

PART IV



History and Holism:
Teige and Benjamin

CHAPTER 7



Vanishing Points: The Liquidations of Aura

The Aura of Originality

The vanishing of the aura is Walter Benjamin's most celebrated postulate not only in his most celebrated essay, 'Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit' [The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility], henceforth the 'Work of Art essay', but indeed anywhere in his writings. Even stating this fact became long ago a mechanical gesture. Over forty years ago Werner Fuld claimed that 'it seems precisely this most inaccessible of Benjamin's ideas has entered the speech (although not the thinking) reproduced daily by culture mavens [*Kulturbeflissene*], as if Benjamin lived on in this single concept'.¹ The Work of Art essay has often been characterized as 'a scandal and a provocation', as overturning established aesthetic beliefs so radically as to achieve epochal status.² An influential history of German literature, for example, has described Benjamin's theses as 'terrifying', 'bordering on heresy', and as 'shred[ding] the fabric of the most cherished beliefs about art', and even unabashedly hostile commentators have felt compelled to pay 'homage [...] to the essay's originality'.³ Benjamin himself encourages such a view when, at the outset of the essay, he claims to provide 'new concepts for the theory of art' and, in a letter to his friend Werner Kraft, claimed to be 'the first to have discovered some fundamental principles of a materialist art theory'; elsewhere Benjamin expresses anxiety lest his ideas be stolen before he

1 Werner Fuld, 'Die Aura: Zur Geschichte eines Begriffes bei Benjamin', *Akzente*, 26 (1979), 352–70 (p. 353). See also Burkhardt Lindner, 'Benjamins Aurakonzeption: Anthropologie und Technik, Bild und Text', in *Walter Benjamin 1892–1940, zum 100. Geburtstag*, ed. by Uwe Steiner (Berne: Lang, 1992), pp. 217–48 (p. 217).

2 Michael W. Jennings, 'The Production, Reproduction, and Reception of the Work of Art', in Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, ed. by Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Michael Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), pp. 9–18 (p. 14).

3 Lindsay Waters, 'The Machine Takes Command', in *A New History of German Literature*, ed. by David E. Wellbery (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), pp. 790–95 (p. 791); Antoine Hennion and Bruno Latour, 'How to Make Mistakes on So Many Things at Once — and Become Famous for It', in *Mapping Benjamin: The Work of Art in the Digital Age*, ed. by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and Michael Marrinan (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), pp. 91–97 (p. 91).

has had the chance to publish them.⁴ The consensus regarding the importance and originality of Benjamin's account of the decline of aura has helped make the Work of Art essay 'probably the most frequently cited and most intensely debated essay in the history of the academic humanities of the twentieth century'.⁵

Nonetheless, the intense fascination generated by the Work of Art essay has engendered a continual re-forgetting of what should be an obvious fact: Benjamin's major theses are brilliantly formulated and occupy a crucial position in the larger edifice of his thought, but they are hardly original. The term 'aura' may be Benjamin's, but the idea of its vanishing is not. Both Benjamin's and later commentators' fixation on the originality of his conception of the decline of aura exemplify an ambition that Françoise Meltzer has described as a problematic obsession: 'the pursuit of originality, the fear of being robbed of a "new" idea, the drive to be first, even the work ethic itself are symptoms of a gendered theology of origin'.⁶ In place of strident claims for originality one might rather speculate that part of what has made the Work of Art essay a touchstone for debates on modern, postmodern, and contemporary aesthetics is the way Benjamin gave conceptual depth to claims that were becoming commonplace even when he completed the first version of the essay in late 1935. To acknowledge this is by no means to question the importance of Benjamin's text. But it should warn against uncritical identification of Benjamin's 'liquidationist claims' as the site of the essay's originality.⁷ Claims that modern society was eroding or 'liquidating' the aesthetic categories traditionally used to define art as a discrete and privileged practice had been raised forcefully over at least the decade and a half preceding Benjamin's text. The Work of Art essay should thus be read as responding to that discourse, rather than being its culmination, let alone inventing it.⁸

4 This phrase appears in all three extant German versions of the essay: see Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schwepenhäuser, 7 vols (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1991), first version: I, 432–69 (p. 435); third version: I, 471–508 (p. 473); and second version: VII, 350–84 (p. 350) (this edition henceforth 'GS'). An English translation of the second version, which I will cite throughout, is contained in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, ed. by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, 4 vols (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1996–2003), III, 101–22 (p. 102, translation modified) (this edition henceforth 'SW'). For the late October 1935 letter to Kraft, see GS, I, 984; translated in *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910–1940*, ed. by Gerschom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno, trans. by Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 516 (hereafter 'CWB'). The anxiety over intellectual property is expressed in a letter to Gerschom Scholem; see GS, I, 983; CWB, p. 514.

5 'Editors' Preface', in *Mapping Benjamin*, ed. by Gumbrecht and Marriman, pp. xiii–xvi (p. xiii).

6 Françoise Meltzer, *Hot Property: The Stakes and Claims of Literary Originality* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 7.

7 In her magisterial analysis of the Work of Art essay, Miriam Bratu Hansen also questions 'the liquidationist tenor of the essay [...] and, by implication, the facile reproduction of this tenor in the essay's standard reception'; see Miriam Bratu Hansen, *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012), pp. 83.

8 This only includes arguments connecting the decline of aura to developments in technological reproduction. If one also includes 'idealist' versions of the thesis then the tradition is far older: as Jürgen Habermas pointed out, 'Hegel already announced the loss of aura in his *Lectures on Aesthetics*'; Jürgen Habermas, 'Walter Benjamin: Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique', trans. by Frederick Lawrence, in *On Walter Benjamin: Critical Essays and Recollections*, ed. by Gary Smith

Few thinkers had pursued this liquidationist discourse as systematically as had Teige. We have already seen how central Teige's liquidationist discourse was to his thinking from the early 1920s onwards, and it anticipates in striking ways many of Benjamin's claims. Beyond that, Teige's thought also sheds light on the often fundamentally opposed positions Benjamin set forth in other texts written more or less simultaneously with the Work of Art essay — and which interpreters have frequently felt compelled to regard as expressing nostalgia for the auratic work of art. Tracing the extent of Benjamin's reliance upon established liquidationist claims in the Work of Art essay is not an exercise in debunking. Rather, such contextualization allows more precise identification of Benjamin's relation to this avant-garde discourse, and greater understanding of how what has often been deemed nostalgia might actually be veiled critique of some of the liquidationist theses the Work of Art essay is so often understood to herald.

Claims for the epoch-making status of the Work of Art essay usually emphasize its prognostic value: how the essay forecast developments extending well beyond Benjamin's own present. The focus on prognosis may seem natural — after all, Benjamin himself wrote of the 'prognostic requirements' of the essay.⁹ Nonetheless, broader contextualization provides grounds for understanding the main analytic gesture of the essay less as *prognosis* of the future and more as *diagnosis* of Benjamin's present. One can cite Benjamin in support of this approach as well: in letters to colleagues Benjamin repeatedly described the essay as forensic rather than forecast. The essay, he wrote, traced the 'signature' of its present and aspired to the 'precise establishment of the standpoint of the present'.¹⁰

Reading the Work of Art essay as a diagnostic rather than prognostic document brings several advantages. First, it avoids attributing to the essay a model of continuous temporal extension into the future that is inseparable from the concept of prognosis and that Benjamin systematically critiques as an ideology of 'progress' elsewhere in his work. Second, it allows a more nuanced formulation of how the essay combines celebratory and critical stances towards the developments it describes (often understood as revealing a fundamental contradiction or ambivalence in Benjamin's thought). Third, it avoids attributing to the essay primacy for liquidationist claims that were already well established at the time it was written. By championing claims that constituted the *Jüngstvergangene*, or recent past of avant-garde theory, the Work of Art essay acknowledges simultaneously the efficacy and the historical boundedness of the liquidationist position. In this and the following chapter, I will argue that Benjamin's formulations in the Work of Art essay are best understood as a form of what he elsewhere called a *Wunschbild*, or wish image, belonging to his own moment in history. Because the wish image of the vanishing aura characterizes the present in which the Work of Art essay is embedded, Benjamin himself cannot escape its seductive power. Yet as wish image

(Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), pp. 90–128 (p. 103).

⁹ Benjamin, 'Artwork', p. 101; 'Kunstwerk', p. 350.

¹⁰ Letters to Max Horkheimer of 16 October 1935 and to Werner Kraft of 27 December 1935, in *CWB*, pp. 509 and 517, respectively, translation modified; *GS*, 1, 983 and 984.

it also marks that moment as historically determined and thus inherently partial. The liquidationist claims that the essay is so often taken to originate, therefore, function less as materialist prognosis of a destination just visible on the horizon of the future, and more as diagnosis of a thought-pattern of Benjamin's present: a wish image that no thinker (or at least none unburdened by regressive ideals) could avoid, including Benjamin himself. This sense of the unavoidability of the wish image lends the Work of Art essay celebratory and critical vectors that are not contradictory but rather self-reflexive.

The interpretive perspective I propose here is neatly expressed in an image Benjamin used to describe the relation of the Work of Art essay to his other work, especially the vast historical construction undertaken in *The Arcades Project* (*Das Passagen-Werk*): 'The issue this time is to indicate the precise point in the present to which my historical construction will orient itself, as to its vanishing point'.¹¹ This image of the vanishing point is curious, for it presumes a counterintuitive relation between foreground and background. One does not look through the foreground of the present out into the background of the past (as a more traditional image of the historical gaze would posit) nor does one look through the foreground of the present out into the future emerging on the distant horizon (as the image of prognosis or progress would require). Rather, historical 'background' forms Benjamin's foreground; and the present, that which is temporally closest, is located in the background, at the vanishing point. If it is true that 'Benjamin thinks in images [*Bildern*]',¹² it is equally true that aspects of Benjamin's thought can be grasped mimetically through images that Benjamin himself invoked only fleetingly. The following discussion will explore the diagnosis of the wish image inherent in the Work of Art essay through the conceptual figure of the vanishing point: a point marking both a hypothetical state in which aura has vanished, as well as Benjamin's critical distance from the liquidationist thought-patterns of his own present.



Much has been written on Benjamin's sources for the concept of the aura. The term clearly echoes the discourse on 'human aura' in *fin-de-siècle* spiritual and spiritualist movements (such as theosophy and anthroposophy, which Benjamin abhorred), of early Romantic or older notions of the 'beautiful appearance' (*schöner Schein*), or even of medieval mysticism and the Kabbalah.¹³ Commentators have traced earlier

11 From the same letter to Max Horkheimer, in *CWB*, p. 509; *GS*, I, 983.

12 Ansgar Hillach, 'Dialektisches Bild', in *Benjamins Begriffe*, ed. by Michael Opitz and Erdmut Wizisla (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2000), pp. 186–229 (p. 189).

13 See, e.g., Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*, Ch. 4; Josef Fürnkäs, 'Aura', in *Benjamins Begriffe*, ed. by Opitz and Wizisla, pp. 95–146; Fuld, 'Die Aura'; Wolfgang Braungart, 'Walter Benjamin, Stefan George, und die Frühgeschichte des Begriffs der Aura', *Castrum Peregrini*, 46.230 (1997), 38–51; Gary Smith, 'A Genealogy of "Aura": Walter Benjamin's Idea of Beauty', in *Artifacts, Representations, and Social Practice: Essays for Marx Wartofsky*, ed. by Carol G. Gould and Robert S. Cohen (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1994), pp. 105–19; Marleen Stoessel, *Aura, das vergessene Menschliche: Zu Sprache und Erfahrung bei Walter Benjamin* (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1983); Birgit Recki, *Aura und Autonomie: Zur Subjektivität der Kunst bei Walter Benjamin und Theodor W. Adorno* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1988); Guy Hocquenghem and René Schérer, 'Formen und Metamorphosen der Aura', in

appearances of the concept in Benjamin's work from the 1920s.¹⁴ Benjamin's particular use of the concept 'aura' thus emerges from a long-standing theological tradition that gives the term an immediate ring, an intuitive clarity. This might suggest that, at least in part, the originality of Benjamin's essay lies less in the concept of aura itself than in his application of the term to aesthetics and in his claim about its vanishing under modern technological conditions.¹⁵

Yet even here precursors are evident. For one thing, Benjamin 'had happily stolen' on a broad level from Romantic and post-Romantic nostalgic discourses on lost aesthetic harmony; indeed it has even been suggested that Benjamin was specifically influenced by conservative critiques of mechanized culture during the First World War.¹⁶ Benjamin's essay, however, is far less pessimistic about cultural change under modernity than such sources. Thus it is rather the interwar avant-garde movements such as Dada, Constructivism, and Surrealism, with their exploration and celebration of the non-auratic tendencies of the modern work of art, that appear more plausible an influence on Benjamin.¹⁷ These movements represented various forms of 'attack on [...] the very notion of art as an institution' in an attempt to 'shed the aesthetic construction of art'.¹⁸ Benjamin himself described Dada in the essay as a major precursor for the idea of the withering of aesthetic aura due to its attempt to create effects that would be fully achieved only later

Das Schwinden der Sinne, ed. by Dietmar Kamper and Christoph Wulf (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1984), pp. 75–86; and Hans Robert Jauß, 'Spur und Aura: Bemerkungen zu Walter Benjamins "Passagen-Werk"', in *Studien zur Epochenwandel der ästhetischen Moderne* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp), pp. 189–215.

14 The most important are 'Little History of Photography' (*SW*, II, 507–28; 'Kleine Geschichte der Photographie', *GS*, II, 368–85) and the report on hashish ('Hashish, Beginning of March 1930', *SW*, II, 327–30; 'Haschisch Anfang März 1930', *GS*, VI, 587–91).

15 Hansen, however, argues that the 'narrowly aesthetic understanding of aura' has impoverished the concept, and that only attention to the wider resonance of the term allows understanding the role of the term in Benjamin's theory of modern experience (*Cinema and Experience*, p. 104).

16 Robert Kaufman, 'Aura, Still', in *Walter Benjamin and Art*, ed. by Andrew Benjamin (London: Continuum, 2005), pp. 121–47 (p. 122). Arnd Bohm has argued that an early essay in *Kulturkritik* by Adolf Behne influenced Benjamin; see Arnd Bohm, 'Artful Reproduction: Benjamin's Appropriation of Adolf Behne's "Das reproduktive Zeitalter" in the *Kunstwerk-Essay*', *The Germanic Review*, 68 (1993), 146–55.

17 In Petr Málek's words, the 'epoch-making importance [of the Work of Art essay] should not [...] obscure the fact that the problem of the mechanical/mass (re)production of a work of art, while grasped here in all its complexity and contradictions, had occupied the minds of avant-garde artists and theorists ever since the 1910s'; Petr Málek, 'Mass (re)production', in *A Glossary of Catchwords of the Czech Avant-Garde: Conceptions of Aesthetics and the Changing Faces of Art 1908–1958*, ed. by Petr A. Bílek, Josef Vojvodík and Jan Wiendl, trans. by David Short (Prague: Faculty of Arts, Charles University, 2011), pp. 263–82 (p. 264). See also Krzysztof Ziarek, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Electronic Mutability', in *Walter Benjamin and Art*, ed. by Andrew Benjamin, pp. 209–25; Dietrich Scheunemann, 'On Photography and Painting: Prolegomena to a New Theory of the Avant-Garde', in *European Avant-Garde: New Perspectives*, ed. by Dietrich Scheunemann (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), 15–48 (p. 26); John McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 160–61; Michael Müller, *Architektur und Avantgarde: ein vergessenes Projekt der Moderne?* (Frankfurt a.M.: Syndikat, 1984), pp. 98–147; as well as the references in notes 20, 21 and 24 below.

18 Ziarek, 'The Work of Art', p. 212.

through the new medium of film. But if Dada intuitively anticipated the ‘ruthless annihilation of the aura’, other avant-garde innovators not discussed in the *Work of Art* essay enacted quite consciously much of what that text analyses.¹⁹ In particular, many figures associated with International Constructivism adhered to the ideal of, and produced radical strategies for carrying out, non-auratic cultural production.²⁰ A telling example is the pair of ‘telephone pictures’ László Moholy-Nagy produced in 1922, titled ‘EM 1’ and ‘EM 2’. To make these works Moholy-Nagy simply gave instructions to a sign painter over the telephone, specifying coordinates and tones of colour fields, which were then printed in enamel on a steel sheet as if on a piece of graph paper. The elimination of authorial intervention, the anti-auratic nature, and the immanence of technological reproducibility to this procedure are clear.²¹

Benjamin’s theory of the decline of auratic art thus took fundamental inspiration from the waves of revolt against aesthetic autonomy produced by the historical avant-garde movements before, during and immediately following the First World War. While the importance of these precedents is conspicuous, commentators have rarely noted the time-lag between the precedent and Benjamin’s essay itself.²² Yet given that Benjamin’s account of the decline of aura as a result of technological reproducibility has been traced back to sources from the early 1920s or mid-1910s (if not earlier), it is clear that the originality of Benjamin’s claims in 1935 cannot lie in the liquidationist moments of the essay, as is so often maintained. Attempts to deepen our understanding of Benjamin’s interest during the mid-1920s in the European avant-garde, and its effect on the shape of his work, offer some clarification here, since they reveal that Benjamin was himself active (albeit

19 Benjamin, *SW*, III, 119; *GS*, VII, 379.

20 Frederic J. Schwartz writes that ‘ideas of the kind central to the *Artwork* essay’s distracted, productive expert were clearly quite current already in the 1920s among a certain group of artists’; Frederic J. Schwartz, ‘The Eye of the Expert: Walter Benjamin and the Avant-Garde’, *Art History*, 24 (2001), 401–44 (p. 412). And in Eckhardt Köhn’s words, ‘the theme Benjamin takes up of the technical reproduction of works of art is an old theme of Constructivism’; Eckhardt Köhn, ‘“Nichts gegen die Illustrierte!”: Benjamin, der Berliner Konstruktivismus, und das avantgardistische Objekt’, in *Schrift Bilder Denken: Walter Benjamin und die Künste*, ed. by Detlev Schöttker (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2004), pp. 48–69 (p. 64).

21 Krisztina Passuth claims that these telephone pictures ‘obviously provided inspiration for Walter Benjamin’s [*Work of Art*] essay dating from a slightly later period’; Passuth, *Moholy-Nagy* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1985), p. 33. See also Schwartz, ‘The Eye of the Expert’, p. 428. Manfredo Tafuri, without discussing the telephone pictures, associates Moholy-Nagy’s ‘technological utopia’ with Benjamin’s *Work of Art* essay; see Tafuri, *The Sphere and the Labyrinth: Avant-Gardes and Architecture from Piranesi to the 1970s*, trans. by Pellegrino d’Acierno and Robert Connolly (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), pp. 142–43. Moholy-Nagy’s 1922 essay on ‘Production-Reproduction’ also foreshadows elements of both the *Work of Art* essay and Benjamin’s ‘The Author as Producer’ (1935); Krisztina Passuth’s translation of this essay is contained in *Between Worlds: A Sourcebook of Central European Avant-Gardes, 1910–1930*, ed. by Timothy O. Benson and Éva Forgács (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), pp. 454–55.

22 Peter Bürger’s classic *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. by Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) set an example for discussing Benjamin in the context of avant-garde movements such as Dada without reflecting on the time-lag between them. Ziarek (pp. 211–14) represents a more recent example. Passuth also glosses over the thirteen-year gap between Moholy-Nagy’s telephone pictures and the *Work of Art* essay (see previous note).

peripherally) in some of the movements that inspired his later essay.²³ More recent scholarship has focused attention, for example, on Benjamin's contacts with the G-Group in Berlin, on his publications in the avant-garde revue *110*, and on his incorporation of avant-garde techniques into works like *Einbahnstrasse* [*One-Way Street*].²⁴ Yet the question remains regarding the belatedness of Benjamin's theory of the decline of aura.²⁵

Benjamin himself proposes a resolution. He implies that his reflections in the *Work of Art* essay represent a qualitatively different phase from the earlier avant-garde movements. While Dada may have anticipated the developments described in his essay, it did so largely in ignorance of the forces to which it was responding. Dada enacted one of the first overt manifestations of the decline of aura, but — like

23 This interest may originate even earlier since, according to Gershom Scholem, Benjamin was neighbour to and met with Hugo Ball and Emmy Hennings in Berne in 1917–19; see Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: Die Geschichte einer Freundschaft* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1975), p. 101. As Detlev Schöttker points out, this early contact with Zurich Dadaists would likely have made Benjamin receptive to the Dada movement emerging in Berlin on his return, and consequently to the Berlin Dadaists' propagation of Russian and International Constructivism; see Schöttker, *Konstruktiver Fragmentarismus: Form und Rezeption der Schriften Walter Benjamins* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1999), pp. 152–53 and 159. This early (and short-lived) alliance between Dada and Constructivism culminated in the International Congress of Constructivists and Dadaists in September 1922 in Weimar.

24 See in particular the editors' introduction in *G: An Avant-Garde Journal of Art, Architecture, Design and Film, 1923–1926*, ed. by Detlef Mertins and Michael W. Jennings (London: Tate, in association with the Getty Research Institute, 2010), pp. 3–20 (esp. pp. 8 and 16); Frederic J. Schwartz, *Blind Spots: Critical Theory and the History of Art in Twentieth-Century Germany* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), Ch. 2, esp. pp. 39–51; Michael Jennings, 'Walter Benjamin and the European Avant-Garde', in *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*, ed. by David S. Ferris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 18–34; Köhn, "'Nichts gegen die Illustrierte!"; Schwartz, 'The Eye of the Expert'; Schöttker, *Konstruktiver Fragmentarismus*, esp. pp. 156–72; Detlev Schöttker, 'Reduktion und Montage: Benjamin, Brecht, und die konstruktivistische Avantgarde', in *global benjamin 2*, ed. by Klaus Garber and Ludger Rehm (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1999), pp. 745–73 (esp. pp. 750–51).

25 Hansen argues that Benjamin practised a 'tactical belatedness' by reaching back to a moment of unrealized potential before the mastery of false auratic culture by Fascism and the 'surrendering [of] important Marxist positions' by the Popular Front: 'It is because Benjamin was so acutely aware of the politically and aesthetically retrograde and dangerous uses of the technological media [...] that he resumed the perspective of the 1920s avantgarde' (*Cinema and Experience*, pp. 87, 77, and 88). This may be true, but underplays what I will argue is a critical re-evaluation implicit in Benjamin's return to this earlier moment. Maria Gough also discusses 'Benjamin's belatedness' in 'Paris, Capital of the Soviet Avant-Garde', *October*, 101 (2002), 53–83 (esp. pp. 76–83), and in turn cites Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), p. 275, note 4. Gough's discussion, however, pertains to 'The Author as Producer' and addresses the belatedness question through historical contextualization specific to that essay. The *Work of Art* essay's belatedness as film theory has been noted: Eva Geulen writes that 'Benjamin's text arrives relatively late in the history of the theory of film' ('Under Construction: Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"', in *Benjamin's Ghosts: Interventions in Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory*, ed. by Gerhard Richter (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), pp. 121–41 (p. 122)); and Lutz Koepnick points out that Benjamin's formulations are 'curiously out of synch with the developments of film technology' (specifically the rise of the sound picture) (*Walter Benjamin and the Aesthetics of Power* (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), p. 143).

all true action — this occurred spontaneously and, as it were, blindly in the heat of the moment. By contrast, Benjamin implies, his *Work of Art* essay represents the intellectual mastery of that originary moment: a phase of reflection that became possible ‘only now’, once the incipient historical vector to which Dada responded revealed its true direction through the development of film as a medium.²⁶ Benjamin states that Dada’s prescient aspirations ‘in the form described here are not, of course, conscious ones.’²⁷ The *Work of Art* essay, therefore, represents the coming to consciousness of what, in Dada and other historical avant-garde movements, constituted an unconscious, instinctively felt response to changes in relations of production. Such a scheme of originary action versus conscious reflection relativizes Benjamin’s debts to the historical avant-garde by attributing primacy to him at least in theoretical elaboration. This scheme may well represent an unspoken academic consensus on the avant-garde precedents for the *Work of Art* essay.²⁸ Yet if one pauses to examine just how far the theoretical or reflective phase of the avant-garde attack on aesthetic autonomy had in fact reached by the early 1920s, then even this scheme appears shaky.

This is where Teige acquires particular relevance. While Teige’s texts neither attain nor aspire to the philosophical heft of Benjamin’s, Teige’s theoretical writings from the early 1920s onwards anticipated many of the central claims of Benjamin’s *Work of Art* essay. The point of presenting Teige in this context is certainly not to claim that Benjamin was scooped by fourteen years or so, and thus to transfer the aureole of originality from a canonical to a lesser-known figure. Teige himself made no claim to originality. He saw himself as a discursive analyst, synthesizer, and propagator of international trends that were already widespread by the early 1920s, freely adopting ideas and slogans from other figures (for example from Soviet Constructivists active in Berlin such as El Lissitzky and Ilya Ehrenburg, who themselves were transmitting and transforming currents from Moscow). That Teige felt his major claims were becoming widely established (at least among ‘progressive’ figures), however, is precisely the point. Accordingly, the following section of this chapter will examine several of Teige’s early texts in order to recover more of the conceptual field of early International Constructivism and show that many of the most famous claims in the *Work of Art* essay appear (albeit in less resonant form) in Teige’s texts of the early and mid-1920s. Chapter Eight will then examine where Benjamin’s thought departs from the liquidationist line put forward by Teige, drawing conclusions for interpreting the *Work of Art* essay.

26 Benjamin, ‘Artwork’, p. 101; ‘Kunstwerk’, p. 350.

27 Benjamin, ‘Artwork’, p. 118; ‘Kunstwerk’, p. 379; translation modified.

28 Andreas Huyssen’s influential account accepts Benjamin’s own explanation that ‘it took much longer for the production relations of capitalist society to make an impact on the superstructure than it took them to prevail at the basis, so much longer that they could only be analyzed in the 1930s’; Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 153.

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There is no evidence that Benjamin and Teige knew, let alone engaged with, each other's work. The closest their names seem to have come during their lifetimes was in the pages of the short-lived avant-garde journal *G*. Hans Richter, the driving force behind the journal, wrote a brief gloss on Prague, Teige, and Devětsil's breakthrough anthology *Život II* ('I know of no illustrated book that is more abreast of its time', wrote Richter) which appeared on the page directly preceding Benjamin's translation of a short essay on photography by Tristan Tzara.²⁹ Although there is no evidence of direct contact, Benjamin and Teige did share a constellation of intellectual orientation points and sources of inspiration. Moholy-Nagy (active for a time in the *G*-Group and then in the journal *ito*) went on to become a central figure in the Bauhaus after 1923. As we have seen, not only did Teige observe developments in the Bauhaus closely, but when Teige's friend Hannes Meyer became director in 1928 Teige was among the guest lecturers whom Meyer soon invited to the Bauhaus to help cultivate this new, sober orientation — the logical positivists Rudolf Carnap, Herbert Feigl, and Hans Reichenbach were also among the better-known guests — and as external *Dozent* Teige delivered a lecture cycle in Dessau in early 1930 on the sociology of architecture.³⁰ A book by Teige entitled *Tschechische Kunst* never materialized but was part of the original publication plan that Moholy-Nagy and Walter Gropius drew up for the series of 'Bauhausbücher' in the mid-1920s, which included titles by figures such as Kandinsky, van Doesburg, Malevich, and Mondrian, as well as Moholy-Nagy's important book *Malerei, Photographie, Film* (1925).³¹ Benjamin was fascinated not only by the Bauhaus but also by the modernist architectural theories of Siegfried Giedion and Adolf Behne, as well as by the ideal of glass architecture as described by the science fiction author Paul Scheerbarth (1863–1915).³² Teige's own work on architectural theory was more austere than the

29 See *G*, ed. by Martins and Jennings, pp. 140–41.

30 Teige's course on material and technical innovations in contemporary literature, poetry and typography, planned for the 1930 autumn semester, did not take place due to Meyer's forced resignation. On Teige and Meyer, see Chapter One, p. 42. On the philosophers' visits to Dessau, see Peter Galison, 'Aufbau/Bauhaus: Logical Positivism and Architectural Modernism', *Critical Inquiry*, 16 (1990), 709–52 (pp. 718–20).

31 On Teige's planned contribution to the 'Bauhausbücher', see Passuth, *Moholy-Nagy*, p. 43. Benjamin quoted Moholy-Nagy's pronouncements on photography at some length in his 'Little History of Photography' (pp. 523 and 527; 'Kleine Geschichte der Photographie', pp. 382 and, unattributed, p. 385). See also Brigid Doherty, 'Photography, Typography, and the Modernization of Reading', in *A New History of German Literature*, pp. 733–38 (esp. pp. 733–34); Frederic Schwartz, 'The Eye of the Expert', p. 403; and Eleanor M. Hight, *Picturing Modernism: Moholy-Nagy and Photography in Weimar Germany* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), p. 3.

32 See, e.g., Heinz Brüggeman, 'Walter Benjamin und Siegfried Giedion oder die Wege der Modernität', in *global benjamin 2*, ed. by Garber and Rehm, pp. 717–44; Hilde Heynen, *Architecture and Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), pp. 103–19; Tyrus Miller, "'Glass Before its Time, Premature Iron': Architecture, Temporality and Dream in Benjamin's *Arcades Project*", in *Walter Benjamin and 'The Arcades Project'*, ed. by Beatrice Hanssen (London: Continuum, 2006), pp. 240–58; Detlef Mertins, 'The Enticing and Threatening Face of Prehistory: Walter Benjamin and the Utopia of Glass', in *Assemblage*, 29 (1996), 7–23; Pierre Missac, *Walter Benjamin's Passages*, trans. by Shierry Weber Nicholson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), Ch. 6; McCole, *Walter Benjamin and*

version of the avant-garde discourse that interested Benjamin (in particular Teige would have had little sympathy for Benjamin's interest in Scheerbart), but there is a more specific connection here as well: as Jean-Louis Cohen has described, Teige maintained a significant correspondence with both Giedion and, in particular, Behne.³³ Finally, both had to work through a period of initial scepticism before becoming favourably disposed towards Surrealism. Thus Benjamin and Teige shared on the one hand an interest in architectural functionalism and its broader impact through the various cultural inflections of Constructivism, and on the other hand an interest in Surrealism that is initially hesitant yet increasingly powerful as the 1920s drew to a close.

While these scattered intellectual analogies may suggest no more than a general milieu of shared concerns, examination of Teige's early texts reveals more specific parallels. In 1925 Teige published a major essay called 'Constructivism and the Liquidation of "Art"'. The very title reveals Teige's interest in identifying the concerns of International Constructivism with what Benjamin in the *Work of Art* essay would call the 'the liquidation of the value of tradition in the cultural heritage'.³⁴ Teige's description of a contemporary liquidation of art made no claim to originality but merely reflected theoretically on what he saw enacted by avant-garde circles in Moscow, Berlin, and elsewhere. He did, however, perceive an epochal shift in how culture was being produced: 'Constructivism cannot signify for us some temporary aesthetic and artistic fashion [... It is] an international, all-encompassing movement [...], a springboard for the new culture and civilization'.³⁵ The primary characteristic of this emerging era, Teige claimed, is that it transforms the category of art so radically that the very word becomes practically unusable. Teige put the word 'art' in scare quotes in the title of his essay and emphasized that the term must not be understood in its standard sense: 'If today we still use and will continue to use the word *art* as a terminological aid, one must note that it does not signify sacred and exalted Art with a capital A [...] that the modern era has unseated from its throne'.³⁶ Disparaging the quasi-religious rhetoric he felt usually accompanied aesthetic discourse, Teige described Constructivism as

Antinomies of Tradition, pp. 184–85 and 229–30; and Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), pp. 124–31.

33 Cohen, 'Introduction', in Teige, *Modern Architecture in Czechoslovakia*, trans. by Irena Žantovská-Murray and David Britt (Los Angeles, CA: Getty Research Institute, 2000), pp. 1–55 (pp. 27, 34, and 44). See also Rostislav Švácha, 'Before and After the Mundaneum: Teige as Theoretician of the Architectural Avant-Garde'; Eric Dluhosch, 'Teige's Minimum Dwelling as a Critique of Modern Architecture'; and Klaus Spechtenhauser and Daniel Weiss, 'Karel Teige and the CIAM: The History of a Troubled Relationship', all in *Karel Teige, 1900–1951: L'Enfant Terrible of the Czech Modernist Avant-Garde*, ed. by Eric Dluhosch and Rostislav Švácha (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), pp. 106–39, 140–93, and 216–55, respectively.

34 Benjamin, 'Artwork', p. 104; 'Kunstwerk', p. 354.

35 Karel Teige, 'Constructivism and the Liquidation of "Art"', in Karel Teige, *Modern Architecture in Czechoslovakia*, trans. by Irena Žantovská-Murray and David Britt (Los Angeles, CA: Getty Research Institute, 2000), pp. 331–40 (p. 331); Karel Teige, 'Konstruktivismus a likvidace "umění"', in Teige, *Výbor*, I, 129–43 (p. 129).

36 Teige, 'Constructivism and the Liquidation of "Art"', p. 331, translation modified; Teige, 'Konstruktivismus a likvidace "umění"', p. 130.

the liberation of art from theological functions and its emergence from the clouds of cultic veneration. He wrote: ‘We assign art no sacral or cultic sublimity, we do not surround it with the smoke of holy incense’.³⁷ The liquidation of art, therefore, returns it to solid ground: spectral images and holy haze give way to tangible, functional products. Several years earlier Teige had invoked Ehrenburg’s formulation that ‘the new art is not art’, but in this essay he offered a redemptive re-definition of the term: ‘For us the word “art” [umění] originates in the verb “to be able” [umětí] and its product is an ability [umělost], an artefact. [...] Art is simply a way of using particular means in a particular function, and both the function and the means are more or less variable entities’.³⁸ Constructivism, in short, made art once again useful — a tool to be grasped and applied towards the improvement of everyday life. Teige thus invoked classic Marxist rhetoric for de-bunking aesthetic fetishism: Constructivism extracts the rational kernel from the mystical shell. It is not difficult to see in Teige’s image of what Constructivism liquidates — the cultic cloud of ‘holy incense’ keeping traditional works of art at reverential remove — the hazy outline of Benjamin’s notion of aura.

The transformation of art that drove Teige to his etymological reinvention of the term — which was in fact more a return to the Ancient Greek meaning of *technē*, combining the senses of ‘art’, ‘skill’, ‘technique’, and ‘craft’ — was fundamentally related to technological developments and, above all, to technological reproducibility. In 1922 he wrote in one of his first major essays: ‘Painting is not religion [...] it is primarily a craft [řemeslem]. And as a craft it cannot ignore the impact of mechanical reproduction. It may be assumed that some day in an egalitarian socialist society pictures will be duplicated [rozmnožovány] by machine; this is already occurring partially through reproductions, which, more than originals, mediate the artistic-cultural relations of today’.³⁹ This passage — practically simultaneous with Moholy-Nagy’s telephone pictures — retains in part a traditional vocabulary of artistic production in its understanding of mechanical reproduction as a craftsman’s tool. But the conception of mechanical reproduction quickly proved stronger than such remnants. Less than a year later, in his essay ‘Malířství a poesie’ [Painting and Poesie] introducing the picture-poem (*obrazová báseň*), all references to art as handicraft disappeared, as if chased away by the technical requirements and innovative possibilities of this experimental genre:

Sooner or later this fusion [of traditional genres in the picture-poem] is likely to bring about the *liquidation* (even if gradual) of traditional methods of painting and poetry. *Picture-poems completely conform to contemporary requirements.* Mechanical reproduction allows pictures to take *book form*. [...] Mechanical reproduction will bring about the popularization [zlidovění] of art securely and on a mass scale. The *press* [Tisk], not museums or exhibitions, mediates between

37 Teige, ‘Constructivism and the Liquidation of “Art”’, p. 332, translation modified; Teige, ‘Konstruktivismus a likvidace “umění”’, p. 130.

38 Teige, ‘Constructivism and the Liquidation of “Art”’, p. 332, Teige’s emphases in original; Teige, ‘Konstruktivismus a likvidace “umění”’, p. 130.

39 Karel Teige, ‘Umění dnes a zítra’ [Art Today and Tomorrow], in *Revoluční sborník Devětsil*, ed. by Jaroslav Seifert (Prague: Večernice, 1922), pp. 187–202 (p. 196).

artistic production and spectators. The old type of exhibition is dying out, for it too strongly resembles a gallery-like mausoleum. The modern exhibition must be a bazaar (a trade fair, a world exhibition). [...] Mechanical reproduction and the press will ultimately make originals useless — after all, we throw manuscripts into the waste-paper basket after they have been printed.⁴⁰

Here Teige not only embraced the new media (the press and typographic pictures published in book form) that technological reproduction opened up and that he felt were bringing art objects closer to the masses: he was already stating in 1923 that technological reproduction made the very notion of an original obsolete — one of Benjamin's central and most celebrated claims.⁴¹

Teige's comments on the transformations instigated by modern forms of exhibition (forms such as the bazaar or the trade fair) further anticipate Benjamin's distinction between cult value and exhibition value in the *Work of Art* essay. Both authors describe the origin of art in religious ritual and see analogous cultic functions extending in secularized form into late nineteenth-century Aestheticism. In both accounts, cultic art in all its historical forms seeks out tight, inaccessible spaces: Teige wrote of the mausoleum, Benjamin of prehistoric caves and the inner sancta of Greek temples or medieval cathedrals. Benjamin wrote that 'Cult value as such even tends to keep the artwork out of sight'.⁴² The viewing of such art thus becomes either initiatory rite or confirmation of privilege. This is why both Teige and Benjamin describe the trend towards exhibition value in modern art as the emancipation or release of art, the opening up of such spaces of religious or aesthetic control and, therefore, as the counterpart to a broader egalitarian or progressive political shift.

The political implications of this shift from cult to exhibition value also explain why Teige associated technological reproduction with a process of popularization.⁴³ Rather than seeing technology's intrusion into the realm of the aesthetic as a form of de-humanization or alienation, Teige emphasized that this shift in fact brought art (with all the caveats he attaches to the term) closer to the masses. There are

40 Karel Teige, 'Malířství a poezie', in *Avantgarda známá a neznámá*, ed. by Štěpán Vlašín, 3 vols (Prague: Svoboda, 1971), 1, 496, emphases in original.

41 One of the most famous picture-poems — the cover image for the 1922 anthology *Život II*, co-designed by Teige with several other members of Devětsil (see Fig. 1.3) — was reproduced in 1924 in the journal *G*. Richter's gloss on Teige and the Prague avant-garde (on the page facing Benjamin's translation of Tzara's article), relays Teige's basic understanding of the function of the picture-poem: 'the title page of *Život* [sic] illustrated on p. 23 belongs to a series of Teige's "picture poems" that he, tired of the senselessness of oil painting — has produced for reproductive techniques in the framework of the book' (in *G*, p. 140). To speculate that Benjamin might have reflected upon this a decade later is perhaps too bold; yet it should be noted that the *Work of Art* essay does echo other concepts from *G*, such as Richter's term 'optical unconscious'; see Mertins and Jennings's introduction in *G*, p. 16.

42 Benjamin, 'Artwork', p. 106; 'Kunstwerk', p. 358.

43 The Czech term Teige uses for popularization (*zlidovění*) occupies the semantic field explored in Chapter Three: it generally implies 'proletarianization', but for Teige also connotes popularization in the consumerist sense (as in 'popular culture') and indeed a process of 'humanization'. The central morpheme, *lid*, means 'people' both in the narrow sense of a nation and the wider sense of humanity in general (*lidstvo*).

several aspects to his argument. The first is the obvious fact that technology enabled broader, faster, and more thorough distribution of cultural products to the public (via reproductions and the like, or through the use of picture-poems on book covers acting as ‘posters’ for the book). But the more interesting aspect of Teige’s notion of a popularization of culture involved the transformation inaugurated in art by its increased social proximity to the masses. Teige was less interested in the cultural edification of the masses than in the massification of culture; indeed, he was among the earliest theorists of the interwar avant-garde to embrace mass culture wholeheartedly. We have seen how in 1922 he extolled ‘westerns, Buffalo Bill stories, Nick Carter adventures, sentimental novels, American movie serials and Chaplin’s slapstick, amateur comedy theatre, jugglers, minstrels, clowns and acrobatic circus riders, Springtime folk celebrations, a Sunday football match’ and claimed that ‘these literary forms [odrůdy] — many of you will say: deformities [zrůdy] — are nowadays the one and most characteristic popular [lidovou] literature’.⁴⁴ Teige greatly valued the capacity of mass culture to produce a positive reaction in its audience and contrasted this with some of the more obscure works of modernist production, stating that ‘Alexander Blok’s works could not approach the readership enjoyed by the anonymous authors of Buffalo Bill novels’ and insisting that the modern artist should think long and hard about why the masses responded spontaneously and positively to Chaplin, Sherlock Holmes stories, or the Good Soldier Švejk while remaining indifferent to Verlaine, Braque, and Picasso (all artists for whom he otherwise had enormous respect).⁴⁵ Teige, in short, took the openly receptive position towards mass culture that would later so famously spark Benjamin’s exchange with Theodor Adorno, who expressed great discomfort with what he felt to be Benjamin’s ‘romanticization’ of the Chaplin grotesque and the ‘laughter of the film spectator’.⁴⁶ Just as Teige discovered new cultural forms in what others regard as deformities, so Benjamin, discussing changes in the reception of culture, cautioned that ‘the fact that this new mode of perception first appeared in a disreputable form should not mislead the observer’.⁴⁷ And just as Teige felt that popular culture exerted a positive, progressive emotional effect on the masses alienated from high culture, so Benjamin emphasized: ‘*The technological reproducibility of the artwork changes the relation of the masses to art. The extremely backward attitude towards a Picasso painting changes into a highly progressive reaction to a Chaplin film*’.⁴⁸

44 Karel Teige, ‘Nové umění proletářské’ [The New Proletarian Art], in Teige, *Výbor*, 1, 33–63 (p. 58).

45 Teige, ‘Nové umění proletářské’, p. 58; and see also Teige, ‘Umění dnes a zítra’, p. 189.

46 The relevant passage from Adorno’s letter is reproduced in Benjamin, *GS*, 1, 1003–04; an English translation is contained in *New Left Review*, ed., *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso, 2007), pp. 123–24. Teige thus stands close to Benjamin’s understanding of laughter as ‘the dialectical precondition for a genuine seriousness’; Tim Beasley-Murray, *Mikhail Bakhtin and Walter Benjamin: Experience and Form* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007), p. 12.

47 Benjamin, ‘Artwork’, p. 119; ‘Kunstwerk’, p. 380.

48 Benjamin, ‘Artwork’, p. 116; ‘Kunstwerk’, p. 374, emphasis in original. Benjamin connected this progressive reaction with the fact that ‘everyone who witnesses these performances [in film and sport] does so as a quasi-expert’ (‘Artwork’, p. 114; ‘Kunstwerk’, p. 371). Benjamin gives the example of newspaper boys leaning on their bikes and analysing a bicycle race. Here, too, Teige’s

The privileged forum for such transformative encounters with mass or popular culture was film. In the *Work of Art* essay Benjamin compared film to the epic as a mode of collective reception.⁴⁹ In 1922 Teige enthusiastically described film as ‘the most powerful fact of contemporary culture and civilization’, ‘the true lexicon of the new art’, and even as ‘a Bethlehem whence comes the salvation of modern art’.⁵⁰ What initially motivated Teige’s identification of this new medium as a crucial phenomenon of modern culture was its mass appeal, the ‘almost unconditional support and enthusiastic applause of the audience’.⁵¹ But after breathlessly listing the ways that film draws on and energizes various features of popular culture — American bars, novels about the tropics or prairies, dance halls, circuses, and so forth — Teige suddenly connects the power of film with its nature as a medium utterly saturated with technology:

[Film contains] the pure power of modern *poesie*. It has its own precise form, which functions more perfectly than classical stanzas and the sonnets of the poets [...]. [I]n its origin in the optical discoveries of chronophotography and mechanical and chemical production it is an exemplar and model for all new art [...]. It is correct to say that the invention of the cinema has for us the same importance as the invention of the printing press for the Renaissance: here, too, mechanical production distributes art to its spectatorship. [...] *Yes, all modern artistic culture consists in and must consist in mechanical production [strojové výroby]*.⁵²

Teige thus placed film at a crucial nodal point in the technological development of art and identified it as the archetypal modern medium.⁵³ In contrast to his statements about other visual media (such as the picture-poem), Teige wrote here of technological *production* (*výroba*), not *reproduction* (*reprodukce*). This constituted the privileged moment of film: it did not start with an original art object and subsequently make use of technology for its reproduction or distribution, but was

logic is similar when he claims that Poetist art ‘must be just as self-evident, passionate, and accessible as sports, love, wine, and all delicacies’; Karel Teige, ‘Poetism’, trans. by Ian Finlay, in *From Laughter to Forgetting: A Sourcebook of Czech Interwar Avant-Garde Discourses*, ed. by Zuzana Říhová (Prague: Karolinum, 2023), pp. 149–56 (p. 149), translation modified; ‘Poetismus’, in *Výbor*, 1, 121–28 (p. 121).

49 See Benjamin, ‘Artwork’, p. 116; ‘Kunstwerk’, p. 375.

50 Teige, ‘Umění dnes a zítra’, pp. 190–91. In the final phrase Teige teasingly imitates a traditional Czech Christmas carol. In these passages, too, Teige raises the caveat that the word ‘art’ does not quite fit these modern cultural phenomena.

51 *Ibid.*, p. 193.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 193. Italics in original.

53 Teige presupposed a narrative about the historical development of art that focused on nodal points associated with technological breakthroughs (e.g., the printing press or film), much as does Benjamin. For both thinkers these breakthroughs could be ‘anticipated’ before the necessary technological means to enact them existed. We have seen how Benjamin cast Dada as an anticipation of filmic effects such as montage. In an incidental but thoroughly Benjaminian comment, Teige described the use of stained glass windows in Gothic cathedrals as a utopian anticipation of the use of projected, coloured light for artistic purposes, a wish image that required eight centuries for technology to provide the means for its fulfilment in cinema; see Karel Teige, ‘Poesie pro 5 smyslů, čili druhý manifest poetismu’, in Teige, *Svět, který voní* (Prague: Odeon, 1931; facsimile reprint Prague: Akropolis, 2004), pp. 195–237 (p. 207). Compare Benjamin’s claim that ‘It has always been one of the primary tasks of art to create a demand whose hour of full satisfaction has not yet come’ (‘Artwork’, p. 118; ‘Kunstwerk’, p. 378).



FIG. 7.1. Jaromír Funke, from the series *Čas trvá* [Time Persists] (1930–34).
Regional Museum in Kolín

rather from the outset a mass-produced product. Teige did not explicitly state that film eliminates originals altogether, but his enthusiasm was based on film's status as a 'purely' cultural object that is simultaneously a product of technological production just like the cars, airplanes, and telephones he invoked to show how the achievements of engineers, though not intended as aesthetic objects, had none the less trumped the self-indulgence of poets. Film thus provided Teige the main evidence for his argument that 'even standardized mechanical production gives rise to a new beauty', and that 'beauty is not the exclusive domain of so-called art'.⁵⁴

To take stock then: by 1923 (1925 at the very latest), Teige's theoretical position entailed the following points. Art in modern society was undergoing a transformation so radical that it barely made sense to use the term at all, a transformation returning to the original meanings of *technē*; this transformation was linked to the technological reproducibility of cultural objects; the saturation of cultural objects with technology eroded, and ultimately promised to destroy, the status of the original; traditional cultic functions of art, remnants from its originary association with religious ritual, were giving way to a libratory process releasing art into spaces where exhibition value and use value took on primary importance; these processes led inescapably to the politicization of aesthetics and culture as these were brought closer to the masses and functioned as a source of social empowerment; the popularization of culture pushed the form of 'art' in the direction of mass culture; and film represented the most advanced stage of these developments, equal in impact to the invention of the printing press in the Renaissance.

Clearly, much of the basic argument of the Work of Art essay is contained here. To be sure, Benjamin's formulations are more subtle conceptually and more resonant philosophically. In addition, writing in 1935 allowed (indeed forced) Benjamin to take several of these arguments further than did Teige.⁵⁵ What stands revealed as an obdurate phantasm, however, is the 'strong thesis' regarding Benjamin's heresies: that is, that when making these arguments about technological reproducibility leading to the loss of artistic aura in 1935 Benjamin was putting forward an original and shocking line of thought. By the time of the Work of Art essay, in fact, the liquidationist discourse had even begun to reverse direction: rather than aesthetic theory attempting to articulate the implications of raw cultural practice, art objects had begun to illustrate explicitly what were already familiar theoretical tenets. If Benjamin had wished to embody his central thesis about the liquidation of aura in a visual image, he could hardly have done better than to turn to Jaromír Funke (1896–1945), one of the leading experimenters in Czech interwar photography and in many respects a 'fellow traveller' of Devětsil.⁵⁶ Funke's quasi-Surrealist photo

54 Teige, 'Umění dnes a zítra', p. 190.

55 For example, while Teige's texts are suffused with the imperative to politicize aesthetics, Fascism obviously did not present the urgent threat for him in 1925 that it did for Benjamin in 1935. By the mid-1930s Teige was also critiquing the aestheticization of politics in Nazism — and, he grudgingly admits, to an increasing degree in the Soviet Union as well. By this time, however, the technical reproducibility of culture was no longer the vital matter it had been for him in the 1920s.

56 On Funke, see Antonín Dufek, *Jaromír Funke: Mezi Konstrukcí a Emocí* (Brno and Prague: Moravian Gallery in Brno and Kant, 2013).

series *Čas trvá* [Time Persists], created between 1930 and 1934, includes the striking image of a sculptured angel reaching upwards and holding a wreath resembling a halo (Fig. 7.1). The photograph makes expert use of the vocabulary of pseudo-auratic pictorialism: hazy light, soft focus, melodramatic gesture. Yet these elements are starkly ironic, since foreshortening makes a distant factory smokestack appear to be right in front of the winged angel. This juxtaposition transforms the gesture: the upward reach becomes an awkward stretch, an attempt to dump the halo of art into the inconveniently tall furnace of industry.

