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The Work of Art in the Age of Digital Reproduction: Memes and Marxist Essays

Luke Hawkins · Thursday, April 20th, 2017

For over a hundred years, the ability to replicate works of art has increased due to the accelerated development of certain mechanical then digital technologies. With this, the appetite for reproducible works has grown in both artist and consumer.

Digital technology has offered nearly every industry a global stage, shop window and marketplace, and the art world is included. Illustrators, painters, photographers and anyone wanting to display their work effectively has to give themselves an online presence. This means slapping copyright symbols and watermarks across their work to protect it as they see it as a valuable work of art – this valuation is not shared by all who post content online.



Digital art: Moonlit Landscape with a View of the New Amstel River and Castle Kostverloren; Aert van der Neer (Dutch, 1603/1604 – 1677); 1647. The “original” is oil on panel; 57.5 × 89.9 cm (22 5/8 × 35 3/8 in.). This reproduction is made of electrons and pixels, and it is sized to fit your screen.

The question of whether artwork loses value through reproduction then re-emerges. In his essay, *The Work of Art in the age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Marxist philosopher and essayist, Walter Benjamin professed his belief in the importance of an original work of art’s aura:

“The technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence.”

The importance of a unique existence to the public in the modern day could be questioned. Benjamin went on to posit the development of a certain perception from the mass audience.

“Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction... To pry an object from its shell, to destroy its aura, is the mark of a perception whose ‘sense of the universal equality of things’ has increased to such a degree that it extracts it even from a unique object by means of reproduction.”

In the age of instant gratification through digital technology, it could be said that the audience of any medium is indifferent to the fact that what they see or hear is a duplicate, just as long as they have it immediately at hand.

When an image becomes less about a personal, interactive experience, the attachment between art

and viewer becomes more tenuous.

Photography was seen as the beginning of reproducible visual art. However, the camera film roll and printed image were at least tangible pieces, unlike an image on a screen. Photographer [Daniel White](#) described the processes and sensations that are being diminished through viewing artwork purely online.

“When you view an artwork in a gallery setting you share an attachment with the whole experience. When you scroll online and come across the artwork you went to see in some gallery then it can become a numb sensation; it becomes another image lost in the thousands of images that populate the ever growing archive of the internet... The social interaction of being able to share thoughts and ideas with one another over an artwork is something that is lost when viewing an artwork online.”



Daniel White, Contestants 1. Reproduced with kind permission of the artist.

Images of famous artworks and shared photography are one way in which stills are being shared but there is an altogether less substantial form of viral images.

It is stills that are likely the most reproduced images online thanks in part to memes. Memes by their very nature, and going by [their etymology](#) (derived from the Greek *mimeme* and first coined, bizarrely, by Richard Dawkins), that are there to be reproduced. What was once live-action puppetry then gets committed to film, a still from the film is taken, text is added and you end up with megabytes worth of [Kermits](#). With each change of medium, the warmth of Jim Henson’s craftsmanship grows colder until the viewership is left with a ubiquitous replica of an image- a picture that, in the future, will be in Kermit’s attic rotting and gnarling further for each of his debauched sins.

Memes have become a pseudo-medium of their own; an image that invites people to make their own slight edits to the superimposed snowclone jokes- reproduction is encouraged. This is where the idea of reproduced work losing value moves from visual pieces into other media- namely comedy.

In the world of written comedy—screen or stand-up—anything that comes close to a reproduced joke is heavily criticised. Comedians are expected to “burn” their own material whenever they use it in any medium so as not to repeat it. Using material similar to others is a comedic cardinal sin. [YouTuber Kain Carter has been found guilty of thieving from the late, great Patrice O’Neal](#); [Amy Schumer also regularly has the “hack” label thrown her way](#).

While it is important that art is accessible, the permission audiences give “creators” to recycle and even plagiarise material encourages the production of unoriginal, ignorable, disposable art.

As art, in any form, carries within its quiddities a documenting of immediate, personal feelings and experiences, it is imperative that original artworks are experienced and not just observed.

In his essay, Benjamin references French poet, Paul Valéry’s work, *The Conquest of Ubiquity*, obviously realising the timelessness of his words.

“Just as water, gas, and electricity are brought into our houses from far off to satisfy our needs in

response to minimal effort, so we shall be supplied with visual or auditory images, which will appear and disappear at a simple movement of the hand, hardly more than a sign.”

With this we have a prediction of transitory artworks; pieces that, through coding and cookies remain digitally permanent yet are casually forgettable for the audience—disappearing at the simple movement of the hand.

Top image: Daniel White, Contestants 2. Reproduced with kind permission of the artist.

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