2003

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TECHNOLOGY, TIME, AND THE RETURN OF ABSTRACT PAINTING.

GRAHAM MACPHEE

[The artist] says to himself, thinking of life around him: this world at one time looked different and, in the future, will look different again.
—Paul Klee, *On Modern Art* (1924)

I was surprised by photography. . . . Suddenly, I saw it in a new way, as a picture that offered me a new view, free of all the conventional criteria I had always associated with art.
—Gerhard Richter, interview with Rolf Schön (1972)

NOW AND THEN

It is often observed that while abstract painting once scandalised the bourgeois public with its failure to present things ‘as they are’, abstraction is now used routinely within popular culture for advertising, packaging and branding. But although much has been made of this irony, less attention has been paid to another ironic reversal involved in the reception of abstract art, one that takes place at the level of art criticism. For if abstract painting once proved difficult for a non-specialist public outside of the enclosed world of the avant-garde, contemporary abstract painting often appears problematic precisely to the specialist ‘public’ of art historians and critics whose concern is not only to mediate between ‘art’ and its publics, but also between art’s past and our cultural present. This sense of the contemporary ‘difficulty’ of abstract painting was identified by Benjamin Buchloh in an essay first published in 1977, ‘Readymade, Photography and Painting in the Painting of Gerhard Richter’ (Buchloh, 2000, 365–403). Written during the emergence of the ‘new’ or ‘radical’ art history, Buchloh’s essay locates the problematic status of abstract painting at a key moment in the development of what have become the dominant paradigms in English-speaking art criticism.1 As Buchloh notes, Richter’s work is marked by a promiscuous eclecticism and by a refusal of both the purity of the medium and the category ‘art’ itself. Thus, not only does his output include happenings, installations, sculpture, and murals, but also ‘photo-pictures’—paintings based
on snapshots and mass media photographs (see figure 1, *Woman Descending the Staircase*, 1965; figure 3 *S. with Child*, 1995). However, according to Buchloh’s essay, it is not the diversity or impurity of Richter’s work that proved critically problematic, since these are precisely the impulses that animate the ‘new art history’. Rather, what makes Richter’s work difficult to plot or map within the terms of this emergent critical discourse is his commitment to abstract painting (see figure 2, *Untitled (Line)*, 1968; figure 5, *Abstract Picture*, 1977).

Through the 1960s and 1970s Anglophone art criticism was concerned with developing critical vocabularies that could address the new practices of Pop Art, Minimalism and Conceptual Art. In turn, this impulse was accompanied by a reaction against the previously hegemonic Abstract Expressionism, and by a rejection of the claims associated with the emergence of aesthetic modernism at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. Thus, as Buchloh observes, by 1977 abstract painting was increasingly understood as harking back to a moment when gesture could still engender the experience of emotional turbulence, when chromatic veils credibly conveyed a sense of transparence and spatial infinity, when impasto could read as immediacy and emphatic material presence, when linear formation read as direction in space, movement through time, as operative force of the will of the subject, and when composition and successful integration of all of these elements into painting constituted the experience of the subject. (Buchloh 2000, 399)

For a critical moment that was coming to see itself as ‘post-modern’, abstraction was seen to be irrevocably bound up with claims for the expressivity of a self-identical and autonomous subject, claims that were increasingly considered not only implausible but arrogant and politically undesirable. However, Buchloh’s essay also identifies another reason why abstraction has come to appear irrevocably ‘out of date’. The last century has witnessed an extraordinary expansion of the role played by optical and image technologies, from the emergence of cinema through advances in printing and photography, to the introduction of television and video, and more recently the new digital technologies of image reproduction and circulation. Technology’s capacity to reproduce images has been understood to reformulate the very nature of visual experience in ways that parallel the theoretical critique of the modern subject. By the 1970s, this convergence was increasingly articulated through the paradigms of the ‘spectacle’ and the ‘simulacrum’ developed by Guy Debord in *Society of the Spectacle* (1967) and Jean Baudrillard in *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1976) and *On Seduction* (1979). Where modern thought had stressed the role of the subjectivity in framing appearance and imbuing it with meaning and coherence, for Debord and Baudrillard
technology is seen as itself supplying the frames through which the subject orders visual experience and makes it meaningful. From this perspective, the mass reproduction and dissemination of images is understood to colonise the conscious and unconscious processes through which the subject senses, desires, and understands the visible world. Thus, notwithstanding their differences, Debord’s ‘spectacle’ and Baudrillard’s ‘simulacrum’ both describe a visual condition marked by the withdrawal of the visual agency once ascribed to the modern subject.

In Anglo-American cultural criticism, the accounts of the spectacle and the simulacrum developed in France have come to inflect the retrospective construction of aesthetic modernism, a connection that is perhaps most evident in the work of Frederic Jameson. Jameson’s well-known essay, ‘Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism’, narrates the history of the ‘absorption’ of the aesthetic autonomy once claimed by modern art, which is now understood to have been ‘incorporated’ into the rhythms of commodity consumption associated with technologically mediated mass culture (1991, 1–54). For Jameson, modernism offered a domain for the free-play of our sensory capacities outside of the instrumental calculation of modern rationality, precisely because it refused to present ‘things as they are’—or represent appearances as they conform to our cognitive frameworks of intelligibility. But according to Jameson, such a realm freed from the prior determination of form is what has been lost within the new visual condition of the spectacle and the simulacrum. For not only is the image-world of contemporary culture comprised of reproduced or ‘second hand’ images, but our perceptual frameworks are themselves already organised in corresponding terms. In this regard Jameson’s approach articulates a broader sense of the symmetry or fit between the contemporary disenchantment with aesthetic modernism and the paradigms of the spectacle and the simulacrum originally developed in France.

For Buchloh, this historical narrative informs Richter’s work, while at the same time explaining why his turn to abstraction is so problematic for contemporary criticism. On the one hand, Richter’s photo-pictures can be seen to embody or perform the incorporation of painting into the technologically mediated realm of the spectacle, in that they literally reproduce the optical parameters of photography within the medium of painting. As such they can be said to exhibit a historical awareness in the sense that they register the historical ‘absorption’ of painting by technologically mediated culture. But on the other hand, Richter’s abstract paintings present a particular difficulty since they seem to contravene the very historical awareness manifested by his photo-pictures, a difficulty which the essay identifies
in their bifurcated reception within American criticism. According to Buchloh, Richter’s abstract paintings had been understood in one of two ways in the United States: either as marking a nostalgia for the technical virtuosity and expressivity associated with the modern subject, or as an ironic gesture of postmodern pastiche. In terms of the first interpretation, Richter is seen to have ‘mastered a craft and skill at a moment in history when the practices of visual meaning production have already moved [on], and where the meaning produced by the belatedly acquired virtuoso performance generates an empty discourse’. In terms of the second, abstraction is simply one of the ‘tropes of Richter’s painterly rhetoric’, which functions exclusively through ‘paraphrase and citation, parody and repetition’ (2000, 395).

Therefore, what is signalled in the repetition of abstraction is not the intention to recapture the lost aesthetic experience of modern art, but the technological logic of repetition itself, a logic that now defines the parameters of visual experience. In these terms, the abstract image does not constitute an attempt to return an earlier mode of experience, however unsuccessfully, but simply offers another instance of technological appearance in all its blank irony and depthlessness.

Buchloh’s essay is dissatisfied with these two approaches because they assume a homogenous temporality within which the abstract image is apprehended. In the case of the first response, Richter’s canvases uniformly inhabit the ‘then’ of aesthetic modernism, but because they now exist within a visual context where painterly technique no longer engenders the sensory free-play it once promised, they remain inert and empty. In the case of the second, these canvases uniformly inhabit the ‘now’ of the technological image, a visual context whose incapacity to provide a sense of the pastness of the past locks visual experience within a perpetual present. But as Buchloh’s essay argues, the homogenous temporality assumed by each of these critical responses fails to register the ways in which Richter’s paintings place the techniques of abstraction in tension with the technological organisation of vision, setting up a dialectic between ‘then’ and ‘now’. For Buchloh, Richter’s abstract paintings neither simply inhabit the ‘then’ of aesthetic modernism nor the ‘now’ of spectacular appearance, but explore the historical condition of painting by returning the ‘then’ into the ‘now’ and placing them in dialectical tension. Consequently, they ‘provide us with an immediate insight into the contemporary conditions of painting: to exist between the irreconcilable demands of the spectacle’ and an aesthetic practice that ‘promised a form of resistance and opposition to … the mass cultural forms of representation that govern everyday life’. By recalling the promise of aesthetic modernism within the very scene of the spectacle, these paintings demonstrate that ‘the one practice that remained outside of that
totality becomes its most precious domain’. As such, they offer a critical insight into the fate of art in technology, understood by Buchloh as its progressive absorption within the spectacle (2000, 400). Ironically, then, Buchloh argues that Richter’s abstract paintings register the very history that informs contemporary critical paradigms, but which they fail to see there.

Buchloh’s reading has had a significant impact on Richter’s reception, and his abstract paintings are now more easily accommodated by contemporary Anglo-American criticism. However, there is a further irony involved in Buchloh’s analysis that is not registered within the terms of the essay, an irony that centres on the kind of visual transaction implied by this more complex temporality. For if Richter’s abstract paintings in some sense recall the history of modern art’s incorporation into the spectacle, the very fact that they can do so cuts across this history in a double sense. Taken as an instance of the after-life of aesthetic modernism, Richter’s paintings are seen to provide an image that is not tied ineluctably to the expressivity of the subject, but offers a yield or return that exceeds the parameters of subjective intention. Taken as instances of spectacular perception, they offer a kind of return that is quite impossible within the terms of the spectacle, which is defined precisely by its inability to return to the eye any sense of location within historical time. Thus, if Buchloh is right to see the re-emergence of history in Richter’s abstract canvases, ironically the history that is recalled there is not the one that he had intended.

This latter irony suggests that the significance of Richter’s turn to abstraction is not exhausted by Buchloh’s 1977 essay, but continues to pose questions for our own critical moment. However, these questions cannot be conceived within narrow disciplinary terms, since they involve the broader critical frameworks through which we have come to figure the fate of visual experience in technological modernity. In order to map out some of these wider issues, this essay will therefore first consider the basic conceptions of visual experience underlying recent cultural theory, and identify their role in constructing the historical narrative of modernism’s incorporation into the spectacle. It will then consider the alternative approach offered by the work of the Weimar philosopher and critic Walter Benjamin, whose assessment of the impact of technology on experience was itself aligned with an examination of the alternative futures anticipated by aesthetic modernism. In order to return to Richter’s painting, then, it is necessary first to recall a broader history of critical engagement with vision and technology.

LOOKING BACK
Jameson’s account of postmodernism points to the wider influence of French cultural theory on Anglo-American criticism, and particularly of accounts of the new technological condition of vision developed by Guy Debord, Jean Baudrillard and Paul Virilio since the late 1960s. While the work of these theorists involves significant differences, there are important elements of convergence, not least in their shared claim that the new technological condition of vision involves the ‘loss of the real’, an assessment that is understood to mark a fundamental break with modernity. However, there is another point of agreement that is less often remarked: for Debord, Baudrillard, Virilio and Jameson, this new visual condition is understood as the actualisation of modern thought and its conception of vision. That is, technology’s organisation of the visible is understood to actualise the dream of visual coherence which they see as characterising modern philosophy, but only to produce an integrated image-world in which appearances are illusory and the subject’s gaze is fixed and preordained.

This conceptual inheritance can be observed at the level of their respective conceptions of the transaction between image and perceiving consciousness. Here it is possible to identify a significant correlation between recent accounts of technological vision and the notions of return that emerged in the historical reception of Kant’s conception of beauty and the sublime. Within the broader terms of Kant’s project, the ‘reflective judgement’ associated with the experience of beauty offers an important contrast to the ‘determinate judgement’ of cognition, which is understood as the application of a cognitive principle or law to the sensory manifold of intuition. In the apprehension of beauty, intuitions anticipate or produce the terms of their own unification without the application of an external unity or law. The feeling of pleasure occasioned by beauty therefore attests to the compatibility of intuition and concept in judgement, while at the same time maintaining their radical heterogeneity as sensible and intellectual. Conversely, where the phenomenal world exceeds the spatio-temporal coordinates of human intuition no such unification is possible, a situation that Kant designates as the ‘sublime’, and which he understands as marking the limits of human experience. These terms were subsequently transposed by the Romantics from the wider context they inhabited in Kant’s critical philosophy to the more limited confines of art criticism, but as a result they came to describe a more restricted economy of perception. As humanly produced, the beautiful object can be seen as returning to the gaze an image that anticipates its framing in perception, thereby instancing a sensory arrangement that matches the character of human consciousness. In these terms, aesthetic experience comes to mark a circular return in which the subject ultimately sees only its own unity and
self-identity. Or, in the language of Romanticism, the beautiful object *looks back*, returning to the gaze a configuration of appearances that corresponds to the fixed character of human consciousness. Conversely, the failure to effect such a circular return instanced by the sublime comes to figure less as an indication of the limits of human experience, and more as defining the condition of freedom, conceived as the release from a static structure of consciousness.  

The circular notion of return that emerged from the Romantic reception of Kant can be seen to re-emerge within the various accounts of visual experience developed by Debord, Baudrillard, Jameson and Virilio. For each of these theorists, the ubiquity of optical and visual technologies means that appearances no longer occasion the difficult process of producing form, but are already ‘pre-formed’ in the manner of the work of art. In the case of Debord and Baudrillard, this situation is understood in terms that recall the circular return of beauty, in that the technological image-world that confronts the perceiving subject already anticipates the terms of its framing in perception. Therefore, the effect of technology is to lock the subject within a perennial cycle, since consciousness is already organised in terms of, alternatively, the ‘spectacle’ or the ‘code’. Although invoking both Debord and Baudrillard, Jameson’s account of postmodernism in fact follows Jean-François Lyotard, who sees the failure of such a return in the sublime as the central characteristic of postmodern experience. Jameson therefore describes the ‘cultural logic of late capitalism’ as a ‘technological sublime’, in which the visual intensity and spatial complexity of technological appearance overwhelms the categories of the perceiving subject, consigning it to a perpetual state of disorientation. Virilio’s account of the history of modern perception harnesses both the circular return of beauty and the non-return of the sublime. The impact of technology seesaws between a blank seeing and a dizzying disorientation, generating a vicious spiral that leads inexorably to the ‘automation of perception’, or what Virilio calls the ‘vision machine’. Thus for Jameson, technology’s spatial intensification of appearances can only be registered as an absolute and inescapable incoherence; while for Virilio, the only response available to the disorientated subject is a renewed ‘faith in the technical sightline’ that plugs perception back all the more firmly into the closed circuits of the vision machine (Virilio 1994, 13).  

What emerges from this brief overview of contemporary accounts of technological appearance is the connection between the fixed alternatives governing their conceptions of visual experience and the linear histories which they imply. All of these accounts orientate their analyses of the present around a conception of a full and substantial mode of visual experience located in the past, whether as the integrated experience that Debord projects prior
to the spectacle, the autonomous sensory realm Jameson identifies with aesthetic modernism, 
the embodied perception Virilio borrows from phenomenology, or merely as the mistaken 
belief in the ‘real’ that Baudrillard ascribes to modern culture. Indeed, their dependence on a 
fixed point of origin is announced in their shared claims for ‘the loss’ of a ‘real’ that was 
onece there, but is now gone. However, the fixed and ineluctable trajectory implied by this 
claim also depends on the rigid alternatives through which they conceive visual experience, 
as alternatively describing the circular return of beauty or the absolute non-return of the 
sublime. Because none of these positions can conceive of a return within visual experience 
other than in terms of these rigid alternatives, they fix its fate as an inescapable and linear 
decline, whether it is ostensibly to be regretted or celebrated.

This connection between a restricted conception of visual experience and an 
eluctable history of loss organises the two critical responses to Richter rejected by Buchloh. 
Both of these approaches understand this transaction in terms of a circular return, in which 
the abstract image is judged by its capacity to provide the eye with an experience that 
corresponds to its own perceptual parameters. In the case of the first response, the invocation 
of a past painterly technique is incompatible with the gaze of the present, and so nothing is 
returned or thrown back to the contemplating eye; consequently the canvases are judged to be 
‘empty’. In the case of the second response, Richter’s abstract paintings are understood as 
just another instance of spectacular appearance, and so they match exactly the parameters of 
their perception: the circle is closed, and so the ‘reified’ eye of the consumer sees only its 
own mute and unblinking reflection in the inert surface of the abstract image. Either way, by 
casting Richter’s canvases as blank and empty, these positions subordinate their temporal 
complexity to a rigid historical scheme, anchored at one end to the fullness of modernism’s 
aesthetic perception, and at the other to the inert repetition of the spectacle. But in seeing the 
history of modernism’s incorporation into the spectacle inscribed on Richter’s canvases, 
Buchloh’s essay in fact describes a visual transaction that escapes this rigid opposition. In 
Buchloh’s account, the abstract image neither fails to offer any kind of return, nor simply 
throws back an image of the present. Rather, there is a differential return available in 
Richter’s paintings, since in recalling the past into the present they offer an insight into the 
futures of painting, an insight that was not already there but which occurs only in retrospect. 
Buchloh’s description of another kind of visual transaction in Richter’s canvases suggests not 
only that a different kind of seeing was anticipated in abstract painting, but also that there 
may be other formulations of its fate in technology.
THE RETURN OF TECHNOLOGY

The work of Walter Benjamin is often assimilated to current accounts of the spectacle and the simulacrum, primarily through readings of his seminal essay ‘The Work of Art in the Epoch of its Technical Reproducibility’ (1935/6). However, this apparent convergence is deceptive, and obscures the differences between Benjamin’s concept of Technik and recent accounts of technology. Viewed in terms of the rigid opposition between the beautiful and the sublime inherited from Romanticism, contemporary accounts of technological reproduction can be seen to function in two ways. First, technology’s capacity to reproduce appearances is emphasised at the expense of its reformulation of space and time, as is most evident in the case of Debord’s ‘spectacle’ and Baudrillard’s ‘simulacrum’. Both terms assume the exact reproduction of appearances within a static spatio-temporal framework, and so there is nothing to see in the spectacle or in the simulacrum because, by definition, they already encode the very experiential coordinates that govern their apprehension. In effect, these positions return to a pre-Kantian conception of perception by bracketing the question of the apperceptive conditions of visual experience—or the spatio-temporal coordinates which organise both sensation and cognition, and which thereby make perception possible. Second, where technology’s reorganisation of space and time is acknowledged, as in the case of Jameson and Virilio, it is opposed to a fixed conception of the transcendental subject. Consequently, technology’s intensification of, alternatively, space and time is confronted by a static apperceptive arrangement, resulting either in a permanent condition of incoherence, or a vicious spiral that leads inexorably to the automatic perception of the vision machine.

In English-speaking cultural criticism Benjamin’s Work of Art essay tends to be read within the terms of these theoretical paradigms. This tendency is encouraged by the availability of only the last version of the essay in English, and by the translation’s prominent use of the phrase ‘mechanical reproduction’, a rendering that suggests a static or identical duplication. However, the historical overview of technical reproducibility that frames the essay in fact works to expand the concept of technology in two important respects. First, while the essay observes that technical reproducibility has long been a feature of human societies, it identifies the historical specificity of modern technology in the fact that reproducibility now involves the transformation of the very spatio-temporal coordinates of experience. Thus, lithography is seen to mark ‘an essentially new stage’, since it not only allows the production ‘of large numbers [of copies] as hitherto’ for sale on the market, but also produces them ‘in daily changing forms’ (221). In the essay’s discussion of photography and film, this transformation is explored both in terms of the arrangement of the phenomenal
world and the coordinates of perception. The photograph ‘can put the copy … in situations which would have been out of reach for the original itself’, a capacity that in *One Way Street* Benjamin ties to technology’s reformulation of the space and time of the social experience in the modern metropolis.\(^{11}\) Equally, through the processes of enlargement and slow motion, the camera ‘can capture images which escape natural vision’, so reformulating the very spatio-temporal parameters of human perception (222).

The history of technical reproducibility also extends the concept of technology in a second sense, by demonstrating not only the historical variability of perception, but also of *apperception*. This aspect of the Benjamin’s argument is developed around a discussion of ancient Greek culture and its concept of authenticity, a discussion that is largely absent from the final version of the essay, and which is therefore much less clear in the English translation.\(^{12}\) Benjamin understands the concept of authenticity in terms of an Aristotelian notion of Being as enduring substance, as opposed to the Heraclitean vision of a cosmos in the perpetual process of becoming and passing away. However, such a notion of Being is not simply to be understood as a product of pure rationality or a reflection of the way things ‘really are’; instead it is shown to be bound up with the historical situation of Greek society in relation to its environment, or what Benjamin designates as the limited character of its technology. In particular, Benjamin argues that the concept of authenticity is developed to compensate for a restricted capacity for technical reproducibility, so valorising manual forms of reproduction such as sculpture. The importance of Benjamin’s discussion of authenticity, then, is that it indicates a relationship between the human inhabitation of the world and the spatio-temporal coordinates that organise the structure of apperception. However, this relationship is not one of identity or ‘reflection’, since as the essay indicates, the response offered by the concept of authenticity is itself a misrecognition of the profoundly temporal character of experience.\(^{13}\) Benjamin’s point is not that works of art were *once* authentic but no longer are, since the concept of authenticity is itself *already* ‘inauthentic’ or internally contradictory; rather, it is to establish the historically variable relationship between perception and apperception, while at the same time maintaining their non-identity. Consequently, Benjamin’s argument is lost if the essay is read in terms of contemporary accounts of ‘the loss of the real’, where the ‘authenticity’ of the past is rigidly opposed to the ‘inauthenticity’ of the present.

The radically historical conception of experience identified here allows Benjamin to reformulate traditional notions of vision and technology. The model of visual experience that we have traced from Romanticism to recent cultural theory figures vision as a transaction
between a self-possessed subject and a world of objects, both of which share the same homogenous temporality. For Benjamin, on the other hand, vision involves the interplay of non-synchronous configurations of experience. Like Kant, Benjamin understands phenomenal objects to occur as already spatially and temporally organised; but unlike Kant, their organisation is not limited to the forms of human intuition, and nor is human intuition itself conceived of as fixed, but is understood as historically variable. Consequently, objects are seen to encode different modes of experience, while the parameters of human perception through which they are apprehended change over time. In being seen, therefore, the spatio-temporal configuration of the object is apprehended through a heterogeneous structuring of experience. Vision is no longer to be thought of as the static confrontation between the interiority of a self-possessed subject and a world of exteriority, but occurs as the overlay of different configurations of space and time within which variable patterns of similarity, difference and resonance may arise. Two important consequences follow from this reconceptualisation of vision. First, visual experience cannot be reduced to the conscious intention of a subject, since visual echoes may jump out at the eye and give rise to unexpected associations of memory and meaning, or what Benjamin calls ‘non-sensuous similarities’. Second, the patterns of resonance, relation or difference that emerge in perception are not ordered around a static transcendental configuration or ‘canon’ of form. That is, the parameters of visibility are not fixed around the clarity, coherence and harmony of a single organisation of form, but themselves emerge in the interplay between different configurations of experience, as much in blurring and dissonance as in relation and resemblance.

This extended conception of experience also underlies the differences between Benjamin’s concept of Technik and the accounts of technology informing recent cultural theory. For each of the theorists considered above, technological vision is contrasted to a pure, unaided or ‘natural’ seeing that precedes it and which has now been lost: consequently, ‘technology’ is opposed as exteriority to the interiority of a properly human ‘technique’ of perception. The actualisation of beauty in the spectacle or the simulacrum is therefore conceived as the colonisation of interiority by the exteriority of technology; while in accounts of the postmodern sublime, this pure and unaided seeing is now overwhelmed by the speed and intensity of technological appearance. However, as Julian Roberts points out, Benjamin exploits the ambiguity of the German word Technik, which means both ‘technology’ and ‘technique’: thus ‘a piece of machinery is Technik, and so are the methods and organisations used to exploit it’ (Roberts 1982, 157). According to Howard Caygill, this extended usage is
designed to overcome the traditional opposition between the ‘spiritual’ and the ‘material’ by conceiving of Technik ‘as a medium of organisation which pattern[s] experience while being reciprocally subject to change in the face of experience’ (Caygill 1998, 96) Benjamin’s concept of Technik therefore refuses to restrict experience within a pure interiority that might be opposed to the ‘exteriority’ of the world. Consequently, the apperceptive conditions of experience cannot be fixed in a static and isolated transcendental consciousness, while experience itself is understood as conflictual or non-identical, since it is open to the contingency of worldly history. For Benjamin, then, the fate of visual experience is not ineluctable, but points to a range of different possible futures.

This extended concept of technology underlies the various interpretative difficulties that face readers of Benjamin’s Work of Art essay, not least the dizzying and apparently exorbitant leap which it makes from aesthetics to modern politics. For Benjamin, Technik not only designates an apparatus like the film camera, but also image technologies like drawing or painting, and indeed modes of organising experience such as ritual or magic. However, as we have indicated, this expanded definition does not erase the unprecedented character of modern technology, which is characterised by the radical reformulation of the very terms of technical reproducibility. Yet the significance of this distinction is not simply ‘technical’ in the narrow sense, but informs Benjamin’s understanding of the history of modernity, understood as the ‘tremendous shattering of tradition’ (Benjamin 1973, 223). Benjamin’s understanding of modernity stresses its radical propensity to transform the conditions of experience, a tendency identified in Marx and Engel’s statement that ‘all that is solid melts into air’, and by Nietzsche’s announcement of the historical advent of nihilism. For Benjamin, this shattering of tradition constitutes an increasingly violent disparity within Technik, since ‘in technology, a physis is being organised through which mankind’s contact with the cosmos takes a new and different form from that which it had in nations and families’.16 That is, Benjamin argues that the unprecedented reformulation of space and time that Marx identifies in the Grundrisse and Capital is not being met with corresponding changes in the modes of organisation of social experience—or the social, political and legal ‘technics’ of the modern nation-state. Thus, while the phenomenal world is being reorganised according to new rhythms of acceleration and configurations of spatial porosity, our political and social structures of right, possession, belonging and exclusion remain rigidly bound to an organisation of space and time modelled on the self-identity of an integral and enduring Being. But as a consequence, the values that articulate the legitimacy of these technics appear increasingly arbitrary and meaningless. The conflict within Technik therefore gives rise to a
nihilistic condition within which renewed attempts to reaffirm traditional social and political forms becomes one, increasingly violent option.

Benjamin’s concept of Technik, then, is not an expression of technocratic optimism nor of a pessimistic technological determinism, but seeks to map out the violent consequences of the failure of modern political institutions to address the reorganisation of the phenomenal world in technology. But in that case, it is reasonable to ask why Benjamin pursues this project through a discussion of the fate of perception and the work of art. In fact, the Work of Art essay repeatedly points out that the significance of its discussion of perception lies ‘beyond the realm of art’, and it indicates at least three different ways in which it offers particular insights into the political predicaments of modernity (223). First, the essay sees a parallel between the failure to develop new political and social technics, and the aesthetic refusal to respond to modernity’s reformulation of the coordinates of perception articulated by the doctrine of l’art pour l’art. The organisation of visual experience implied by l’art pour l’art underlies Benjamin’s concept of ‘aura’, which he describes in ‘A Little History of Photography’ as ‘a strange weave of space and time’ (Benjamin 1999, 518). Auratic perception is ‘strange’ because in the face of the transformation of the phenomenal world, it attempts to organise appearances in terms of the rigid spatio-temporal coordinates implied by the Aristotelian conception of enduring substance. That is, the auratic image offers a perceptual arrangement that corresponds to the apperceptive structure that subtends the social organisation of ‘nations and families’. Thus, the term ‘aura’ describes the circular return of beauty that we have traced from Romanticism to recent cultural theory: for as Benjamin explains in ‘Some Motifs in Baudelaire’, ‘to perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return’. However, Benjamin’s usage is designed to emphasise its broader applicability by stressing the involvement of apperception as well as perception, and so in the same essay he notes that the structuring of this return can ‘in the case of thought processes, . . . apply equally to the look of the eye of the mind as to the glance pure and simple’ (Benjamin 1983, 148, 147). Auratic perception’s attempt to arrange the phenomenal world within the rigid space and time of a fixed transcendental organisation can therefore be understood as an analogue of attempts to impose the social, political and legal forms of the nation-state upon a new global situation increasingly characterised by a spatial porosity and a temporal transitivity. The essay sees the apogee of this tendency in fascism.

The second sense in which the essay identifies broader insights within the history of perception revolves around the new perceptual parameters made possible by the technology
of film. Where auratic perception seeks to restrict appearances within a static configuration defined by ‘uniqueness’ and ‘permanence’—or spatial and temporal self-identity—in film, appearances are organised in terms of ‘transitoriness and reproducibility’—or the mutability of the space and time (Benjamin, 1973, 225). This understanding of film is elaborated by the essay as a reformulation of the terms of Kantian judgment. In film, Benjamin argues, images are not subordinated to a prior framework or canon of coherence and meaningfulness, but instead ‘the meaning of each single picture [is] prescribed by the sequence of all the preceding ones’ (228). That is, the spatio-temporal coordinates of formal coherence and meaning are themselves produced through the sequencing and interrelation of images, rather than being a function of a fixed transcendental framework. The essay illustrates this idea through an analogy between the film camera and the surgeon: like the surgeon, the camera ‘penetrates deeply into [the] web’ of the phenomenal world, cutting it up into ‘fragments’ which ‘are assembled under a new law’ (236). In these terms, the law of visibility is not fixed and established prior to experience, but is itself open to renegotiation and reinvention in technology. Consequently, film offers Benjamin a way of envisaging a reciprocity that is neither the absolute return of beauty—in which ‘technology’ is subordinated to ‘technique’—nor the absolute non-return of the sublime - where ‘technology’ simply exceeds the capacities of ‘technique’. For in film, technique negotiates with technology from within technology, allowing a differential return or non-identical reciprocity. Thus, the technology of film produces an image-world that can respond to the porosity and transitivity of the phenomenal world, but without fixing it within a static transcendental framework. Film therefore points to different political, social and legal technics that would, in the words of an earlier essay, move ‘to correct the incapacity of peoples to order their relationships to one another in accord with the relationship they possess to nature through their technology’.  

However, if the technology of film points to different social and political possibilities, this is not to say that it constitutes or realises them in itself, nor even that the current situation of film actualises all the latent possibilities of film technology. Indeed, the essay emphasises the fact that the existing condition of film is necessarily subject to the same conflict between technology and technics that characterises the broader social world. Further, it goes on to argue that the conflict between inherited political structures and the new technological condition of appearance is in the process of transforming the very nature of the political. This insight provides the third reason why the essay chooses to stage its analysis of modern politics around a consideration of the fate of perception, although in the version available in English much of this discussion is relegated to footnotes and so tends to go unnoticed, an
omission which underlies the repeated claims that Benjamin offers a naïve and ‘over-optimistic’ assessment of film. In fact, the essay works quite differently. It describes the current situation of technological appearance in Western societies in terms of the disparity between the massive expansion of the arena of social visibility—or ‘exhibition’—and the increasingly atomised and isolated situation of the private realm. This conflict is imaged in the essay by Valéry’s prediction that one day ‘visual and auditory images’ will be piped ‘into our houses from far off to satisfy our needs in response to minimal effort’ (Benjamin 1973, 221; emphasis added). Thus, while the technology of film transforms the conditions of social visibility from the local to the global, there is no corresponding reorganisation of the social, political and economic atomisation that structures individuality. The new detachability and transportability of the image therefore subordinates the appearance of the social world to the coordinates of private need and desire, but without a reciprocal adjustment of the distinction between ‘public’ and ‘private’ that organises social life. Paradoxically, then, the technological drive to ‘bring things “closer”’ in fact functions to demarcate all the more firmly between the aggregate of atomised individuals (as ‘the public’) and those who appear before them (225, 233). As the essay observes,

Radio and film not only affect the function of the professional actor but likewise the function of those who also exhibit themselves before the mechanical equipment, those who govern. Though their tasks may be different, the change affects equally the actor and the ruler. The trend is toward establishing controllable and transferable skills under certain social conditions. This results in a new selection, a selection before which the star and the dictator emerge victorious (249n12).

Although often neglected in accounts of the essay, Benjamin’s discussion of the conflict between the new conditions of visibility and the social, political and legal forms of the nation-state is significant in a number of senses. At one level it demonstrates that his understanding of the fate of perception is not organised around an ineluctable transition from the auratic character of painting to the ‘non-auratic’ character of film. Within the situation described here, the new detachability and transportability of the image promises unprecedented ways in which the aggregate of individuals might come to see themselves as perennially the same; that is, it describes possibilities for auratic perception on a previously unimaginable scale. Yet if this is the case, such an organisation of perception will itself come into conflict with the changing parameters of social experience, since its structuring of ‘authenticity’ is itself ‘inauthentic’, or incompatible with the increasingly mutable space and time of experience. At another level, however, it indicates that changes in perception need
to be understood in terms of a transformation of the relationship between experience and the structuring of apperception. Or, to say the same thing in a different way, it demonstrates how changes in the nature of ‘publicity’ cannot only be met by new forms of representation, but are also bound up with questions of ownership, access to technology in the broadest sense, and with the democratisation of modern bureaucracies - whether ostensibly ‘public’ or ‘private’.

THE FUTURES OF ABSTRACT PAINTING

Benjamin’s conception of a different notion of return in technological appearance not only reformulates the history of vision in modernity, but also the temporality of the object and the historicity of its technique. This is why he does not conceive of abstract painting as necessarily auratic, anymore than he regards photography or film as inevitably unusable for the reconstruction of aura. This temporal complexity can be seen in the discussion of modern art in the Work of Art essay, which revolves around the conflict between the traditional constraints of the medium and its anticipation of future possibilities. Benjamin argues that ‘traditional art forms in certain phases of their development strenuously work toward effects which later are effortlessly attained by the new ones’ (Benjamin, 1973, 251n17). Thus, according to the essay the visual and linguistic experiments of Dada prefigure ‘the effect which the public today seeks in films’, yet these effects are created within the confines of existing media and so remain restricted and partial (239).

This conception of art’s anticipatory potential means that the essay’s account of aesthetic modernism is complex and highly differentiated. It describes Cubism and Futurism as ‘deficient attempts’ by art ‘to accommodate the pervasion of actuality (Wirklichkeit) by the [technical] apparatus’, attempts that produce ‘some sort of alloy in the joint presentation of actuality and apparatus’ (252n20; translation amended). That is, modern art is identified as temporally heterogeneous, since although pursued within the constraints of a traditional medium, it is animated by impulses that gesture towards unprecedented modes of visibility. Because these aims are not realisable within the spatio-temporal coordinates of the medium, the attempt to achieve them generates distortions and warps that rearrange and disrupt inherited forms of coherence and harmony. Consequently, while Benjamin identifies modern painting’s invitation to contemplation and its continuing adherence to the canon of uniqueness and permanence as vital components of aura, he also understands it as offering intimations of different possible configurations of vision and visibility. So, while the essay’s discussion of contemplation is illustrated by the example of a painting by Arp, it also locates
a powerful insight into the future role of technology in Cubism and Futurism. In the case of
the first, Benjamin identifies ‘the premonition that [the technical] apparatus will be
structurally based on optics’, while in the case of the second, he sees an anticipation ‘of the
effects of this apparatus which are brought out by the rapid sequence of the film strip’ (252–53n20).

A consequence of this understanding of the heterogeneous temporality of modern
painting is the important distinction which the essay draws between the reception of modern
art and film, a distinction that is particularly relevant to the discussion of Richter with which
we began because it suggests different temporal relationships between painting and film. The
essay illustrates this distinction by noting that ‘the reactionary attitude towards a Picasso
painting changes into the progressive reaction toward a Chaplin movie’, an observation that
both aligns modern art and film, and yet also insists on their difference (236). Seen in the
light of Benjamin’s recasting of traditional concepts of technology and time, this statement
can be understood as offering a theoretically rigorous reflection on the different historical
predicaments of these media. The essay identifies film’s reinvention of the conditions of
reception by describing it in terms of a radicalisation of Kantian reflective judgement, where
intuitions order themselves; in the reception of film, as soon as individual responses ‘become
manifest they control each other’, so that they ‘are predetermined by the mass audience
response that they are about to produce’ (236; emphasis added). This complex temporality
suggests new possibilities for a differential return, in which the collective response both
informs and is informed by the semantic and affective potential of the sequence of cinematic
images. However, as we have seen, these possibilities are qualified by the social situation of
film which Benjamin identifies as the historically determinate conflict between technology,
and existing social, political and economic technics.

The reception of painting is of course also subject to this conflict, but as Benjamin
makes clear, the nature of the conflict is different in each case. Traditional media like
painting and sculpture had once been available for collective reception, although only in the
context of first the church, and then as a function of the political display of princely courts:
consequently, Benjamin observes, the ‘collective reception of paintings did not occur
simultaneously’ as in the case of film, ‘but by graduated and hierarchised mediation’ (237).
That is, the restricted technology of painting was able to achieve a collective reception that in
many ways contradicts its own characteristics as a medium, but only within particular social,
political and theological modes of organising experience. In the ‘tremendous shattering of
tradition’ that is modernity, these modes of organisation are themselves transformed. Painting
is therefore unable to maintain such a privileged position, particularly in the face of new optical technologies like film, and is relegated to an individualised reception characterised by contemplation. However, the essay’s understanding of ‘contemplation’ is itself nuanced, and underlies the temporally heterogeneous conception of modern art considered above. Although painting loses its traditional social location, the categories of formal coherence and harmony that it subsequently develops inherit—albeit in a distorted form—the ‘graduated and hierarchised’ apperceptive organisation that previously governed its reception. This is what Benjamin means when he talks of the ‘ritualistic basis’ of art, and why he describes l’art pour l’art as ‘the secular cult of beauty’ (226). It is this inheritance that underlies the temporal heterogeneity of modern art, and also helps to explain its inaccessibility. Where film can perform unprecedented spatio-temporal arrangements of visibility, painting can only allude to such unprecedented configurations through the warping and distortion of its inherited canon of formal harmony and coherence. That is, although modern painting still relies on the sensory qualities of the medium, its anticipation of future configurations of visibility emerges negatively, in the experience of the failure of experience to cohere. As such, modern painting increasingly relies upon a distinctly non-sensory, conceptual knowledge of the history of Western art and its changing parameters of formal proportionality or ‘beauty’.21 Paradoxically, then, modern painting anticipates future modes of experience by recalling the history of Western art, although not as it ‘once really was’ but negatively, as distortion, disfigurement and loss.

With this in mind, it is possible to return to the reception of Richter’s abstract painting with which we began, although with the appropriate temporal adjustment of our critical optic: for where the Work of Art essay is concerned with reviewing the emergence of modern painting, our own reflections must consider the anticipatory potential of its belated return. And in this connection, it is worth recalling Richter’s own self-understanding of his aesthetic practice in the light of Buchloh’s analysis. For Buchloh, the significance of the dialectic between ‘then’ and ‘now’ inscribed in Richter’s abstract canvases lay in what it could tell us about the fate of aesthetic technique in technology, namely its confirmation of the incorporation of art’s autonomy into the spectacle. But Richter’s conception of abstract painting does not oppose technology and technique in this way, even if only to set up a dialectic between them: for as he explains, he is ‘not trying to imitate a photograph’ in his photo-pictures, but is ‘trying to make one’. Consequently he argues that, ‘seen in this way, those of my paintings that have no photographic source’, such as the abstracts, ‘are also photographs’ (see figure 4, S. with Child, 1995; figure 6, Funeral, 1988; figure 7, November,
But if Richter does not dialectically oppose technology and technique, nor does he conflate them in the manner of the postmodern concept of pastiche, as he indicates in his discussion of the ‘surprise’ produced by photography. Richter recounts that he was ‘surprised by photography’ because it offered a ‘new view, free from all the conventional criteria … associated with art’; ‘That’s why I wanted to have it, to show it’, he goes on to explain, ‘not to use it as a means to painting, but use painting as a means to photography’ (Richter 1995, 72-3). What Richter offers, then, is not a description of the identity of photographic and painterly technics of vision, nor a conceptual dialectic that places these abstract entities in tension, but a statement of their speculative non-identity.

That technological appearance can offer an experiential charge, or ‘surprise’, distances Richter’s conception of the visual from postmodern accounts of the ‘loss’ of history in the blank appearance of the spectacle, a claim belied by their unacknowledged repetition of the tradition of Romanticism. But equally, this charge does not simply confirm a history which we already knew, namely that of art’s absorption into the spectacle. For as Richter argues, the force of this surprise is not directed from ‘photography’ to ‘painting’—or from the technological appearance of the present to the past of aesthetic modernism—but obtains within technological appearance through its recall of the non-identity of modern painting. In these terms, Richter’s photo-pictures and his abstracts can both be understood as describing a different relationship between concept and intuition. Just as modern painting recalled the history of aesthetic categories by generating experiential configurations that distorted and warped their legislation of form, so Richter’s canvases suggest that such a possibility remains open within the image-world of technological appearance. That is, rather than marking the ‘loss’ of history, technological appearance might itself provide a site for returning the histories that govern its own inherited canon of coherence and meaningfulness, precisely by anticipating different configurations of meaning and experience. However, what would be revealed would not be the ‘graduated and hierarchised’ apperceptive of l’art pour l’art, but the ‘democratic’ distinctions inherited from the nation-state—between public and private, inside and outside, possession and dispossession—which continue to organise an increasingly incompatible global social space.

NOTES

1. For a discussion of these term see the introduction to Harris, 2001.
4. As I indicate below, this is not to say that these positions are aware of the significance of Kant’s transcendental philosophy for thinking visual experience.
5. This distinction is made in the first and second introductions to Kant’s *Critique of Judgement*.
6. For a summary of this distinction see sections 22 and 23 of Kant’s *Critique of Judgement*.
7. This sketch of Kant’s reception-history draws on Benjamin’s doctoral dissertation ‘The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism’ (Benjamin, 1996, 116–201), which distinguished not only between Kant and his subsequent reception, but also between earlier and later Romantics. For an account of the relationship between aesthetics and subjectivity after Kant see Bowie (1990).
8. For a fuller analysis of these different positions see chapter 2 of my *Architecture of the Visible*.

In the text I follow what is now the standard English translation of the essay’s title for reasons that I indicate below. There are in fact three versions of the essay in Benjamin’s *Gesammelte Schriften*, but only the last version, written in 1936 in response to Theodor Adorno’s editorial suggestions, is currently available in English translation.
13. Thus, the essay’s observation that ‘the uniqueness of the work of art is inseparable from its being imbedded in the fabric of tradition’ is ironic, since it locates the self-identity of the object in a ‘fabric’ or texture of meaning that extends far beyond it and changes over time (Benjamin 1973, 225). This irony is developed by the example of the ancient statue of Venus that follows: for what is illustrated here is not the statue’s enduring identity with itself, but its changing function and meaning as it is handed down into the medieval world.
14. For a fuller account of Benjamin’s reconceptualisation of vision see chapter 4 of my *Architecture of the Visible*.
17. Benjamin 1979, 128. Benjamin’s conception of nature is not Romantic, but follows Lukács’s conception of a technological ‘second nature’.
18. In fact, the medium that consistently offers the most powerful insights into collective experience for Benjamin is not film, but architecture; see Benjamin (1973, 241–2).
19. However, this renewed conflict is not itself necessarily benign; the point is that for Benjamin, in contrast to recent accounts, the organisation of appearance is not ‘automatic’, but remains open to decision.
20. An appreciation of the anticipatory nature of aesthetic modernism can be observed in the writing of Paul Klee, an important artist for Benjamin. For Klee, modern art’s apparent ‘deformation’ of ‘natural forms’ is an effect of the artist’s new awareness of the profoundly temporal character of appearance, and so he argues that the modern artist ‘must be forgiven if he regards the present state of outward appearances in his own particular world as accidentally fixed in time and space’ (Klee 1966, 47).
21. Like the conflict governing film, this conflict raises broader questions about the orientation of the technics of art education and its protocols of inclusion and exclusion.
22. Interview with Rolf Schön in Richter, 1995, 73.
23. For an account of the distinction between the ‘dialectical’ and the ‘speculative’ that informs this discussion see Rose (1979, 48–9).

WORKS CITED


