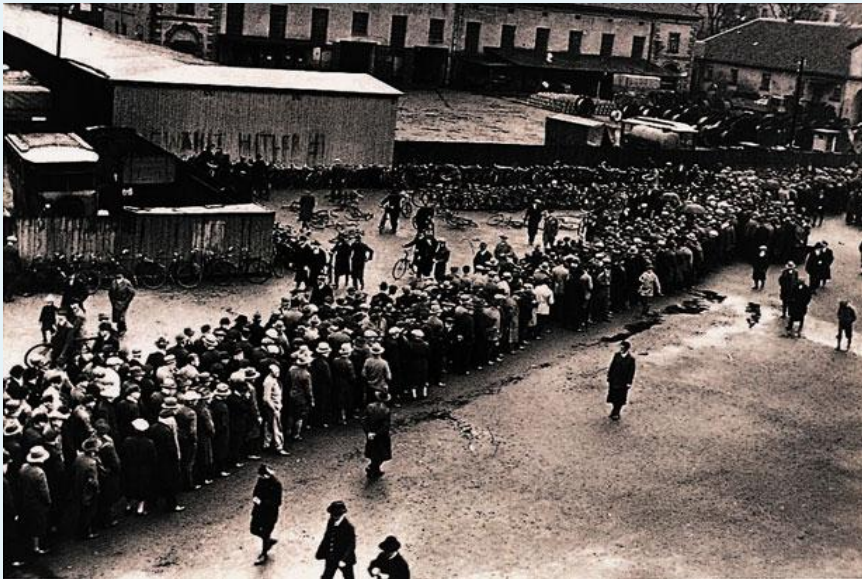
- Walter Bendix Schönflies was born the oldest of three children to a wealthy Jewish family in 1892 in Berlin
- Walter was enrolled in a boarding school in the Thuringian countryside for a brief period, before returning to the city and studying at the Kaiser Friedrich School.
- Studied philosophy at the Albert Ludwigs University of Freiburg, then the Humboldt University of Berlin. In 1917 transferred to the University of Bern, where he met his future wife.





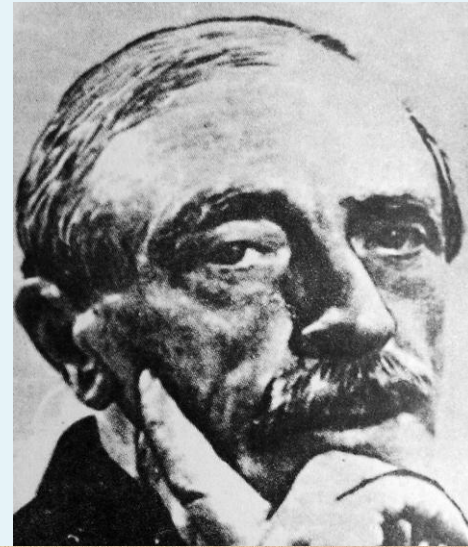
## Later Life and Death

- In the 1920s wrote a plethora of essays on a multitude of topics, as well as newspaper articles and novels.
- Facing rising discrimination against Jews with Adolf Hitler's rise to power, Walter left Germany in 1932
- Lived in Paris and published *The Work of Art in the Ages of Mechanical Reproduction*.
- In 1940, Walter Benjamin was trying to flee to the USA from Spain. He was caught and expect to be sent back to Germany by the French, committed suicide.



# Paul Valéry

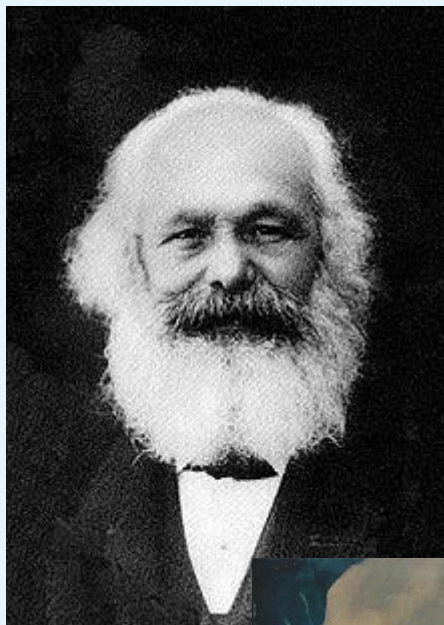
- The essay opens with a quote by Paul Valéry that prefaces the entire essay: art in the “modern” era is different from art produced in the time before.
- Therefore, in order to understand modern art fully, one must see it through a more contemporary lens. Just as art has evolved, so has the way we as viewers have to perceive it in order to understand it.





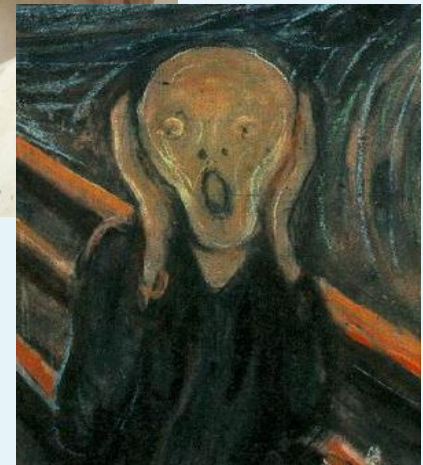
## Art in a Capitalistic Society

- According to Marx, capitalism is on a slippery slope, one that would end with the proletariat being utterly dominated by the upper class.
- In the end, the longer capitalism is around, the harder it is to be rid of it.
- Art can be representative of the societal conditions it was produced in.



# Art Before the Age of Mechanical Reproduction

- People have always been able to reproduce art created by the “masters”
- Reasons for reproduction include a pupil recreating a piece for practice, a “master” making a replica for distribution, or a third party making unjust gains.
- Most means of art reproduction were vastly inferior to more modern, mechanical methods.



# A New Era

- Technology increases at an exponentially faster rate.
- Methods of art reproduction are no exception. With the advent of things like print, engraving and etching, “art” was extremely easy to reproduce.





# The Modern Era

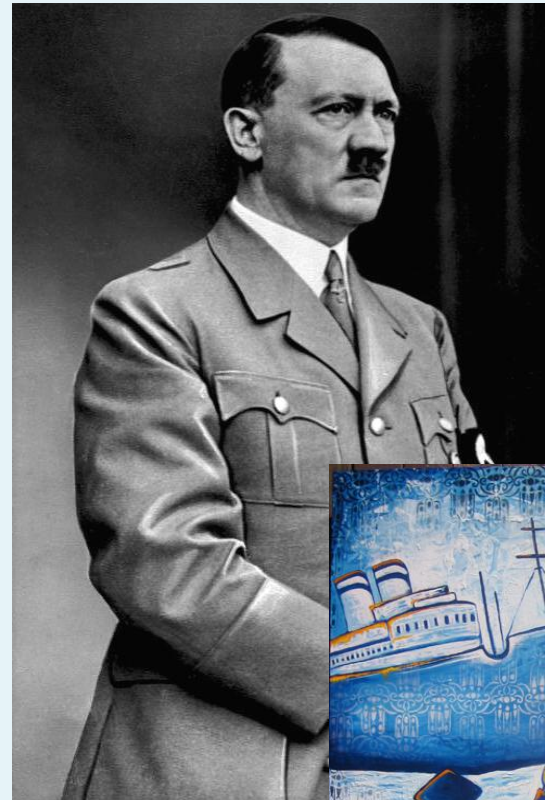
- In the age of mechanical reproduction, the attention to detail of reproductions is truly immense.
- While not available in his time, the advent of computer technology only furthers Walter's point.
- Furthermore, the ability to distribute these reproductions is simply unmatched by any previous era.





# Cultural and Historical Context of Art

- An often neglected but extremely vital part of fully appreciated or understanding a piece is being aware of the situation in which the part is produced. This includes the artist's roots, the culture at the time, among many other variables.



# Authenticity vs. Reproduction

- An issue that arises from the mass reproduction of pieces is the lack of authenticity or originality that the initial piece possesses.
- However similar the reproduction may be due to all the technological advances, it is still not truly the same piece
- What the new piece lacks is the “aura” that is present in an original piece.
- The aura is something intangible, yet very important to the art piece. It is the sum of the situation in which the art is produced and the lens through which it is viewed.





# The Evolving Purpose of Art

- Before the wide distribution of printed works, art was primarily meant for small private viewings.
- Before the mechanical reproduction age, paintings were only seen by a select few, and the audiences were predictable, and easily reachable

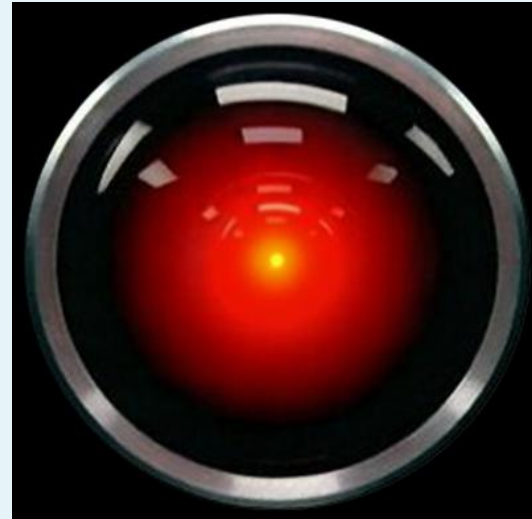
Now, with so many means of distribution available, the masses are all aware of famous pieces of art.

And yet, the masses generally lack the understanding of the aura behind a piece, making them unable to fully appreciate it.



# The Art of the Future

- In Walter's time time, film was the up and coming medium
- However, film differs from classical “art” forms because it lacks an aura that “art” possessed.
- There are things done behind the scenes in editing rooms, a second layer of changes.
- The audience of films is generally “the masses” as well.





# Video Games as Art?

- Just as film was working its way to recognition as an art form at the time, video games could follow a similar path.
- While it is a stretch to say all video games are art, the lengths to which some developers go to produce their games certainly merits some recognition. The degree to which some games have the potential to captivate their audience with their work is astounding.
- Just recently a game made by a small independent developer won a prestigious award in the video game community: for its ability to make the players truly *feel* for the characters.



## Impact

- Benjamin's views heavily influenced many thinkers of the Frankfurt School
- Walter Benjamin's ideas are made apparent in the 1992 series by John Berger who claimed that technological advances have made what was so special about art in the first place completely obsolete.

