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Theory of Distraction

Theory of distraction¹

Attempt to determine the effect of the work of art once its power of consecration has been eliminated

Parasitic existence of art as based on the sacred

In its concern with educational value [*Lehrwert*], "The Author as Producer" disregards consumer value [*Konsumwert*]²

It is in film that the work of art is most susceptible to becoming worn out
Fashion is an indispensable factor in the acceleration of the process of becoming worn out

The values of distraction should be defined with regard to film, just as the values of catharsis are defined with regard to tragedy

Distraction, like catharsis, should be conceived as a physiological phenomenon

Distraction and destruction [*word conjectured*] as the subjective and objective sides, respectively, of one and the same process

The relation of distraction to absorption must be examined³

The survival of artworks should be represented from the standpoint of their struggle for existence

Their true humanity consists in their unlimited adaptability

The criterion for judging the fruitfulness of their effect is the communicability of this effect

The educational value and the consumer value of art may converge in certain optimal cases (as in Brecht), but they don't generally coincide

The Greeks had only one form of (mechanical) reproduction: minting coins

Hence: eternal art

Just as the art of the Greeks was geared toward lasting, so the art of the present is geared toward becoming worn out

This may happen in two different ways: through consignment of the artwork to fashion or through the work's refunctioning in politics⁴

Reproducibility—distraction—politicization

Educational value and consumer value converge, thus making possible a new kind of learning

Art comes into contact with the commodity; the commodity comes into contact with art

Fragment written most likely in 1935–1936; unpublished in Benjamin's lifetime. *Gesammelte Schriften*, VII, 678–679. Translated by Howard Eiland.

Notes

This fragment is associated with the composition of the second version of "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" (1935–1936), in this volume.

1. See Section XVIII of the second version of "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" (1935–1936), in this volume. See also Section XV of the third version of the essay (1939), in Benjamin, *Selected Writings: Volume 4, 1938–1940* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), pp. 251–283. Benjamin's term for "distraction" is generally *Zerstreuung*, which in this context can also mean "entertainment." In a related fragment (*Gesammelte Schriften*, VII, 678), Benjamin writes: "The work of art undertakes to produce entertainment in a responsible manner."

2. See "The Author as Producer" (1934), Chapter 8 in this volume.

3. "Absorption" here translates *Einverleibung*, meaning more specifically "integration." Compare Benjamin's comments on reading as *Einverleibung* in his radio talk "Children's Literature," in Benjamin, *Selected Writings: Volume 2, 1927–1934* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 255–256.

4. "Refunctioning" translates *Unfunktionierung*, a term taken from Brecht. See "The Author as Producer" (1934), Chapter 8 in this volume.