

Habit, Distraction, Absorption: Reconsidering Walter Benjamin and the Relation of Architecture to Film

Richard Charles Strong

While it is true that many critical theorists and radical philosophers of the twentieth century engaged seriously with art and its relation to politics, it is also true that many focused perhaps too narrowly on literature, or film, or music and perhaps neglected architecture. Of course, many exceptions to this general trend are to be found. Among those who did encounter and engage with architecture we find Walter Benjamin. One Benjamin text, among others, which dealt seriously with architecture, one that is canonical and cliché, one that has probably been reproduced and read more than any other of his writings, is *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility*. It is the *Artwork* essay with which I will here primarily focus my attention. In the course of this essay I will attempt to show that Benjamin didn't miss an encounter with architecture, but that his encounter with architecture in the *Artwork* essay may have missed the mark. And yet, I also want to submit the hypothesis that we might be able to think as our present technological, aesthetic and architectural milieu with a critical reading of the *Artwork* essay, paired with a recuperation and reorganization of certain key Benjaminian concepts.

In his *Artwork* essay, Walter Benjamin claims that perhaps the best way to understand the relation between film and the film-going masses is by looking at the way the masses relate to architecture. This relation between the masses and architecture is opposed to the way in which a single individual might visually contemplate a painting or similar art form (Benjamin, 2006a, p. 268). The analogy that Benjamin puts forward is thus that the masses relate to film like the masses relate to architecture; in a state of distraction and in a manner of habitual tactile appropriation. Today one finds more and more frequently that film or rather filmic images are not restricted to the cinema house or even to our private spaces. One finds that filmic images have made their way to our everyday public spaces and more specifically into the surfaces of our structures. Though it is by no means a foregone conclusion that such technologies and filmic applications will continue to proliferate. And yet, in a limited number of concrete cases, what were once

wooden walls are now moving images. Benjamin's account remains apropos because it foregrounds the affects of the technical structure of the filmic medium at a time when that medium is increasingly encountered in new contexts. More specifically, Benjamin's account foregrounds the notions of distraction and tactility at a time when many theories in the field of media and technology dwell on attention and manifest visual content without taking into account the ways in which that content is conditioned by tactility or perhaps the way in which the technical structure of a given medium affects its reception.¹ Moreover, Benjamin's account remains timely and ought to be in-part recuperated because of the similarities he draws between film and architecture at a time when, as it will be shown, this relation has shifted, in some instances, from a possible analogy to certain mereology.

In the course of this essay I will argue that Benjamin's insight, namely, that the relation of the masses to film is best understood by an analogy with architecture, never held, or at least no longer holds. Further, I will show that the failure of Benjamin's analogy is, in part, because new building materials such as high definition screens qua walls and ceilings collapse Benjamin's analogy between film and architecture. Filmic images and surfaces are now elements of architecture. Additionally, I will show that despite Benjamin's analogical failure, his analyses of film and architecture can provide helpful inroads for thinking, theorizing, and reflecting upon the related technological and social changes in our built environment today. In particular, building on the premise that filmic images are possibly becoming a more ubiquitous part of our built environment and everyday life, I will show that this gives inherent 'shock effects' to some buildings, that the habituations and absorption that already occur within our built environment are made more robust, elaborate and varied, and that unlike film in a traditional context, architectural instances of filmic images are often site specific. These conclusions will be guided by the position that Benjamin's concepts of shock effects, distracted absorption and tactility qua filmic images remain viable and potent when the context is shifted from the traditional filmic milieu to applications in new fields such as architecture. More and more, so it seems, one is confronted with filmic images. This is not because we choose to go to the movies more often but because these moving images have come to us without our solicitation.

I will begin by giving an account of Benjamin's original sense of tactility, absorption, distraction, and shock effects and how they relate to the masses, film, and architecture in the *Artwork* essay. I will then show how and why the analogy between architecture and film no longer holds qua analogy and how it is the case that, with modifications, Benjamin's account of film and its relation to architecture can still provide potent theoretical ways for thinking about film and architecture today.

Original context and content, or; what's past is not merely prologue

Benjamin's *Artwork* essay written between 1936 and 1939 was published posthumously in 1955. The essay was composed in response to, or in light of, a number of historical conjunctures. Among these were the fall of the Weimer republic, the rise of National

Socialism, the invention of photography which begat film (art forms in which technical reproducibility is inherent), the supposed decline or shift of the auratic in art, the supposed shift in the function of art away from ritual towards politics, and the increase of leisure time that demanded new and accessible forms of entertainment among the working class.² The themes that are broached and addressed in the essay are therefore complicated, interwoven, dialectal and above all else fecund loci for many and varied investigations. However, for present purposes, I will limit the scope of my analysis primarily to section XV of the essay wherein Benjamin gives his account of architecture, tactile appropriation, distraction, and habit as a means for thinking about the emergence of the new mediums of photography and film and their relation to the masses.

Section XV of the *Artwork* essay is the final section of the essay notwithstanding the epilogue. It is preceded by a section claiming that the Dadaist attempts to shock the spectator morally promoted the medium of film which equally shocks the spectator physically or tactilely 'by means of its technological structure' (Benjamin, 2006a, p. 266; Armstrong, 2000, p. 66). Whereas the Dadaist artists might put together a collection of seemingly unrelated objects and images via collage, photomontage, or assemblage in order to attempt to create a shock effect, film, on the other hand, shocks the viewer not only by moving through frames on the reel one image after the next but more markedly in the editing cuts whereby disparate images, shots and perspectives are made contiguous. The 'shock effect' of film, in contradistinction to that of the Dadaist objects, should not be understood as something particularly jarring or even conspicuous. Indeed, the movement of the images themselves itself is all that is required. The shock effect of film, due to its being bound up with film's technical structure, means that any and every film has the quality of producing a shock effect regardless of any intention to do so. Thus a mild film for children shocks the spectator, as does a more experimental collection of intentionally disparate images, such as one might see in the opening sequence of Ingmar Bergman's *Persona*. In other words, shock effects are inherent in the medium of film regardless of content. Therefore, by 'shock' or 'shock effect' Benjamin has in mind the spectator or rather the mass spectators' collective perception of images being constantly interrupted by change or movement which then precludes, in most instances, something like thoughtful attention or contemplation. Or, as Georges Duhamel puts it in the first person, whom Benjamin quotes, 'I can no longer think what I want to think. My thoughts have been replaced by moving images' (Benjamin, 2006a, p. 267; Duhamel, 1930, p. 52). This highlights the extent to which the movement of the images is enough to create a shock effect. Jarring or unforeseen jump cuts are common but not necessary. Though this shock effect seems to overwhelmingly preclude contemplation, it includes the inscription of a memory trace not immediately or explicitly present to consciousness, according to Benjamin.

The relation of the shock effect to memory is essential to understanding Benjamin's account and thus to modify its scope in order to understand the ways in which I will expand the domain of the filmic shock effect in order to think changes in architecture and film today. In order to give more substance to the way in which shock effects relate to memory it is necessary to examine its fullest elaboration in Benjamin's essay

On Some Motifs in Baudelaire, written in 1939 and published in January of 1940 (Benjamin, 2006b, p. 343).³ In *On Some Motifs in Baudelaire* Benjamin contends that exposure to shock causes consciousness to screen stimuli as a sort of defense or protection (Benjamin, 2006b, p. 317). That which gets screened, being incompatible with consciousness, is registered as a memory trace (Benjamin, 2006b, pp. 317, 319). This formulation can be understood in the following quotation in which Benjamin, not afraid of using many sources in a short span of writing, partially cites Freud from *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in addition to supplementing Freud with his own words, couched in Proustian terms. He writes:

The basic formula of this hypothesis is that 'becoming conscious and leaving behind a memory trace are incompatible with each other within one and the same system'. Rather, vestiges of memory are 'often most powerful and most enduring when the incident which left them behind was one that never entered consciousness'. Put in Proustian terms, this means that only what has not been experienced explicitly and consciously, what has not happened to the subject as an experience [*Erlebnis*], can become a component of the *mémoire involontaire*. (Benjamin, 2006b, p. 319; Freud, 2011, p. 156)

What this brings to the fore is that when we take the shock effect and its relation to memory and then apply it to film one can then say that the masses, under the influences of multiple shock effects inherent in the technical structure of film are not explicitly experiencing that which they absorb as memory traces or fragments because memory traces and consciousness are 'incompatible with each other within one and the same system' (Freud, 2011, p. 156). Though not experienced by consciousness, these memory traces can, couched in Proustian terminology, emerge explicitly in involuntary remembrance, which is to say, they do not necessarily remain latent forever. Moreover, it is likely that these memory traces inform the subject on a supra-, pre-, or subconscious level.

With respect to film, the specific difference is that these shock effects and subsequently produced memory traces are not operating at the unit of one individual, but quasi-simultaneously for the film-going masses. It is as if, to extend the Proustian theme, it is not only the individual named Marcel for whom all of Combray, for example, can be made present by the madeleine, it is the collective masses for whom these quasi-homogeneous memories, not present to consciousness, have been absorbed or inscribed as a memory trace. Moreover, according to Tim Armstrong, these non-traumatic 'shocks are written into the texture of modern life' with its crowds, incessant advertising, alienated labour, constant news cycles, and so on (Armstrong, 2000, p. 66). Armstrong is right in foregrounding the fact that these shocks are non-traumatic and common. It is beyond Armstrong's historical intent to try to think about how and where shock effects might confront us in the present. In addition, Armstrong seems to omit the fact that film was, due to its mode of quasi-simultaneous reception, imbuing *the masses* with seemingly *the same* memory traces. I say 'seemingly the same' in so far as the same images could of course be absorbed and 'understood' differently, as well as the fact that different images could be viewed or imbued with meaning that is

similar.⁴ Much of the possible difference in the non-deliberative interpretation of the images will be contingent upon the habitudes of thought and vision operative in given populations. This behavioural and epistemological haziness with respect to absorption foregrounds the extent to which our grasp on the relation between habit, memory, body, and learning was and is a problem.

Thus we have seen that inherent in the structure of film are non-traumatic shock effects which produce memory traces in order to protect consciousness from the onslaught of stimuli. These memory traces can emerge as involuntary remembrances or remain supra-, pre-, or subconscious. While film is not the only phenomenon to produce such effects it is differentiated by the fact that the spectators of a film are experiencing the same shocks and registering similar memory traces.

Returning now to the *Artwork* essay, we can see the stress Benjamin places on the key difference between the shock effects of film and its mass and quasi-simultaneous audiences versus other shock-producing phenomena or modes of experience. Thus, section XV begins by Benjamin stating:

The masses are a matrix from which all customary behavior toward works of art is today emerging newborn. Quantity has been transformed into quality: *The greatly increased mass of participants has produced a different kind of participation.* (Benjamin, 2006a, p. 267)

First we find textual evidence that it is the masses and their relation to art and not merely the new medium of film that has brought about a change. Again, it is not the individual or film per se which bring about his 'change in behaviour towards art' it is both the new medium and its mode of presentation, working together, which bring about this change. Second, and furthermore, this quantitative shift in the relation of masses to art has brought about a qualitative change in the way people participate with the then new medium of film. What Benjamin means by quantity being transformed into quality is that participation with many previous art forms in thoughtful attentive concentration and reflection by the few, gives way to participation that is marked by distraction, no longer by the few, but by the many, by the masses. In other words, the quantity of those experiencing the art object, at the same time nonetheless, changes the quality or mode of participation from individual concentration to collective or mass distraction.

Shock effects that break concentration and force the apparatus of perception to screen itself from overstimulation which produce memory traces are related to participation in a mode of distraction by intensity, not causality. That is to say, shock effects and participation in a mode of distraction can both stand on their own, they are not mutually implied and it is not the case that one is the condition for the other. However, given shock effects there is an intensification or guarantee of distraction because shock effects actively disrupt and largely preclude the contrary of distraction, concentration.

Distraction in its full elaboration is another essential concept for the sake of understanding the then new medium of film and its effects on concentration because it is the polar opposite of the previous mode of participation with many art works,

namely concentration. Additionally Benjamin's assertions regarding distracted participation reveal a change whereby people are no longer absorbed into a work, rather, they absorb the work into themselves. The language of absorption may seem hermetic but Benjamin makes it clearer in the following passage from section XV of the *Artwork* essay. Here we see the relation of concentration and distraction to absorption. Benjamin writes:

Distraction and concentration form an antithesis, which may be formulated as follows. A person who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it; he enters into the work, just as, according to legend, a Chinese painter entered his completed painting while beholding it. By contrast, the distracted masses absorb the work of art into themselves. (Benjamin, 2006a, p. 268)

The opposition between distraction and concentration is further explained in terms of the direction of the 'absorption' of the work of art. In front of a painting a contemplative individual is absorbed *into* the work of art, so to speak. The distracted mass, rather than being absorbed into the work, themselves absorb the work presumably as a memory trace due to the shock effects of film itself. Thus the direction of absorption is reversed when comparing painting or any other contemplative art object to film. Admittedly, the language of absorption is still somewhat vague. Echoing Kracauer on the subject of film, I think this notion of the masses absorbing the work (rather than being absorbed by or into the work) is best understood in terms of the production and reinforcement of the status quo or as Kracauer said, 'films are the mirror of the prevailing society' (Kracauer, 1995, pp. 291–304).⁵ That is to say, what gets absorbed or 'internalized' are a whole host of values, givens, framings, compartments, roles and possibilities including, but not limited to, objects of desire, gender, class, race, labour, institutions, morality and rationality. This absorption is a matter of inconspicuous and habitual learning. These absorptions need not be present or manifest to the thetic consciousness of the subject spectator. Benjamin's notion of distracted absorption whereby the masses soak up what they have seen has the virtue of being sufficiently vague enough to allow for it to be understood beyond its original scope while at the same time providing a contrast to the absorption 'into' art objects by the attentive viewer confronting a painting, for example. Of course, film is not the only medium that begets absorption we might face today, but it was certainly a novel locus at the time. And yet, despite this mode of reception being new in cinema, one can, according to Benjamin, find antecedent works of art that function similarly.

According to Benjamin, such absorption or reception of values and understandings by the distracted masses has a prototype by which we can understand film, architecture. He writes:

This [distracted absorption by the masses] is most obvious with regard to buildings. Architecture has always offered the prototype of an artwork that is received in a state of distraction and through the collective. The laws of architecture's reception are highly instructive. (Benjamin, 2006a, p. 268)

He writes further that,

Architecture has never had fallow periods. Its history is longer than that of any other art, and its effect ought to be recognized in any attempt to account for the relationship of the masses to the work of art. Buildings are received in a twofold manner: by use and by perception. Or, better: tactilely and optically. Such reception cannot be understood in terms of the concentrated attention of a traveler before a famous building. On the tactile side, there is no counterpart to what contemplation is on the optical side. Tactile reception comes about not so much by way of attention as by way of habit. The latter largely determines even the optical reception of architecture, which spontaneously takes the form of casual noticing, rather than attentive observation. Under certain circumstances, this form of reception shaped by architecture acquires canonical value. *For the tasks which face the human apparatus of perception at historical turning points cannot be performed solely by optical means – that is, by way of contemplation. They are mastered gradually – taking their cue from tactile reception – through habit.* (Benjamin, 2006a, p. 268)

Thus, Architecture or the built environment is the paragon of art that can serve as an analogy for understanding the relationship of the masses to film, or collectively experienced art objects. Let me reiterate that this analogy does not hold for all arts or media, it only obtains for Benjamin in those cases where the scale of the relation is between the masses and art, not an individual before a painting, not a small group in a salon hearing and discussing a sonata.

Constructed environments, such as buildings, parks, town squares, or city streets are appropriated or absorbed in a twofold manner by touch (use understood as sensually unified and quotidian ‘taking their cue from tactile reception’) and by sight (privileged visual perception suggesting contemplation). A key claim for Benjamin is that it is touch or use that is primary and that the visual or sight is secondary and informed by the tactile. Tactile appropriation is not accomplished by attention or conspicuous awareness but by habit and in the case of architecture and film, at the unit of the masses or collective. For example, one can understand tactile appropriation in the following way; think of your own home or apartment and your knowledge of the light switches there. Turning them on or off is ‘second-nature’ and the appropriation of the placement of those light switches and their corresponding lamps and bulbs is not acquired primarily by visual attention but by tactile habituation or absorption. When one walks into a dark room for the first time and fumbles for the switches in what must look like a humorous flapping and flailing of arms, visual attention is not even an option as the room is unlit. Upon second and third attempts at entering the same unlit room one has already absorbed or appropriated the location of the switch. Now imagine, by analogy, that the light switch is the role of labour in society, or the concept of justice, and the room is film.

The tourist gawking at the *Unité d’Habitation* in Marseilles or the Comcast Center in Philadelphia is different in kind from those who live or work in those buildings, respectively. That is because in a derivative mode of privileged visual intuition the process of distracted habitual absorption through quotidian use is overlooked. It is the

average everyday comportment with the built environment that Benjamin has in mind. To say that 'habit determines to a large extent even optical reception' means that one is habituated or inculcated to look up when one enters a lobby, for example, or to look for stairs that lead down if one is in a Parisian café and needs to find a toilet, or even the tacit awareness that the hierarchy of bureaucratic power is mirrored by the floors of an office building. These examples are habituated absorptions that certainly pertain to the visual, yet are principally informed by the tactile and habitual dealings we have with the grammar and content of our built environment. So too with film, the Benjaminian analogy contends, there are certain expectations to which the masses become habituated and expect unknowingly. For example, if one works hard they will be rewarded, or that given situation *X* one should feel the emotional response *Y*. The difference between the two is that with architecture the habituations are often inherently more limited in scope. While in the case of filmic habituations fewer technical limitations obtain. There is of course some liminal overlap of the architectural habit and filmic habit, which would be, for example, the learning or anticipating of certain actions of bodies in the built environment after having seen them on the screen or *vice versa*.

With this notion of tactile appropriation in mind, Benjamin goes on to make the even more substantial claim that 'the tasks which face the human apparatus of perception at the turning points of history cannot be solved by optical means, that is, by contemplation, alone. They are mastered gradually by habit, under the guidance of tactile appropriation' (Benjamin, 2006a, pp. 268–9). Benjamin's contention here is that we don't learn of the affects of pivotal new elements and media by examining the visual manifest content, or perhaps aural in the case of radio. We experience and absorb these changes without being ourselves aware. However, by looking at the new habituations of the masses in their use or tactile appropriation of new media we can take distance and thus give a functional account of the changes in habit and tactile perception which ground or inform other changes. It is only then, once an understanding of the reorganizations and modifications of tactile habit, and the other perceptions that they inform, that our 'tasks', be they positive potentials in the emergent media and elements or negative pitfalls to avoid, have even the possibility of coming to the fore.⁶

To be sure, these are imbricated and large-scale (yet perhaps slow) shifts of perception that cannot be isolated in terms of only a single new medium. That is to say, the developments and specific qualities of film that Benjamin outlines, namely, its shock effects, its tactile appropriation, and its distracted inculcation, also confronted the nineteenth-century person as they walked home on the crowded streets as recounted by Baudelaire and Poe and reflected upon by Benjamin (Benjamin, 2006b, pp. 329–30). And yet the example of crowds does not seem to bring with it the same level of homogeneity as one gets with film. By which I mean that when examining the shock effects of crowds, it is hard to say what might get absorbed in a manner that is sufficient to make general remarks about its possible affects. Moreover, shock effects and habituated appropriation are found in the process and practices of industrialization and alienation driven by Capital whereby the workers' task is repeated without completion, without contemplation, more by habit and use than by circumspect vision and attention on the assembly line. But again it is far more difficult to say what exactly might be absorbed in this way other than the memory trace of the habituated action

which would vary greatly from person to person (Benjamin, 2006b, p. 329).⁷ Filmic shock effects are a special case because of the seeming homogeneity of that which gets absorbed.

What we get from Benjamin's account of film and architecture is as follows. First, film has within its technical structure the property of producing shock effects in the viewer. These shock effects cause consciousness to protect itself from overstimulation by screening off content which then gets recorded as memory traces. This shocking, so to speak, technical structure of film is then coupled with the fact that the same films are viewed quasi-simultaneously by the masses as opposed to the careful attentive contemplation of an individual art aficionado. The mode of participation of these masses is one of distraction, not concentration. Moreover, Benjamin asserts that when the masses participate with film, or any other art, in a state of distraction they unknowingly absorb the content of the work of art. Given that film has within its formal structure shock effects which beget memory traces not manifest to consciousness, aided by a mode of participation that is one of distraction, the masses then absorb much of the content of films without being contemplatively aware of either the absorption or much of the content itself. Any art that is absorbed in a state of distraction does so primarily by means of tactile as opposed to optical means. The tactile is primary and largely informs the optical reception which takes the form of distracted casual noticing and not attentive contemplation. Benjamin then contends that this tactile absorption that one finds in film is best understood in terms of an analogy with architecture and that its mode of reception by the distracted masses serves as a paradigmatic example and helpful analogy for understanding the distracted masses and how they participate with film.

Problems with Benjamin's account

The first problem is the possibly specious nature of the analogy between architecture and film, the second, related to the first, is the lack of any inherent or formally constituted shock effect in architecture, and the third is the fact that Benjamin's analysis does not hold qua analogy in the present given the state of architecture vis-à-vis the filmic image. I will first bring these issues to light in order to show that they can be resolved by revising and updating Benjamin's own account.

Many commentators do in fact question whether or not the analogy between film and architecture is a good one. Joan Ockman, for example, does so on the grounds that film is often narrational whereas buildings are not (Ockman, 2000, p. 171). We also find that in their introduction and commentary to letters exchanged between Adorno and Benjamin found in *Aesthetics and Politics*, Livingstone, Anderson and Mulhern unequivocally claim that the analogy between film and architecture, as Benjamin presents it, is a spurious or specious generalization (Anderson et al., 2007, p. 115). They write:

His [Benjamin's] theory of the positive significance of distraction was based on a specious generalization from architecture, whose forms are always directly used as

practical objects and hence necessarily command a distinct type of attention from those of drama, cinema, poetry or painting. (Anderson et al., 2007, p. 115)

While Livingstone, Anderson and Mulhern are more concerned with the larger issue of Adorno's dismissal of the positive value of distraction, that fact does not so much concern us here (Anderson et al., 2007, p. 115). What does concern us is the claim that architecture is 'always' practical and thus commands a distinct type of 'attention' that differs in kind from the 'attention' paid to entertainment or diversions such as those named (cinema, drama and so on) (Anderson et al., 2007, p. 115). Clearly, Livingstone, Anderson, and Mulhern are not adhering to Benjamin's own vocabulary of attention and distraction. However, their contention is that our relation to architecture and our relation to film are not enough alike such that one could best be understood by analogy with the other and therefore that Benjamin's analogy is a false one.

The claim that the attention paid to a building or built environment 'always' commands a different type of practical 'attention' than does the 'attention' required by film does have some credence because often one has an ulterior aim in mind when dealing practically with a public building, for example.⁸ The building is often a better or worse means to an end in terms of our engagement with it. Contrariwise, one views a film in order to be entertained – the traditional cinema house therefore is not often a means to an end.⁹ Again, to use the word 'attention' in this case is of course to misuse or miss the point of Benjamin's account which rests on the polar opposite of attention, namely distraction, but nevertheless the spirit of the criticism is a good and forceful one. When the masses have dealings with shared built environments or public buildings it is often for the sake of some other ultimate aim.¹⁰ This is not 'always' as Livingstone, Anderson and Mulhern claim, but it is often or usually the case. For the cinema-going masses the distracted tactile appropriation occurs while pursuing an end in itself which is different from practical dealings in terms of its necessity and frequency. For example, the masses have daily dealings with subway station *in order to* catch a train to go to work. The masses file into shopping malls *in order to* purchase things. The masses enter religious meeting places *in order to* come together for worship. In contradistinction, the masses go to the movies in order to go to the movies. The former examples are instrumental while the example of going to the movies is terminal and therefore at least possibly indicates a different type of engagement. Surely, in the given examples of 'means to an end' dealings there is a process of tactile and distracted appropriation of the built environment by the masses but it is different from the tactile and distracted appropriation of the masses in the cinema in so far as with the case of the cinema house there is no practical necessity or ultimate aim motivating the behaviour or engagement save entertainment. Does this 'means to an end' versus 'end in itself' distinction render Benjamin's comparison of architecture to film a 'specious generalization?' Probably not 'specious', but it is at least suspect or questionable in light of the distinction between the necessary 'means to an end' engagement with most buildings and the contingent 'end in itself' of going to the movies.

The second fault that could be brought to bear on Benjamin's account is an extension of the point already made about the suspect generalization between architecture and film, but in different terms. One could just as easily claim that perhaps the shock effect

which is part of film 'by means of its technical structure' is not to be found inherently in architecture, making a more robust case against comparing film to architecture because the shock effects of film are such a key notion for Benjamin's account.

Shock effects in film prevent contemplation, which precludes attention thus fostering incognizant absorption in a mode of distraction. Of course, making one's way through a busy shopping mall, or metro station, or boulevard with its crowds and sounds does indeed produce a shock effect (Benjamin, 2006b, pp. 329–30). However, are these cases not different in kind in so far as that which might get absorbed is more obtuse, less pointed, less homogenous? Is it not also true that not all built environments are always or even often crowded and noisy and that the crowds and noises are different from the built spaces themselves? Buildings have traditionally had no *inherent* shock effects.¹¹ Therefore, one can conclude that the shock effect is not necessarily to be found in architecture *in the same way* it is found in film. This is problematic for the analogy between film and architecture but not entirely damning unless one maintains a strict and clear etiology with respect to shock effects with their memory traces and distraction with its absorption. On the contrary, I maintain that the relation between the two is that the shock effects can intensify absorption, but that distracted absorption can occur without shock effects. Thus shock effects and distracted absorption are related, but not causally. This lack of inherent shock effects in buildings is a problem with Benjamin's analogy but not one that forces us to jettison his considerations *in toto*.

The two criticisms raised above, the problematic generalization that Benjamin makes between architecture and film qua use and qua shock effects are serious problems with Benjamin's claim that one can and should look to architecture and its distracted tactile absorption by the masses in order to better understand film. Or better, these *were* serious problems. Today, the more salient problem facing Benjamin's account is that his comparison no longer holds because the terms of the analogy have collapsed, that in certain instances, insipient yet concrete, film (or rather the filmic image) is an element of architecture. The fluid filmic surface is a material at the disposal of the architect and builder. This is true in so far as the filmic image is now a building surface material in essence no different from plaster, brick, drywall, marble façade or *béton brut* (perhaps not load-bearing, but certainly loaded).

In light of the fact that the filmic is now a building material which can be employed as the surface of walls, ceilings or other architectural elements, the problems of use (means to an end vs end in itself) and the shock effects must also be seen from a new perspective; a perspective in which these formerly problematic differences between film and architecture cease to be oppositions and come to form one single amalgam.

These problems with Benjamin's account demand that one revisit and see in a new perspective Benjamin's claim that laws of the reception of architecture are most instructive in understanding shifts in perception, and apperception, that occur with the advent of film. The question now becomes one of what sorts of changes take place when film becomes part of architecture? The collapse of Benjamin's analogy allows us to rescue and resuscitate some of Benjamin's keenest insights and to think about architecture's appropriation of filmic images using the guiding concepts of the masses, shock effects, distracted absorption and tactile habituation in a different context.

The present state of affairs (coming soon to a built environment near you)

[. . .] In a [political] state which is desirous of being saved from the greatest of all
plagues-not faction, but rather distraction [. . .]

Plato, *Laws* V.5

If it is kept in mind that the filmic or the moving image is now part of architecture or the built environment, in some instances, much can be gained in terms of our understanding by rescuing elements of Benjamin's analysis of film and architecture in light of this change. Presently, many of the discussions surrounding emergent technologies and pedagogy announce a crisis of attention and then go on to study attention spans, streams, and styles, without concentrating on distraction, so to speak.¹² In this section I will provide a sketch of what these technological changes might mean for film and architecture thought together, and the way in which learning or ideology formation takes place unaided by attention. The changes I wish to highlight with respect to the rise of filmic images in our built environment are not opposed to discussions of information networks, computational architecture, or the rise of ubiquitous computing, but instead form part of the larger set of questions concerning how architecture is situated within the present technological and aesthetic milieu and what is at stake.¹³

The seamless integration of the filmic image into architecture is not currently a terribly common phenomenon, by and large. But it is to be found, and one of the best examples is located in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in the lobby of the Comcast Center.¹⁴ This is a paradigmatic example because the LED screens upon which the images play are quite different from a television mounted on the wall, a far more common and conspicuous phenomenon. The screens at the Comcast Center are seamlessly integrated into the lobby walls, or rather, they form the surface of the lobby walls. Their resolution is so high that if the screen produces an image similar to the wood panels around them one cannot easily distinguish them from the actual wood. However, the screens are usually presenting various moving images, be they scenes from the city of Philadelphia, depictions of the solar system, or even scenes of green pastures replete with butterflies fluttering by and so forth. The images often move between idyllic, bucolic and patriotic. It is notable that the content which gets displayed at the Comcast Center is specific to this location as opposed to using stock footage or merely replaying television or traditional film programming. The lobby wall is considered to be an art installation called *The Comcast Experience*.

Another example or case study one could look at in order to understand the more general shift in the relation of film to architecture is an outdoor walkway and focal point of a shopping and business centre in Beijing, China eerily called The Place. This example differs from the Comcast Experience in that it is outside, the filmic images are the surface of the ceiling of a large walkway, not walls, and it is more directly in the service of selling goods and services. The aim of selling goods and services is achieved in a straightforward manner by being host to advertisements and indirectly by drawing people to the shopping centre itself.

The lead designer of the centre walkway at The Place is an American by the name of Jeremy Railton (Railton, 2007). Railton also led the design and implementation of the Freemont Street Experience in Las Vegas Nevada, which is another notable example of the extension of the domain of the filmic (Railton, 2007). The walkway at The Place is 80 feet high (24.35 metres), 88 feet wide (26.82 metres) and 2,296 feet long (699.82 metres) (Railton, 2007). Like the Comcast Center, the filmic images are displayed using LED screens.

The content, or that which gets displayed at The Place, it is in keeping with traditional Chinese values. Or, as the designer puts it:

Not only is The Place spectacular, but in the generous Chinese tradition, it offers a free theatre-like experience. For me, this inclusive atmosphere made the project more exciting and more challenging because the content of the shows must appeal to a wide range of interests by being new, while still calling on venerated Chinese traditions and values. (Railton, 2007)

He then goes on to describe more specifically the first moving images the installation displayed, writing:

The premier show, The Blessing, begins with the flight of the red and yellow dragons of Fortune and Power, and then progresses through scenes such as updateable performances of Olympic hopefuls, Chinese hip hop, Kung Fu, fireworks, and the largest image ever created of The Great Wall. People on the street below experience the four seasons, from the peach blossoms of spring gently falling to the lightning strikes and thunderstorms of winter. My favorite line is, 'No matter what the weather is like in Beijing, The Place can always change it'. (Railton, 2007)

Importantly there is a veneration and production of a sense of Chinese identity, pride, tradition and values.

Railton himself was fully aware of the shock effects that the use of the filmic medium in the built environment will produce in the masses as they experience it. He writes that:

The formula and techniques for these large screens are very different from the usual filmmaking techniques, and it has been hard to get the filmmakers to believe me. Flash cuts, zooms, and normal-speed objects make you feel like you are in an earthquake or that the sky is falling. (Railton, 2007)

What this quotation highlights is the extent to which Benjamin's remarks on the shock effects inherent in the technical structure of film, while perhaps forgotten when one has in mind traditional film in traditional settings, are again exposed. One finds verification of Benjamin's filmic shock effects to the extent that even the engineers of the new filmic built environments cannot help but run up against the shock effects of film. While Railton attempts to avoid these shock effects by omitting certain tropes and grammars of traditional filmmaking, such as jump cuts, he only mitigates these shock effects to the point at which the masses do not feel like they are in an earthquake. This only makes the shock effects less conspicuous and more pleasant.

Echoing Rancière, what the lobby of the Comcast Center and The Place show are crystalline examples of how moving images and architecture are no longer disparate genres of art.¹⁵ Not only is there a mixing of genres of art but also an incorporation of technologies of communication and information into the technologies of construction, a crossover that is obviously not limited to filmic images (Virilio et al., 2001, pp. 32–53). As such, the filmic image has been infused into our built environment in a new way. The relation of the masses to architecture is not *like* that of film, it, in some instances, *is* that of film. Thus, in the present, we should not look to architecture to understand film, but we should look to film theory to understand some of the changes taking place in architecture. With this reversal, come new consequences and demands for thinking about tactile distracted appropriation and the way in which the tactile grounds or informs the visual. In this respect Benjamin's notions of absorption and shock effect can act as a guide to thinking these changes. Again, to invoke the language of Rancière, the relation that obtains between architecture and film that I have tried to bring in to relief is not only an example of the aesthetic regime of art, but also educational, and therefore participating in the ethical regime of images as well.

Given this new or modified aesthetic arrangement one might ask what the relation between politics and aesthetics might be in these cases and other like them. While Benjamin famously stated the in the *Artwork* essay that the aestheticizing of politics as practised by fascism solicits the reply by communism to politicize art, I want to here suggest that we hold that suggested relation between art and politics in abeyance and focus on the concept of habit (and the production and reinforcement of habit), very broadly conceived, and aesthetics *vis-à-vis* politics à la the work of Butler, Bourdieu, Foucault, and Rancière, for example. I want to gesture, therefore, that this novel relation between architecture and film perhaps presents something like an increased sophistication when it comes to the production and reinforcement of dispositions in certain architectural spaces.

As was previously noted, Benjamin finds this shock effect to be part of the technical structure of film. Functionally, the shock effect largely precludes contemplation and promotes or causes distraction. Engagement with objects of art in a mode of distraction, according to Benjamin, has as its concomitant the inconspicuous absorption of the work by those who participate with it. Shock effects, like those found in film, in turn intensify distraction and absorption. Again this occurs with film by dint of the constantly changing or moving – often disparate – images. Distraction is here understood as the polar opposite of concentration or attention. Attention implies contemplation while there is no intellectual counterpart to distraction (Benjamin, 2006a, p. 268).¹⁶ Certainly it was already claimed by Benjamin that the masses absorb architecture in a state of distraction and habit. However, as I previously highlighted, architecture was inherently more limited in terms of content for absorption than film. That is no longer necessarily the case with the implementation of the filmic image into repertoire of construction materials. That is to say that the content which gets absorbed in architecture can go beyond the abstract coding of power and gender or the more concrete habituation to placement and movements to incorporate the more robust and elaborate, yet tacit, ideologies one finds in film, as Benjamin understood it. Further, this means that not only are the masses going about constructed environments in a merely distracted

manner and becoming inculcated and habituated to the buildings they, the masses, are also tactily appropriating that which appears on the filmic walls or other filmic architectural components.

For Benjamin it was important to note that the quantitative shift in the reception of art, from the individual to the masses, resulted in a qualitative change. This aspect was important, among other reasons, because it highlighted the fact that most people were seeing and absorbing the same content, their sensibilities were being produced and reinforced quasi-uniformly. This was possible because the medium of film is made to be copied and disseminated – there is no authentic or meaningful ‘original’. Those at the cinema in Berlin were watching the same film at the same time as those at the cinema in Paris, London, New York, and every other place where there was a cinema house. When the filmic image extends its presence into the walls, floors and ceilings of our built environment this widespread exposure that marked traditional film falls away. One has to enter specific places in order to experience these new filmic images, thus this new use of filmic images is topologically fettered. This means that, in contradistinction to traditional cinema, the images that are presented and that which then get absorbed will not of necessity be the same from place to place. However, there is still a collective absorption but it is not one that is similar for all places. Film is, in the architectural paradigm, site specific. It still informs or educates a collective mass but on a smaller scale, in a specific location, and with more tailor-made content.

In the previous section, I highlighted possible difference in kind between the way people relate to film and the way they relate to architecture. As it stands the two cannot be rigorously held apart because filmic images have entered the space of architecture outside of the traditional cinema house. Specifically, I highlighted the way in which it was not the case that buildings or built environments produced any shock effects, and if they did, it was not due to their technical or, one can say, formal structure. Buildings that use the medium of the filmic as the surface of its constituent parts – wall, ceilings and floors – *do* have this shock effect built-in. In other words, one can conclude that distraction, tactile appropriation, and absorption of a building are intensified and extended with the insertion of the filmic into the surfaces of our buildings.

In his original characterization of architecture, Benjamin highlighted the way in which a tourist staring at a building is a derivative mode of engagement that does not allow one to gain an adequate or proper understanding of the way in which use, habit and tactile appropriation take hold of the masses. With the introduction of filmic images into the basic elements of architecture it comes to be that even in this derivative mode of gawking at a structure there is, via filmic images, a shock effect which produces in the tourist certain memory traces or absorptions.

These changes may prove to provide positive potentials for architecture or they could be deleterious, it is too soon to make such a judgement.¹⁷

Conclusion

Thus, I have shown the original context in which Benjamin made his analogy between film and architecture. Further I have tried to show the way in which that analogy no

longer holds and that this is the case because, most importantly, the filmic image has become incorporated into the walls of our built environment. Additionally, I have shown that Benjamin's analyses of film can form part of a broader analysis of not only changes in architecture and our built environment but also broader shifts in perception today. I highlighted the fact that architecture that integrates filmic images into its surfaces inherently produces shock effects. Moreover, these shock effects then promote distraction and absorption. This new architectural absorption, aided by the content of the filmic elements is notable because of the more robust and elaborate habituations and inculcations it is able to produce in a more targeted audience. In making my case I brought to the fore that perhaps distraction, rather than or in addition to attention, should form part of conceptual vocabulary that gets employed in trying to make sense of the interrelated aesthetic, artistic, perceptual and technological changes we face today.¹⁸

In light of my arguments advocating for a collapsing of the terms architecture and film in some cases, the question of the engagement between radical philosophy and architecture thus seems to be poorly framed in so far as the question assumes some real or perceived distinction between different genres or types of art. Whereas, today, I think it is the case that to ask questions of architecture or engage critically with architecture – which is a crucial task – means at the same time to incorporate other types of art, aesthetics, and social practices into the analysis and to abstain from meretriciously restricting the terms of the discourse to categories that are themselves not beyond scrutiny and critique. Rigidly isolating architecture can be illusory and misleading. Yet not engaging with architecture at all would be blind and ruinous.

Notes

- 1 See, for example, Hayles, Lomas, Haynes and Duttlinger (Hayles, 2007, pp. 187–99; Lomas, 2008, pp. 163–72; Haynes et al., 1998, pp. 187–93; Duttlinger, 2007, pp. 33–54). Duttlinger also notes the way in which there has been a 'flurry' of discussion of new media which focus on attention while omitting the Benjaminian notion of distraction from the discourse.
- 2 Benjamin's account of art history is not without condign criticism that is beyond the scope of the present essay.
- 3 Benjamin wrote *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility* from 1936–9, it having undergone many revisions before he allowed it to be copied by Greta Adorno. It was not published until 1955. Given the proximity of dates between the two essay it stands to reason that shock effects were, among other things, in the foreground of Benjamin's thinking at the time.
- 4 I have in mind here the work of Thomas S. Kuhn on the subject of 'givens.' The pithiest account of this is when Kuhn writes, 'The duck-rabbit shows that two men with the same retinal impressions can see different things; the inverting lenses show that two men with different retinal impressions can see the same thing' (Kuhn, 1996, pp. 125–30).
- 5 One could call this vague absorption by the name ideology or superstructure following Marx, or following Bourdieu, habitus, or following Castoriadis, the imaginary, or following Gramsci, cultural hegemony. Cf. (Marx, 1993; Bourdieu, 1977; Castoriadis, 1998; Gramsci, 2010).

- 6 Benjamin here clearly anticipates the work of Marshall McLuhan with his famous notion that the 'medium is the message' and also that media are never neutral (McLuhan, 1994).
- 7 As Benjamin puts it, 'the shock experience which the passer-by has in the crowd corresponds to what the worker "experiences" at his machine' (Benjamin, 2006b, p. 329).
- 8 Obviously there are counterexamples to such a claim and the binary opposition is heuristically employed for the sake of a generous reading of Livingstone, Anderson and Mulhern.
- 9 Yet it could be a means to an end in certain situations. For example, think of a training film or a public service announcement. What remains important are general trends, not hard and fast universality applicable laws.
- 10 A notable exception would be the wanderings of the *flâneur* or the similar Situationist practice of *dérive*.
- 11 The exception here is the funhouse.
- 12 See, for example, the work of Hayles, Lomas, Haynes and others (Hayles, 2007, pp. 187–9; Haynes, et al., 1998, pp. 187–93; Lomas, 2008, pp. 163–72).
- 13 See the work of Felicity D. Scott. Scott's essay draws a similar conclusion in her presentation and analyses surrounding a similar constellation of questions raised in the 1930s by Meyer Schapiro (Scott, 2002, pp. 44–65).
- 14 Other notable examples include Fremont Street in Las Vegas, Nevada, Harrah's Casino Façade in Atlantic City New Jersey, and myriad video installation pieces which forego the previous medium of traditional television sets or large screens in favour of large projections or LED presentations of moving images which often take up one or more walls of a gallery space, see the work of Kosuke Fujitaka, Mark Luyten or just pick up any given copy of *Artforum* published in the last 10 years.
- 15 This echoes Jacques Rancière's notion of the 'aesthetic regime of art' wherein genres, high versus low forms of art, and the ethical use of images are no longer necessarily at play. Rancière makes the case that his concept of the 'aesthetic regime of art' is more helpful than the nebulous notion of 'modernity' (Rancière, 2004, pp. 20–30). See also the work of K. Michael Hays. Hays is very good at elaborating this point with special attention paid architecture, Hays, 1995, p. 45.
- 16 Albeit in different terms, it might be helpful here to compare Benjamin's conceptualization of attention, distraction and absorption with the Merleau-Pontian phenomenological concepts of operative intentionality and sedimentation (Merleau-Ponty, 2012).
- 17 While the case could be made that Benjamin views the shifts in perception brought about by film as negative rather than simply functional, if one followed the gestures of the Situationist International it could be claimed that the thorough incorporation of film into architecture could serve to create situations or give a much higher degree of affective plasticity and dynamism to our built environment. Moreover, a plasticity and dynamism of which we (one is?) are in control (ed. McDonough, 2009).
- 18 These analyses are, of course, only the tip of the iceberg, so to speak, of the changes which confront the field of perception in the present milieu. The sea-changes in our built environment and networks in conjunction with how these changes affect the formation of subjects, habits, and affects is without a doubt a very large and difficult question or series of questions. Moreover, the analyses and cases I have provided are geographically and socially tied to places and people where there are enough resources to apply the filmic image quite literally into the very walls of our shared

spaces and brick and mortar (and filmic) institutions. Therefore one would do well to pay special attention to changes in media and perception without losing sight of specific differences in concrete cases.

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