From Reproduction to Reproducibility: Creativity and Technics in Benjamin and Arendt

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The origin of [modern] technology lies at a point where, by an unconscious ruse, human beings first began to distance themselves from nature. It lies, in other words, in play.


The always-new as the ever-same

There is an unacknowledged paradox in many recent descriptions of modern technology. The impact of imminent technological developments is often described as “unprecedented,” as presaging fundamental changes that will inundate, overwhelm or saturate inherited parameters of perception and understanding to such an extent that existing patterns of social interaction and political organization will be swept away. Yet the explication of technology’s “unprecedented” effect imagines it primarily in terms that reproduce existing features of social experience, albeit in more intensified or extensive ways.¹ Such claims to articulate the unprecedented nature of modern technology fail to identify how reproduction might introduce anything that is qualitatively new; they fail to account for that element of newness within repetition that initiates or inaugurates, or what Hannah Arendt had described as that “element of the ‘miraculous’ present in all reality [which ensures] that events, no matter how well anticipated in hope or fear, strike us with shock and surprise once they come to pass.”²

Arendt’s concern for “newness” is associated in her work with the concept of “natality,” and underlies her understanding of politics as creative, as an intersubjective realm constituted by the openness and unpredictability of what she calls “action.” As such, it might potentially provide an important resource for thinking the political implications of modern technology: for just as contemporary assessments of technology are characterized by a failure to think the impact of technology beyond notions of reproduction and intensification, so they tend to envisage the political consequences of technology in terms of static repetition, generating dystopian scenarios of disempowerment and loss of agency.³ In contrast, Arendt’s emphasis on the moment of newness in political action – and for Arendt it is speech that is the most significant form of political action – suggests the possibility of rethinking the interplay of politics and technics.

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not simply in terms of reproduction but also through the matrix of creativity.

However, if Arendt’s concept of natality suggests a different relationship between politics, technics and creativity, this is not to say that Arendt’s writing necessarily pursues this avenue. Indeed, in her often insightful but highly problematic work *The Human Condition* (1958), Arendt rejects this possibility from the outset. Responding to calls for a reinvention of the political through an “adjust[ment of] our cultural attitudes to the present status of scientific achievement,” she insists that “if we follow th[is] advice...we would in all earnest adopt a way of life in which speech is no longer meaningful.” For Arendt, the impulse to rejuvenate the political by way of its negotiation with technology would bring not the reinvention of politics but its liquidation.

Given this rejection, it is striking that a different relationship between politics, technics and creativity was anticipated by a thinker whose most celebrated work on technology pre-dates *The Human Condition* by some two decades, namely Walter Benjamin. Arendt not only knew of Benjamin’s work – her 1968 essay on Benjamin played an important role in introducing Benjamin to the English-speaking world – but they struck up a warm, if brief, friendship as fellow refugees in Paris in the late 1930s. But like much of the anglophone reception of Benjamin in which she played a part, Arendt fails to register the radicality of Benjamin’s thinking of technics and creativity. This failure is in turn instructive for thinking the categorical framework of *The Human Condition*, both in terms of its abstract opposition of “action,” “work” and “labor,” and in its underestimation of the modern philosophical engagement with technology initiated by Hegel.

Since the 1960s the anglophone reception of Benjamin has been marked by a reliance on a very limited number of translated works, whereby individual essays have achieved a prominence that isolates them from the complex web of Benjamin’s intellectual engagements. In turn, this isolation has made such texts – and in particular Benjamin’s most famous essay, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* (1935–36) – particularly vulnerable to being assimilated to the various intellectual movements and concerns that have traversed the Anglo-American academy over this period. The publication in recent years of a relatively wide selection of Benjamin’s authorship in translation provides the resources for challenging this assimilation, which is, after all, a reduction of the productivity and potentiality of Benjamin’s text. The aim of this study is not to propose an “authentic” reading of Benjamin’s essay, that is, not to restore its meaning “as it once really was”; rather, it is to follow Benjamin’s demand in “The Task of the Translator” (1922) for a literal rendering of the text, which punctures the placid appearance of the present by returning into it the unfamiliar conjunctions and relationships that lie embedded in the original.

### ii newness and the fate of the world

The central concern of *The Human Condition* is to provide the basis for an enriched account of the political, which Arendt saw as a priority in the wake of her analysis of the modern propensity to violence in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951). Consequently, discussion of technology is embedded within the larger architectonic of the work, which pursues an examination of what Arendt calls the “*vita activa.*” While this term suggests that the pivotal conceptual opposition will be with the “*vita contemplativa*” that occupies her posthumously published *The Life of the Mind* (1978), in fact the conceptual terrain of the study is organized primarily around a threefold distinction within the *vita activa*, between “labor,” “work” and “action.”

This strong conception of the political rests on the notion of action developed in the fourth part of *The Human Condition*: “The *polis*, properly speaking,” Arendt writes there, “is not the city-state in its physical location; it is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together” (HC 198). What she wants us to understand by action centers not on human activity per se but on the element of creation, initiation and newness that can arise only there; and crucially, she sees this element of creativity
as intrinsic to the human condition because of the biological fact of birth:

To act, in its most general sense, means to take an initiative, to begin (as the Greek word *archein*, “to begin,” “to lead,” and eventually “to rule,” indicates), to set something in motion. Because they are *initium*, newcomers and beginners by virtue of birth, men take initiative and are prompted into action. With the creation of man, the principle of beginning came into the world, which, of course, is only another way of saying that the principle of freedom was created when man was created but not before. (HC 177)

In coining her neologism “natality,” Arendt seeks to capture the fundamentally human character of this capacity for creation, which is both the basis for politics and the reason why the end of politics is freedom: “action as beginning corresponds to the fact of birth, . . . it is the actualization of the human condition of natality” (HC 178). And because “with each birth something uniquely new comes into the world,” then each person “is unique,” which for Arendt points to “the essential human condition of plurality, the acting and speaking together, which is the condition of all forms of political organization” (HC 178, 202).

The unprecedented, creative and plural character of action underpins Arendt’s valorization of politics, since political action is now understood as both “boundless” and “unpredictable.” Even “the smallest act in the most limited circumstances,” Arendt insists, “bears the seed of the same boundlessness, because one deed, and sometimes one word, suffices to change every constellation” (HC 190). As such, the “full meaning” of a political act cannot be predicted or foretold, but “can reveal itself only when it has ended” (HC 192). However, this means that political action is by its very nature fleeting and fragile, and Arendt pointedly talks of “the frailty of human affairs” (HC 188). Indeed, the genuinely “new form of government” that Arendt recommends for the modern world – as opposed to the Greek *polis* which remains a central theoretical model despite its antiquity – is “the system of people’s councils” which arose as a fleeting but “never successful[ly]” possibility of the workers’ movement (HC 216). The very terms which make political action so valuable for Arendt are those which make it so vulnerable, a vulnerability that emerges once placed in relation to her two other classifications of human activity – “work” and “labor”; and it is the specifically modern reformulation of the relationship of action, work and labor in technology that underlies the political pessimism of *The Human Condition*, notwithstanding its attempt to stake out and defend a strong concept of the political.8

Although Arendt’s discussion of the “frailty” of the political realm suggests that its vulnerability lies in the very boundlessness of political action, the cumulative argument of *The Human Condition* locates the most significant threat not in the inherently excessive character of “the human condition” but in nature, or what is termed “earth.”9 Notwithstanding the opening claim of *The Human Condition* that “earth is the very quintessence of the human condition,” its argument is organized around an existential opposition of the human to nature. It is the task of what Arendt calls “the human artifice of the world” to “separat[e] human existence from all mere animal environment” (HC 2); indeed, without such “a world,” Arendt insists, “there would be nothing but changeless eternal recurrence, the deathless everlastingness of the human as of all other animal species” (HC 97). The ramifications of this opposition are multiplied because Arendt’s nature inhabits the human itself: nature includes the “life process” – or physiological metabolism – and the emotional disposition of the human organism, as well as the inanimate and animate world which would sustain this organism. The human is therefore riven by a deep opposition between what Arendt calls “animal laborans” – that dimension of being centered on the reproduction of biological or “natural” life – and “zoon politikon” – the properly human condition initiated by acting and speaking together (HC 22–23).

The conflict between nature and the human configures Arendt’s distinction between “action” and “labor,” opposing the former as a creation *ex nihilo* to the latter’s sterile reproduction.
creativity and technics

Underlying this opposition are two different temporalities: action initiates and creates, introducing “newness” into the “changeless eternal recurrence” of nature from the outside, as it were (HC 97); labor, on the other hand, is fundamentally tied to satisfying the biological needs of the “animal laborans,” and so the temporality of labor replicates “the rhythmic repetition of the life process and its metabolism with nature,” reproducing the same again and again (HC 146). Thus, the repetitive rhythm of labor menaces the very creativity that defines the human, since it insinuates within human activity the eternal return of nature or “earth,” so threatening the absorption of the human within “the deathless everlastingness...of all other animal species” (HC 97). Because it reproduces within human activity the cyclical reproduction of nature, according to Arendt “animal laborans...remains the servant of nature and the earth” (HC 139).

Like labor, but in marked contrast to action, “work” is based not on creation but on reproduction; however, crucially for The Human Condition, work is understood to manifest a different kind of reproduction, one that reproduces not nature but a preexisting idea. Because labor’s “repetition is urged upon [it] and remains subject to the biological cycle,” it involves the reproduction of “the needs and wants of the human body” which, even “though they reappear again and again at regular intervals,” “come and go” and “never remain for any length of time.” This ephemeral reproduction of the ephemeral is dismissed as “mere repetition” by Arendt, in favor of the “multiplication” she locates in work. “Multiplication, in distinction from mere repetition,” she writes, “multiplies something that already possesses a relatively stable, relatively permanent existence in the world” (HC 142); that is, work converts the permanent impermanency of earth into the relative permanence of what Arendt calls “world,” by refashioning nature within the coordinates of a properly human design.

“World,” according to Arendt, is the “human artifice” that “separates human existence from all mere animal environment” (HC 2); it is the barrier between the human and “the deathless everlastingness...of all other animal species” (HC 97). From the standpoint of human beings, Arendt argues, “the most important task of human artifice is to offer a dwelling place more permanent and more stable than themselves,” understood as biological beings or animal laborans (HC 152). For “[w]ithout a world between men and nature,” she insists, “there is eternal movement, but no objectivity,” and so human action cannot be revealed, recognized or remembered. The fleeting nature of praxis, then, requires a poiesis to build a world that will outlast it: zoon politikon requires homo faber to erect the public space within which action can appear.

It is at this stage that The Human Condition considers modern technology, placing its discussion at the heart of the book’s attempt to think politics in modernity; but as such it inherits the contradictions and elisions bound up in Arendt’s opposition of a human creativity to the reproduction of nature. The importance that Arendt assigns to the fabrication of a “world” in her attempt to develop a strong concept of the political might suggest that her approach implies the need for a negotiation between praxis and poiesis, or politics and technics. However, The Human Condition rules out the possibility of such a negotiation by characterizing modern technology as ineluctably bound to the degraded reproduction of labor. Yet in describing the fate of modernity, The Human Condition offers a profoundly contradictory account of modern technology, which despite itself must accord to technology an element of creation (HC 148). In describing technology as both reproductive and creative, Arendt’s text suggests the possibility of a different configuration of the relationship between praxis and poiesis, or between politics and technics.

The central charge against modern technology in The Human Condition is that it converts the cumulative reproduction characteristic of work – which grants a relative permanence to objects – into the ephemeral reproduction of labor, where the product is simply consumed; thus, in the shift from tools to automatic machines there is a shift from a linear temporality that enables the accretion of a world, to the
cyclical and empty eternal return of biological consumption. What underpins the secret affinity between modern technology and nature is a shared temporal organization based on rhythmic repetition: “nothing can be mechanized more easily and less artificially than the rhythm of the labor process,” writes Arendt, “which in turn corresponds to the equally automatic repetitive rhythm of the life process and its metabolism with nature” (HC 146). Modern technology marks the predominance not of homo faber but of animal laborans, who “does not use tools and instruments in order to build a world but in order to ease the labors of its own life processes”; in bringing about “the emancipation of labor,” then, technology “supplant[s] human labor power with the superior power of natural forces” (HC 147).

At the same time, however, The Human Condition also suggests a more complex account of technology that exceeds the terms of reproduction. In the initial stages of industrialization, technology is “still characterized by an imitation of natural processes” (HC 148); but in the shift to electrically powered automation, a qualitative change is identified:

This stage can no longer be described in terms of a gigantic enlargement and continuation of the old arts and crafts. . . . For here we no longer use material as nature yields it to us, killing natural processes or interrupting or imitating them. In all these instances, we changed and denaturalized for our own worldly ends, so that the human world or artifice on the one hand and nature on the other remained two distinctly separated entities. Today we have begun to “create,” as it were, that is to unchain natural processes of our own which would never have happened without us, and instead of carefully surrounding the human artifice with defenses against nature’s elementary forces, keeping them as far as possible outside the man-made world, we have channeled these forces, along with their elementary power, into the world itself. (HC 148–49; emphasis added)

Ostensibly, what is threatening about modern technology is that it “channels” the “elementary power” of nature into the human world, degrading the cumulative reproduction of work to the ephemeral reproduction of labor; but as Arendt must in part concede, what is perhaps more frightening is that the operation of technology exceeds reproduction. Despite the typographical cordon sanitaire of quotation marks, Arendt nominates the power of technology as creation, because rather than simply reproducing nature, technology “unchain[s] natural processes. . . . which would never have happened without [it]” (HC 148).

In addition to typography, The Human Condition deploys a conceptual cordon sanitaire in its insistence that the intrusion of nature remains within reproduction since nature is fixed: consequently, it argues, the infusion of its elementary powers can only be the eternal return of the same. Yet Arendt warns that “if present technology consists of channeling natural forces into the world of human artifice, future technology may yet consist of channeling the universal forces of the cosmos around us into the nature of the earth,” so transforming “the household of nature as we have known it since the beginning of our world” (HC 150). But the future may already be here, for in criticizing the design of consumer goods Arendt concedes that their “shape” is based neither on “human standards of utility of beauty” nor merely on the “basic functions” of the life process, but “depend[s] entirely upon the capacity of the machine” (HC 152). That is, she concedes that their structuring is open for invention beyond the static reproduction of world or earth, since in the machine the very coordinates of space and time may themselves be reinvented.

iii technik beyond the work of art

If The Human Condition finds the durability of human artifice to be threatened in the work of the world, it locates a more comforting permanence in the work of art. Because it is “removed from the exigencies and wants of daily life,” art is described as having “survived gloriously its severance from religion, magic and myth” (HC 167). Arendt interprets this “survival” as “a durability [that] is almost untouched by
the corroding effects of natural processes,” a “durability” that
is of a higher order than that which all things need in order to exist at all; it can attain a permanence throughout the ages. In this permanence, the very stability of the human artifice, which, being inhabited and used by mortals, can never be absolute, achieves a representation of its own. Nowhere else does the sheer durability of the world of things appear in such purity and clarity, nowhere else does this thing-world reveal itself so spectacularly as the non-mortal home for mortal beings. (HC 167–68)

“It is as though worldly stability had become transparent in the work of art,” Arendt writes (HC 168; emphasis added). But, of course, this statement remains an “as if”: for as the text repeatedly confirms, “worldly stability” is available “nowhere else.”

The extraordinary significance ascribed to art in The Human Condition – a work concerned primarily with developing a richer account of the political, and not with aesthetics – is thus a function of the pessimism that haunts its vision of the fate of the world in technology. Conversely, the critique of the work of art developed by Walter Benjamin in “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility” is best understood as an engagement with what we might describe in Arendtian terms as the fate of the world as a context for political action – rather than primarily a work of aesthetics in the post-Romantic sense. Indeed, as Benjamin makes clear, its account of the historically changing experience of art “is symptomatic,” and “its significance extends far beyond the realm of art.”12 However, in English-speaking cultural criticism the essay’s exploration of the radical consequences of modern technology has been obscured by a preoccupation with a concept of “aura” removed from the broader conceptual context of Benjamin’s thinking.13 This tendency has been encouraged by the availability, until recently, 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.

Underlying the essay’s account of the “decay of aura” is a broader reconceptualization of experience that seeks to avoid the opposition between technology and a properly human artifice or technique, a paradigm which, as we have seen, structures The Human Condition. As Julian Roberts has pointed out, Benjamin does this by exploiting the ambiguity of the German word Technik, whose meaning includes two distinct senses that in English are expressed by the terms “technique” and “technology,” respectively. Thus, as Roberts observes, “a piece of machinery is Technik, and so are the methods and organisations used to exploit it.”14 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 organization which pattern[s] experience while being reciprocally subject to change in the face of experience.”15 As a way of describing the organization of experience, Technik not only designates an apparatus like the camera or “visual technics” such as drawing or painting, but also pre-modern ways of relating to nature such as ritual or magic.

Benjamin’s new concept of Technik therefore marks a considerable extension of what we normally think of as “technology,” a point that is made clear in the first and second versions of the Work of Art essay, but which is elided in the third version. Thus, in the second version of the essay Benjamin describes both film and magic as forms of Technik, in that they each constitute a particular way of organizing the relationship between humanity and the phenomenal world, or what the essay terms “nature.” However, if both are designated as instances of “technology,” the essay insists on a radical difference between them, a difference reflected terminologically in the distinction between what is called the “first technology” of myth and magic, and the “second technology” of modernity. This distinction is elaborated in terms of two different temporalities that emerge from the historically variable relation between humanity and the phenomenal world.
According to Benjamin, magic emerged as a response to “the requirements of a society whose technology existed only in fusion with ritual” — that is, a technology that was tied to the repetition of natural forms in order to master and control them. Consequently, “the results of [this] first technology [appear as] valid once and for all” since “it deals with irreparable lapse or sacrificial death, which holds good for eternity”; that is, first technology remains tied to the configuration of space and time given by a nature whose cycles appear fixed and eternal. In contrast, the second technology of modernity emerges “when human beings first began to distance themselves from nature,” a distance understood as freedom from the reproduction of natural forms, or from the givenness of spatio-temporal configuration; “It lies, in other words,” Benjamin writes, “in play” (SW 107). Thus, the historical development of technology involves a fundamental reformulation of the transcendental structure of experience, which marks a shift from the static spatio-temporal framework of myth to a new condition characterized by the mutability of space and time. As such, the central feature of this second technology is not reproduction, or repetition with a fixed spatio-temporal framework, but reproducibility, or the reinvention of the coordinates of space and time in each moment of “repetition.” In “play” repetition is at the same time reinvention, as exemplified by film, where images are not simply reproduced according to preexisting spatio-temporal coordinates, but “are assembled according to a new law” (SW 116; emphasis added).

We miss the historical specificity of modern technology, therefore, if we privilege technological reproduction at the expense of the new element of “play” contained within it. However, the essay is routinely read as being concerned primarily with a shift from handcraft to “mechanical reproduction,” and therefore as implying an “age” of electronic reproduction to come; each “age” is then in turn associated with a particular set of technologies that would correspond to it: sculpture and painting; photography and film; digital video or computer-generated imagery. But in fact the decisive shift from first to second technology begins to emerge prior to photography and film in lithography, which is seen to mark “an essentially new stage” since it not only allows the production of “large numbers [of copies] as previously” but also produces them “in daily changing variations” (SW 102; emphasis added). In the essay’s discussion of photography and film this transformation is explored both in terms of the arrangement of the phenomenal world and in terms of the coordinates of perception. The photograph “can put the copy . . . in situations which the original itself cannot attain,” while through the processes of enlargement and slow motion, the camera can “record images which escape natural optics altogether,” so reformulating the very spatio-temporal parameters of human perception (SW 103).

What are also occluded when the essay is read through the frame of “reproduction” are the different political possibilities that are opened up by the new spatio-temporal condition signaled by “reproducibility.” Benjamin argues that “the first technology really sought to master nature” because it lacked its inventive or productive power, and so in a sense always remained subordinate to it (SW 107). For Benjamin, the unprecedented reformulation of space and time that Marx had identified in the Grundrisse and Capital had not been met with corresponding changes in the modes of organization of social experience – or the social, political and legal “technics” of the modern nation-state. Thus, while the phenomenal world was being reorganized according to new rhythms of acceleration and configurations of spatial porosity, the political and social structures of right, possession, belonging and exclusion remained rigidly bound to an organization of space and time modeled on the self-identity of an integral and enduring Being. As a consequence, they can be maintained only through an increasingly violent subordination of the mutability and porosity of social experience, a subordination manifested at the level of perception as “aura.”

Yet the unprecedented productive potential of the second technology means that such an imperative to domination is no longer necessary, in the sense that it has become practically possible to envisage a reciprocal “interplay
between nature and humanity.” Instead of positing the absolute incommensurability of technology and a “properly human” action, Benjamin looked to technology itself as the “schema” or matrix that would reinvent the very terms of this relation. The central significance of film in the Work of Art essay lies in its capacity to figure a different kind of response to the mutability of space and time in technology—albeit at the level of perception. Instead of appealing to tradition or to a notion of the “properly human” to organize interpretation in the face of technological modernity, the technology of film generates a perceptual matrix that can respond to the porosity and transitivity of the phenomenal world without fixing it within a static transcendental framework. Thus, rather than opposing the transitivity of second technology with the fixed coordinates inherited from the first technology, the spatio-temporal openness of film offers a response that is reciprocal. Film therefore points to different political, social, and legal technics that would, in the words of another 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.”

But if this possibility is made practicable in modern technology, that is not to say that it will be realized. On the contrary, as Benjamin notes, in fact we persist in “viewing the second technology in terms of the first” — that is, we persist in “describing the goal of the second technology as ‘mastery over nature’” (SW 107). As such, Benjamin’s Technik marks a violently unstable disjunction that runs through the political and social fabric of modernity.

iv the politics of creativity

In the wake of her analysis of modernity’s propensity to violence in The Origins of Totalitarianism, Arendt’s claim in The Human Condition that the “polis, properly speaking, is not the city-state in its physical location” but “the organization of people as it arises out of speaking and acting together” was designed to underpin a strong account of the political by separating it from what she calls “the social.” However, in the earlier text the fate of modern politics was located within the global reorganization of the space and time of social experience; in The Human Condition, on the other hand, a formal concept of the political is opposed to the mutability of space and time through the opposition of “action” to a technology that can only be the reduction of “work” to “labor.”

In this context, the fate of the world is sealed by the ineluctably cyclical character of technology’s reproduction. Such an abstraction of politics from social experience may have unintended consequences: for if political action — which Arendt identifies with the spontaneous workers’ councils of modern popular protest and specifically the workers’ movement — is cast as inevitably unsuccessful, then such a concept of the political becomes an unattainable “ought,” leaving the flawed “republic” as the best worst option available.

Thus, notwithstanding Arendt’s powerful invocation of the creativity of politics, we may be left with the eternal return of the same.

Benjamin’s concept of Technik offers a significant alternative in this respect, since its account of reproducibility requires us to think technology beyond reproduction. If Arendt’s notion of the political threatens to ossify in the formalism of “the republic,” Benjamin’s concept of Technik — which marks the violent disparity between the technological reorganization of the phenomenal world and our inherited configurations of value and meaning — requires that we think the creativity of the political in relation both to the reproduction and the reinvention of social experience in global technology.

Yet if this is true, there remains a significant lacuna in Benjamin’s difficult leap from the perceptual experience of film to the reinvention of politics, a lacuna that harks back to Benjamin’s problematic account of the political in “Critique of Violence” (1921). For if film makes possible an image-world open to assembly under “a new law” in the spontaneity of collective reception, this reception nonetheless takes place within accumulated networks of inequality and power which press upon and shape the spontaneity of legislation (SW 116). In that case, this spontaneous legislation will be determined by a
disposition that cannot be distinguished, known or evaluated, other than through abstract polarities such as “old” and “new,” “permanent” and “transitory,” or indeed “fascism” and “communism” (SW 122). Benjamin’s rethinking of technology, therefore, still requires a developed concept of the political through which the politics of creativity can be negotiated. For unless the creativity of the polis is accompanied by a means of orientation that can register the shifting global topography of inequality and injustice, the spontaneity of its legislation may unwittingly reproduce this inequality and injustice again and again.

notes
An earlier version of parts of section iii appeared in “Glass Before its Time, Premature Iron: The Unforeseeable Futures of Technology in Benjamin’s Arcades Project,” New Formations 54 (winter 2004–05).

1 For an analysis of recent approaches in cultural theory that function in these terms see Graham MacPhee, The Architecture of the Visible, chapter 2.

2 Hannah Arendt, Between Past and Future 170.

3 See MacPhee, Architecture of the Visible, chapter 2, esp. 72–76, 100–03.

4 Arendt, The Human Condition 3–4; hereafter cited as HC.

5 Arendt, “Walter Benjamin: 1892–1940.” A sense of the warmth of their friendship, and of Benjamin’s appreciation of Arendt’s intellect, can be gleaned from Benjamin’s letters; see Benjamin, The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin 1910–1940 596, 601. Arendt was, of course, the editor of the first selection of Benjamin’s essays in English, Illuminations, published in 1968. This highly influential collection follows the 1955 Suhrkamp selection of Benjamin’s writing edited by Adorno, which includes only the third version of the Work of Art essay.

6 See esp. G.W.F. Hegel, Hegel and The Human Spirit. For an account of Hegel’s engagement with politics and technology, see Fine, Political Investigations.


8 “Pessimism” is used here in a technical rather than capricious sense: it is not that Arendt foresees a future decline within an open interpretative paradigm, but rather that the interpretative categories she puts in place seal the future as a “fate” that is non-negotiable.

9 Cf. The Origins of Totalitarianism 301–02: in the retrospective light of The Human Condition, the threat of an exponentially increasing population of superfluous people risks appearing automatic – literally built in to modern technology.

10 HC 137; for Arendt’s account of the political as revelatory see HC 178–88.

11 For Benjamin, in contrast, the decay of tradition does not straightforwardly erase the origin of art in ritual, but gives it a new and unexpected significance: see Selected Writings, vol. 3, 105–06; cited hereafter as SW.

12 Benjamin, SW 104.

13 For a fuller consideration of “aura” see Graham MacPhee, “Technology, Time and the Return of Abstract Painting.”


15 Howard Caygill, Walter Benjamin 96. The argument presented here draws on Caygill’s rereading of Benjamin’s thinking in terms of a “transcendental but speculative philosophy” (4).

16 Just as the significance of creativity for Benjamin’s thinking of technology has tended to be ignored in anglophone cultural theory, so conversely has the importance of technology for his thinking of creativity. Thus, in his “Infinite Spaces” Marc Cauchi fails to consider the complexity of Benjamin’s account of technology, seeing only the reductive opposition of “the bourgeois logic of eternal recurrence” and a “creation ex nihilo” (24).

17 Benjamin, Selected Writings, vol. 2, 320.

18 HC 198; for Arendt’s account of the social see HC 22–73.

19 Notwithstanding Arendt’s later insistence on the purity of politics, part 2 of The Origins of Totalitarianism, “Imperialism,” locates the reformulation of modern politics within the spatial and temporal organization of the globe: see esp. 123–57.
20 Kant’s formulation of morality as an “ought” is the subject of Hegel’s sustained critique: for a statement of this critique see Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, sect. 618, 374–75. Arendt’s “Reflections on Little Rock” (1959) and *On Revolution* (1963) both indicate that in the significant instance of the USA, her account of the “republic” proves unable to sustain the analysis of the involvement of the “internal” space of politics in the reformulation of the globe begun in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.


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