

When Colin Powell went before the United Nations on 5 February to make his case for war against Iraq, instructions were given to cover Picasso's *Guernica*, usually displayed at the entrance of the Security Council, with a blue cloth; this cover-up was in turn to be covered up with a display of the council's flags. According to U.N. diplomats, the picture would have sent too much of a "mixed message"; quipped Maureen Dowd, "Mr. Powell can't very well seduce the world into bombing Iraq surrounded on camera by shrieking and mutilated women, men, children, bulls and horses."¹

What does this cover-up indicate? The reach of White House image control? anticipatory obedience on the part of U.N. bureaucrats? the power of art? the persistent ability of modernism to give offense? Perhaps a bit of all of the above, but we need to take a closer look. The *Guernica* displayed at the Security Council is obviously not the original that, if memory serves, has been returned to Spain by the Museum of Modern Art. Nor is it a replica that pretends to look like the original oil painting. It is a tapestry reproduction, we learn from the *New York Times*, contributed by Nelson Rockefeller. We are so far into the decline of the aura of the work of art in the age of technological reproduction flagged by Walter Benjamin that the opposition between the original and its mass production no longer seems to grasp the conundrum posed here. For one thing, the painting's reproduction in the U.N. is not a mass-produced object. It is a unique, privately commissioned, transposition of Picasso's image onto another material—one with medievalist connotations at that—which the modernist dictionary would probably classify under the heading of kitsch. What nonetheless lends the object cultural cachet, one might argue, is the symbolic value of *Guernica* as an icon of historic modernism, specifically a type of modernism assumed to be allied with progressive politics.

The event might receive some such framing within the discipline of art history, conventionally understood. Once we look at it from the perspective of media studies, however, another set of questions arises to complicate this framing. What are the locations of this event and its modalities of existence? How does it appear (and disappear), circulate, and function within the public sphere? Whether or not the image would have been covered up without the concern over media coverage is a moot question. The institution of the United Nations and its precursor, the League of Nations, are part of a history of globalizing modernity that is unthinkable without the rise to dominance of technological mass media and their industrialized public spheres. We're dealing therefore with yet another transposition of materials, from the artisanal medium of tapestry—via the double veils of cloth and flags—to television, photojournalism, and the internet. And this transposition is not simply additional or posterior to the others: the mise-en-scène of the press conference is the very condition of the cover-up. As the linkage of the traditional, parliamentary public sphere of the U.N. with industrial media publicity makes that public sphere visible on a mass and global scale, it makes Picasso's image of war, death, and suffering invisible—but also, at the same time, virtual.

From here we could go into an ideological analysis of the event as an instance of the preemptive spin on "live" TV coverage and the micromanagement of contradiction. Such an analysis could draw on theories seeking to define ideology in its contemporary form as the systematic inurement of consumer-citizens to contradiction. Approaches from psychoanalytic theorists such as Slavoj Žižek complement and require the political and economic analysis of the unprecedented conglomeration of the media industries, enabled by a deregulation policy driven by a capitalist and radical Rightist agenda.

1. Maureen Dowd, "Powell Without Picasso," *New York Times* 5 Feb. 2003: A27.

“How can the contradictions of an economic situation give rise to a form of consciousness inappropriate to it?” Benjamin asked in 1930. In his subsequent work, he sought an answer to this question in the interrelations between industrial technology and aesthetics, the latter understood as comprising both the traditional sense of art as an institution of bourgeois society and a broader notion pertaining to the “theory of perception which the Greeks called aesthetics.” By doing so, Benjamin recast the more orthodox Marxist question of false consciousness in terms of his (un)timely theory of “anthropological materialism”: How is consciousness, whether false or critical, produced and reproduced in the first place? What is the effect of industrial capitalist technology on the organization of the human senses, and how does it affect the conditions of experience and agency, the ability to see connections and contradictions, remember the past and imagine a (different) future? How can the alienation inflicted on the human sensorium in the defense against technologically induced shock (anesthetics), the splitting of experience into isolated sensations, affects, and sound bites, be undone or, rather, transformed? What kind of understanding—and practice—of art and aesthetics would be needed toward that goal?

It is from the perspective of Benjamin’s anthropological materialist philosophy of technology that film and other media assume a central significance in his theory of aesthetics. “The most important among the social functions of film is to establish a balance between humans and technology”; more specifically, “to train human beings in the apperception and reactions needed to deal with a vast apparatus, whose role in their lives increases with almost each passing day.” In terms of aesthetic theory, Benjamin argued, this requires a shift from the cultivation of semblance (*Schein*; auratic artworks, technologically enhanced phantasmagoria) to an aesthetics of play (*Spiel*). Citing particular practices of modernist and avant-garde art as evidence of such a shift, Benjamin attributes to film, as a “play-form” of technology, the medium-specific ability to engage with advanced technology in a nondestructive, sensory-reflexive, and collective form.

We might take this project to be one of a modernist education of the senses, were it not for the realization, on Benjamin’s part as well as ours, that the moment for such a project has passed, at least in its high modernist, utopian aspirations. More pragmatically, his gamble with cinema was driven by the fact that the social adaptation of technology had already failed on a grand scale (World War I) and the desperate hope for an ameliorative strategy in the face of another, even more devastating military catastrophe. Hence his emphasis on film’s ability to engage alienated technology at the level of aesthetic technique, through the work of montage, precise rhythms of staged shocks or countershocks, metamorphic games with animate and inanimate, human and mechanical traits—techniques capable of effecting a “therapeutic detonation” of mass psychoses in the medium of collective laughter (slapstick comedy, Mickey Mouse) and, more generally, a reconversion of neurotic energy into sensory affect.

Seven decades later, we are confronted with a perpetuation of crisis on a global scale, with new challenges (such as technologically mediated fundamentalisms both in the U.S. and abroad) that appear to have rendered Benjamin’s speculations obsolete. However, the epistemic shift he proposed is not invalidated by the marginalization—and recontextualization—of older media such as photography, film, and radio. The unprecedented acceleration of circulation and technical innovation with the advent of digitality has created conditions in which consciousness is more than ever inadequate to the state of technological development, its power to destroy and enslave human bodies, hearts and minds. At the same time, new digital media have expanded the formal and material arsenal for imaginative practices and have opened up new modes of publicness that already enact a different, and potentially alternative, engagement with

technology. This antinomic situation eludes the perspective of strictly media theory, especially in its ontological and teleological bent (for example, Paul Virilio, Friedrich Kittler, and Norbert Bolz), to say nothing of popular pundits' nostalgic techno-pessimism. It requires understanding the social and cultural uses of technology in relation to the historically specific and geopolitically variable force fields of modern mass publics. It urges us to resume Benjamin's concern for the conditions of apperception, sensorial affect, and cognition, experience and memory—in short, for a political ecology of the senses.

For us—teachers, scholars, intellectuals—to engage on both sides of this antinomy, we need theory and we need aesthetics. The current reinvention of the aesthetic in the humanities would do well to heed Benjamin's lesson. The question of the fate of art in the age of technological reproducibility still maps a heuristic—and historical—horizon that no serious effort to refocus the study of literature and other traditional arts can afford to ignore. At the very least, awareness of that horizon should guard the renewed attention to formal and stylistic questions against illusory attempts to revive artistic autonomy as an enclave protected against technical mediation and commodification.

Rethinking the study of the traditional arts from the perspective of mass-mediated culture could shape new research perspectives, in particular for debates on modernism and modernity. For one thing, we might discover in technological media practice forms of modernist aesthetics—configurations of “vernacular modernism”—that elude the lens of traditional criticism and theory. For another, as Andreas Huyssen, Molly Nesbit, and others have demonstrated, the history of modernism cannot be thought without its mass-mediated intertexts and afterlife. From Hollywood musicals to museum shops, from advertising to the fringes of the popular music scene, the icons of high modernism have been disseminated and recycled, disfigured and reinscribed. Picasso is a trademark of modern art just as Chaplin is of modern times, known to people who may never have seen a painting by the former or a film by the latter. And in a way that is insufficiently accounted for by the postmodernist celebration of the collapse between distinctions of high and low; the mass-mediated afterlife of modernist art has undeniably altered but not necessarily diminished its power to move—as evidenced, at least by the force of its negation, in the double veiling of *Guernica*.

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