



**VM503**  
**AESTHETICS AND HISTORY**  
**OF NEW MEDIA**

**WEEK 1 CLASS 2**

**Defining New Media**

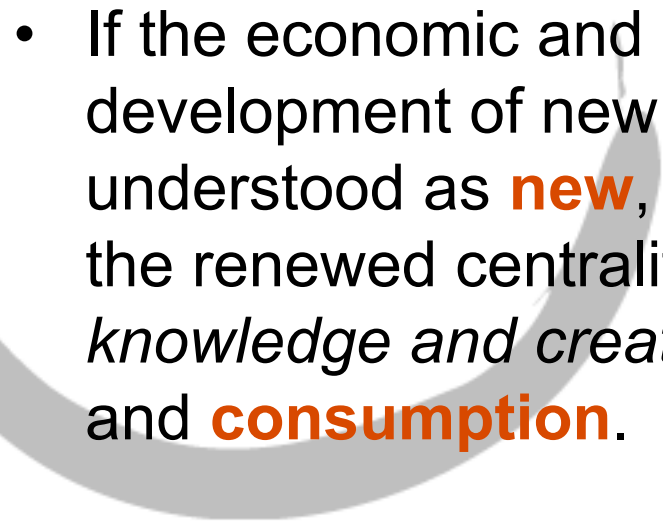

**The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction**



Jo-Anne Green, Emerson College

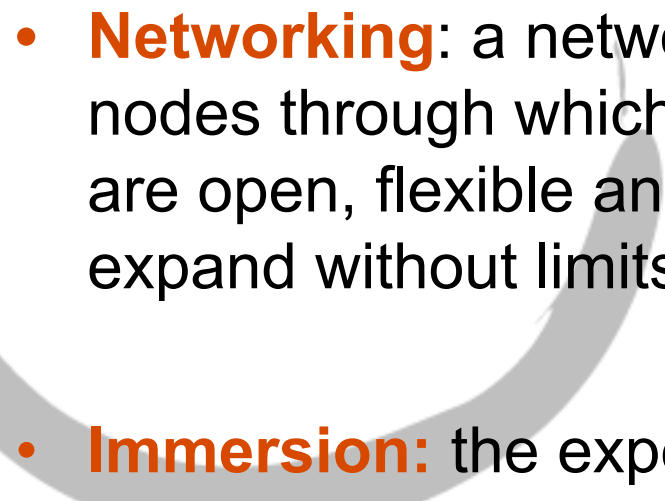
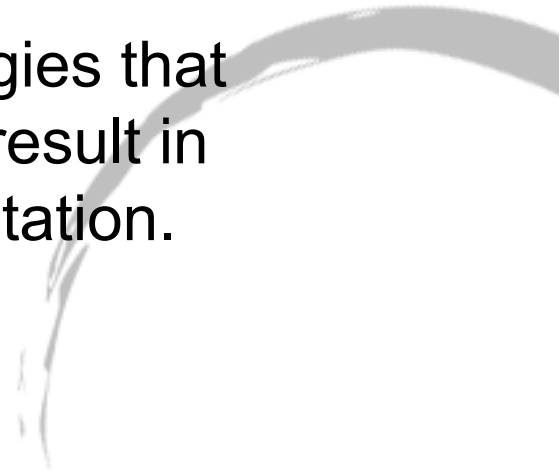
# DEFINING NEW MEDIA

- New Media *technologies* arise out of the interaction between **digitized content**, **intermedia** (integrated media forms), and **global communications networks**.
- *Technology* is understood not only as **hardware** (or the things that humans make use of), but also as **software** or **content**, and as the complex systems of *knowledge* and *social meaning* that accompany their development and use.

- 
- 
- If the economic and social structure arising out of the development of new media technologies can be understood as **new**, an important reason for this is the renewed centrality of the application of *knowledge and creativity* to processes of **production** and **consumption**.
  - Mediation of communications through technological forms renders communications a form of **social practice**.

## Some Characteristics of New Media Are:

- **Digitization** and **Integration**: because BITS are impartial, artistic forms can be combined into a hybrid form of expression.
- **Interactivity**: the ability for the user to manipulate and effect her experience of media directly. Users are given a degree of choice; each pattern of use leads the user down a distinctive 'pathway', creating what is termed a **hypertext**, or *a text made up of other texts*.

- 
- **Networking:** a network is a set of interconnected nodes through which communication flows occur that are open, flexible and adaptable forms able to expand without limits. (Manuel Castells)
  - **Immersion:** the experience of entering into a simulation or suggestion of a 3-D environment.
  - **Narrativity:** aesthetic and formal strategies that derive from the above concepts, which result in nonlinear story forms and media presentation.
- 

# Walter Benjamin: The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction (1935)

- Profound changes are impending in the ancient **craft of *The Beautiful*** (Valery 1928)
- The *craft of the beautiful* is also known as **aesthetics**.
- **Aesthetics (esthetics)** is commonly known as the study of sensory values, sometimes called *judgments of sentiment and taste*.
- By the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, **aesthetics** referred to the **study of beauty** and specifically beauty related to **art**.

- Thus the statement: “I don’t mind New York City, I just shut off my senses and visit the MET on weekends.”
- **Participation** in art has been a *strategy* for almost 100 years. As a strategy and/or structure, it implies a certain political stance, as in Walter Benjamin’s statement that in “**judging a work’s politics, we should not look at the artist’s declared sympathies, but at the position that the work occupies in the production relations of its time.**” (1934)
- **Photography** and **film** constitute the *production relations* of the 20<sup>th</sup> century -- “brushing aside a number of outmoded concepts, such as **creativity** and **genius, eternal value** and **mystery.**”

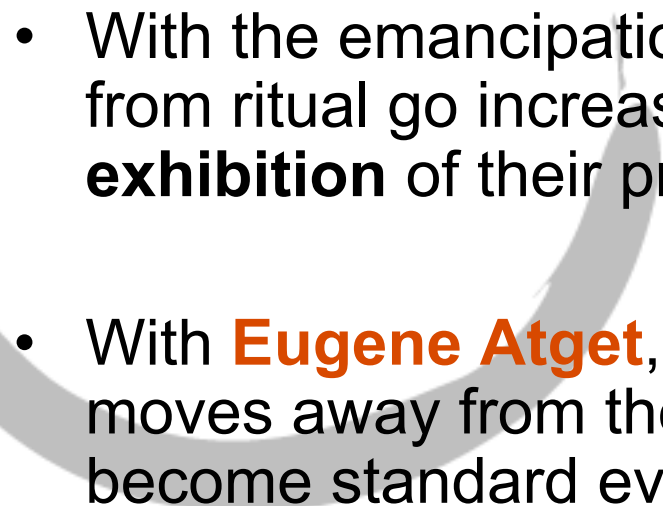

- **Photography** accelerated the process of pictorial reproduction so enormously that it could keep pace with speech.
- Just as **lithography** virtually implied the *illustrated newspaper*, so did **photography** foreshadow the *sound film*.
- The most perfect *reproduction of a work of art* is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its **unique existence** at the place where it happens to be.



- The **presence of the original** is the prerequisite to the concept of **authenticity**. The original preserves all its authority but ...
- The photographic process can capture images which *escape natural vision*, and...
- Can put the copy of the original *into situations which would be out of reach for the original itself* - peoples' living rooms.
- Thus, that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the **aura** (uniqueness) of the work of art

- During long periods of history, the **mode of human sense perception changes** with humanity's entire mode of existence.
- If changes in the medium of contemporary perception can be comprehended as **decay of the aura**, it is possible to show its **social causes**.
- Namely, the desire of contemporary masses to bring things "closer" *spatially* and *humanly*, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction.

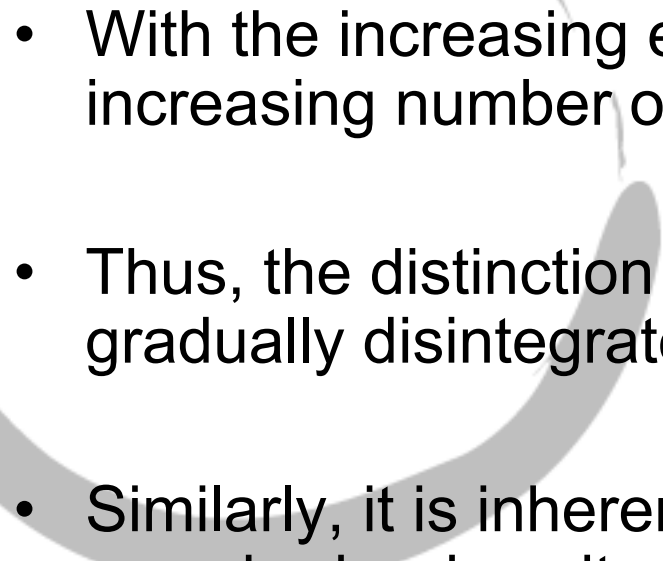
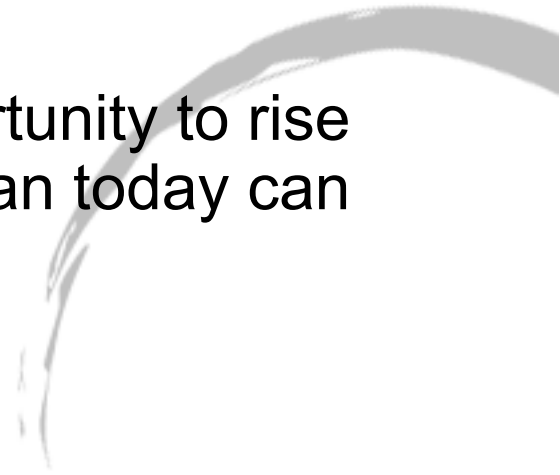
- 100 years later, art reacted with **art-for-art's-sake** which **denied any social function of art**.
- Mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual.
- To an ever greater degree *the work of art reproduced* becomes *the work of art designed for reproducibility*.
- The instant the criterion of **authenticity** ceases to be applicable to artistic production, *the total function of art is reversed*. Instead of being based on **ritual**, it begins to be based on **politics**.

- 
- 
- With the emancipation of the various art practices from ritual go increasing **opportunities for the exhibition** of their products.
  - With **Eugene Atget**, (1857-1927) photography moves away from the cult of the portrait. Photographs become standard evidence for historical occurrences... **challenging the viewer in a new way.**
  - Magazines begin to publish him. **For the first time, captions have become obligatory.**

# FILM

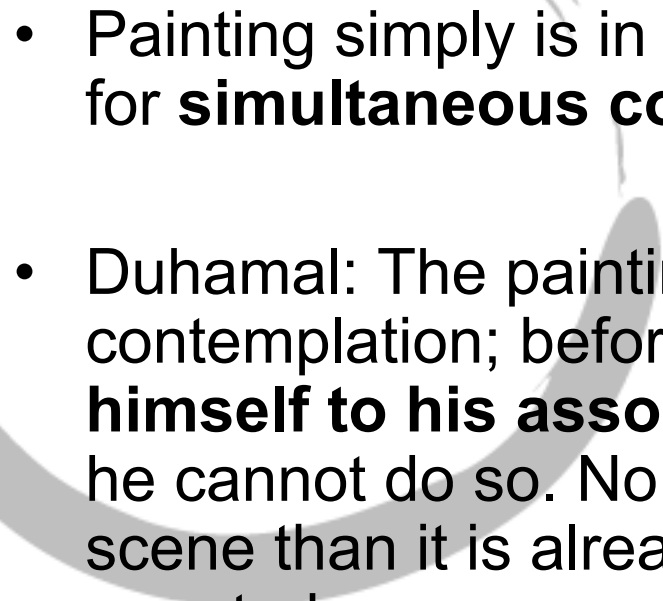
- The **stage actor** is presented to the public by the actor *in person*.
- The **screen actor** is presented by *a camera*.
- The audience's identification with the actor is really an identification with the camera. Consequently the audience takes the position of the camera.
- Because of this *distancing*, the audience takes the position of a critic.

- For the first time, man has to operate with his whole living person, yet **forgoing its aura**. For aura is tied to his **presence**; *there can be no replica of it*.
- The stage actor identifies himself with the character of his role. The film actor is often denied this opportunity. His creation is by no means all of a piece; it is composed of **many separate performances**.
- The actor experiences a similar estrangement felt before his mirror image; now the reflected image is **separated** from him and **transported to the public** (the consumers who constitute the market). **It is beyond his reach**.

- 
- 
- With the increasing extension of the press an increasing number of **readers became writers.**
  - Thus, the distinction between **author** and **public** gradually disintegrated.
  - Similarly, it is inherent in the technique of film that everybody who witnesses its accomplishments is somewhat of an **expert.**
  - The newsreel offers everyone the opportunity to rise from **passer-by** to **movie extra.** Any man today can lay claim to being filmed.

- In the theater one is well aware of the place from which the play cannot immediately be detected as illusionary.
- In film, the equipment-free aspect of reality has become the height of artifice (illusion).
- The painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, the cameraman penetrates deeply into its web.
- Because of the **thorough going permeation of reality** with mechanical equipment, film is more **significant** than painting (and theater). This is what one is entitled to ask from a work of art.



- 
- Painting simply is in no position to present an object for **simultaneous collective experience**.
  - Duhamal: The painting invites the spectator to contemplation; before it **the spectator can abandon himself to his associations**. Before the movie frame he cannot do so. No sooner has his eye grasped a scene than it is already changed. It cannot be arrested.
  - The movie is “*a pastime for helots, a diversion for uneducated...*” the same ancient lament that the **masses seek distraction** whereas **art demands concentration** from the spectator.