
CARANTES NEWSLETTER

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Dear Friends,

We hope that May has been good to you so far. For academics, the semester is wrapping up and it is usually a period of frenetic activity with tests to take or grade, papers to write or read, and deadlines to meet all over the place. This newsletter will be straightforward, as we are simply bringing you notes from the lovely discussion we had for our Beltane meeting on May 9th, concerning Walter Benjamin's 1935 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction". (<https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/benjamin.pdf>)

As always with more theoretical pieces, we really encourage reading them in a group context. Everyone's distinct perspectives help to build a comprehensive reading of what is often rather opaque.

We began by discussing definitions for some key terms: **infrastructure** and **superstructure**. These are common in Marxist analysis, and it's really worth taking the time to investigate them. Simply put, Marxism holds that in a capitalist system, society has two levels. The first, infrastructure (which Benjamin names substructure), refers to everything that has to do directly with production: the means (tools, machines, factories, raw materials) and the relationships (between proletarian and capitalist). The superstructure is everything in society that is not directly related to production: schools, legal systems, police, and (broadly) ideology. **Marxism holds that although the superstructure is not directly related to production, it serves to protect and strengthen the infrastructure.** For instance, many educational systems have been built to mold the next generations into workers/labourers rather than to help children grow to their full potential. Similarly, police do not protect the individual members of a society but the private property of capitalists.

This led to a first point of discussion: where does the artist fall in this framework? Does the artist produce what the capitalist then sells? This is exactly the point what Benjamin's article, as he examines how attitudes to the making and receiving of art are impacted by capitalism and fascism. It is important to note that Benjamin's definition is largely informed by early 20th century fascist states like Italy and Germany. Broadly, he is arguing that **fascism seeks to maintain property**

relations by giving the masses a chance to express themselves in a destructive way. As one attendee put it, we are seeing similar dynamics at play today as America may be said to be expressing itself to death!

As we discussed the article's opening and its end-point, it became important to define the concept of **dialectics**, which Benjamin is also using. This word is a very commonly used bit of jargon, and it can feel exclusionary, particularly when it seems like the general understanding of it doesn't fit the way it's used. Its modern definition is deeply rooted in Hegelian dialectics, often summarized as a process by which "thesis" is confronted with "antithesis" in order to arrive at "synthesis". But this can be confusing, as it suggests that truth lies in the middle ground between two ideas—a centrist illusion and a slippery slope leading to fascism! Some more helpful terms are: abstract, negative, and concrete. **We begin with an abstract idea and mediate it through the negative to arrive at the concrete.** The negative does not eliminate any part of the abstract but **highlights its limits and contradictions.** Hegel names this "aufheben," often translated as "sublation" or "overcoming" and describes it as "**making implicit contradictions explicit.**" Though coming out of left field, the *Dao De Jing*, an ancient Chinese text attributed to Lao Zi, can be of help here with the image of the Yin Yang symbol. The white side and the black side work together and each contain a dot of the other. The *Dao De Jing* says: "Gravity is the root of lightness; stillness, the ruler of movement". This is what Hegelian dialectics are trying to tell us: **you cannot conceive of lightness if you do not also conceive of its opposite, gravity.**

For more of the *Dao De Jing* see: <https://cext.org/dao-de-jing#n11617>

Marxist dialectics use this idea in a more direct manner by arguing that **phenomena related to labour and class impact each other, leading to development and negation and, more broadly, to history as an ongoing process.**

Having defined these terms, we moved on to the discussion of what Benjamin's opposing phenomena might be. One answer that came up was aura versus the mechanically reproduced work of art. **Aura, according to Benjamin, is the combination of elements that contribute to making a work of art an original.** These things are, in generalized terms, its context: **where it was made, the traces of years that become visible on it, where it is when being viewed.** Conversely, photography (a mechanical process) presents us with an infinitely reproducible object. It is perhaps not insignificant that an original in photography is called a negative. As the photograph is infinitely reproducible, we find that the artist becomes less of a craftsperson and more of a factory worker. Similarly, theatre allows for the audience and the actor to exist in the same space and experience a direct connection. In film, the camera introduces distance. **Alienation becomes inherent in the mechanically reproducible work of art.**

After a quick break, we looked at section three, in which distance is described as constitutive of aura, as well as the mechanically reproducible work of art (in a fun example of those dialectics we spoke about earlier)! **Aura, it seems, has a temporal immediacy that is also psychological and emotional.** Another attendee described it as a kind of rawness. An encounter with a raw vegetable is less mediated, and therefore more *immediate* (!) than an encounter with a meal that has been cooked by several chefs.

Another attendee pointed out that an issue of distance with a mechanically reproducible work of art is the illusion of possession of a piece of art through its reproduction. **The masses wish to own art too, and when you have a reproduction you feel that you have closed the distance with the work of art— but that feeling is ultimately an illusion because the reproduction lacks the aura of the original.**

Benjamin is also criticising the idea of art for art's sake. There has always been a purpose to art (in the Middle Ages it was often made at the behest of a patron), and it is possible to engage meaningfully with a reproduced work of art as long as context is kept in mind. **Revolutionary criticism of social conditions is possible!** So Benjamin's recommendation would probably not be to do away with mechanical reproduction but use it to destroy the superstructures and free the masses.

Benjamin spends a considerable time discussing film, which is understandable given its relative novelty when he was writing in 1935. Someone noted that, according to Benjamin, film does have the potential to empower the masses through the politicisation of aesthetics, but it is used instead by those with capital to maintain the power structure. Another dialectical contradiction! An attendee brought up a further important fact of Benjamin's own context: 1935 was the height of the Great Depression and people went to the cinema as a form of escapism. The Great Depression resulted largely from the rampant speculation and insatiable hunger of capitalists, harming the masses the most who were then encouraged to consume this new media created by those who were responsible for their suffering. This continuous alienation and exploitation plays a large part in Benjamin's analysis of mechanically reproducible art.


Finally, we discussed whether or not this is an elitist framework, arriving at the conclusion that it is most likely not an elitist piece. It's human to want to engage with art. **Before capitalism, art belonged to elites and under capitalism, the masses are not given ownership of art but the illusion of ownership.** Someone pointed to streaming services today as an example of this. This again demonstrates Benjamin's point at the end of the piece that fascism seeks to maintain the property structure of capitalism while giving the masses a chance to express themselves, instead of eliminating the parasitic property structure.


We ended by talking about AI slop, and the **difference between art and content**. It is likely that Benjamin would have been fascinated by this mechanically *producible* “art” and how it is being used not just by certain sections of the masses but also by those in power, especially the authoritarian regime in the United States. There is such a hollowness, an emptiness, a lack of humanity in this content that it is perhaps not surprising that it has been so deeply embraced by those with hate in their hearts and no empathy for other humans (or the world at large)! This is exactly as we see in Benjamin’s concluding paragraphs that fascism seeks to introduce aesthetics into political life and the destruction of humanity through war. Perhaps we can extend this in the modern day by mentioning the delight with which AI-slop-conjurers speak of their perception of the destruction of artists’ endeavours as a result of AI being able to spit out content faster than most artists: art is a way of connecting humans to each other and these people are excited to see that avenue taken over by machines. Destruction of humanity, indeed.


Make art! Resist fascism! Make art!


Logistics

Now for a few brief points of notice to round out the newsletter that we thought would be a short one:

 If you are interested in joining the **Discord Server**, you can use this temporary link to join: <https://discord.gg/6wU7QFa5>

 As we continue to polish up the Carantes website, we are looking for more **reviews of popular media** that features representation and use of Celtic imagery or history, meant to serve in a fact-checking section of the website (up to 1,000 words). Please feel free to contact us if interested!

 The **book club** is going medieval! For the next meeting (date TBC) we are going to discuss race in medieval Welsh and Scottish literature, with these two articles: Hammond. "Ethnicity and the Writing of Medieval Scottish History", 2006 (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/25529883>), and Lumbley. "Geoffrey of Monmouth and Race". in A Companion to Geoffrey of Monmouth, 2020, pp. 369-396 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1163/j.ctv2gjwzx0.21>.

 For those interested but perhaps unaware, the **Association of Celtic Students** will be holding their 12th annual conference in Aberystwyth from 12–14 June. It is fully hybrid with simultaneous interpretation of all Celtic languages (and you don’t need to be a student to attend)! <https://celticstudents.blogspot.com/p/conference.html>

That is all for us now at the CARANTES steering committee. Please feel free to contact us if you have any reactions, thoughts or concerns, or if you would rather not get any more emails.

Until next time, keep well and safe,
and thanks for doing this work with us.

Your friends at



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caranteswg@proton.me

[@carantes.bsky.social](https://bsky.social/@carantes)