Chapter 5.30
The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Production

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ABSTRACT

When Walter Benjamin wrote his famous essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, he shone a light on the cultural changes inherent in technology's ability to infinitely reproduce and distribute art. One of the important consequences of this development was the democratization of art's availability, allowing the general population to experience artwork that they would otherwise be unable to access. Now technology has advanced to a point where not only is art's reproduction available to anyone who wants it, its very production is now accessible to almost everyone, even if the prospective artist is utterly devoid of training, expertise, or even talent. With software-based artistic assistance and low-threshold electronic distribution mechanisms, we have achieved the promise of Benjamin's blurred distinction between artist and audience. As a result, the process by which art is produced has now been democratized, resulting in legitimate questions regarding quality, taste, and the legitimacy of authorship in a human-technological artistic collaboration.

INTRODUCTION

When Walter Benjamin wrote his famous essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, he shone a light on the cultural changes inherent in technology's ability to infinitely reproduce and distribute art. One of the important consequences of this development is the democratization of art's availability, allowing the general population to experience artwork that they would otherwise be unable to access—artwork that previously was only available to a privileged elite.

Now technology has advanced to a point where not only is art's reproduction available to anyone who wants it, the very production of art is now accessible to almost everyone, even if the prospective artist is utterly devoid of training, expertise, or even talent. This development is symptomatic of a wider self-service mindset that pervades western society, what I have dubbed the "kiosk culture." The term "kiosk culture" connotes the general acceptance and even encourage-

ment of self-service for the postmodern citizen. From touchtone telephone answering systems to Web-based electronic commerce to scanning our own groceries at the neighborhood supermarket, self-service is as much an expectation for the postmodern consumer as it is a business necessity for the provider. The kiosk culture represents nothing less than a cultural transition to a naturalized "do it yourself" attitude.

In the production of art, the do-it-yourself aesthetic of the kiosk culture has been actualized by the introduction of performance support technology into all manner of expression. Just as with consumer-oriented tasks, artistic performance support technology compensates for any skill-based shortcomings, allowing a novice to achieve the same level of performativity as an expert. As such, the very process by which art is produced has been democratized. But when these support technologies are applied to the creation of art, the cultural implications are quite different from those in the business milieu. It raises essential questions such as *What is good art*? *Is art developed with the assistance of performance support technology as valuable as that produced without it? Who really is the artist—the human or the machine?*

Art, of course, does not exist independently from a complicated infrastructure of production, distribution, and consumption, tied together by social relationships that maintain it. As described by Bourdieu (1993) and others, the consumption of art involves social, economic, and class implications. Recognizing this larger context, it's important to note that the subject of this essay focuses only on the production of art—specifically the production of art as enabled by the use of assistive performance support technology.

Software such as Dramatica and Scriptware assists the aspiring screenwriter to prepare a screenplay. In many cases, this support goes far beyond surface assistance such as formatting and spelling to include brainstorming services, story

ideas, and other cognitive help normally considered the sole domain of the artist. Marketing literature for Dramatica® Pro touts the collaborative aspect of the software's artistic support, calling it "the 'Ultimate Creative Writing Partner.'" Another software product from the same company, Writer's DreamKit™, is promoted specifically as a tool for beginning screenwriters and even promises to co-write your script. "(A)s your mentor, the Writer's DreamKit will do something no other writing program can do—it predicts parts of your story based upon creative decisions you make!" (Write Brothers, 2004, p. 5-6)

With technological tools like these and low-threshold distribution mechanisms such as self-publishing, podcasting, and blogs, we have achieved the promise of Benjamin's blurred distinction between artist and audience. Benjamin (1968) predicted that the distinction between author and public is about to lose its basic character:

The difference becomes merely functional; it may vary from case to case. At any moment the reader is ready to turn into a writer. As expert, which he had to become willy-nilly in an extremely specialized work process, even if only in some minor respect, the reader gains access to authorship… Literary license is now founded on polytechnic rather than specialized training and thus becomes common property. (p. 232)

Just as we no longer need to be a trained cashier in order to use the complex point-of-sale (POS) technology of the retail industry, likewise we no longer need to possess any expertise in how to write a screenplay to accomplish the writing task. The embedded performance support technology compensates for our lack of competence. The "readerly" has literally become "writerly," where "the reader [is] no longer a consumer but a producer of the text" (Barthes, 1970, p. 4).

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