The Mechanical Body and Perception of the Unperceivable

in the Avant-garde

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In his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility", Walter Benjamin focuses on the concept of the "technological reproducibility", which is crucial for his arguments in two ways. Firstly, the concept of "technological reproducibility" is crucial for his theory that the function of art is changing from an aesthetic one to a political one: Benjamin tried to show that art was going to stop being a privilege of the educated middle class (*Bildungsbürgertum*) and become something that could be enjoyed by the masses, including the proletariat, and something in which anyone could become involved through the process of its creation. Secondly, the concept of "technological reproducibility" is crucial also for his theory regarding the transformations in perception seen in the new stage of the arts: Benjamin tried to show that technologies were extending human perception. This argument is, in the history of media theory, one of the earliest testimonies of an acute discernment of the paradigm shift in perception resulting from the development of technologies. Benjamin believed that both of these two features were embodied, more clearly than by anything else, by film, as "works of art in the age of technological reproducibility".

The shift accompanying the development of "technological reproducibility" that Benjamin discerned in "film", and in "photography" as a precursor to film, quite closely overlaps the shift created by the avant-garde in the history of the arts. It is, thus, quite reasonable for Benjamin to refer to Dada when he discusses prominent features of film in his essay.

The excesses and crudities of art which thus result, particularly in periods of so-called decadence, actually emerge from the core of its richest historical energies. In recent years, Dadaism has abounded in such barbarisms. Only now is its impulse recognizable: *Dadaism attempted to produce with the means of painting (or literature) the effects which the public today seeks in film.*[1]

It is not a coincidence that film and the avant-garde both created decisive shifts in about the same period. Although film itself as a medium is not, of course, equivalent to the general concept of the avant-garde, the shift created by film and the one created by the avant-garde can be regarded as parallelly linked phenomena if we consider the fact that they both represents radical changes in the aesthetic and social function of art, as well as in the field of physical perception. The most significant affinities between these two shifts are, firstly, the body image connected with technologies, and, secondly, the tendency towards fragmentariness. A representation based on a fragmentary structure is something made possible by technology and something that creates a totally new way of perception. Film as a medium of "technological reproducibility" created a new framework for vision through the reconstruction of fragmented shots. In the case of the avant-garde, it might seem as if such features as the image of mechanical bodies and the tendency toward fragmentariness are not essential elements for the whole, although we can find some remarkable examples. However, the paradigm shift from the mimetic representation of the outer world to representation based on the subject, which is generally regarded as a shift created by the avant-garde in the history of art, represents a turning point in the development of human perception based on a *camera obscura* model, as is discussed in Jonathan Crary's study[2]. In this sense, we can say that the reorganization of subjectivity in the avant-garde is achieved by means of technologies, although technologies are not the only factor. We can also assume that the reorganization of the

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[1] Walter Benjamin. *Selected Writings*. Volume 4. 1938-1940. Edited by Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003, p. 266.
[2] Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the 19th Century*. The MIT Press, 1992.

outer world by the subject is a precondition for the tendency in the avant-garde toward abstraction and constructiveness.

At this very point, however, we can note that the avant-garde has a tendency that is clearly different from that of the "technological reproducibility" in film.

"Film", according to Benjamin, is a medium that aims at the ultimate reproduction of the world. As technological reproducibility develops, objects in the outer world are represented all the more precisely and faithfully. The advent of photography and film marks a crucial turning point in the development of technological reproducibility as regards the representation of the outer world. In the time when Benjamin lived, silent films and early talkies were the frontier elements of the highest technological reproducibility. In this context, in fact, Benjamin refers to a kind of illusion created by film, which he calls "the presentation of reality"[3]. If we theoretically think of the ultimate state of Benjamin's concept, beyond the technological limits of his time, we can imagine a sort of "virtual" reality from which you can no longer distinguish "real" reality.

Contrastingly, the major movements of the avant-garde aimed at breaking away from the faithful representation of the outer world and at the reorganization of the outer world by the subject.

In short, the development of technology primarily aims at achieving a perfect copy of the outer world, and yet, at the same time, it also promotes the reorganization of the subject, thus creating a kind of representation that differs from a representation based on an old and simple way of perception. In other words, both these two contrasting tendencies are created by radical shifts in technology.

What do these two contrasting tendencies derive from? It is important to note that both the shift created by the avant-garde and that created by technological reproducibility represent a shift in human perception—from one based on actual bodies to the one based on the technology of *camera obscura*.

According to Benjamin's theory, a breakthrough in perception is brought about by technologies based on a *camera obscura* model that aims at the reproduction of the outer world, such as

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[3] Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol.4, p. 264.

"photography" and "film. Here, the feature of fragmentariness also contributes to creating the illusion of a reproduced outer world. We can say that the ultimate state of such an illusion is the world of digitally produced virtual reality.

Contrastingly, in the case of the avant-garde, the same shift in technology and perception resulted in an opposing phenomenon, deconstructing the world based on a *camera obscura* model. The *camera obscura* model, thus, exhibits two contrasting tendencies: while it essentially aims at a perfect copy of the outer world and realizes a high virtual corporeality by means of technology, it also contains in itself a tendency to demolish the very concept of a "mimetic representation of the world" since its corporeality is mediated by technology. Photography and film, based on a *camera obscura* model, certainly aim at the precise visual reproduction of the outer world and, in that sense, they seem to reproduce direct visual experiences more faithfully than do, for example, landscapes on canvases. These new technologies, however, separate the vision from the corporeal unity of the senses and externalize it outside the body. It is this feature inherent in the *camera obscura* model that promotes the subjective reconstruction and abstraction of fragmented elements of the world. In other words, the reconstruction and abstraction of the world by a subject are a result of the segmentation of the corporeal unity created by the technology of the optical medium of "*camera obscura*".

Just as Jonathan Crary sees a shift in the *camera obscura* model in scientific and technological achievements in the first half of the 19th century, we can also recognize a starting point for such a segmentation of corporeal unity in, for instance, E. T. A. Hofmann's "The Sandman", with its central elements of telescopes, automaton, and an exaggerated consciousness of eyes. We can also go further back in time to find a starting point in "Molyneux's problem", the thought experiment referenced by John Locke, or in the more extreme version of that thought experiment proposed by Condillac. Such perception of segmented corporeal unity promotes the abstract reconstruction of the world, which is the opposite of the precise reproduction of the world. Such representation of the world, based on reconstruction and abstraction, cannot be understood within the old paradigm of

perception based on an old *camera obscura* model. That is why such originators of abstract art as Kandinsky, Mondrian, Klee, and Itten had to present their theoretical reflections on their art and explain the new paradigm of representation.

My hypothesis is that, although "film" and "the historical avant-garde" exhibit opposing directions regarding the representation of the world, they both represent a shift in perception toward "the perception of the unperceivable" or "the perception of the unrecognizable". I believe that this common feature is a fundamental element in both "film" and "the avant-garde".

This shift in perception derives from the simple fact that the *camera obscura* is a technology. When this technology carries the mimetic representation of the world to its extreme, it enhances corporeality, but at the same time, paradoxically, it also reduces corporeality because its visual experience is indirect and mediated by technology. In these contrasting phenomena, the "perception of the unperceivable" appears in different ways.

In the avant-garde, the "unperceivable" or the "unrecognizable" is one of the most prominent features. In the work of Dada, for example, which is the most extreme case, the "unperceivable" appears even as its own aim. When you cannot rightly perceive or recognize an avant-garde work, it means that you cannot position it in your traditional framework of perception and corporeality. In the field of visual art, we can find numerous examples of works that require a new framework to understand them.

In the field of literature, we can see that, in phonetic and optic poems, for example, optical and phonetic elements become dominant, and therefore the connections between words and meanings are demolished. We can also see that, in surrealism, for example, words do not describe existing "reality"; rather, they construct their own world by themselves. Here words are no longer used to indicate relationships or the logical structure of concrete objects in the "real" world— rather, they deconstruct the mimetic representation of "reality", breaking away from an old *camera obscura* model. We can also see that, even in cases in which the "real" outer world is referred to, the world is not represented mimetically; it is, rather, constructed through mosaic-like juxtapositions of

fragmented materials. In some cases, writing style itself become fragmentary: writers like Walter Benjamin and Robert Walser chose a micro-script writing style in order to reconstruct the world through fragments.

Contrastingly, in the case of "film", which is a medium characterized by its high "reproducibility", perception is based on the old framework of the *camera obscura* model, which aims at a mimetic representation of the world. In this sense, perception in "film" belongs within the traditional paradigm. The masses react positively to film because its traditional mode of representation makes it easy to understand, while they react negatively to avant-garde works of art, which are difficult to understand in the old framework of perception. In Benjamin's words, "the extremely backward attitude toward a Picasso painting changes into a highly progressive reaction to a Chaplin film."[4]

However, when Benjamin tries to shed light on the new mode of perception in "film" as a new technological medium, in order to emphasize its political possibilities and to reject, from a Marxist point of view, the values of the educated middle-class, he unintentionally becomes caught in the paradox of the *camera obscura* model—two opposing phenomena regarding corporeality. Emphasizing the fact that the representation in film is created by technology, Benjamin mentions both of the opposing phenomena by technology—the enhancement of traditional corporeality and detachment from traditional corporeality—without theorizing a distinction between the two.

In film, mimetic representation of the world enhances corporeality. Benjamin, of course, is aware that the representation of "reality" in film is a "secondary reality" created by technology[5]. He does not, however, regard filmic representation as "unreal" or "fake". He rather tries to focus his attention on its closeness to "reality" and points out that the high corporeality in filmic representation is produced by the interpenetrating relationship between technology and reality. Such "reality" reproduced by technology, of course, belongs within the traditional paradigm of representation.

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[4] Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, p. 264.
[5] "The illusory nature of film is of the second degree; it is the result of editing." Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, p. 263.

Benjamin is also aware of the transformation in perception created by technology, and he points out three significant aspects regarding experiences of new perception in film.

The first aspect is related to the well-known concept of "the optical unconscious"[6]. With this concept, Benjamin suggests that perception in film can correspond to the concept of "the unconscious" in Freud. In this analogy, the new corporeal experiences offered by film are related to a latent truth beneath the surface of consciousness. The technology of film enables us to perceive things that a real body cannot directly perceive. Here, I should add that, although Freud's concept of "the unconscious" was adopted by Surrealism, Benjamin does not mention the connection between "the optical unconscious" and Surrealism. In any case, use of the concept of "the optical unconscious" shows Benjamin's acute awareness of the shift in perception created by the technology of film—the shift toward "perception of unperceivable".

The second aspect is related to his concept of a "collective body". This concept also reflects his awareness of the shift in perception created by technology. Benjamin was strongly interested in the fact that a "collective body" mediated by technology emerges in film. To be precise, I should add that the term "collective body" appears not in his "artwork essay" but in his essay on Surrealism[7]. However, when he states in his artwork essay that film is a medium of "collective reception"[8], it is clear that he is also thinking of the arguments on the "collective body" presented in the essay on Surrealism.

With his concept of "collective reception", Benjamin suggests that the collective and simultaneous experiences of virtual corporeality in a closed space like cinema create a kind of "collective body". In today's cultural environment, the opportunity to experience such a "collective body" has nearly been lost.

In Benjamin's time, contrastingly, audiences actually shared corporeal experiences together with others in cinemas while watching films. It is important, I believe, to take into consideration such a difference when we conduct research on the shift in perception around this time. We should bear in

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[6] Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, p. 266.
[7] Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, p. 217. ("The collective is a body, too.")
[8] Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, p. 264.

mind that it is difficult for us to accurately grasp the historical discourses on perception of this time because we now have a different framework of perception.

The third aspect is related to the concept of "tactility". Although film is, of course, an optical medium, Benjamin interestingly stresses that it also has a tactile quality[9]. He tries to show that, while such old media as books and painting are strictly connected to optical perception, film rather offers tactile experiences instead. He gives two reasons for this argument. The first is that people feel a physical shock when they experience a new medium[10]. As Benjamin explains also in his essay on Baudelaire, using the term "shock effects", a new medium is usually first perceived as a physical shock. The second reason is related to the well-known dichotomy of "distraction" and "concentration" (*Zerstreuung und Sammlung*). According to his theory, while the "concentration" that books require is connected to "vision", elements of "distraction" in film are connected to "tactility". This argument is indirectly related to a series of discussions about Molyneux's problem concerning visual and tactile perception, just as McLuhan's argument is when he refers to the shift from "vision" to an "audile-tactile complex" in order to explain the paradigm shift from "the Gutenberg galaxy" to an "electronic culture".

In any case, it is important to note that Benjamin tries to explain tactile characteristics in film not within a theoretical framework but rather by focusing his attention on actual physical sensations that film creates. In his artwork essay, for example, he refers to "successive changes of scene and focus which have a *percussive effect* on the spectator"[11]. In our time, of course, the segmentation of time, space, and logic in the sequence of fragmentary shots no longer gives us a tactile shock. The same thing can be said also in regard to trains and bicycles, which are frequent subjects in historical avant-garde art (especially in Futurism and Russian avant-garde): the speed of a bicycle or a train no longer gives us the tactile shock that it did in the past.

Lastly, I would like to examine Benjamin's arguments on the avant-garde in order to see how he compares it with film and how he describes in them the shift in perception caused by film.

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[9] Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, p. 267, 268.
[10] Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, p. 267.
[11] Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, p. 267.

In his artwork essay, for example, he discusses Dadaism in comparison with film. Benjamin says that Dadaism rejects traditional concepts of art and brings about a new framework of sensibility, but it has a contradiction in that it relies on traditional media to express its radical ideas. The eccentric expressions of Dadaism, according to Benjamin, derive from this contradiction. He thinks that the same thing can be said about Cubism and Futurism as well. In a footnote in the artwork essay, he says: "Film proves useful in illuminating Cubism and Futurism, as well as Dadaism. Both appear as deficient attempts on the part of art to take into account the pervasive interpenetration of reality by the apparatus. Unlike film, these schools did not try to use the apparatus as such for the artistic representation of reality, but aimed at a sort of alloy of represented reality and represented apparatus."[12]

Here Benjamin describes those avant-garde movements as "deficient attempts on the part of art" (*mangelhafte Versuche der Kunst*) because, unlike film, they do not aim at the "artistic representation of reality". Although Benjamin recognizes the efforts of those avant-garde movements to create a new kind of art that reflects the shift in perception created by technology, he thinks that the avant-garde was going in a wrong direction. Here we can see the paradox regarding relationships between corporeality and technology in media: technology enhances virtual corporeality while it separates human beings from actual corporeality.

It is precisely because of this paradox that film and the avant-garde exhibit contrasting features, such as the pursuit of "virtual corporeality" and the "loss" of (actual) corporeality. Fragmentariness, which is a common feature in both film and the avant-garde, also takes different directions: in film it aims at mimetic representation while in the avant-garde it aims at abstraction. These contrasting tendencies are two sides of the same coin, and the shifts created by these contrasting tendencies are fundamentally of the same nature. I believe that it is important to examine further this paradox of technology in order to explore relationships between technology and perception.

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[12] Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, p. 281. (Footnote 43.)