

## Editors' Preface

Conceived, written, and first published—but not very widely discussed—during the mid- to late-1930s, Walter Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" has become a central point of reference in cultural studies ever since Benjamin began to receive broad international attention some thirty years later. For plausible reasons, the *Artwork* essay has been understood—and has been used—as both condensation and emblem of what Benjamin's admirers find most typical of his intellectual style: a familiarity with, and active interest in, the cultural phenomena of his own time; an awe-inspiring depth of historical knowledge; a fascination with "facts" in all of their factual bluntness; a passion for the joy of speculation reminiscent of the great protagonists of German Idealism; a commitment to political causes of the Left that does not narrow predictably the range of intellectual options. It must also be mentioned that the *Artwork* essay, beyond being read as a metonymy of Benjamin's entire oeuvre, is probably the most frequently cited and most intensely debated essay in the history of the academic humanities of the twentieth century.

The unusual appeal of this text is not due exclusively to the problems that Benjamin tackles in often innovative ways. Another reason—very likely the main one—for the authentic spell cast by the *Artwork* essay over our community of scholars and students has to do with Walter Benjamin's courage to present predictions about the future development of culture and its technical arrays. He was the marginal critic who made the claims that many of his colleagues and successors (especially during the 1960s) were dreaming but did not dare to articulate. However, this general (and certainly well-deserved) enthusiasm for what we might call "Benjamin's bet" has prevented most of his readers and admirers from admitting that the past seven decades have shown that almost none of Benjamin's central predictions have proven

to be right. Aura has definitely not disappeared as Benjamin anticipated; rather, it has actually conquered the field of art's technical reproduction. Film has not developed into the critical medium about which he was dreaming; or, at least, it has not done so as a medium received broadly by the "masses." Finally, many of us are no longer completely convinced that Benjamin's notorious political advice—his prescription to opt for a politicization of art against an aesthetization of politics—is pertinent or plausible in our own time.

A realization that the central theses of Benjamin's *Artwork* essay have not come true—a situation that bears some resemblance to Hans Christian Andersen's tale of the "Emperor's New Clothes"—was the starting point for the intellectual project materialized in this volume. When we invited a broad range of scholars from different disciplines, cultural contexts, and generations to reread and reassess Benjamin's text in light of contemporary developments in digital recording techniques, it was not our intention to "prove him wrong." Rather, we were interested in finding answers to the question of why this particular text has so successfully engaged several generations of scholars in intense debates, despite a failure of the historical prognostication that Benjamin took to be its central function. To continue with the analogy of Andersen's tale: it turned out that the emperor was not wearing the clothes he was supposed to wear, but he was fascinating nonetheless, even if why this is so was not entirely clear. The clusters of short essays presented in our volume have collectively opened, shaped, and developed a very specific hermeneutic situation. On one hand, to admit the "failure" of Benjamin's predictions leads us to reconstruct the historical specifics of Benjamin's intellectual context (the mid-1930s) within which his prognoses might have been plausible. On the other hand, the direction and dynamics of our questioning obliges us to rethink our own cultural, technological, and media environments at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

The distance and contrast between our situation and that of Walter Benjamin are what the title of our book tries to capture: a mapping that measures the distance and locates the coordinates of Benjamin's essay so as to clarify the contrast that accounts for the essay's strength and intellectual appeal. Precisely because Benjamin's critical concepts and his analytic yield were so historically specific—probably more specific than even Benjamin imagined—they have obliged later generations of readers to ask: what, precisely, have been the intervening changes in the relationship between the arts (in the largest sense of this word) and

their technological environments? There can be no single answer to such a question, nor even an emerging point of convergence: certainly not in this book, and probably not in today's debates within the Humanities. Indeed, we believe the most compelling reason to read and to think through the essays presented here lies on a different level, one that was not necessarily part of our original conception of this project. This level, this plateau, is a mapping of the intellectual field established and shaped by Benjamin's *Artwork* essay. When we speak of a "field" here, we use the metaphor in the sense of "magnetic field," because the essays we received have convinced us that the mapping of Benjamin's concepts is dynamic, never completely closed, uneven in its zones of intellectual intensity, and constantly offering and asking for revisionist moves. Representing many different reactions to Benjamin's text, the essays characterize it as a dynamic force field of concepts; at the same time, they establish a conceptual field of their own—one that proceeds from Benjamin's provocations without necessarily repeating the basic outlines of his thought.

Our intuition about this secondary effect has structured our presentation of the essays. Based upon our own reading of the *Artwork* essay, we isolated sixteen critical terms that seemed germane to Benjamin's analysis. We decided to proceed, in a strictly formal operation, by "tagging" each of the thirty readings with the three most apparent conceptual links to Benjamin's text, selected from our pool of sixteen. As it turns out, this extremely formalized approach helped us to cluster the different readings of Benjamin into overlapping zones of intellectual interest and intensity, while it simultaneously marked out the zones of intellectual space that our volume would have to leave blank. The Table of Contents is no less than the schematic diagram of this mapping operation.

Rather than trying to summarize each of the thirty essays in a "traditional" editors' introduction, we have elected to develop the armature of the mapping presented by the Table of Contents. In a second—equally arbitrary—formal decision, we grouped our sixteen key terms into eight pairs of juxtapositions, corresponding broadly to their use and function within Benjamin's argument, yet sufficiently distinct from it to draw the contours of new terrains that might simultaneously connect back to the *Artwork* essay and open onto contemporary cultural concerns. In so doing, we wanted to re-create some of the conceptual tensions that give the *Artwork* essay its famous intellectual dynamism (perhaps one could even say its productive intellectual unrest). We then

wrote, independent of one another, commentaries on “one side” of each pairing, trying in each case to refer centrally to the “other side” of the pair. In other words, we wrote eight “dialogues” to open or chart the intellectual terrain for the eight large sections of the book. Instead of a single running commentary written in a mastering voice, we offer something akin to a zigzag of ideas to sketch the horizon of a space in which the heterogeneous voices of the essays themselves might interact. Proceeding from the complexity of the *Artwork* essay that we assume Benjamin intended, yet cognizant of the alternate mapping suggested by the diverse readings of that essay presented in this volume, our interventions—in two times eight “stations” within the volume—both develop and engage the interpretations, insights, and proposals suggested by our thirty authors. As the word “stations” might suggest, our “commentary” is somewhat discontinuous and certainly not definitive: in fact, we designed it to be intrinsically inconclusive.

Historically speaking, Benjamin’s *Artwork* essay has been an amazing catalyst for intellectual activity: our goal for this collection was to ride the essay’s momentum without exhausting its energy. Indeed, we believe the lasting power of Benjamin’s work resides in its ability to complexify our thinking about culture even today—despite our “full immersion” in the data streams of the digital age.