

digital encounters:
mythical pasts and electronic presence

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On my way to the shops I am distracted by an enormous panoramic photograph. It shows a man's back, his white T-shirt and cropped hair. He leans on a fence. In the middle distance is a pick-up truck, and beyond that, mountains. The back of his neck is a sunburnt red, the rest of the image is black and white (Figure 10.1).

Is this a 'digital' image? It's hard to tell, at least for the uninitiated. Certainly, the image has been manipulated, but the red flush could feasibly have been produced using an airbrush. If it was produced on computer, this new technology is merely performing a task as old as photography itself: retouching.

Perhaps there are other manipulations, so sly that I cannot notice them. What does it matter to me? I have no interest in whether this man, his T-shirt or his truck ever existed. It is the image, its presence here, in front of me, which strikes me so forcefully.

In other words, my relationship with this particular advert seems to have little to do with its possible status as the imprint of a real scene, what Roland Barthes called the 'having-been-there' of the photograph.¹ Yet, historically, the chemical photograph's most powerful claim to truth is in its basis in an encounter with the physical world, and the idea that at a fundamental level, photography has an

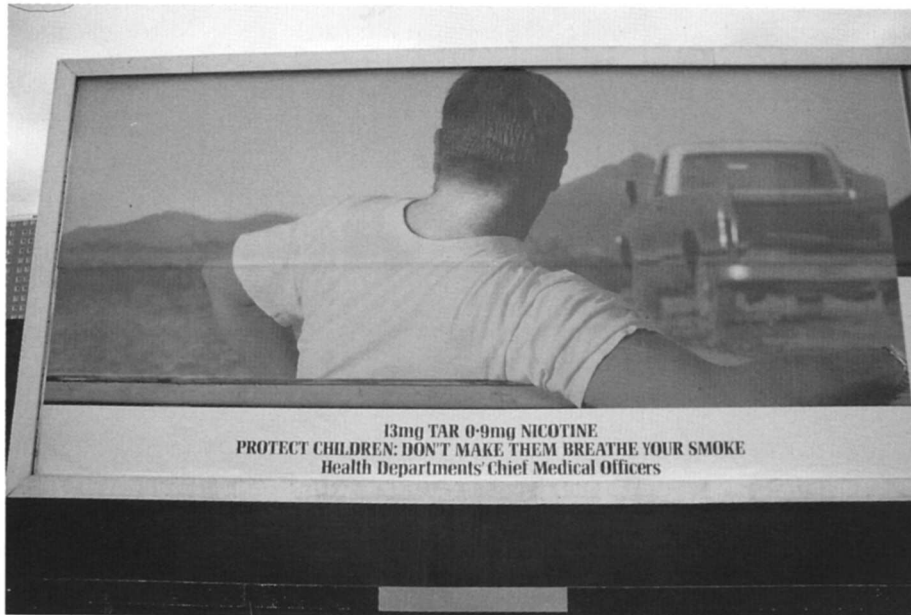


Figure 10.1 Image from the 1994 Marlboro campaign in Britain. Reproduced by permission of Philip Morris.

element which is beyond manipulation, a thread of evidence as unmediated as a fingerprint.

Even though many writers and photographers have effectively shown this truth claim to be no truth at all, and photography no more innately 'realistic' than any other medium, we may continue to feel its pull. For example, the documentary photographer Fred Ritchin described his own encounter with some advertisements on a subway train.² His perception of the ads and of the people around him on the train changed as he meditated on the idea that digital technology presents the possibility of photographically 'real' images of people who had 'never existed'. As the advertising images 'began to seem unreal', so too did the people who surrounded him, and he became overwhelmed by anxiety.

Ritchin's sensations may be felt but they depend nevertheless on certain assumptions about technology and a belief in the truth of the chemical photograph. The significance Ritchin attaches to the development of electronic or digital forms of representation is summed up in the term 'derealisation'. The reduction of the photographic image to numbers implies the possibility of its reversal, in other words the creation of fictional but photographically 'real' imagery (and spaces). As Gerard Raulet says, 'The significance of simulation is missed if it is seen as imitation. Simulation does not imitate; it creates.'³

Chemical photography, on the other hand, may have constructed reality, but

at least we could be reassured by the fact that ultimately the photo had resulted from an encounter with the visible world. It appeared to have some scientific truth claim, however slight. It held a mirror to reality, reassured us that our senses did not deceive us.

But in what contexts would we seek such reassurance? Is Ritchin's experience one that many would have, if familiar with the idea of digital simulation, or is it particular to someone with a certain stake in photography and its documentary functions? To answer these questions we need to take into account differences in the social functions of photography, in the content of the photographs in question, in contexts of interpretation, and use. To give a simple example of the first point, I might expect or desire that images presented to me in the news, act as a 'window on the world'. Faced with a billboard like the one I described at the start of this essay, such expectations hardly seem relevant. What is most surprising about Ritchin's account is that the photography to which he refers is advertising. Yet how common is it, in the ad-saturated West, to expect or require that advertising has the status of a document? If the questioning of the objectivity of representation has entered popular common sense and felt experience at all, it is surely in relation to advertising.

So much of what has been said about the 'digital image' seems to centre around the idea of the 'loss of the real' or 'derealisation'. Such arguments may rely to some extent on ideas of photographic truth, but, even where they don't, they rely on a belief that the main way that people interpret and engage with visual images is through treating them as documents of reality. In some versions the concept of the 'loss of the real' suggests that the user (or viewer) of computer-generated imagery will eventually lose the ability to distinguish between the 'simulated' or 'hyperreal' world and the real one.⁴ In other versions, often stimulated by the 'postmodern' theories of Jean Baudrillard, we find the argument that reality has, in effect, been replaced by the world of simulation.

In some accounts then, the loss of the real is a crisis in the consciousness of an individual (often perceived as deluded or vulnerable), whilst according to the Baudrillardian account simulation is experienced as our collective 'reality', not because we are necessarily deluded or deceived, but because social interaction has been reduced to an exchange of signs unrooted in material existence.

It has often been claimed that new digital imaging technologies will precipitate radical changes in perception, in consciousness, and ultimately in society. Not only will we never see the world in the same way again, it will never be the same again. Commentary on digital technology appears to be dominated by utopian and dystopian prophecy. Utopian versions predict 'radical and liberating breaks with the past' whilst in the dystopian view 'cherished certainties are threatened and the world as nightmare is glimpsed'.⁵

Walter Benjamin wrote that 'Overcoming the concept of "progress" and the concept of "period of decline" are two sides of one and the same thing.'⁶ In this

case, these prophecies are linked by a shared belief in the immense significance of recent developments in technology, or, to put it another way, what they share is a kind of technological determinism. This leads to a one-dimensional reading of social changes that ignores the social relations already in place (divisions of labour, available cultural resources) which affect not just how a technology is used or experienced, but also its emergence.

That said, I don't want simply to dismiss these arguments on such grounds, but to examine the ways in which the insertion of a new technology into existing social relations and cultural forms might be thought of in terms of transformation. I am going to do so partly through an interpretation of certain aspects of the writings of Walter Benjamin, in particular two essays: 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire' and the famously ambiguous 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'.⁷ That this is not an unusual starting point is evidenced by the number of essays and books on electronic image/communication technologies which parody the title of the latter.⁸

However, it is precisely *because* this essay has become canonical that I wish to use it here. It is usually read as technologically determinist, and has become renowned, certainly in film studies, as a celebration of the radical potential of what was, when Benjamin was writing, the relatively new technology of film, as against older, high-cultural media (such as painting). It is this selective interpretation which is canonised, and which paves the way for the use of Benjamin's work in arguments about the electronic image.

In fact, there are many aspects of the 'Artwork' essay which would seem to militate against its use in discussions of the 'digital image' altogether. For one thing, the relationship Benjamin envisages between film technology, forms of attention, and changes in consciousness is dependent on a highly particular historical analysis of social and cultural changes in Europe. In addition, it would be surprising if essays written nearly sixty years ago could explain the digital image.

Even so, Benjamin's writings do seem useful in that they offer different ways to think about technology. Far from simply reaffirming ideas about the determining role of technology and the 'loss of the real', these writings can be used to reconsider the bases of such ideas. For my purposes, Benjamin's work offers insights into the possibility that a new technology might make certain interpretations (meanings) more available than previously; the nature of the experience of technological change; and the general possibility of a transformed perception and mode of attention in relation to new image technologies. These are the aspects which I want to explore in the remainder of this essay.

The newness of technology

In much recent discussion of computer imaging there is a tendency to focus on its newness, rather than the ways in which there might be repetition, or an

apparent continuity (of meaning or use). In order to understand exactly what *has* changed we need to pay attention to these unacknowledged aspects.

One of the things that Benjamin noted (and which I will discuss in more detail further on) is that technical newness is not always apparent, and that this would affect how we conceive of it in relation to social newness. This is one reason why I chose to describe a particular advertisement at the beginning of this essay, instead of a more spectacular and unambiguous deployment of digital imaging techniques. It seems that the very possibility of ambiguity, of the confusion of the digital image and the chemical photograph, is at the heart of arguments about 'loss of the real'. After all, what matters to Ritchin seems to be the likelihood of mistaking the digital image for the photograph.

Here, it matters that I can't be sure that this is a 'digital image', not just because I might attribute to a digital image the truth claim of photography, but because we experience new media and technologies in old and familiar contexts and not necessarily in a 'pure' form. It would be possible to gather together enough instances of this intermingling to demonstrate that what we have is not so much a digital culture, in the sense of new media overtaking and displacing old ones, as the increasing digitalisation of older media.

If a new technology cannot be conceived of in isolation, but only in relation to the means it displaces, and the media it affects, then the idea that it might be the determining factor in social changes and changes in consciousness becomes difficult to maintain. In addition, in this ad, newness and oldness are bound together, in terms of the formal aspects of the image, and in terms of what it represents. If a new manipulative process is used, it is used to take us back to an earlier form (photographic retouching); similarly the imagery is contemporary and up-to-date yet it declares at the same moment its place in a photographic tradition or genre (of images of the American West).

In these respects the moment of the arrival of the new is simultaneously a reinvention of the old, yet in reinventing it also transforms. To explain what I mean by this I want to place it in the context of more general arguments about 'revivalism', a phenomenon which can be traced back to the beginnings of modernity.

Perhaps the most influential study of the effect and uses of revivals in social change is Karl Marx's study of the circumstances leading to Louis Bonaparte's *coup d'état* in 1851, *The Eighteenth Brumaire*. Marx noted the way in which a class, in the process of revolution, dons the costumes of a past era in order to act. He recognised the danger in this kind of revivalism, amending Hegel's statement that all important historical events occur twice, by adding 'the first time as tragedy, the second as farce'.⁹

But Marx doesn't portray all such revivals as negative. Sometimes such borrowing can serve a critical function, that of 'magnifying the given task in the imagination', as in the 1789 revolution, in which the bourgeoisie deceived

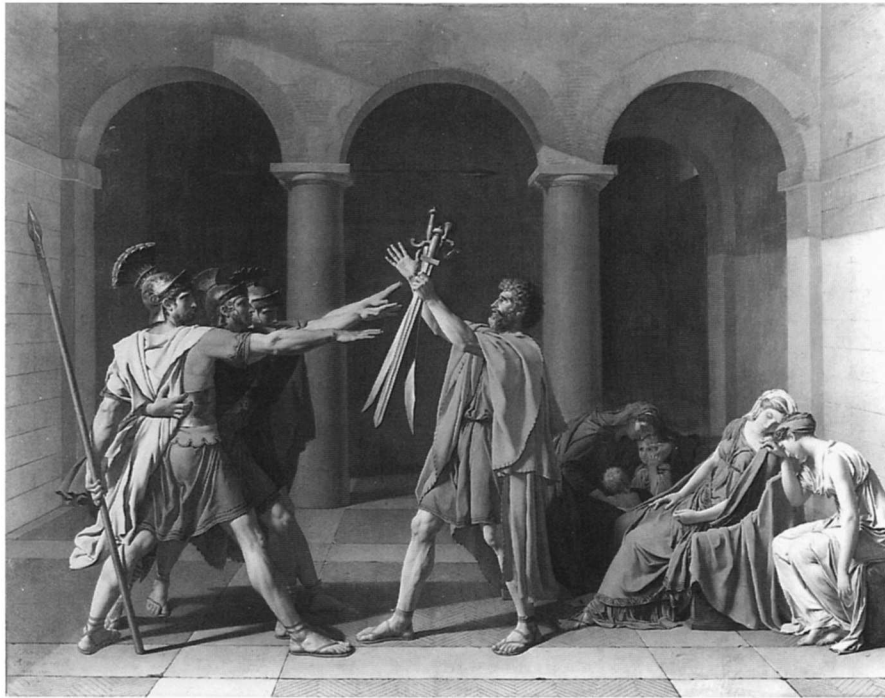


Figure 10.2 Jacques Louis David, *The Oath of Horatii*, 1785, Musée du Louvre, Paris, copyright Photo R.M.N. This painting can be read as both rhetoric and anti-rhetoric: it stands as an example of the Roman rhetoric of the French Revolution, but its stylistic awkwardness appears to have been understood by pre-Revolutionary radicals as equivalent to their own rejection of the deceptive mask of aristocratic 'style'. See Thomas Crow, *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth Century Paris*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985, pp. 226–8.

themselves as to their own limitations, and through Roman costume and rhetoric were able to conceive of their actions on the 'high' plane of tragedy. However the actors of the 1848–51 revolution attempt to escape the reality of their situation through costume drama. In this farce the successful character is Bonaparte, who recognises the situation for what it is, and is able to exploit it to his own ends. But even Bonaparte mistakes fantasy for reality; 'under the Napoleonic mask' he 'imagines he is the real Napoleon' and thus becomes 'the victim of his own conception of the world'.¹⁰

For Marx then, revivalism can be progressive as well as farcical, although ultimately he argues that if the communist revolution is to end class struggle, then all inherited language, all borrowed costumes, are insufficient.

How does this argument about social revolution get translated into an argument about technology and its social implications? Siegfried Giedion, in

Building in France (1928), recalled Marx's observation as he described the way in which, in the nineteenth century, new building technologies emerged masked as older forms. Giedion pointed out the way in which constructions in iron and glass were veiled in stone, or imitated the styles of stone architecture.¹¹ But it was Walter Benjamin who brought Marx and Giedion together, joining the discussion of repetition in revolution to this observation about the 'masking' of new technologies. In doing so he related technical change to social change.

Marx had already suggested that the mechanisation of the workplace was a crucial factor in the emergence of an alienated workforce and its (self) transformation into a revolutionary class. Benjamin extended the Marxist analysis to consider the parallel emergence of leisure and the ways in which the new means of reproduction which come to occupy this space have the potential to increase alienation, but also to enable this self-transformation. For him, as for Marx, revivalism is a crucial issue. What difference does it make if people encounter these technologies, not as the absolutely new but in the form of repetitions, continuities or revivals? Benjamin distinguished between two types of repetition or reworking: one which, in returning to a distant past, de-naturalises the present, reminds us of the unfulfilled promise of earlier times; the other which smooths over change, presenting the new in continuum with the old, as the heir to what went before.¹²

So revivalism can be seen to have no *inevitable* political outcome: it can work in a positive way, enabling people to imagine how the world could be 'otherwise'; or it can work in a reactionary way, giving the impression of a 'false continuum' of history. If technical 'newness' is not immediately apparent because it is embedded in the reworking of past forms, it is also the case that the technical means of production will shape the form of this reworking – it is never simply repetition but always the 'new old'.

Mobilising technology

The significance or value of a technology is not innate but determined by the ways in which it is 'mobilised'.¹³ In other words a technical development only gains meaning through the social uses to which it is put. I'm aware that certain traditional versions of this argument would take 'social uses' to refer particularly to issues of production and control, but we can take it to include the ways in which the cultural forms which employ a particular technology are used and negotiated by an audience. Theories of language and interpretation suggest that no text is firmly and inevitably fixed in its meaning; thus it is not possible to categorise one cultural text as inevitably working in this way or that, since to do so would be to assume a stable and unvarying relationship between the viewer and the image. How an object, image, film, etc. stages its relationship to the past, its place in history, is dependent not just on its own qualities or form, but on this

encounter. This isn't to say that everything is open to an infinite plurality of readings. Any form of culture offers a number of available readings, or is *more or less* available to being negotiated or used in different ways.

This idea of texts being more or less available, of 'open' and 'closed' texts, has been used to displace traditional left-wing views of culture. It can throw into question, for example, the idea that mainstream 'mass' culture is simply a vehicle for dominant ideology, whilst 'high' culture may criticise and present oppositional views of the world (at the price of being locked in its ivory tower).¹⁴

I want to take some of these distinctions, of open and closed, new and old, and map them onto the 'text' with which I began this essay. It is an advertisement. The ad, the cultural text which Roland Barthes chose to analyse because its meanings were explicit – 'emphatic' – can now be seen as highly ambivalent.¹⁵ Taking this image as a starting point, I want to explore the relationship between the available range of interpretation and uses of an image, and the factors which determine it. In this way we might consider the relation of technical means of production, to availability of meaning. Do certain technological means offer the possibility of more or less open texts? Is there any sense in which technology can be said to determine meaning? In what follows I offer some examples of the ways in which a complex range of factors as well as technology determine the appearance of the image.

My encounter with a digital image, if this is what it is, is an everyday encounter and it occurs in a public space: the image is available to (if not addressing) all social classes. It is an advertisement for Marlboro cigarettes, a brand produced by the US tobacco conglomerate, Philip Morris. The Philip Morris company make it their business to market the American West. More precisely, they mythologise this landscape and its inhabitants: in the famous 'Marlboro Man' ads they did this through the image of the cowboy (Figure 10.3).

The current Marlboro advertisements stage their relationship to the myth of the West in more complex ways. I have mentioned that the new and old intersect on technical and formal levels as well as on the level of content: these ads declare an affinity with film, not just in the photographic style, or in terms of what is depicted but in their very shape. As with many cigarette adverts, the compulsory health warning is the means by which the type of product becomes identifiable, but it also enables certain filmic associations, changing the format of the billboard to 'cinemascope'.

The 'Marlboro man' ads were also filmic, but if they imitated the cowboy film, the new ads resemble recent art-house cinema. They allude not just to the longstanding myth of the West, but to a critical reworking of that myth. Films such as *Baghdad Café*, *Paris Texas* and *Gas, Food, Lodging* depict a landscape of borders, not frontiers, of life lived at the margins.¹⁶ In the classic Western the myth of the West is simultaneously a myth of white male subjectivity and its relationship with an untamed nature.¹⁷ These 'road movies' do not explicitly debunk this myth,



Figure 10.3 Marlboro merchandising: *Sounds from Marlboro Country*, LP, 1976. The 'Marlboro Man' is a cowboy mediated by film, so it is not surprising that the 'Sounds from Marlboro Country' turn out to be '20 themes from some of the most memorable Western films of all time'.



Figure 10.4 Graffiti on a Marlboro billboard (the advertisement in Figure 10.1). Photograph by John Parish, Bristol, 1993.

although it could be argued that they render its constructedness explicit.

The original Marlboro man is often used to epitomise the link between ideas of the West, ideas of white masculinity, and right-wing politics.¹⁸ In the advertisement I've described this link is more problematic. This man's political colouring is made explicit through a visual-verbal pun: the image is retouched to make him literally a 'redneck'. The old 'Marlboro man' ads may have been more or less explicable in terms of some assumed viewer 'identification' with the cowboy, but the 'redneck' is not a contemporary cowboy. It's even possible that, in Britain, familiarity with this word is linked to a rejection of, or distance from, the political conservatism it implies (Figure 10.4). On one level this advertisement works very much in the tradition of British cigarette advertising, whereby the intended audience is distinguished by its ability to recognise the colours of the Marlboro packaging, and to 'get' the pun (i.e. by a certain knowingness about US culture as well as the Marlboro brand image).

It is possible to argue that the Marlboro ads to which I refer are relatively 'open' texts, that they allow or invite a plurality of readings, even though we know that ultimately they are promoting cigarettes. Contrast this to another version of American mythology which extends beyond the production of images to the physical transformation of the landscape. The same conglomerate, Philip Morris, finance the Mission Viejo company. This company has attempted, in the phrase of one employee, to 'fulfil the Californian Promise' in the construction and management of a pseudo-Spanish settlement in Orange county. In a familiar irony, Mission Viejo is populated by white exiles from a Los Angeles whose fastest growing population is Hispanic. This 'old mission' is a hyperreal copy of an 'original' (the Spanish Mission) mediated via an earlier 'Mission revival' (which began in the 1890s).¹⁹

Mission Viejo is a kind of 'hyperreality', a kind of 'simulation', although it has concrete physical form. Its 'oldness' is related to Benjamin's more negative sense: in offering a 'safe haven' of 'traditional Spanish' homes to its inhabitants, it reinforces the image of them as rightful heirs to the Spanish past. It proffers an image of 'communal harmony', and erases past and present social tensions with a wash of Californian sunshine.

As with Mission Viejo, the form of the advert, the way in which it addresses us, and the meanings produced in this encounter, are all determined not by the technological means of production alone, but by a complex range of social, economic and institutional relations and constraints. Indeed, these play a strong role in determining how/which technologies are deployed. For example, in Britain cigarette advertising on television is prohibited, and at the beginning of the 1990s, the threat of a total ban on cigarette advertising by the European Community appears to have led to a 'last-minute' boom in billboard advertising.²⁰

However, it is not just law, in its actual or potential application, which plays a part in 'shaping' the ad. The orientation of capitalism toward profit demands

that companies continually seek out new markets. In the case of the cigarette companies this expansion is hampered by the association of smoking with disease and 'anti-social behaviour'. As cigarette manufacturing became increasingly considered a disreputable business, and the US market for cigarettes declined, US tobacco conglomerates have acquired subsidiaries dealing in more 'respectable' products (for example, food and pharmaceuticals). At the same time they have aggressively marketed their tobacco products amongst less affluent communities. To this end, the association of Marlboro cigarettes with the 'American dream' remains central.

The advertising agency is constrained by British law from explicitly extolling the virtues of smoking, so it has the job of turning a warning (the compulsory Government or EC Health warning) into an appeal, of making danger and discomfort attractive. Advertising since the mid-1980s has seldom conveyed a sense that cigarette smoking is relaxing. What the recent Marlboro campaigns share with the films I have mentioned is a sense of disturbance, a slight tension, a 'buzz' which almost seems to be embodied by the scenery, by the landscape itself. The grain of the images, the turbulence of the skies, contribute to this. These pictures are constructed as if they are extracts from a narrative, frozen moments of waiting or anticipation from a moving sequence of images. In addition the areas of red in each image, the sunburnt neck, a light on top of a police car, a traffic light, glow like the

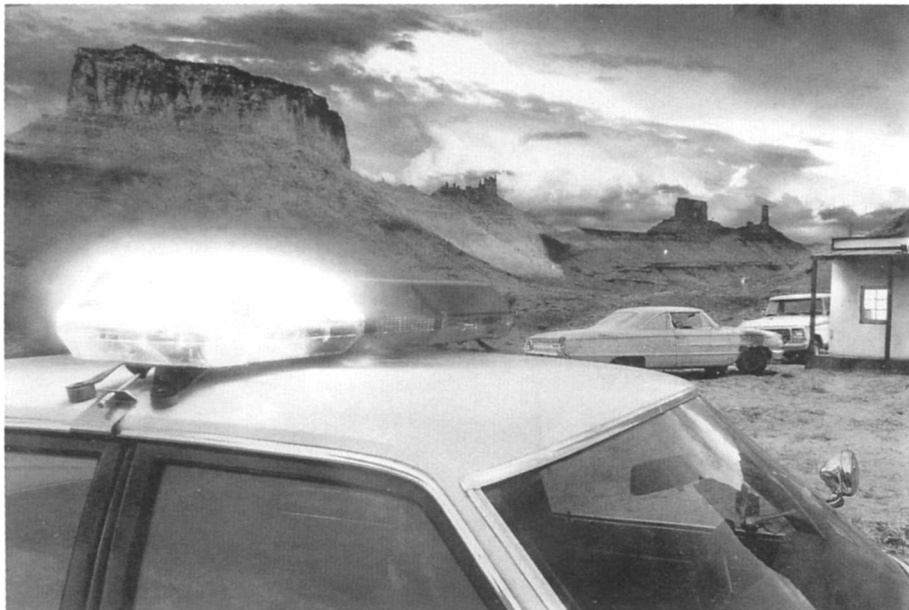


Figure 10.5 Detail from another advertisement from a recent campaign. Reproduced by permission of Philip Morris.

tips of cigarettes. Smoking has taken on new meaning: in the close-ups of burning cigarettes in David Lynch's film *Wild at Heart* and here, in the Marlboro ads, it signifies the romance of living on the edge (of death).

If this is a 'digital image', it is perhaps ironic that it gains its aura or 'presence' through resembling film. I will discuss the concept of 'aura' more fully further on, for now it is worth pointing out that it is this resemblance which enables it to aestheticise a certain type of destruction, so that instead of experiencing the (possible) pleasures of smoking, we are asked to experience the dangers of smoking *as* pleasure.

Even from these brief observations it is evident that the content of the image and the uses to which different technologies are put are determined to an extent by economic imperatives. The forms that an ad might take are also affected by ideological shifts, in this case the changing meaning of smoking. However, we should also note that the changes we may observe at the levels of production and distribution (diversification, targeted markets, etc.) are more generally seen as characteristic of a shift from Fordism to 'post-Fordism' and are changes which have been enabled by the application of computer technologies.²¹

In other words, wider technological changes are related to ideological changes and changes in the availability of interpretation, but it is clear that this is not a simple one-on-one relationship. Such technical shifts can only be made sense of as part of a complex range of things which affect the image.

Digital encounters

If technology alone cannot determine shifts in meaning, it nevertheless seems that technological developments substantially change our everyday experience. From the machines in the workplace to telephones and computers in the home, to video surveillance in the shopping centre, we can see how it affects our behaviour, the ways in which we interact with one another and the ways we move.

But who is this 'we'? There is a high degree of uneven development in social modernisation. A number of writings on women's experience of modernity have debated the extent to which women's restricted access to spaces, forms of leisure and forms of labour would have meant an experience of technological change qualitatively different from that of men of the same class.²² It's clear that modernisation would be experienced differently or to different extents according to the social position of a person. This is a consideration which so often seems missing in contemporary theories of postmodernism and of the new electronic technologies. Jonathan Crary has pointed out that,

The inescapable yet continually evaded truth is that participation in the emerging information, imaging and communications technologies will

never (in the meaningful future) expand beyond a minority of people on this planet.

He adds,

The north/south or center/periphery split (wherever these peripheries might be) needs to be examined in terms of the psychic and social hierarchies being created by the extreme disparities in the machinic arrangements that constitute everyday life.²³

If people's experience of technological change is differentiated according to social identity, place and so on, current 'utopic' and 'dystopic' views tend not to recognise this (and the possible social consequences it might have).

Here again, Benjamin's account is useful in that it does not universalise human sense perception and 'human consciousness' in the way that the rhetoric around the digital image might suggest. In his analysis perception is differentiated, determined by changes in social and economic relations which lead to the emergence and formation of what he terms the 'historical collectives' and which I take to mean social classes. Changes in perception are merely an 'expression' of these social revolutions which have taken place.²⁴

Changing forms of attention and perception

This returns us to the question of technological determinism. According to Benjamin, the new technology of film did not produce a change in perception, and hence in consciousness. Rather 'a new and urgent need for stimuli was *met* by the film' (my emphasis).²⁵ This 'need' Benjamin sees as a means of 'adjustment' to the 'dangers' inherent in the 'shock' experiences of modern everyday existence.

These 'shocks' are the result of changes in material reality, which do, therefore, determine forms of attention and modes of perception. He suggests that the modernisation of everyday urban experience, which involves new types of social relations and new technologies, leads to an increasing rapidity and abruptness of life. In the urban environment human sense perception has to deal with an accelerating number of shocks: the crowd jostles; the speed of the traffic produces collisions, or sudden jumps to avoid collision; technological innovations in all aspects of everyday life involve 'countless movements of switching, inserting, pressing and the like'.²⁶

Amongst these movements Benjamin lists the pressing of the camera button, the snapping of the shutter. As a form of representation, film matches shock with shock: through the necessary disjointedness of editing, the shifting of viewpoints and rapid changes of scene, it provides a representational equivalent to the disjointedness of life.

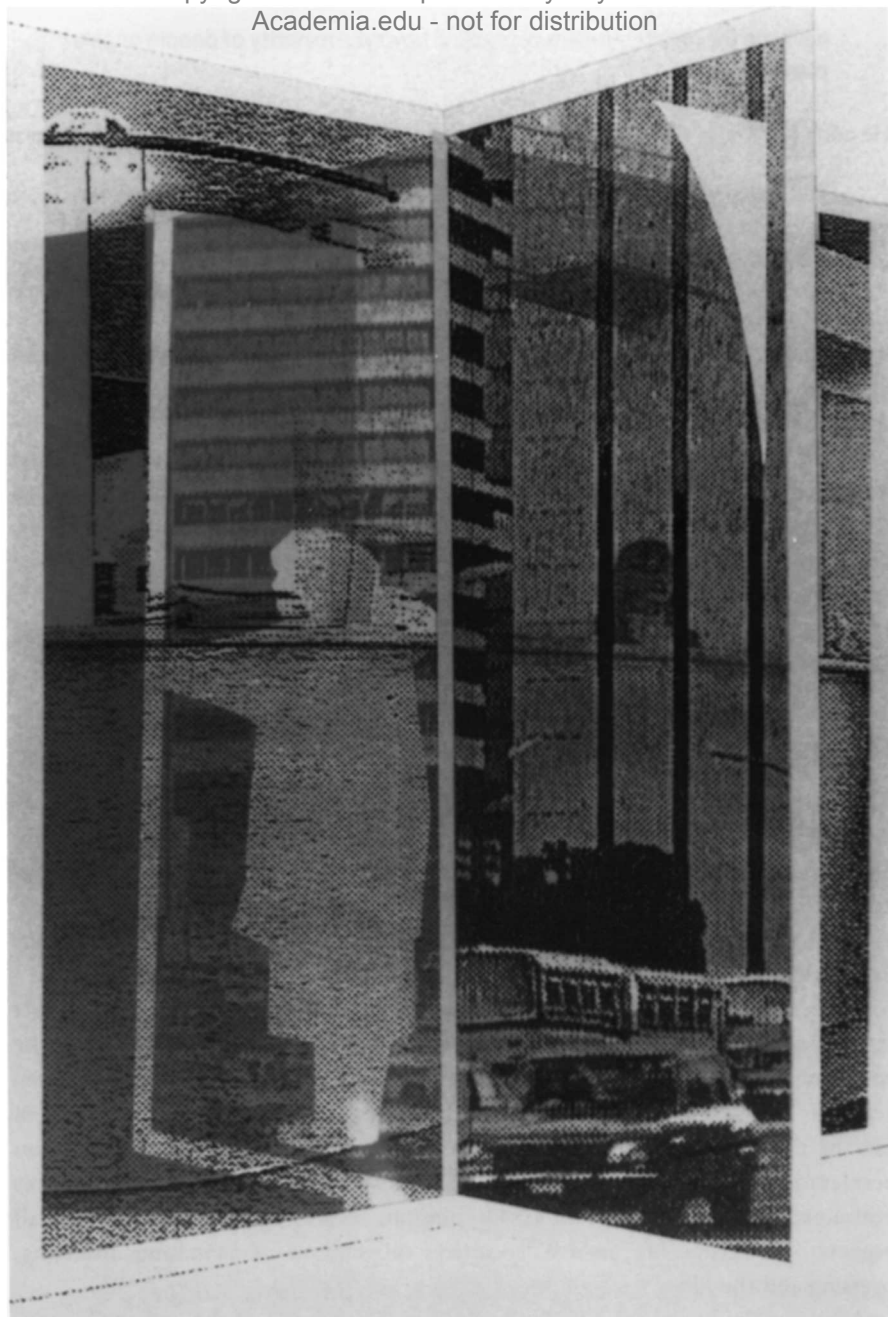


Figure 10.6 Steven Marshall, *Revolver II*, collage, 1994.

So, through its physical structure cinema contributes to what Benjamin terms 'loss of aura'. This phrase has frequently been interpreted, and commonly 'aura' is associated with the ideas of genius, authorship, uniqueness and originality which are invested in the canonical works of high culture. As I suggested earlier, Benjamin's essay is used to bolster the belief that film, and now computer technology, promises the breakdown of cultural (and ultimately social) hierarchy.

Certainly this link to high culture and traditional critical categories is one aspect of the concept of aura. But I want to place emphasis on another side of 'aura', which returns to the notion of history. Whilst Benjamin's 'Artwork' essay is vague on the subject of aura, another essay 'Some Motifs in Baudelaire', links aura to the idea of memory. Here, aura is defined as 'the associations which, at home in the *mémoire involontaire*, tend to cluster around the object of a perception'.²⁷

The term *mémoire involontaire* (involuntary memory) is derived from Marcel Proust. Proust described the experience of eating a certain pastry or cake – a Madeleine – and the way in which certain forgotten aspects of his childhood came flooding back upon tasting it. He uses the term involuntary memory to characterise this experience in which the past seems to be present in a material object or at least in the sensation produced in the encounter with that object.

Benjamin argued that this kind of experience of the past becomes an increasingly private and chance occurrence, as contemporary life offers fewer and fewer possibilities of producing knowledge out of experience: in other words, possibilities of using subjective experience to act upon and understand the world. He explicitly connected this change to the rise of mass reproduction (his example is the newspaper) and to unskilled factory labour (in which the worker, like the gambler, is unable to gain knowledge through experience, and can only repeat the same actions over and over again).

This account differs from the one in the 'Artwork' essay in that the idea of aura is explicitly linked with the idea of historical consciousness. However, this is not a positive consciousness of history which enables people to understand their contemporary situation. Indeed Benjamin suggests that involuntary memory is not what it appears (a genuine experience of historical continuity), 'Concerning the *mémoire involontaire*: not only do its images not come when we try to call them up; rather they are images which we have never seen before we remember them.'²⁸

These images come into consciousness as the result of a defence mechanism, Benjamin uses Freudian theory to make the point: in this account consciousness provides, not a means of making sense of sensory stimulation, but a shield against it, against 'the excessive energies at work in the external world'.²⁹ In mastering these stimuli, which are experienced as 'shocks', consciousness protects us against trauma. If this shield is broken, and trauma does occur, we attempt to 'master

the stimulus retroactively':³⁰ in dreams or through recollection, we try to translate it into something manageable.

It's a difficult argument, but it seems that aura, for Benjamin, is the sensation or impression of historical experience, produced in the attempt to cushion the abrupt 'shocks' of everyday modern life. An auratic experience is one which deals with historical discontinuity by replacing it with an illusion of continuity. So when Benjamin writes of the 'loss of aura', what is 'lost' is not the real but the 'false continuum of history'.³¹

It is through enabling the 'loss' of this aura that film technology had the potential to be 'progressive'. One of its aspects that gives it this potential is the fact that it is experienced collectively, *en masse*. Interestingly, Benjamin argues that mass consumption increases the quality of consumption. His analysis of film is oriented around a recognition of the relationship of cinema as 'mass' entertainment to the 'mass' on the factory assembly line and the politics of the 'mass', Communism and Fascism.

Benjamin links the rise of the masses and increase in alienating labour to the increase in a new mode of attention. As with the shifts in perception this is not produced by film, rather film 'meets it halfway'. In other words this new mode of attention occurs in relation to all spheres of culture and everyday life, but it appears most appropriate in the cinema: it is 'distraction' or 'diversion' (*Zerstreuung*). Many critics of the day railed against film as *merely* diversionary or distracting, contrasting it to what is required of the audience by other forms of culture (the term distraction is rather misleading, as it implies a lack of absorption or involvement, whereas what seems to be at stake here is a distinction between *forms* of involvement rather than *levels* of involvement). Contemporary arguments about the over-absorption or apparent passivity of users of computer games tend to presuppose this polar opposition between distraction and concentration – in which distraction is seen as passive reception and concentration as critical engagement. Yet Benjamin argued against it. In his writing, distraction becomes a term which undoes the opposition between entertained, unthinking absorption and distanced or disinterested criticism. The collective experience of cinema can bring together these 'critical and receptive' attitudes. Through distraction, Benjamin suggests, we gain tacit knowledge and 'new tasks have become solvable by apperception'.³²

Apart from the fact that it is experienced collectively, the aspect of cinema that most decisively contributes to loss of aura is its capacity to reproduce objects and in doing so detach them from their high cultural and distanced context and 'bring them closer'. Many writers on computer technology recognise the computer's capacity to 'bring things closer', enabling people to see and communicate across physical and national boundaries (for a different kind of 'closeness' enabled by computer technology, see Beryl Graham's essay in this volume). Benjamin sees this 'bringing closer' as a potentially empowering development, opening to

analysis aspects of reality which until then had been hidden to the viewer (through, for instance, the aerial view, or the frame by frame breakdown of motion). Yet the 'postmodern' analysis of digital technology comes to very different conclusions, seeing it in terms of bodily invasion, infection, schizophrenia.³³

What are the implications of this? For Benjamin the way of thinking which erects a hierarchy between critical 'distance' (associated with 'high' culture) and the closeness and absorption which is linked to cinema-going, is useless. Social changes (most particularly the spreading of the principle of exchange to all aspects of life) have produced a sense of the 'universal equivalence of things', a demand *met* by film.³⁴ Film has the potential to be used as a tool for the understanding of the real conditions of existence; as stated earlier, Benjamin sees it as having a role to play in the formation of a revolutionary consciousness. Changes in forms of perception and attention are not the result of film technology, but, in Benjamin's study at least, catered for by film.

As I have suggested, in contemporary dystopian accounts the old notion of 'distance' is upheld, in so far as 'closeness' is perceived in terms of infection leading to an inability to grasp the real, or a closing of the 'gap' between representation and reality. In addition the idea of 'loss of the real' assumes that once there was a simple correspondence between representations and reality, a kind of *a priori* authenticity, which has somehow been lost. The concept of 'loss of aura', however, suggests that what has been lost is this illusion. Indeed the contemporary arguments can be seen as highly gendered, since the loss of the real is linked to loss of mastery and the inauthentic, as well as fear of invasion and infection, ideas historically associated with the fear of being 'feminised'.³⁵

I would like to suggest that if we shift the agenda from the idea of 'loss of the real' to the idea of 'loss of aura' (in the sense I have given it), then we might move away from technological determinism and the belief in the (comparative) authenticity of the chemical photograph, to an understanding of the profound ambivalence of new technologies. The digital image, like the chemical image, has the potential to disrupt but also to reaffirm aura.

Notes and references

1 Roland Barthes, 'Rhetoric of the Image', in *Image, Music, Text*, London: Fontana, 1987, p. 44.

2 Ritchin describes this in his book, *In Our Own Image: The Coming Revolution in Photography*, New York: Aperture, 1990. I based my account on Martin Lister, 'The Living Death of Photography and Walter Benjamin's Ghost', in *Fotofactions* exhibition catalogue, Chapter Arts Centre and Ffoto Gallery, 1993.

3 Gerard Raulet, 'The New Utopia', *Telos*, 87, 1991, p. 40.

4 See for example Kevin Robins, 'The Virtual Unconscious in Post-Photography', in

Science as Culture vol. 3, pt 1, no. 14.

5 Martin Lister, op. cit.

6 Walter Benjamin, N2,5, quoted in Gary Smith (ed.), *Benjamin, Philosophy, Aesthetics, History*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989, p. 48.

7 Both essays are in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, London: Fontana, 1992.

8 See for example: Bill Nichols, 'The Work of Culture in the Age of Cybernetic Systems', *Screen* 29 (1), 1988; P. Wombell (ed.), *Photo-Video: Photography in the Age of the Computer*, London: Rivers Oram, 1991; Roger F. Malina, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Post-Mechanical Reproduction', *Leonardo*, Digital Image – Digital Cinema Supplemental Issue, 1990.

9 Karl Marx 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte', in *Selected Works*, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1968, p. 96.

10 *ibid.*, p. 137.

11 Siegfried Giedion, *Building in France*, Leipzig: Klinkhardt & Biermann, 1928.

12 See Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, London: MIT Press, 1989, pp. 114–15; also pp. 79–80 where she argues that Benjamin was persistent in attacking mythic theories of history, and saw history as having no *inevitable* social outcomes.

13 This point is argued by John Tagg in 'Totalled Machines: Criticism, Photography and Technical Change', *New Formations*, 7, (Spring 1989).

14 Nevertheless it seems that when this concept of 'open' texts is used, it frequently reinstates canonical distinctions: the 'open' texts just happen to be those already deemed worthy of serious consideration.

15 Roland Barthes, op. cit., p. 33.

16 Respectively: Percy Adlon, *Mainline/Pelemele/Pro-Ject*, 1988; Wim Wenders, *Road Movies/Greno*, 1984; Allison Anders, *Mainline/Cineville Partners*, 1991. Also, the use of colour and black and white recalls Francis Ford Coppola's *Rumble Fish*.

17 According to Deborah Bright it was the cowboy movie which 'succeeded as no other form in masculinising the Western landscape', 'Of Mother Nature and Marlboro Men: An Inquiry into the Cultural Meanings of Landscape Photography', in Richard Bolton (ed.), *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989.

18 See for example the photographs of the Marlboro ads by Richard Prince. For Abigail Solomon-Godeau, Prince's work 'pointedly addresses the new conservative agenda [of the Reagan administration] and its ritual invocations of a heroic past', see 'Living with Contradictions', in Carol Squiers (ed.), *The Critical Image*, London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1991, p. 73. Richard Misrach also re-photographed a Marlboro ad which had been used as a shooting target, as part of his *Violent Legacies: Three Cantos*, Manchester: Cornerhouse, 1992.

19 Open University programme, *Los Angeles: City of the Future*, from the course D213, *Understanding Modern Societies*.

20 *Campaign* magazine, April 1993.

- 21 Robin Murray, in Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques (eds), *New Times*, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1989.
- 22 Key texts on this are: Patrice Petro, *Joyless Streets: Women and Melodramatic Representation in Weimar Germany*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989; Janet Wolff, 'The Invisible Flaneuse: Women and the Literature of Modernity', in *Theory, Culture and Society*, 2 (3) 1985; Griselda Pollock, 'Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity', in *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art*, London: Routledge, 1988; Elizabeth Wilson, 'The Invisible Flaneur', *New Left Review*, 191, January/February 1992.
- 23 Jonathan Crary, 'Critical Reflections', in *Artforum*, February 1994.
- 24 Benjamin, 'The Work of Art', p. 216. In my reading of this section I have been helped enormously by numerous alternative translations of phrases and paragraphs, in particular those in the essays included in Smith, op. cit.
- 25 Benjamin, 'On Some Motifs', p. 171.
- 26 Benjamin, *ibid.*, p. 171.
- 27 Benjamin, *ibid.*, p. 182.
- 28 Walter Benjamin, from 'A Short Speech on Proust', 1932, quoted in Miriam Hansen, 'Benjamin, Cinema and Experience: "The Blue Flower in the Land of Technology"', *New German Critique*, 40, Winter 1987.
- 29 Freud, quoted in Benjamin, 'On Some Motifs', p. 157.
- 30 Freud, quoted in Benjamin, *ibid.*, p. 158.
- 31 See Buck-Morss, op. cit., for an exploration of this concept in relation to Benjamin's 'Arcades' project.
- 32 Benjamin, 'The Work of Art', p. 233.
- 33 See for example Robins, op. cit.
- 34 Raulet relates computer technology to the principle of equivalence. He argues that in capitalism, as exchange value and use value are separated, things become 'interchangeable. Losing their particularity they become derealized', and, for Raulet, 'The computer is both the father and child of this evolution.', op. cit., pp. 41–2.
- 35 See for example Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989.