**The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction**

By Walter Benjamin

Translated by Harry Zohn

“Our fine arts were developed, their types and uses were established, in times very different from the present, by men whose power of action upon things was insignificant in comparison with ours. But the amazing growth of our techniques, the adaptability and precision they have attained, the ideas and habits they are creating, make it a certainty that profound changes are impending in the ancient craft of the Beautiful. In all the arts there is a physical component, which can no longer be considered or treated as it used to be, which cannot remain unaffected by our modern knowledge and power. For the last twenty years neither matter nor space nor time has been what it was from time immemorial. We must expect great innovations to transform the entire technique of the arts, thereby affecting artistic invention itself and perhaps even bringing about an amazing change in our very notion of art.”

Paul Valéry, Pièces sur L’Art, 1931

Le Conquete de l’ubiquite

By the early 1930’s, film was moving in a poetic and avante-garde direction along with the movement of the social documentary. The impetus for such a movement was a desire from filmmakers to expose the social and experimental realities of contemporary life.

One on side, critics hated the move away from literature as an inspiration of film, while others concluded that these experimental films were distorted and beautiful interpretations of social problems (the dangers of technology, for example).

Benjamin’s essay serves as “one of the most important and dramatic statements about the radical social value of film in the changing history of art and literature” (Corrigan, 2012, *Film and Literature,* p. 21).

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| DIRECTIONS:  In groups of 5, you will annotate and discuss the 15 sections of Benjamin’s essay. Each group member will be responsible for covering three sections of the essay. After reading and annotating your sections, you will share your understanding with the group. Yes! This is hard! Some guided questions are provided for you as a jumping off point if you are stuck. |

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| SECTION | Summary/Focus Question |
| 1: I, II, III | How would reproducing a piece of art take away its value and authenticity? |
| 2: IV, V, VI | What used to be the relationship between art and ritual? Is the existence of art as important as the viewing of art? |
| 3: VII, VIII, IX | How do we decide it something is art or not? What are differences between film acting and stage acting? |
| 4: X, XI, XII | What does author think about people who believe anyone can go from a nobody to an overnight success? What’s the difference between enjoying art alone and in a viewing with other people? |
| 5: XIII, XIV, XV | Does a cameraman and editor take away from an audience member’s unique interpretation of a film? How do close-ups intensify the human experience? |

How would you characterize the relationship between art and politics?

Why do certain artistic movements die?

Do you prefer film or theater? Why?