ICONOGRAPHY IN THE AGE OF MECHANICAL REPRODUCTION

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ABSTRACT

Benjamin's era of mechanical reproduction may not have diminished the aura of art works as he thought, but it has had an impact on the structure of iconography. Now that images can be reproduced so easily by mechanical means, iconographies no longer need to be reinvented over and again by artists. At the same time, the sheer size and diversity of iconographic output means that fewer visual themes are held in common by viewers of images.

Keywords: Benjamin. *Casablanca.* Iconography. Mechanical reproduction.

Walter Benjamin's article "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" may well be the most famous essay on art of the past hundred years. Its celebrity has arisen despite the fact that the article's central claim seems very questionable.

Benjamin argued that "what wastes away in the age of mechanical reproduction is the work of art's aura".[1] Benjamin suggested that in a period when any work of art could be copied mechanically, then the allure of the original would be diminished. Even when a work of art was one which was copied by hand numerous times, as the Mona Lisa was, the copies only served to whet the art lover's appetite for the original. But when mechanical reproductions of the original spread around the globe, seeing the actual painting could no longer be as intense an emotional experience as it had previously been.

Benjamin not only believed this to be the case, he also of course wanted it to be the case, since, as a Marxist, he thought that the nineteenth-century theology of art acted as a buttress for bourgeois ideology. But despite the possible political attraction and the *prima facie* plausibility of his argument, one might wonder whether mechanical reproduction has not brought about the opposite of what Benjamin envisaged. Today works of art, made more famous by mechanical reproduction than they ever were before, have become celebrities, which people will travel thousands of miles to see, and which they then reproduce mechanically to take home with them [**Fig. 1**].

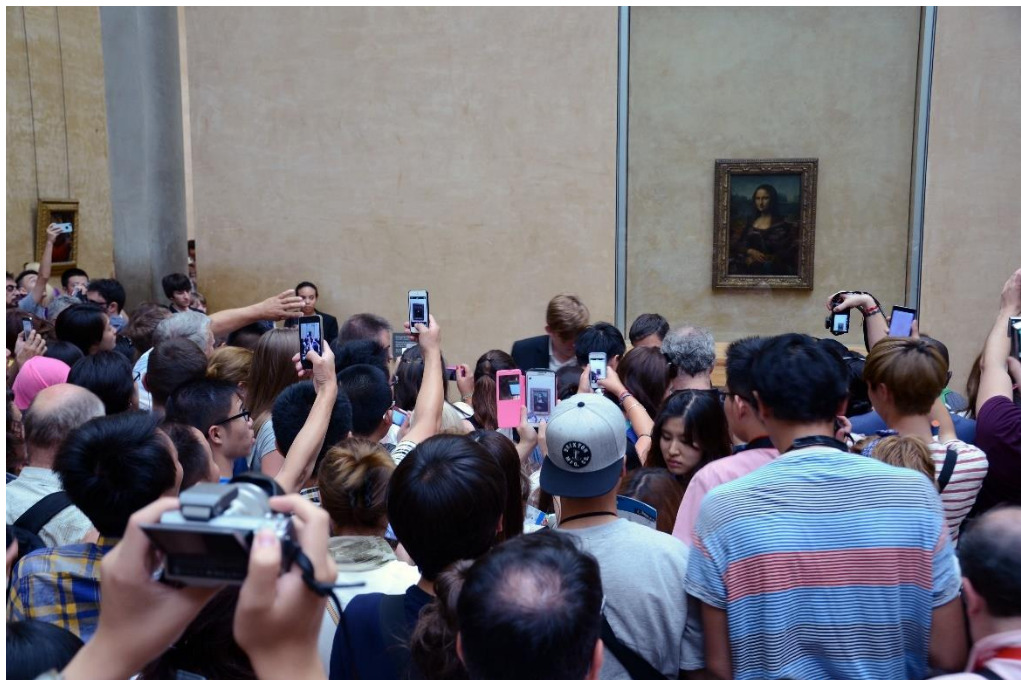

Fig. 1. Steven Lek, Photographers near Mona Lisa, Wikimedia Commons
(https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Photographers_near_Mona_Lisa,_Louvre,_2014.JPG)
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[1] 'Man kann, was hier ausfällt, im Begriff der Aura zusammenfassen und sagen: was im Zeitalter der technischen Reproduzierbarkeit des Kunstwerks verkümmert, das ist seine Aura.' Walter Benjamin, 'Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit', in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1, part 2, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1980, pp. 471-508 (477).

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Perhaps Benjamin could have argued that the experience undergone by tourists is a greatly impoverished version of the reverence felt by art lovers in the presence of works of art in the age before mechanical reproduction, but it is not clear how the truth of that claim could be established. We have too little evidence concerning the emotional responses of art lovers in the past, and even if we had more, it is not clear that we would be able to compare the authenticity of their experience with the response of the modern museum-goer. What we can say as a measurable fact is that millions more people visit art galleries today than in the nineteenth century, and that is a statistical outcome which does not lend strong support to Benjamin's thesis.

Whatever our view on Benjamin's argument about the waning of the art work's aura, he was of course right to say that mechanical reproduction has had a great impact on the production and consumption of visual art, and of course also on drama and music. In this paper I would like to examine one aspect of that impact which Benjamin seems not to have noticed; the consequences of mechanical reproduction for iconography. I do not mean here to discuss the currently popular topic of the influence of photographic collections on nineteenth – and twentieth-century art history[2] rather, I would like to talk about some of the ways that attitudes to the subject matter of imagery have changed since the birth of photography. I will however go on to note that many of these changes are continuations of a much broader and longer-term process.

In the era before photography, themes and stories were depicted in numerous different ways by different artists; but since the birth of photography, stories have been spread by mechanical reproduction, and have been reinterpreted much less. Two slides should be enough to clarify this idea.

In this first slide [**Fig. 2**] we see a passage from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* describing the transformation of Daphne into a tree, together with a selection of the many images that were made from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries in an attempt to illustrate the story that the passage describes. Some of these images appear to be direct attempts to illustrate Ovid's text. Murer (3) and Veronese (4) come close to the words of the poet himself, in particular in their attempt to translate the phrase "ora cacumen habet", "a tree-top has her face". Maratti (7) and Tiepolo (8) show their awareness of his text by painting Daphne's father, Peneus. We can assume that Rubens (5) had read Ovid, even though he doesn't attempt to follow the text at all closely, and he may well have thought of himself as illustrating the myth, rather than the poem; the same may also be true of Pollaiuolo (2) and Bernini (6).[3] The illustrator of Christine de Pizan (1) was asked to depict the myths that Christine was

[2] Costanza Caraffa (ed.), *Photo Archives and the Photographic Memory of Art History*, Deutsche Kunstverlag, Berlin, 2011; Jaś Elsner and Clare Hills-Nova (eds), 'Exiles and Emigrés, Libraries and Image Collections: the Intellectual Legacy', *Art Libraries Journal*, 38/4 (2013); Chiara Franceschini and Katia Mazzucco (eds), 'Photographic Collections and Theories of Thematic Ordering', *Visual Resources*, 30/3 (2014).

[3] Luba Freedman, '*Apollo and Daphne* by Antonio del Pollaiuolo and the poetry of Lorenzo de' Medici', *MAAR (Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome)* 56/57, 2011/12, pp. 213-242.

allegorizing, and so was not trying to follow Ovid's telling of the tale. So here we see different versions of the story, of which Ovid is a textual version and the others visual versions; four or five of the visual versions seem to have based themselves on Ovid's textual version of the story, but not all of them have done so.

Fig.2. Apollo and Daphne comparisons: Christine de Pizan, Epistre Othéa, Ms fr. 606, 40r, 1405-1510, Bibliothèque nationale, Paris; Piero del Pollaiuolo, ca 1475, National Gallery, London; Christoph Murer, ca 1580, Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento; Paolo Veronese, 1560s, Museum of Art, San Diego; Rubens, ca 1636, Musée Bonnat-Helleu, Bayonne; Gianlorenzo Bernini, 1620s, Galleria Borghese, Rome; Carlo Maratta, 1681, Koninklijke Museen, Brussels; Giambattista Tiepolo,1744, Louvre, Paris.

Let us now turn to another example of a text turned into an image, but this time one drawn from the age of mechanical reproduction [**Fig. 3**]. Those of you who have seen *Casablanca* will remember this famous line from the film. So far, there has been only one film version of *Casablanca* – one would have to be very brave to produce a remake – and so at present this particular line is invariably associated with Humphrey Bogart. *Casablanca* is based on a play called *Everybody Comes to Rick's*, but the play had never been produced on stage when the film appeared, and has hardly ever been performed since. Besides, the script of *Casablanca* deviates a great deal from the play, so that one can think of *Casablanca* as a separate play. As it happens this particular line appears in *Casablanca*, but does not appear in *Everybody Comes to Rick's*.[4]

[4] Aljean Harmetz, *The Making of Casablanca: Bogart, Bergman and World War II*, New York: Hyperion, 2002.

Fig. 3. Still from Michael Curtiz (dir.), *Casablanca*, First National Pictures/Warner Bros, 1942.

Casablanca has been performed once, and that performance was filmed, and so everyone thinks of it as a unique film, rather than as a text which might spawn other productions. There are relatively few films that have been made more than once, and those that have been made most often are normally versions of plays or novels, based on classic works by authors such as Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Jane Austen or Scott Fitzgerald. It is rather uncommon for a script which was first used in a film to be reused in another film. An exception to prove the rule is Gus van Sant's 1998 remake of Hitchcock's *Psycho* [**Fig. 4**], a version which was exceptionally faithful to the original, and which was a critical and commercial disaster. A comment by the film critic Roger Ebert is worth quoting. He gave Van Sant's film two out of five stars, and wrote as follows:

> Curious, how similar the new version is, and how different. If you have seen Hitchcock's film, you already know the characters, the dialogue, the camera angles, the surprises. All that is missing is the tension – the conviction that something urgent is happening on the screen at this very moment. The movie is an invaluable experiment in the theory of cinema, because it demonstrates that a shot-by-shot remake is pointless; genius apparently resides between or beneath the shots, or in chemistry that cannot be timed or counted.[5]

Fig. 4. Stills from (left) Alfred Hitchcock (dir.), *Psycho*, Shamley Productions/Paramount Pictures, 1960, and (right) Gus van Sant (dir.), *Psycho*, Imagine Entertainment/Universal Pictures, 1998.

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[5] https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/psycho-1998.

Ebert's comment seems a valid one, but of course a remake of a film is only pointless because it *can* be pointless. It is pointless because anyone who wants to see a film can go to see, or these days download, an exact mechanical reproduction of the original. The same is not of course true for theatrical productions. It may well be that anyone who was lucky enough to see Sarah Siddons or Ellen Terry as Lady Macbeth [**Fig. 5**] concluded that all other actresses who played this part failed to convey a similar degree of tension and conviction. "Genius", they might well think, "resides between or beneath the lines". And they may well be right about that. But they would surely not think that any other performance of *Macbeth* was pointless, since they would be aware of the fact that only those who managed to see Siddons or Terry in the theatre could have any but the vaguest idea of what it was like to experience their performances. Other Shakespearean actresses may be pale travesties of these greats from the past, but if we want to see *Macbeth* on stage at all we will just have to make do with the actresses we have. Theatrical performances cannot be reproduced, except of course in a film, and there were no films in Siddons' and Terry's days.

Fig. 5. (Left) George Henry Harlow, *Sarah Siddons as Lady Macbeth*, 1814, Garrick Club, London.
(Right) John Singer Sargent, *Ellen Terry as Lady Macbeth*, 1889, National Portrait Gallery, London

Great productions of theatrical plays do not prevent mediocre productions of theatrical plays from being staged. Many people want to see Shakespeare, and they will accept whatever happens to be on stage in their region at the time. But great films do put mediocre remakes out of business, as the story of Van Sant's *Psycho* shows. Mediocre remakes have to compete directly with great originals. And the reason they have to compete is precisely because the originals can be reproduced. Competition of all kinds is reliant on reproduction. If you have seen something I have made that you want to buy, then I must be able to make you something as similar as possible. I can

do that either by using a machine to make a replica, or by repeating an earlier feat of skill, but repetition, reproduction, is a necessary element in the process. When people or businesses compete in a market place, they are pitching against one another their ability to reproduce desirable products.

Film is a way of reproducing theatrical productions, a technology which allows theatrical productions to compete with one another internationally. In the days of Siddons and Terry, one theatrical production could compete with others amongst playgoers in the West End of London, but today one theatrical production can compete with others across the five continents. This is bad news for weaker productions, which are likely to be pushed out of business. And so we come to a situation where there is typically just one example of any particular production in the market place.

It is not just that there is only one production of the play *Casablanca*. There is only one version of the story, too. No one has an incentive to retell the story of Rick Blaine and Ilsa Lund. Anyone who tries to do so will be compared, almost certainly unfavourably, to the Bogart-Bergman film version, and there is too the complicating factor of copyright. This problem has become more pressing since 1982, when Universal Studios successfully sued an Italian production company for making a film with many uncanny resemblances to Universal's hit *Jaws* [**Fig. 6**]. Even though all the names were changed in *L'Ultimo Squalo*, even though the two films had not one line of dialogue in common, it was decided that the details of the two plots were so close that *Jaws*' copyright had been infringed.[6]

Fig. 6. Advertising posters for (left) Steven Spielberg (dir.), *Jaws*, Zanuck/Brown Company/Universal Pictures, 1975, and (right) Enzo G. Castellari (dir.), *L'Ultimo Squalo/The Last Shark*, Horizon Film/Montori Productions/Variety Film, 1981.

[6] Judges in both the US and Australia ruled that, while the core plot – shark terrorises beach resort – cannot be copyrighted, the details of plot and characterisation can be. Universal City Studios v. Film Ventures Intern., 543 F. Supp. 1134 (C.D. Cal. 1982) (https://law.justia.com/cases/federal/district-courts/FSupp/543/1134/1460974/); Re Giovanni Zeccola, Liliana Zeccola, Superstar International Films Pty Ltd Franco Benito Adolfo Zeccola, Vincenzo Zeccola, Gregory Phillip Lynch, GL Film Enterprises Pty Ltd v Universal City Studios Inc [1982] FCA 241; (1982) 67 FLR 225 (26 November 1982) (http://classic.austlii.edu.au/au/cases/cth/FCA/1982/241.html).

As a result of these various reproductive, competitive and legal factors, we have reached a situation where the narrative norm is for unique stories to be embodied in unique texts, which are then multiplied thousands of times through the techniques of mechanical reproduction, either as films or as books. In past centuries, on the other hand, stories were not unique: they were told and retold by numerous different authors, and they were then visualised and revisualised by numerous different artists, playwrights and librettists.

This process of what we might term "narrative individuation" had got under way long before the invention of the camera. The successful campaign by nineteenth-century authors such as Charles Dickens to have their literary productions protected by international copyright laws was one important staging post of this historical process. But so too was the much longer-term rise of the author-owner; by which I mean, that narratives have tended to become identified with individual story-tellers. This can come about in various ways. Sometimes an author writes a version of a story which becomes canonical, so that other versions of the same story are forgotten or put in the shade. Few authors since Homer have tried to retell the story of how the death of Patroclus led through a sequence of events to the death of Hector. The other main way of individuating a narrative is for an author to invent a new story, either with historical or traditional characters – like Dante's *Divine Comedy* or Ariosto's *Orlando furioso* – or with new, invented characters, like Guarini's *Pastor Fido* or Molière's *Tartuffe*. This last method of writing stories is of course now the norm, but it is surprising how late it was before it took hold. Before the eighteenth century, the vast majority of tales were retellings of traditional narratives, not inventions from scratch.

These days the author – or the production company or publishing house to which the author has signed away rights – owns the story and the text of the story. It is therefore important that the story and the text be original, so that rights can be claimed over it. Ownership and originality go hand in hand.

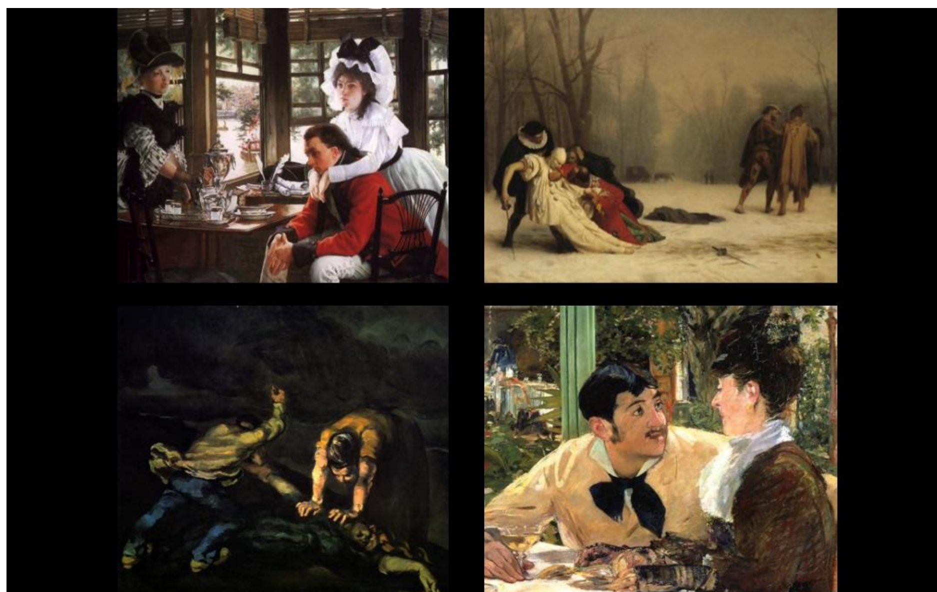

Fig. 7. Narrative comparisons: James Tissot, *Bad news (The parting)* (1872), National Museum, Cardiff; Jean-Léon Gérôme, *The duel after the Masquerade*, 1857, Musée Condée, Chantilly; Paul Cézanne, *The murder*, ca 1870, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool; Édouard Manet, *Chez le père Lathuille*, 1879, Musée des beaux-arts, Tournai.

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The history of iconography reflects this process of narrative individuation. Classical mythological and historical narratives became less common during the course of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. They were at first replaced by narratives from vernacular authors, such as Dante, Shakespeare and Goethe. However these vernacular narratives soon waned in popularity, and artists began to invent their own narratives [**Fig. 7**].

None of these paintings is based on a pre-existent story; they were all invented by the artists themselves. We are not perhaps used to thinking of Impressionist paintings like the Manet at bottom right as “narratives”, but imagine what a story Flaubert or Maupassant could have created out of this telling interaction.

Narratives of any kind became extremely unfashionable in the art of the first half of the twentieth century, but that does not mean that visual narratives disappeared. Rather, they migrated across to film. There are of course many obvious differences between film and early modern narrative painting, but the similarities are also worth attending to. Traditional history painting always had much in common with the theatre of its time, in its desire to visualize narratives, and its aim to be exemplary. *Ut pictura poesis* was only true when poetry was primarily a narrative art form, since the central concern of painting, from at least the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, was to tell stories as effectively as possible. This narrative intention continues to live on in film, and so too does much of the exemplary ambition of early modern history painting.[7] The various characters played by Humphrey Bogart are surely no more crass as moral exempla than earlier favourites such as Mucius Scaevola, and most films, certainly of the Hollywood variety, are meant not only to entertain but also to point a moral or two.

However one main difference, as I have been arguing, is that the stories in films are normally unique, whereas the stories of traditional iconography were told over and over again. There is only one *Casablanca*, but there are hundreds of Scaevolas.

Perhaps then we could take Benjamin’s argument and turn it on its head. Maybe the uniqueness of stories has increased their aura. Films, after all, have a much more devoted and passionate audience than history painting ever had. As Umberto Eco once observed in an essay on the emotional appeal of *Casablanca*, “fans cry every time Bogey says ‘kid’ “.[8] The aura of narrative images is still very much with us.

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