

Andreas Feininger. *Dennis Stock*,
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Editors' Introduction

Walter Benjamin's Media Tactics: Optics, Perception, and the Work of Art

MICHAEL W. JENNINGS AND TOBIAS WILKE

When Walter Benjamin composed the initial version of “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility” in 1935, he concluded his observations on media—before turning, in the essay’s final paragraph, to the political situation of his time—with the following résumé:

Reception in distraction—the sort of reception which is increasingly noticeable in all areas of art and is a symptom of profound changes in perception—finds in the cinemas its central place. And there, where the collective seeks distraction, the tactically [taktisch] dominant element that rules over the regrouping of apperception is by no means lacking. It finds its more originary form in architecture. Yet nothing more clearly betrays the violent tensions of our time than the fact that this tactically dominant element asserts itself in optics itself. And precisely this occurs in film through the shock effect of its image sequences. In this respect, too, film proves to be the most important subject matter, at present, for the theory of perception that the Greeks called aesthetics.¹

These lines from the first, handwritten draft of Benjamin’s essay establish the particular set of conceptual relations that this special issue of *Grey Room* takes as its starting point. Along with the familiar notions of distraction and shock—long recognized and widely discussed as core components of the artwork essay’s theoretical framework²—the passage constellates such significant concepts as reception, perception, tactics, and aesthetics. This constellation has remained largely underexplored in its implications for Benjamin’s writings on media. Most significant, it expresses the overarching concern that informs not only Benjamin’s particular fascination with such photo-based media as film but his interest in a wide range of media including painting and the graphic arts, print and sound media, and such bodily arts as dance. For while he never formulated

a universal “theory of media,”³ his theoretical engagement with various kinds of mediality reveals, as its constant guiding thread, a distinct emphasis on the question of media’s function within more comprehensive economies of perception. Accordingly, the concluding statements about film in the passage cited here can be seen to serve a twofold purpose: on the one hand, they define cinema’s particular task in a particular historical context; on the other hand, they suggest an analytical framework that addresses dynamic processes of perceptual “regrouping” rather than the materiality of representation or technologies of reproduction in themselves. Closely linked to this specific focus is the notion of aesthetics that Benjamin articulates in the final sentence, in a move that reliteralizes and simultaneously broadens the concept to include all physiological, psychological, technological, and social developments pertaining to a “theory of perception” in the sense of the Greek term *aesthesis*. This extended understanding of the aesthetic is what underlies and shapes Benjamin’s reflections on both the basic organization of psychophysical processes and on the specific organizational power of artistic forms.

The essays in this issue address different facets of this overarching conceptual framework, thereby expanding our understanding of Benjamin’s investigations of what we would now call medium specificity into new directions. The essays examine the crucial nexus between media and perception as it plays out in Benjamin’s analysis of the “tactile” component of cinematic experience (Wilke), in his anthropological reevaluation of man’s “mimetic faculty” (Ogden), in his reflections on the use of “uncolorfulness” in Cubist painting (Bourneuf), and in his theoretical engagement with the dynamic structure of the “true” work of art (Richter). The essays also, however, draw attention to another aspect of Benjamin’s writings, an aspect that the title of this issue refers to as his “media tactics.” The notion of tactics, explicitly introduced in the passage quoted above, not only informs Benjamin’s account of a particular perceptual shift in which the “subject matter” of cinema figures prominently as both agent and proof—that is, it not only defines the functional relationship between the medium of film and the “tactical” imperatives of a particular historical situation; it also applies to Benjamin’s *own* strategies of theoretical appropriation and presentation. “Tactics” refers here to a set of strategies that serve to describe, and make describable, the perceptual effects, and hence the very mediality, of various media. Having begun with the ending of Benjamin’s magisterial essay, we return now to its beginning and its enormously influential articulation of the historicization of perception. To speak with László Moholy-Nagy, Benjamin’s conception of media emphasizes not their “reproductive” capacities but their “productive” capacities; that is, those that actively shape the sensorium of a historical collective.⁴

This special issue includes the first English translation of the first version of “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility.”⁵ Benjamin’s repeated rewriting of this essay suggests its importance to him: the successive versions are not so much corrections of this first one but shifts of emphasis. The result is that certain clusters of concepts receive their fullest treatment in only one version of the essay. The version translated here includes, for example, the most extensive discussion of the conceptual nexus “second nature / apparatus.” Benjamin here builds on Lukács’s isolation of the phantasmagoric effect exercised by the accumulation of commodities in networks by reconceiving second nature itself as an apparatus. Like the more localized apparatus—the *dispositive*—of filmic reproduction, second nature as an apparatus both mediates the objects of our perception and in doing so alters its very nature. This version also suggests more powerfully than any later version the explicit connections between the *perceptual* effects of the technologically reproduced artwork and the *political* status of those very effects. In the interplay that arises from the semantic field around the word *taktisch* (tactical / tactile), Benjamin alludes to the organization of sense perception within political categories. To understand the “subject matter” of a medium, this suggests, is to recognize its particular function in the changing landscapes of sensorial economies, its (potential) suitability for certain kinds of *maneuvers* that serve to put into effect, by means of tactical adjustments, a new pattern of apperception adequate to a technologically altered milieu.

Notes

1. Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility (First Version),” *Grey Room* 39: TK–TK; emphasis in original. On the English translation of the German word *taktisch*, see TK n. 7.

2. See, for example, Miriam Bratu Hansen, “Not a One-Way-Street: Benjamin and Cinema,” *Critical Inquiry* 25 (1999): 306–343; Susan Buck-Morss, “Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin’s Artwork Essay Reconsidered,” *October* 62 (1999): 3–41; and Howard Eiland, “Reception in Distraction,” *boundary 2*, 30.1 (Spring 2003): 51–66.

3. To speak of Benjamin’s writings on media in terms of a coherent “media theory”—as recent scholarship on the subject sometimes does—is therefore somewhat misleading. See, for example, Christian Schulte, ed., *Walter Benjamins Medientheorie* (Konstanz, Germany: UVK, 2005).

4. See László Moholy-Nagy, “Production—Reproduction,” in *Photography in the Modern Era*, ed. Christopher Phillips (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1989), 79–82.

5. The Harvard edition of Benjamin’s *Selected Writings* includes translations of the second (volume 3: 101–133) and third versions of the essay (volume 4: 251–281). See Walter Benjamin, 1935–1938, vol. 3 of *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Howard Eiland et al., ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2002); and Walter Benjamin, 1938–1940, vol. 4 of *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2003).