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Benjamin on Film and Montage

“The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility” (1935–39) and “The Storyteller” share much common ground. Both texts seize on the transformed status of art and aesthetic experience as a privileged point of entry for reflecting on the modern condition. Each essay examines the changes wrought by a watershed event in the development of technology—in “The Storyteller,” the propagation of movable print and a book culture that displaces the oral practice of storytelling, marking the dislocation of the collective wisdom of tradition by the putative objectivity of information; in the artwork essay, the advent of photography and especially film, which undermines the quasi-sacral weave of authenticity and uniqueness that both embedded the artwork in the authority of tradition and buttressed this very authority. If “The Storyteller” focuses on the loss of shareable experience symbolized by the dying art of storytelling, the artwork essay inverts this discursive trajectory by emphasizing the potential gains to be reaped from the accelerating collapse of tradition caused in part by new technologies of mechanical reproduction like film. As the text’s well-known thesis goes, the combination of accessibility, portability, and positively coded transience symbolized by film ushers in a reorganization of perception that alters the status of art by shattering its aura, that is, the Nimbus of authority that enveloped artworks in a nexus of uniqueness, unattainability, and putative permanence. To be sure, the two essays are suffused by very different moods, the elegiac tone of “The Storyteller” forming a sharp contrast to the activist register of the artwork essay, which often seems to celebrate the very developments that “The Storyteller” decries. Yet on the whole the two texts make a consistent argument, which hinges on accounting for the present by historicizing (aesthetic) experience and mapping the deep changes produced by
technology. These changes boil down to a loss of substantive community as a result of the rise of mass society. The continuous, self-contained quality of tradition, as undergirded by the contemplative self-sufficiency of auratic experience, contrasts sharply with the disjointedness and sensory overload of modern life, which finds an apt counterpart in the juxtaposition of filmic images. When considered from this perspective, the montage of images in film, which bear the imprint of the disjunctive perception of modern life, stands in an antithetical relation to storytelling.

Before leaping to this conclusion, however, it will be helpful to briefly describe the discrepancies in the accounts of tradition developed by the two texts. In “The Storyteller” tradition appears as a shared patrimony that has equalizing effects. It is the work of a cohesive collective—Benjamin imagines it as a premodern community comprised of handworkers, seafarers, and peasants. This is a community of equals, or at least a community in which virtually anyone has the right to engage in the vital practice of storytelling as the weaving and handing down of tradition. By contrast, the force of tradition that the auratic artwork both exploits and reinforces serves a vertical social structure. In short, if “The Storyteller” offers an account of tradition as an inclusive and equalizing force, the artwork essay treats it as a tool of power, suggesting that its demise following the collapse of aura levels social distinctions and has potentially democratizing effects as an opening for the masses to come into their own. In this respect, the concept of the masses assumes a positive valence as the horizontal conglomerate of individuals deprived of long-established social attachments in the anonymity of the modern metropolis. The different understandings of tradition in the two texts make it possible to see the masses of the artwork essay not simply as a product of the disintegration of community bemoaned in “The Storyteller,” but rather as community’s inchoate counterpart in modernity. Understanding the masses as a potential foil to premodern community begs the question of what practices and media can lend themselves to producing the effects of storytelling, that is, of instantiating experience by means of collective practice. This chapter shows how the desirable features of storytelling outlined in the Leskov essay—its emphasis on a rhetoric of perception, its grounding in routines of the body shaped by specific modes of labor, its dependence on practices that both necessitate and reinforce physical proximity, its equalizing impact and ability to produce a collective experience informed by a sense of reciprocity, its orientation toward an outside that does not hinge on an analogical relation between narrative and experience—are adapted to the contemporary moment in the sections the artwork essay devotes to montage. This will in turn provide a frame for reading film as a narrative medium whose montage
principle has aesthetic repercussions that go well beyond film itself, suggesting a far-reaching reconceptualization of narrative as a mimetic practice that is not primarily centered on meaning.

The artwork essay has been at the center of the phenomenal Benjamin reception that has enlivened fields of inquiry ranging from media theory to cultural studies, film and visual studies since the rediscovery of Benjamin’s work in the 1960s. While it may well be one of Benjamin’s most influential texts, critics agree that it is also problematic on account of its elliptical reasoning, conceptual leaps, and peremptory judgments that appear unsupported by the evidence at hand. This relates in part to the essay’s complex textual history and the editorial issues posed by the existence of four versions—three in German and one in French—none of which can be regarded as the definitive one. In spite of differences that are at times significant, the various drafts revolve around the same main argument and share a common discursive scaffolding. This hinges on a set of neatly stacked oppositions—authenticity/uniqueness versus reproducibility/iterability, auratic art versus technologically mediated film, contemplative versus distracted or scattered reception—that drive a historical trajectory whose underlying causality brings it uncomfortably close to the pernicious historicism Benjamin tirelessly criticized in his lifelong engagement for a nonteleological model of history. As Miriam Hansen has noted, this reading may well account for the shortcomings of the third (and last) German version of the artwork essay, which was published in 1955 in the collection of Benjamin’s Schriften edited by Theodor and Gretel Adorno and has since been at the center of the text’s phenomenal reception. This draft is, however, a compromise (and for some compromised) version of a typescript from 1936 that contains the text Benjamin originally intended for publication. This version, often referred to as Benjamin’s urtext, was pushed to the wayside by the later draft after it appeared in a drastically cut and altered French translation in the Zeitschrift für Sozialwissenschaften in 1936. This second German draft unfolds a more nuanced discussion of the collapse of aura and concomitant rise of the masses, which, as Hansen points out, complicates the teleological thrust of the essay. In addition, an important lengthy footnote in this version offers a layered understanding of technology as a realm that is not merely destructive, but can provide room for an emancipatory form of play (Spiel) understood as “an alternative mode of aesthetics . . . that could counteract, at the level of sense perception, the political consequences of the failed—that is, capitalist and imperialisit, destructive and self-destructive—reception of
technology.” The differentiated understanding of both aura and technology that Hansen develops by focusing on this second draft and on other texts by Benjamin is invaluable in linking the desirable narrative practice described in “The Storyteller” to a reading of film as a mass technology that can lend itself to practices analogous to premodern storytelling. A brief review of Hansen’s arguments will thus provide a framework for discussing the significance of montage as an aesthetic principle that accounts for film as the narrative medium of the masses.

“What then, is the aura? A strange weave of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be” (SW 3:104–5; translation modified). If the concept of aura functions as an anchor for the diverse lines of argumentation pursued in the essay, then Benjamin’s attempt at defining it in this oft-quoted passage appears as elliptical as it is clarifying. Aura is portrayed here as a paradoxical mode of spatial-temporal apperception that renders objects remote no matter how close they may actually be. This type of apperception accounts for the quasi-sacral status of artworks that can be physically approached as material objects, yet are ontologically unattainable in their quasi-religious status as art. Key to this spatial dialectic of farness and nearness is the distancing temporality of tradition, which embeds objects in the singularity of a pregnant moment and then exploits it as the source of their putative authenticity and uniqueness. The sum total of these singular moments constitutes the very fabric of tradition, giving rise to the circular relation that allows tradition to both authorize and be authorized by artworks. Film, like photography, undercuts the exceptional status of the singular on account of its reproducibility, thus undermining the auratic mode of spatial-temporal perception on which both tradition and bourgeois art rely. In collapsing the ontological distance that endowed art with a halo of unapproachability, it brings aesthetic practice close to the masses for deployment in the contemporary struggle against fascism, which is itself intent on fabricating aura through the spectacle of aestheticized war.

This reading suggests an uncompromisingly negative valuation of aura as a tool of domination whose destruction can only be welcomed. Yet, as Hansen observes, Benjamin’s glosses on aura in other texts paint a more differentiated picture, one marked by deep ambivalence at the prospect of aura’s decay. This is bound up with the complex temporality inherent in the perception of aura, which goes well beyond turning the poignant singularity of historical experience into power-mongering claims to authenticity and uniqueness. Aura, Hansen explains by drawing on Benjamin’s reflection in “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” (1939) and “Little History of Photography” (1931), is the vestige of an archaic mode of perception predicated on a bond of reci-
procity tying humans to nature. In this archaic age aura was not restricted to
the realm of the aesthetic, but entailed a general mode of apperception
bound to ascribe to any and every element of creation the ability to recipro-
cate one’s attention, or, to draw on the Romantic trope Benjamin used in his
discussion of Baudelaire, to return one’s gaze. In modernity this auratic
mode of perception has withdrawn to the realm of aesthetics following the
rise of a quintessentially exploitative engagement with nature. The “schöner
Schein,” or beautiful semblance, for which Goethe cherished art is a remnant
of this ability to perceive objects not as part of an indifferent nature to be
mastered, but rather as looking back in an act of reciprocation that places
them on the same level as the human gaze that beholds them. This is at bot-
tom a projection that Hansen accounts for by drawing on Freud’s under-
standing of the uncanny. In the auratic mode, she argues, one glimpses one-
self engaged in an archaic process of transference. What the individual
perceives in glancing at a creaturely world that returns his gaze is not the
magically animated nature of animism, but rather his own submerged ability
to project on things the ability to look back. Because this reciprocal mode of
apperception has been suppressed in the present, its resurfacing has uncanny
effects in the Freudian sense, that is, it appears as the return of something
that was once familiar, yet has been repressed and can only manifest itself
under the guise of unsettling strangeness. What the individual glimpses in
the auratic mode is at bottom himself engaged in a suppressed modality of
selfhood that makes him a stranger to himself.

This positively connoted understanding of aura accounts for Benjamin’s
ambivalence toward its decay. In hastening the withering of aura, photogra-
phy and film are not just undermining a tool of domination that authorizes a
hierarchical social structure, but also the last remnants of a form of appercep-
tion that productively destabilized subjectivity, providing glimpses of that
reciprocal relation to creation whose prereflexive ethos is celebrated in “The
Storyteller.” Aura’s association with this modality explains why Benjamin oc-
casionally asked himself whether film could also produce auratic effects. As
Hansen points out, the issue for him was not to reendow film with the status
of auratic art, but rather to appropriate it as the fitting correlate of the tech-
nologically altered perception that shaped modern experience. The ultimate
aim was to use film as a collective tool for counteracting what Susan Buck-
Morss has called the anesthetizing effects of technology, which Benjamin
saw routinely deployed to lull individuals into perceiving their own dehu-
manization as an aesthetic spectacle.

Film can become a tool of emancipation when considered within a dif-
ferentiated understanding of technology that grasps both its liberating po-
tential and its destructive effects in capitalist-industrial modernity. Crucial to this layered reading of technology is a section in the second draft of the artwork essay that distinguishes between a “first technology” dominated by the instrumental impulse to subjugate and exploit nature, and a “second technology” that, by contrast, can engender a balanced interplay between humans and nature. At issue is a new ecology of the senses fostered by the prereflexive insights disclosed by a technologically augmented apperception (SW 3:127–28 n. 22; GS 7:1:368–69)—at stake in the case of photography and film are the insights relayed by close-ups, frog’s- and bird’s-eye views, slow motion, and playback, which serve as an “optical unconscious” in their ability to derail the ossifying experience of putatively self-same time and space (SW 3:117–18; GS 7:1:375–78). This positive understanding of technology makes it possible to read film as paradigmatic for a technologically enhanced storytelling hinging on the principle of montage.

At first glance the artwork essay does not seem especially concerned with exploring the narrative potential of film. This is all the more notable as the so-called Kinoebatte of the 1910s and 1920s, driven as it was by desire to assign film its proper place within a rapidly shifting constellation of old and new media and art forms, persistently compared film to narrative literature and drama both as a way of dismissing the new medium as mere technology and in the contrary effort to elevate it by assimilating it to high-brow artistic media. Instead, Benjamin’s discourse follows the work of the pioneering Soviet directors—Eisenstein, Vertov, and Pudovkin—in focusing on montage as the conceptual pivot for describing the aesthetics of film. Unlike the Russian filmmakers, however, Benjamin was not interested in exploring the operations of montage as a principle of film poetics, that is, as a technique or set of practices that allow us to describe the features of specific films. Rather he treated montage as a primarily aesthetic category that resonated closely with contemporary forms of experience and modes of labor and thus encapsulated film’s perceptual and cognitive surplus vis-à-vis other media. Grasping this surplus through the notion of montage was for Benjamin key to describing how film revived a broad understanding of mimesis based not just on reproducing semblance but also on a performative form of mimicry, a kind of play that could restore a balanced relation between humans and technology. In what follows I will examine how montage forms the centerpiece of this mimetic play in ways that adapt the desirable narrative practice outlined in “The Storyteller” to the new technology of film.

Benjamin introduces his discussion of montage in section X of the art-
work essay by drawing a comparison between film and photography, the visual technologies deemed to be hastening aura’s liquidation in the present. The discussion is framed by the question of the artistic quality that inheres in technologies of mechanical reproduction—the question of art being at bottom a question of how to harness the transformative perceptual and cognitive surplus harbored by these technologies. While film, as “moving pictures,” may initially appear to be a mere extension of photographic technology, its essential reliance on the montage principle introduces a key qualitative difference that Benjamin elucidates by focusing on the modality of reproduction on which the two media rely. Neither photography nor film, he notes, derives its artistic quality from the objects it reproduces—in other words, the fact that photography and film may be reproductions of artworks does not automatically endow them with the perceptual qualities of the objects they depict. Unlike photography, however, film relies on a technical procedure that is bound to produce a new artistic element, that is, to affect perception in ways that are in excess of the sum total of what film depicts. This procedure is editing: “The work of art is produced only by means of montage. And each individual component of this montage is a reproduction of a process which neither is an artwork itself nor gives rise to one through photography” (SW 3:110).13

The discussion that follows makes clear that montage should not be simply understood as a technical principle proper to film. Rather, its operations form an illuminating correlate to the dehumanizing features of modern life, a claim that sections X–XII seek to corroborate in a long detour that defers discussion of montage as constitutive of film as art.14 The question of montage as an aesthetic principle had, however, already been broached in section VII, which juxtaposes film to photography by likening its concatenation of still frames to the role played by textual inserts (Beschriftung) in helping read photographs in illustrated magazines:

The directives given by captions to those looking at images in illustrated magazines soon become even more precise and commanding in films, where the way each single image is understood seems prescribed by the sequence of all the preceding images. (SW 3:108)15

This statement summarizes a longer discussion unfolding at the end of Benjamin’s “Little History of Photography,” which examined photography as a medium that traversed in a compressed way the historical trajectory leading up to the atrophy of aura in the present. By the beginning of the twentieth century, Benjamin argued in this earlier essay, the proliferation of photo-
graphic material in the illustrated press had exposed photography’s heteronomy, that is, its inability to function in a self-sufficient, autonomous mode. This was especially glaring in illustrated magazines, which reversed the traditional hierarchy that placed images in a subordinate relation to texts, which could also be received without illustrations. In betting on photographic material as the main carrier of entertainment and information, the photomagazine had to resort to captions or textual inserts that showed not only photography’s dependency on another medium, writing, for its disambiguation and contextualization, but also the historical contingency and ideological nature of the relation between text and image, which turned out to be the very obverse of the splendid self-sufficiency and semantic plenitude promised by auratic art. Benjamin insisted that the fact that in principle photographs cannot be made sense of without accompanying information delivered a salutary shock, that is, a jolt at the level of apperception that was the actual repository of their authenticity, as it spoke to the heteronomy of all art, to its fundamental boundedness to structures of perceptions, material technologies, and modes of labor (SW 2:527; GS 2.1:385).

These issues, Benjamin suggests in reprising the discussion from the photography essay, are productively magnified by the kind of Beschriftung or captioning film instantiates. Film, the passage indicates, pushes the logic of captioning to an extreme by stringing together images that must rely on each other for the necessary work of contextualization. In other words, in film the function of captioning is taken on by the surrounding images rather than by textual inserts, so each image never exists for itself but is always already positioned in relation to others, which it helps disambiguate. Beschriftung in this context partakes of two separate, seemingly incongruous moments. On the one hand it fulfills a disjointive function by interrupting the flow of images and thus emphasizing the heteronomy of the single image, that is, its fundamental dependence on the preceding one. On the other, it serves to conjoin the images to one another and helps form complex syntagmatic units that generate meaning on the basis of contiguity. Hence the new perceptual arrangement that film engenders on account of its specific features—its ability to both shrink and stretch time and space—not only explodes “the prison world” mediated by reified sensory routines, but also reassembles its shards following a combinatory, oneiric logic that, as Benjamin asserts in a controversial passage dropped from the essay’s later versions, form a correlate at a collective level of the dream processes of an individual psyche, allowing for therapeutic effects (SW 3:117–18; GS 7.1:376–77).

To unfold the implications of this logic, one can think of Lev Kuleshov’s
momentous experiments with filmic montage, particularly the much-discussed sequences that feature the same take of a blank male face in combination with shots of disparate objects—a bowl of soup, a revolver, a baby. These sequences function as minimal syntagmatic units that give the impression that the man is exhibiting wildly different feelings or emotions—craving for food, fear, affection. As Sam Rohdie pointedly puts it, the experiment is notable not solely because it showcases the human ability to make sense of any sequence of contiguous units, showing that meaning is at bottom contextual, that is, constituted at the level of the utterance. The experiment also emphasizes that the moment of fiction in these sequences does not reside in the images themselves, but in the cutting and pasting that makes up the sequence. Unlike D. W. Griffith, whose montage sequences imaginatively reassembled shots of objects that had occupied the same physical space or mise-en-scène, Kuleshov pasted together images derived from wildly disparate spatiotemporal contexts without in the least weakening the narrative force of his sequences. This demonstrated the constructive power of editing, which could produce narratives that did not hinge on reproducing/filming an existing state of affairs but rather in conjoining disparate material that was unrelated in “real life.” The force of the fiction constructed in this way was thus able to render imperceptible the moment of conjunction—the stitching together of unrelated elements—on which it nonetheless depended, dramatizing the inextricable nexus of dissociation and conjunction that makes up Benjamin’s concept of Beschriftung as the logic driving montage in film.\(^{17}\)

The juxtaposition I have drawn with Kuleshov’s montage experiments helps to emphasize the Constructivist streak of Benjamin’s understanding of montage, indeed, its focus on the element of production rather than reproduction of reality, but underplays an important aspect of his analysis, namely, its emphasis on the physiognomic potential of the medium and lack of concern for its semiotic aspects. That is, while Kuleshov’s experiments foreground the ability of filmic montage to produce a surplus at the level of discourse or story, Benjamin was rather more interested in the peculiar mimetic play that film engenders, which unfolds at the level of a production of forms. Key to this understanding of mimesis is a lengthy footnote from the urtext that discusses the ancient practice of mimes engaged in ritual representation:

The mime presents his subject as a semblance \(\text{[Der Nachmachende macht seine Sache scheinbar]}\). One could also say that he plays his subject. Thus we encounter the polarity informing mimesis. In mimesis, tightly interfolded like cotyledons, slumber the two aspects of art: semblance and play. \(\text{(SW 3:127)}\)^{18}
As Benjamin explains, in the oldest forms of performance the mime had no other material or medium than his body to work with. He summoned the semblance of things through a gestural, corporeal *Nachmachen* that was at bottom a “doing like,” an acting or becoming like the thing being mimed. Mimesis at this early juncture was thus based on the coexistence of two distinct moments: the demonstrative moment of performance (*Spiel*) and the imitation of appearances (*Schein*). The effectiveness of the mime’s operations, one can extrapolate, resided in a mode of mimicry that had little to do with modern concepts of illusionism or verisimilitude, but was rather about enacting salient features of the mimed object through performance. In the Western understanding of mimesis, however, the focus on the production of semblance gradually gained the upper hand at the expense of the dimension of performance or play, according to Benjamin, giving rise to the modern emphasis on art as schöner Schein or idealizing representation of appearances. Hence, the ancient understanding of mimesis as playful mimicry became supplanted by a focus on delivering an artifact that could function semiotically as the transfiguring stand-in for an original. For Benjamin the modern atrophy of aura allowed the reversal of this development and recovery of the mimetic moment of aesthetic play:

What is lost in the withering of semblance and the decay of the aura in works of art is matched by a huge gain in the scope for play [*Spiel-Raum*]. This space for for play is widest in film. . . . In film, the element of semblance has yielded its place to the element of play, which is allied to the second technology. (*SW* 3:127)

Film, as the modern instantiation of potentially emancipatory technology, was thus the medium that allowed for engaging experience again through playful mimicry. This claim, however, begs the question of how, exactly, film engenders mimetic play—not as a particular mode of emplotment or production of discourse, as in the Kuleshov example discussed above, but as physiognomic interaction with the world. This also raises the question of how to characterize closer the emancipatory import of mimesis thus defined.

To delve deeper into these issues it will be helpful to draw on an analogous discussion unfolding in Rudolf Arnheim’s *Film als Kunst* (*Film as Art*; 1932), which provides a foil for Benjamin’s analysis of film and is quoted at length in the footnote immediately preceding the one on mimesis I just examined (*GS* 7:1:367). On closer inspection, much of Benjamin’s discussion in this and the following sections (XII–XIV) echoes Arnheim’s extended examination of film’s illusionism. Spelling out film’s illusionary power was
for Arnheim a key step in naming its artistic quality and thus rebuking those who portrayed the new medium as brute technology only capable of an artless rendering of reality (Wirklichkeitswiedergabe).\textsuperscript{22} Far from delivering a replica of the experiential world, Arnheim maintained, film produced it anew and thus fulfilled the fundamental human impulse to imitate, that is, to negotiate experience by re-creating it through representation.\textsuperscript{23} Within Arnheim’s modernist anthropological framework, art’s ability to produce experience was predicated on exploiting the gap separating the aesthetic artifact from the sensory image elicited by an object in real life. In the case of film, this meant that the “film image” (Filmbild), with its pronounced flatness and lack of color, wasn’t anything like the corresponding “world image” (Weltbild) as relayed through the human sensory apparatus, yet precisely the divergence between the two mobilized perception and engendered the productive repetition that was at the heart of film’s evidentiary force.\textsuperscript{24}

Arnheim, in short, identified film’s mimetic ability in its playful amplification of a gap between perception and technological apparatus. Translated into the conceptual framework of Benjamin’s mime, who summons an object by enacting its salient features through the gestural performance of a body that looks pronouncedly different from the object itself, one could say that what Arnheim called the inherent deficit of the film image, its conspicuous departure from the object as normally perceived, would be the demonstrative moment, the moment of play or performance, whereas the similarity or physiognomic overlap between film image and the object’s appearance would constitute the moment of Schein, or semblance. Thus film functions as a technological prosthesis that realizes the mimetic play valued by Benjamin by juxtaposing the ingrained appearance of selfsame time and space to the productively jumbled, distorted images of an “optical unconscious” (SW 3:117; GS 7.1:376). Within this framework the montage of images in film executes a form of mimicry that does not copy, but rather produces experience by repeating it with a differential physiognomic surplus. At issue is a creative imitative impulse that is realized at a most fundamental bodily level, that is, by mobilizing perception.

This connection is confirmed by Benjamin’s discussion of the paradoxical sense of immediacy evoked by film. In section XIV Benjamin directly reprises, without explicitly quoting them, arguments that structure Arnheim’s comparison between the illusionism of stage drama and the illusionism of film. He, however, tweaks Arnheim’s conclusions by maintaining that film’s ability to conjure a perfectly self-contained, illusionistic world relies, paradoxically, on the overwhelming encroachment of technology:\textsuperscript{25}
In principle, the theatre includes a position from which the action on the stage cannot easily be detected as an illusion. There is no such position where a film is being shot. The illusory nature of film is of the second degree; it is the result of editing. That is to say: *In the film studio the apparatus has penetrated so deeply into reality that a pure view of that reality, free of the foreign body of equipment, is the result of a special procedure—namely, the shooting by the specially adjusted photographic device and the assembly of that shot with others of the same kind. The equipment-free aspect of reality has here become the height of artifice, and the vision of immediate reality the Blue Flower in the land of technology.* ([*SW* 3:115])

Live drama, this passage contends, can be enjoyed from a perspective that masks the moment of illusion. The audience can, for instance, forget that the actors on stage are playing roles and instead experience the dramatic action as immediately unfolding events. This has to do with the distinctive illusionism of drama, which hinges on witnessing live actors perform in real time. Film’s illusionism is qualitatively different in that its diegetic unfolding is the result of individual shots that have been spliced together through montage. This means that film does not allow for a vantage point that could induce the viewer to forget about the constructed nature of the single shot. Indeed, in film the sense of immediacy (“a pure view of that reality”; *der Anblick der unmittelbaren Wirklichkeit*) engendered by the apparent absence of technological mediation (“the equipment-free aspect”; *der apparatfreie Aspekt*) is actually the result of montage as a technical procedure essential to film, and which, as discussed in the Kuleshov example above, produces a coherent effect through a complex nexus of dissociation and conjunction. This sets film off from the immediacy summoned by stage drama, which ultimately arises from viewers watching an action actually unfolding before their eyes. Hence Benjamin concludes that the unmediated (“equipment-free”) quality of the reality relayed by film actually constitutes its most constructed (“artificial” or *künstlich*) trait. In this respect the impression of immediate reality in film can be given the status of a deluded yearning for an uncontaminated natural condition, one that Benjamin sardonically likens to the Romantic longing for a mythical blue flower unfurling in a contemporary landscape saturated by technology.

While this statement would seem to usher in a critique of film as a most pernicious technology bent on manufacturing the simulacrum of immediate reality in order to amplify and entrench the phantasmagoric delusions of
commodity capitalism, the subsequent paragraph drops this argumentative thread and instead adds new terms of comparison to the juxtaposition of theater and film. At issue are, quite surprisingly, the positive effects of the immediacy produced by film, which is valorized not for its illusionistic power, that is, for its skill in summoning lifelike appearances, but rather for its ability to collapse distance. In a complicated analogy that involves, among other things, substituting painting for the example of stage drama unfolded up to this point, this paragraph juxtaposes the practice of the painter and the cameraman to the healing art of the magician and the surgeon, respectively. Like the painter, the magician retains a natural distance from the person on whom he imposes his healing hands. By contrast, the surgeon resembles the cameraman in that he radically collapses the distance to his patient and even violates the integrity of his body in order to heal it. If the magician/painter retains a total picture of experience as a result of his preserving the conventional distance to it, the image of reality produced by the cameraman/surgeon is conspicuously piecemeal and reassembled according to a new law, a principle that is different from any structure gleaned in experience:

The images obtained by each differ enormously. The painter’s is a total image, whereas that of the cinematographer is piecemeal, its manifold parts being assembled according to a new law. Hence, the presentation of reality in film is incomparably the more significant for people of today, since it provides the equipment-free aspect of reality they are entitled to demand from a work of art, and does so precisely on the basis of the most intensive interpenetration of reality with equipment. (SW 3:116)28

Taking the analogy between cameraman and surgeon full circle, this passage claims that film’s contemporary relevance lies in granting access to reality in a mode that circumvents technological mediation. This is made possible, paradoxically, by film’s radical commingling of reality and technology—what a few lines before was dubbed its heightened artificiality. The seeming incongruity of this claim is compounded by the parenthetical remark according to which the person of today is entitled to demand of the artwork a presentation of reality unencumbered by the apparatus. But why should the contemporary individual expect a presentation of experience free of the apparatus? What value does it have and how does it square with the contradictory claim about film’s artificial immediacy?

Key to unfolding these admittedly cryptic statements is the differentiated understanding of immediacy that is entailed by the qualifiers unmittelbar and apparatfrei. While unmittelbar in the phrase “Anblick der unmittelbaren
Wirklichkeit” evokes the illusionary moment of art, that is, its ability to produce sensuous forms that promise direct access to undistorted reality, the term *apparatfrei* in the expression “den apparatfreien Aspekt der Wirklichkeit” refers to the absence of technological mediation as a material condition. This semantic difference is consequential, as *apparatfrei* is not burdened by an understanding of immediacy as a quest for uncontaminated nature and mythical blue flowers, but rather signals the elimination of material hurdles that may prevent access to the real. This aligns film with the surgeon’s willingness to collapse the putatively natural distance from his patient and cut his body open in order to heal it. Film’s constructed ability to present reality as unencumbered by the apparatus recalls the ways in which the artificial, demonstrative thrust of Brecht’s epic drama endeavors to tear down the invisible wall that separates the audience from the actors in auratic forms of drama, according to Benjamin. This artificiality is dialectically linked to a notion of immediacy that may well promise to grant access to unadulterated reality, but is at bottom the product of convention, and as such erects a barrier between audience and dramatic action, producing the impression that the events unfolding on stage are endowed with transcendent authority and immutability. Along similar lines, film’s interlacing of illusion and artificiality destroys the “conventional” distance to the real by dramatizing the fact that the reality it presents under the guise of immediacy is in fact thoroughly constructed, as it has been cut up and reassembled through the principle of montage.

One can conclude that the artificial immediacy film produces appears desirable not because of its ability to summon a lifelike world, but rather because its distinctive illusionism helps bring reality closer by presenting it as constructed and changeable. Shrinking distance, moreover, recalls a trait that quintessentially defines storytelling as a practice that produces collective experience. This begs the question of how, exactly, one is to understand the argument about collapsed distance that forms the core of film’s constructed immediacy. Early in the essay Benjamin had emphasized photography’s and film’s ability to make the semblance of things portable and thus bring them before the masses (*SW* 3:103–4; *GS* 7.1:352–53). One could observe that this type of portability certainly collapses distance, though what is ultimately moved here is the image of a thing duplicated by mechanical means. While it is true that reproducibility destroys the object’s aura by engulfing the phenomenological singularity of its appearance in an ocean of duplicates, the question is how a viewer engages with the portable image itself. Does collapsing distance entail viewing a reproduction that presents the object much in the same way the photographer or cameraman would have seen it? Is this about the possibility of experiencing the object vicariously without being in
its presence? This would bring us back to a discussion of illusionism, of evoking semblance through illusion. Hence collapsed distance would be metaphorical in the final analysis; it would be another term for illusion. Film and photography would then allow for getting closer to objects in what is fundamentally the mode of Schein and not involve any type of physiognomic play.

Significantly, the following sections directly reprise the question of play by exploring the collective mode of reception engendered by film. This entails, at an individual level, a form of engagement that eschews the immersive response demanded by auratic art and rather favors a distracted attitude (SW 3:119), one that recalls the stance of “expert appraisal” championed by Bertolt Brecht. Benjamin moves, however, beyond Brecht’s position by postulating a simultaneous collective reception that forms a correlate to the reception engendered by the epic and by architecture (SW 3:116–17; GS 7.1:374–75). While what immediately follows focuses on the Spielraum that is opened by the augmented visual range of film, which is famously likened to an “optical unconscious” (SW 3:117; GS 7.1:376), the argument takes an unexpected turn in section XVII, which involves valorizing film as much for the tactile mode of reception it engenders as for its ability to broaden visual perception. Key to this valorization of the haptic is the question of how to account for the collective quality of film reception given that the visual remains haunted by the lure of contemplation and thus by the threat of an isolating mode of reception. If the visual is always in peril of yielding to the contemplative when left to its own devices, Benjamin intimates, the tactile provides a much-needed corrective that allows for engaging objects in an unself-conscious and habit-driven mode, recalling the mix of self-oblivious listening and habitual bodily routine that fosters storytelling in the Leskov essay (SW 3:120; GS 7.1:381). Notably, this tactile engagement is made possible by the breakdown of perceptual routines elicited by the montage of shots in film. As expounded in an important footnote that continues the comparison between film and painting, the breakdown induced by montage produces a shock that prevents contemplative immersion:

The image on the film screen changes, whereas the image on the canvas does not. The painting invites the viewer to contemplation; before it, he can give himself up to his train of associations. Before a film image, he cannot do so. No sooner has he seen it than it has already changed. It cannot be fixed on. The train of associations in the person contemplating it is immediately interrupted by new images. This constitutes the shock effect of film, which, like all shock effects, seek to induce heightened attention. Film is the art form corresponding to the
pronounced threat to life in which people live today. It corresponds to profound changes in the apparatus of apperception. (SW 3:132 n. 33)\textsuperscript{32}

The rapid succession of images in film undercuts contemplation by interrupting the natural flow of associations that provide a spontaneous frame of reference for reading individual images. In this respect film formally mimics an essential trait of modern life, which incessantly subjects individuals to experiences that cannot be fitted into available experiential patterns. As Benjamin noted in a similar discussion unfolding in “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” consciousness intervenes to parry the shock produced by inability to weave these experiences into the web of unself-conscious, habitual practices and thus helps defuse their traumatic potential.\textsuperscript{33} However, while in the Baudelaire essay the shock-driven perception of film is valued solely as a formal correlate to the alienated rhythm of labor on the assembly line, the shock effect is here given a more positive twist, as it allows for preventing the immersive, contemplative mode engendered by the historical conditioning of the visual. Another significant difference is that shock is here associated with a presence of mind (Geistesgegenwart), a heightened state of alertness that does not quite rise to the level of consciousness (Bewußtsein) described in the Baudelaire essay. That is, the jolt that derails the contemplative state of automatized visual reception is treated here more like a physical effect than a complex psychological phenomenon.\textsuperscript{34} Filmic montage thus reproduces a basic physiological response to the alienated circumstances of metropolitan life and modern labor in order to make it productive for an emancipatory engagement with experience.

Before I discuss the ramifications of this last point, which pulls together the essay’s various argumentative strands and ushers its conclusion, let me sum up the main aspects of montage as a principle that is key to defining film as art. Montage figures in the essay not so much as a technique that is helpful in describing the poetics of film, but rather as a point of interface between technology and the human sensory apparatus that operates at various, interconnected levels. At the physiognomic level suggested by discussion of the Arnheim intertext, the incongruous mix of similarity and difference that marks the relation between our picture of the world and the montage of film images hinges on a type of mimicry that operates at the level of perception to deform the trusted physiognomy of the real and thus explode the iron cage of conventional experience. In addition, the coexistence of a disjointive and conjunctive moment in montage produces an effect of artificial immediacy that shatters the halo of unattainability that envelops auratic art. In so doing montage collapses distance not only to the artistic object, but also to the ex-
perience it represents, making both appear accessible and changeable. Finally, the shock produced by the montage of images engenders a state of alertness that jolts the viewer out of the automatized contemplative mode associated with vision—that very mode which causes the individual to fold onto himself and cuts him off from the outer world.

It is this physical jolt that accounts for the tactile quality of film—a quality that turns individuals outwardly, favoring their incorporation into a mass of other individuals. In forming an antithesis to both the psychological focus and the physical segregation produced by contemplative visuality, this mode of reception is _zerstreut_ in the double sense of distracted and scattered:

> Distraction and concentration form an antithesis, which may be formulated as follows. A person who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it; he enters into the work. . . . By contrast, the distracted masses absorb the work of art into themselves. Their waves lap around it; they encompass it with their tide. This is most obvious with regards to buildings. Architecture has always offered the prototype of an artwork that is received in a state of distraction and through the collective. (_SW_ 3:119f)\(^{35}\)

This passage famously juxtaposes the tactile visuality of film to the unself-conscious, habit-driven mode of interaction elicited by architectural forms. At issue is the kind of simultaneously distracted (i.e., not focused through consciousness) and scattered (that is, plural, collective) reception that marks the physical engagement with architecture, and which enables a mass of individuals to engulf buildings with the metamorphic movement of constantly shifting waves. In this scattered mode driven by habit and utilitarian considerations, individuals come into contact with objects and with each other, establishing patterns of ever-changing physical contiguity.\(^{36}\) In the words of Michael Taussig, this distracted mode is about “the unstoppable merging of the object of perception with the body of the perceiver and not just with the mind’s eye.”\(^{37}\) In restoring tactility to the visual, it allows for recuperating vision for a kind of mimesis, that is, a technologically augmented repetition of forms that presents key features of desirable storytelling. In the first place, it is oriented outwardly and marked by an emphasis on habit and need, thus undercutting the self-segregating self-sufficiency of auratic art. It further presents reality as open to intervention by producing an artificial immediacy that collapses distance to both the art object and the experience it presents. Collapsed distance is here to be understood physiologically, as an appropriation of bodily routines governed by the shock-driven rhythms of modern la-
bor. This tweaking of bodily responses opens the way for unself-conscious patterns of apperception that complement the visual by means of a tactile mode that facilitates forms of reception predicated on distraction and habit. Bridged distance is in turn key to creating physical contiguity and engendering collective bonds among individuals. *Zerstreueung*, one may say in closing, elicits a mode of experience that is inherently plural and enables the masses to come into their own as a substantive collective.

- It has often been noted that many of the conclusions Benjamin reaches in the artwork essay do not appear particularly stringent or even plausible. This is especially true of the epilogue’s wildly optimistic prognosis, which famously hails the incipient politicization of art at the hands of communism as a formidable antidote against the aestheticization of politics perpetrated by fascism. The evocative force of this chiasmatic formula cannot paper over the generic nature of the recommendation, which begs for a much harder look at the specifics of the contemporary historical moment. How, given the state of the film industry in the mid-1930s, could a collective of moviegoers make the transition to a proletariat ready to take on class struggle? And based on what could one celebrate film’s all-pervasive, artificial illusion given the ways Hollywood studios and the national-socialist film industry put this very illusionary power to work to peddle ideologically noxious or mind-numbing film fare? Furthermore, why should the shock of montage jolt the body back to desirable tactile modes governed by habit instead of intensifying the neurotic forms of behavior developed on the modern workplace?

While I acknowledge the importance of these questions and of the criticism that drives them, my concern here is not with evaluating the diagnostic power of Benjamin’s analysis, but rather with reconstructing the implicit understanding of narrative practice that informs his discussion of film. This practice comes into sharp focus if one juxtaposes the essay’s account of montage to the unconventional notion of storytelling developed in the Leskov essay, which grounds storytelling in a mode of imitative behavior that appropriates key tenets of contemporary philosophical anthropology. This hinges on a notion of mimesis that operates at the level of perception and involves a mimicry of forms that produces new forms. The understanding of narrative thus engendered no longer rests on investing experience with meaning through stories that illuminate it in an analogical mode. Narrative practice, rather, directly produces desirable experience by activating routines of the body linked to contemporary experiential environments and modes of labor. Their immediate effect is to collapse distance among individuals and the ob-
jects that make up one’s environment. Within this framework, the physical contiguity of storytelling in premodern times finds its counterpart in the haptic mode of reception produced by the montage of images in film, whose shock effect shatters the isolating parameters of visual contemplation and favors the establishment of intersubjective bonds. As a principle of conjunction and disjunction that productively alters ingrained patterns of perception by mimicking them, montage produces an artificial type of immediacy, that is, a mode of evidence that is not predicated on the illusionistic conjuring of lifelike worlds, but rather on exploiting the congruence between contemporary technology, bodily routines, and forms of apperception. The montage of images in film thus realizes the outward, practical orientation Benjamin identifies with storytelling, which forms a prerequisite of communicable experience.

While identifying montage primarily with film technology, Benjamin repeatedly noted that its principle of disjunction and recombination had implications for other media as well. He famously drew on montage to describe the operations of Brecht’s epic theater, remarking that Brecht’s notion of gesture was at bottom a transposition of the technical understanding of montage developed for film and radio onto the broader domain of human affairs. These glosses emphasize Benjamin’s awareness that montage was bound to play out differently in different media through varying material conditions and institutional constraints. For instance, he noted that epic theater and filmic montage were both predicated on strategies of interruption, but that the moment of interruption in film had primarily Reizcharacter; that is, it operated at the level of a basic perceptual trigger, whereas it assumed a more elaborated pedagogical character in drama. This had to do with the fact that illusionistic drama lacked the disjunctive temporality that in film results from the sequencing and splicing of distinct frames. In other words, if film’s temporal flow is inherently pieced together, the continuous flow of dramatic time had to be interrupted in the first place by turning the unity of action into an aggregate of distinct situations through a variety of defamiliarizing devices that included the deployment of gestures, understood not as a spontaneous expression of the body but rather as conventional behavioral units crisscrossed by a web of partially conflicting social meanings. Hence Brechtian dramatic praxis was able to reduce character behavior to an assemblage of recognizably conventional, and thus quotable, gestures, whose effect unfolded at a semiotic rather than perceptual level. The effect elicited by Brechtian montage was thus Staunen, an amazement linked to a defamiliarizing semiotic play that defies audience expectations and produces new read-
nings of the ostensibly familiar, rather than the more basic shock of apperception of filmic montage.

Benjamin’s own appropriation of the montage principle is found in the assemblage of quotations that make up the *Arcades* project, which offers an alternative historical account of the nineteenth century telescoped through the ruins of the Parisian arcades. Here historical writing is to be understood as a “literary montage” of the passages Benjamin transcribed from the myriad of books he poured over at the Bibliothèque Nationale between 1934 and 1940, which are only occasionally interspersed with terse remarks in his own voice. This amounts to a “poetics of parataxis,” in the words of Richard Sieburth, that deliberately dispenses with explanatory commentary, that is, forgoes the mediation of generalizing statements and rather relies on the demonstrative force of the copied fragments themselves, whose dialectical constellations allow for a touching of past and present that produces imponderable flashes of insight and recalls the constructed collapsing of distance and artificial immediacy made possible by film.39 Sieburth especially emphasizes the distinctive mimetic force of Benjamin’s act of copying, which “involves a repetition of the same, a reduplication of identity—but an identity that contains within itself a crucial, infinitesimal difference”40—a difference that is physiognomic, that is, has to do with the perceptual character of the writing, and not primarily semantic. In further likening Benjamin’s activity as a scrivener to the cannibalistic practice of quotation Benjamin himself had eloquently pinned on Karl Kraus, Sieburth stresses how this mimetic understanding of writing entails a mode of physical appropriation, one that, one may add, mirrors the bodily incorporation Benjamin described in his glosses on reading. Hence Benjamin reconceptualized the task of the historian along the lines of a writerly cannibalism that refrains from acts of interpretive commentary that would engender a linear and homogenous narrative of history, and rather offers “history as parataxis,” “a montage where any moment may enter into sudden adjacency with another.”41

Benjamin’s understanding of the media-specific inflections of montage practices shows how for him montage was a principle marking the interface between body, technologies, signifying practices, and power structures. The effects of this interface could be appropriated for a narrative mode that did not consist in making experience intelligible by superimposing a meaningful order on it, but rather engendered experience directly through a mimicry of forms. This is, specifically, a desirable experiential mode that is oriented toward an outside and is inherently plural—the plural constituting a fundamental condition of possibility for substantive experience. The body is cen-
tral to this experiential modality as both the locus of the self and a medium for an interactive perception that both centers and decenters the self by enabling or stifling given emotional and perceptual routines. This understanding of narrative places a premium on the body’s automatisms and perceptual capability while avoiding the perils of essentialism. Reading the artwork essay in conjunction with “The Storyteller” makes clear that the body or the corporeal is not coterminous with the givens of organic physicality, but is rather incessantly produced through interaction with perceptual forms and technologies. Along these lines, the ability to collapse distance among individuals is not to be understood as an actual touching of physical bodies, but is rather an interconnectedness realized through the multiple ways in which forms and technologies mobilize perception. In short, mapping the changing interaction with technology and its ability to alter experiential patterns allows a phenomenological understanding of the body that is historically inflected as an evolving network of interactions operating at various levels.

Understanding narrative as a manipulation of perceptual routines further suggests that the virtual or fictional of narrative is not a quality that is opposed to a real world of which narrative would be an imperfect or manipulative imitation, but is rather an arena for practicing an interaction with forms and bodies that generates shared experience. Film represented for Benjamin a most advanced technological arena for playing with our world, our senses, and the forms of experience. His valorization of the new medium was not driven by a naive faith in technology, as some critics have charged, but rather by awareness that the same technology that lends itself to subjugation can be appropriated for emancipatory aims. What drives this awareness was the possibility of grasping technology’s effects as emanating from a plurality of historically situated discourses and devices, rather than demonizing or idealizing it as a monolithic abstraction. Precisely this optimistic notion of a narrative practice that grounds in perception and the prosthetic potential of technology echoes the discourse and practice of artists associated with Dada and Constructivism, with whose artistic milieu Benjamin was well familiar. In the next chapters I turn to examining exemplary cases that inflect the paradigm of narrative montage delineated in his discourse.