

Exposability: On the Taking-Place in Future of Art

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Art's *exposability*—Walter Benjamin's word is *Ausstellbarkeit*¹—promises both a public future and a social history for art. Or we might rather say: public futures and social histories for artistic practices. I want to revisit *Ausstellbarkeit* as Benjamin invokes it in the 1930s and to repurpose it for art theory now. As part of that project, a few different lenses will be tried out here. First is *A Woman of Paris* (1923), the film written and directed by Charlie Chaplin and starring Edna Purviance, which is frequently cited by Benjamin and has some intriguing recent history online. Second comes the “Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism” show at the Museum of Modern Art, New York (1936), and the position of Mickey Mouse in relation. Third and finally, I will briefly reflect on the trajectories of two filmic heroines of early Soviet cinema, in *The Adventures of Oktyabrina* (Pokhozdeniya Oktyabrini, 1924) and *Alone* (Odna, 1931) respectively. Applying these lenses, I will explore what it might mean to think through *exposability* as a heuristic serving sociopolitical ends.

Benjamin lived through numerous experiments in exhibition-making as staged in Europe between World Wars I and II. I am thinking of the proliferation of avant-garde shows in the overlapping fields of art, photography, film, architecture, design, theater, and the press as staged across Europe in the 1920s and 30s.² And I am also thinking of the Nazi's “Degenerate ‘Art’” exhibition of 1937. Yet Benjamin does not consider such activity when articulating his concept of art's exhibition or exposure value [*Ausstellungswert*] in his essay on “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,” as drafted in various versions during 1935–39. Instead he celebrates Dada “manifestations” [*Kundgebungen*] and the clowning of the Russian Eccentrics as events of public artistic encounter and, moreover, as precursors to cinematic engagement.³ Indeed film production and distribution constitute his primary example and therefore the cinema auditorium—not the gallery space—is the scene or setting for the art that claims the foreground. His concern is not to define or reflect on exhibitions, or art exhibitions, as such. What he offers us instead is analysis of art based on its *exposability*—which I will here elaborate as its *capacity to produce sociopolitical entanglement*. This is not to be understood as some essential or inherent characteristic of all artworks; it suggests instead that we consider *what happens* when art *takes place*, and *in particular circumstances*.

¹ As I will come on to address, *Ausstellbarkeit* features in all three German versions of Benjamin's essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility” (1935–39), but it is not typically

² For an outline summary from the point of view of installation design, see Mary Anne Staniszewski, *The Power of Display: A History of Exhibition Installations at The Museum of Modern Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 2–57. Although Central and Eastern European initiatives, such as the Dada Bazaar in Prague and Brno (1923–24), should be considered additionally.

³ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility” (Second Version), 1935–36, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn in Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (ed.), *Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings, vol.3, 1935–38* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 2002), 118–19.

Benjamin's specific concern, although it will not be mine here, centers on how exposability is improved through modern changes in technologies of reproduction. In fact, *Ausstellbarkeit* is the dialectical pair of aura, with the declared historical decay of art's aura directly related to increased exposability. Benjamin sets aura's domineering cultic (e.g., religious, capitalist, or totalitarian) operation upon individuals against the open social function of exposability as based in (e.g., socialist) politics.⁴ More generally, what is at stake in *exposure value* may be *our mutual implication in each other's lives*. I want to suggest that art's exposability implies *liaisons and negotiations across the "we" convoked in its durational field*. The "we" here insists on the sociality of art, while envisaging the shifting constitution and reconstitution of differing camps on diverse specified matters. In other words, "we" as the pronoun of political subjectivity is itself pluralized here, with disagreement and debate necessarily operational and altering over time.

For the translation of *Ausstellbarkeit*, I draw on the work of Michael Jennings, who acknowledges his debt to Samuel Weber's publication *Benjamin's -abilities*.⁵ Here Weber notes and explores Benjamin's tendency to nominalize verbs not in the usual manner but by adding the suffix "-barkeit," that is, "-abilities." Weber does not analyze *Ausstellbarkeit* in particular in his book but rather, for example, readability, criticizability, and impartability. He sets out how, in the place of more attention-grabbing neologisms, the mere addition of "-ability" to a noun allows Benjamin to maintain and highlight the structural possibility of future recurrence, over and above any particular instantiation. The power or potentiality to repeat is crucial to *Ausstellbarkeit*, which, in its very grammatical form, emphasizes that art's value in a given situation—its specific exhibition value or sociopolitical functionality—does not endure eternally but passes away, even while this very transitoriness holds out the possibility of further future operations, with new interactions to be reconfigured in different subsequent contexts. There is not simply iterability and the open possibility of repetition here, but incompleteness, or unfulfillability, and the necessity to repeat in order to remain (ever somewhat differently) affective and effective. Following Benjamin it is not "the exhibition" that needs emphasis but—in the name of *Ausstellbarkeit*—art's potentially ongoing capacity *to pluralize and interrelate individuals*, realizing without exhausting sociopolitical possibilities.

Translated as "exhibition," *Ausstellung* implies display and draws on the Latin *exhibere*, to hold-out or hold-forth. Crucially, what is presented to view here perhaps is something pre-existing; as discussed by Samuel Weber in relation to "expression," "a prior internally constituted entity is merely being pressed-out—given a face."⁶ By contrast, "exposition," from the Latin *exponere*, implies "something that has hitherto been concealed, and that perhaps through the very process of exposure only becomes visible in the first place."⁷ In what follows I will favor art's exposability and exposure

⁴ Benjamin, "Work of Art" (Second Version), 106–8.

⁵ Michael Jennings favors "exhibitability" in his translation. See M. Jennings (trans.), "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility (First Version)," *Grey Room*, no. 39 (Spring 2010): 37 (fn. 1).

⁶ Samuel Weber, "Pictures After an Exhibition," contribution to the "Art's Exhibition Histories Online" symposium, Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts London, 16 November 2017.

⁷ Weber, "Pictures After an Exhibition."

value, over its exhibitability and exhibition value—on the basis that when art galvanizes a public situation, it is also *shaped by* these circumstances.

***Spielraum*: Into Fields of Play and Action**

A Woman of Paris is initially mentioned in “The Work of Art” essay when Benjamin attacks the myths of artistic genius and of art’s eternal value on the basis that these stem from attachments to obsolete or outdated techniques of production and reproduction. For contrast, he then turns to film and describes how: “To produce *A Woman of Paris*, which is 3,000 meters long, Chaplin shot 125,000 meters of film.”⁸ He is here highlighting one of several ways in which films are “assembled” [*montiert* and *montierbar*] rather than being “created at a single stroke”; thereby rejecting, for example (and this is my example rather than Benjamin’s) Michelangelo’s biblical vision of God creating Adam with the mere point of a divine finger. Pushing Benjamin’s own line of argument further, I want to suggest that the sense of assemblage—which, if we are thinking about conventional art exhibitions, we might further gloss as a process of “mounting,” or “installation”—this assemblage points not towards “the here and now” of an *eternal* artwork,⁹ but to “*a* here and now”—a *particular* “here and now”—for an artwork getting transient display or exposure in a particular context and for a particular duration, while holding out the possibility of different future opportunities.

The point for *A Woman of Paris* is that—through invoking the film’s exposability—we are forced to acknowledge that we assess not its essential, authentic, and eternal value as an auratic work of art, but its sociopolitical effectiveness as (say) screened on one day at one cinema rather than on another date somewhere else, or more generally on release in New York as compared with Paris, for example. Equally, but differently, we might consider the implications of its recent YouTube circulation as dubbed in Isaan, the Northeastern Thai dialect of the Lao language. Or indeed we may examine the entanglements staged in *any* given presentation context, with ever more events of collective availability potentially possible, while none is guaranteed. Here reception studies, the social history of art and new museology all have methodological propositions to offer.

The question then arises as to what would turn a cinema screening—or circulation via YouTube—into an art exhibition, or rather into an actualization of art’s exposability. And the answer, while setting standards not easy to satisfy with the passage of almost a hundred years since initial screenings, or given the dispersed anonymity of most YouTube access, lies in the conviction that a public or publics have been collectively (if diversely) affected and mutually engaged. Clearly the public assembly of bodies is foregone on the internet but not, as it happens, at least for the YouTube instance cited, the transience of exposure: if only given that copyright claims by a French distribution company have led to the Isaan-dubbed version of *A Woman of Paris* being taken down. Where online content instead lingers on, with the number of “views” clicking ever upwards, we have to draw comparison with the publication of books and circumscribe a durational field—six months, maybe, or ten years—as the basis for analysis. But how then to assess the interrelated impact of all those individual encounters? Most interestingly in the example cited, a distinct life for the dubbed film

⁸ Benjamin, “Work of Art” (Second Version), 109.

⁹ Benjamin, “Work of Art” (Second Version), 103.

is suggested by the soundtrack since it conveyed more than just the intertitles, instead providing a full running commentary and vocal characterization. This sets it within the Thai tradition of live narration as added during film screenings, which draws on regional oral and theatrical improvisation practices that predate film.¹⁰ Although largely abandoned in the 1980s, this mode of live presentation has since been rethought in the era of YouTube and given the cheap circulation of DVDs and VCDs in Thailand, such that a new generation of voice artists in Northeastern regions have taken to producing performances to Chaplin films, now as a kind of participatory spectatorship activity.¹¹ Perhaps, then, the short-lived presentation of the Isaan-dubbed version of *A Woman in Paris* online therefore documented a live event, tracing a past instantiation of exposability, as much as instigating a new one.

The reception of *A Woman of Paris* as idealized at the time of its first release might be said to take place in cinematic “spaceless darkness,” as described by Rudolf Harms in his 1926 philosophizing of film,¹² but the other people present co-occupied—even filled-out—that dark spacelessness. Benjamin is insistent on the *collective* reception that is implied by art’s exposability and on its *tactile* or *tactical* [*taktisch*] mode of operation.¹³ Chaplin’s films are specifically praised by Benjamin for taking to a new level Dada’s earlier enfolding of “physical shock effect” and “moral shock effect.”¹⁴ He sets the social “jolt” or “percussive” effect of art—its *taktisch* quality—against the “asocial” allure, enchantment and “contemplative immersion” offered by aura, as modelled on “being alone with one’s God.”¹⁵ Interpersonal entanglement here contrasts with individual personal enlightenment. Moreover (and taking the liberty of generalizing what Benjamin exclusively associates with film, indeed with privileged historical association to Chaplin), the exposability of art “manages to assure us of a vast and unsuspected field of play/action [*Spielraum*].”¹⁶ Here the active reception of art yields to a sense of enabling agency, with social transformation or specific emancipation coming boldly into view given the *Spielraum* opening up.

Presumably the impact for Benjamin of Chaplin’s films in the 1920s and 1930s, lay in their potential to enable the “newly proletarianized masses” to understand themselves as a class with fields of play and action to explore.¹⁷ But this is only loosely speaking

¹⁰ See May Adadol Ingawanij, “Figures of Plebian Modernity: Film Projection as Performance in Siam/Thailand,” *Southeast Asia Program Bulletin* (Cornell University), Fall 2014: 10–16.

¹¹ I am indebted to May Adadol Ingawanij for generously sharing of her knowledge of this scene.

¹² I borrow this from Noam M. Elcott, “Rooms of Our Time: László Moholy-Nagy and the Stillbirth of Multi-media Museums,” in Tamara Trodd (ed.), *Screen/Space: The Projected Image in Contemporary Art* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), 25.

¹³ Benjamin, “Work of Art” (Second Version), 119.

¹⁴ Benjamin, “Work of Art” (First Version), 32.

¹⁵ Benjamin, “Work of Art” (Second Version), 119. The “theological archetype” of “being alone with one’s God” is added in a footnote to the final version; see Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility (Third Version, trans. Harry Zohn and Edmund Jephcott), in Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (ed.), *Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings, vol. 4, 1938–1940* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 2003), 281 (fn. 40).

¹⁶ Benjamin, “Work of Art” (Second Version), 117.

¹⁷ Benjamin, “Work of Art” (Second Version), 120. Compare Bertolt Brecht’s development of epic theater in this era, as I will later reference—and see his 1931 note “(The actor Chaplin, incidentally, would in many ways come closer to the epic than to the dramatic theatre’s requirements.)” in B. Brecht (trans. John Willett), ed. Steve Giles, Marc Silberman and Tom Kuhn, *Brecht on Theatre* (London: Methuen, 1964), 56.

and certainly Benjamin does not attempt to articulate the film's particular social effectiveness himself at the time. To offer some conjecture I will turn to the contemporary analysis of two British cinema critics. C.A. Lejeune, writing her weekly column for *The Manchester Guardian*, was prompted by *A Woman of Paris* to remark that "Chaplin makes the spectator's imagination a creative force in all his drama."¹⁸ Evidently, she perceives a shared artistic creativity between director and audience, rather than suggesting that the very concept of artistic creativity is itself outmoded, and she holds back from elaborating the empowerment implied. Nevertheless, and expressly aware that cinema audiences were majority female in England at the time, she would write in the same newspaper the following year that "the kinema must please the women or die."¹⁹ And here I would insist, following Benjamin, that to be "pleased" is not just to be entertained, but is fused with "an attitude of expert appraisal."²⁰ There is assuredly no simple fit between *A Woman of Paris* and women's suffrage, or first-wave feminism, in Europe and the US at the time but it is nevertheless tempting to glimpse in the film "a vast and unsuspected *Spielraum*" beginning to open up: maybe the possibilities of operating as the lead protagonist or heroine in a narrative of one's own shaping, when supported through female solidarity, are ventured? Iris Barry conveyed something of the invitations, perhaps, in her regular column for the *Daily Mail*, where she described *A Woman of Paris* as "remarkable because it was a first attempt at filming human beings instead of types."²¹

Returning now to the performative informal screening of *A Woman in Paris* in Isaan, as recently (if briefly) posted on YouTube, I rely on May Adadol Ingawanij's insights to allow me to speculate on the emancipatory horizons potentially drawn within view. On the basis of her analysis of Siamese voice-performance at film screenings in the 16mm and Cold War era, which she describes as mostly employing Central Thai rather than local languages,²² I broadly understand the transient YouTube presentation of a recent performance event in Isaan as traces of regional mobilization against ongoing Thai centralization. Of course, the active spectatorship of the voice-over event is lost online, but the audience thereby reached—however brief the window of access—is geographically expanded. In order to play my role as a member of that public, and turn digital dissemination into socialized exposure value, I have to ask myself what *I* can do to address the issues at stake. And this paragraph is a basic attempt to connect with, and amplify the cause of, those potentially enabled.

Fantastic Machines: Mobilized by Technology

In 1936 Jay Leyda, assistant curator of the newly established film library at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, requested a copy of Benjamin's "Work of Art" essay for translation into English for MoMA's library. When Max Horkheimer wrote to Benjamin flagging this request,²³ "Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism" was on show in

¹⁸ C. A. Lejeune in *The Manchester Guardian*, 1 March 1925.

¹⁹ C. A. Lejeune in *The Manchester Guardian*, 15 January 1926.

²⁰ Benjamin, "Work of Art" (Second Version), 116.

²¹ Iris Barry in the *Daily Mail*, 13 September 1926.

²² Adadol Ingawanij, "Figures of Plebian Modernity."

²³ Horkheimer urged Benjamin *not* to send Leyda a German version of his "Work of Art" essay, on the basis that this would lay bare the political references that (much to Benjamin's regret) had been edited out of the French version—the only one published at the time.

the MoMA galleries, as curated by Alfred Barr.²⁴ This exhibition united paintings and works on paper dating back to the sixteenth century—for instance by Hieronymus Bosch, Albrecht Dürer, Hans Holbein, and Leonardo da Vinci—with a core section on Dada and Surrealist art, including contributions by most of those now canonized under these banners, plus various ancillary sections displaying “comparative material,” such as the “art of children,” “art of the insane,” “folk art,” “commercial and journalistic art,” and “scientific objects.”²⁵ Making a US claim for recent cultural preeminence in the field, a press release for the exhibition proclaimed Mickey Mouse as “the world’s best-loved Surrealist.”²⁶ The role of film in the show, as well as other publics won by Disney, are also interesting as regards the exposability of art.

The first Mickey Mouse film to be distributed and thereby widely exhibited was *Steamboat Willie*. It opened at the Colony Theatre, New York, in November 1928 and two weeks later, on the basis of popular demand, it transferred to the nearby Roxy Theatre, where it could reach an audience of some 6,000 people at a time. Release in Europe came the following year and by 1935 Walter Benjamin hailed Mickey Mouse, with a whiff of modernist universalism, as a “globe-encircling” figure of “collective dream.”²⁷ Benjamin had proposed in 1927 that a chief “target” of American slapstick film was “technology,” continuing, “This kind of film is comic, but only in the sense that the laughter it provokes hovers over an abyss of horror,” with the lethal power of military machinery lurking below.²⁸ In keeping with this, the mechanical gags and stunts in *Steamboat Willie* arguably addressed the working class in particular since, as deftly summarized by Esther Leslie, these were the audiences most ready “to see the technological apparatus they daily face acknowledged, mocked and reworked.”²⁹ Leslie brilliantly identifies Mickey Mouse’s early anarchic appeal to the intellect and imagination, tracing in Benjamin’s 1931 text on this cartoon hero an unmasking of various “cover stories for the powerful.”³⁰ Here the exposure value of *Steamboat Willie* on its highly popular first run in New York City seems to lie in its enmeshing laborers in a lampooning of working conditions—a potential step towards building mass solidarity.

Walt Disney Productions donated three Mickey Mouse shorts to MoMA’s Film Library in December 1935.³¹ Just as the company was about to reposition itself in the

²⁴ Curated in follow up to Barr’s “Cubism and Abstract Art” show, “Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism” ran 9 December 1936 to 17 January 1937.

²⁵ These are the classificatory categories offered in the exhibition catalogue. Available at:

https://www.moma.org/documents/moma_catalogue_2823_300061909.pdf

²⁶ https://www.moma.org/documents/moma_press-release_325075.pdf

²⁷ Benjamin, “Work of Art” (First Version), 31. Compare the press-release for “Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism” already quoted, which capitalizes on similar ideas in the interests of anchoring a predominantly *European* selection of art within the *US* cultural field.

²⁸ Walter Benjamin, “Reply to Oscar A. H. Schmitz” (1927, trans. Rodney Livingstone) in ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith, *Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings, vol.2, pt.1, 1927–1930* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 1999), 17.

²⁹ Esther Leslie, *Hollywood Flatlands: Animation, Critical Theory and the Avant-Garde* (London: Verso, 2002), 112.

³⁰ Leslie, *Hollywood Flatlands*, 83. And see Walter Benjamin, “On Mickey Mouse” (1931, trans. Rodney Livingstone) in Jennings et al. (eds.), *Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings, vol.2, pt.2, 1931–1934*, 545–46.

³¹ These were *Plane Crazy* (1928), the first ever Mickey Mouse film; *Steamboat Willie* (1928) the first to have sound as well as the first to get commercial release; and *The Band Concert* (1935) the first in Technicolor. See a press release online:

marketplace through the imitation of naturalistic narrative cinema—with *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) turning a folktale by the Brothers Grimm into a moralizing feature-length animation—it secured respectability for its powerfully “unrespectable” beginnings.³² MoMA had limited screening facilities at this time, and film programs put together in 1936 tended to take place at the Dalton School before being offered for loan to museums, colleges, and study groups across the US. *Steamboat Willie* was presented in New York in this way under MoMA’s auspices in May 1936, as part of a program titled “The Talkies,” which reflected on the introduction of sound into film.³³ In this company, any Dada impact or Surrealist sensibility was set at bay, with a formal and medium-specific focus on audio-visual relations suggested instead. Here technology was only to be celebrated for its accumulating achievements.

In this period, the preservation of film prints after commercial release and disappearance was rare, and MoMA’s moves to acquire and circulate past material was significant for historicization within the field and for enabling ongoing access. Use of a school auditorium—as opposed to a movie theater—emphasized an educational rather than entertainment ethos, and decorous museological reception was actively fostered. Funding for MoMA’s Film Library from the Rockefeller Foundation operated in concert with the desire to encourage a certain filmic discernment, indeed to culturally instruct.³⁴ Moreover, it suggests a financial stake in precisely reducing the capacity to empower the disempowered, to discourage the mobilization of the laboring masses within what we might call a newfound *Spielraum*—or at least to emphasize a studious collective criticality, at best, and inspire cowed individual contemplation, at worst. Here we may perceive the creeping auratic overtones of (national) cultural canon formation, and at the expense of the social entanglements of exposability. The disembodied and escapist “spaceless darkness” idealized for the cinema, as already quoted and problematized, here translates rather directly what we might describe as the *neutral lightness* striven for within the galleries at the new Museum of Modern Art. Mary Anne Staniszewski has memorably described MoMA’s early display techniques in terms of their direct address to US cultural values of individual rights and free will, and the simultaneous exercise of a paternal didacticism.³⁵ It is perhaps this that we may see projected into the Dalton School auditorium, through the undulating light of *Steamboat Willie*.

Mickey Mouse did not, it seems, feature in the final selection of work for the MoMA exhibition “Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism.” Nevertheless, the first film in Disney’s “Silly Symphonies” series, *The Skeleton Dance* (1929), would be highlighted in the exhibition catalogue among the “Fantastic or Surrealist films in the Museum of Modern Art Library,” and it was there flagged as part of a screening program—presumably previewed at the Dalton School and then available for hire. Within the

https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press_archives/285/releases/MOMA_1935-37_0008.pdf?2010

³² Leslie, *Hollywood Flatlands*, 32.

³³ See a press release online:

https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press_archives/295/releases/MOMA_1935-37_0018.pdf?2010

³⁴ For a historical account of film at MoMA New York see Haidee Wasson, *Museum Movies: The Museum of Modern Art and the Birth of Art Cinema* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005).

³⁵ Staniszewski, *Power of Display*, 62–70.

galleries, no motion pictures were exhibited;³⁶ however, four frames showing an elaborate Disney cartoon contraption labelled a “wolf pacifier” were apparently included, as taken from *Three Little Wolves* (1936, then a recent addition to the “Silly Symphonies” series). In the installation photographs for the MoMA exhibition, I have not been able to spot the mechanized boots and automated rolling pins that kick and batter Disney’s wolf, nor indeed the show’s “small section devoted to drawings and paintings of marvelous and fantastic machines devised by artists during the past 300 years,” which presumably included these frames.³⁷ It seems clear that the works by the leading lights of Dada and Surrealism that might have been here included—for instance by Paul Klee, Francis Picabia, Marcel Duchamp, Max Ernst, and Man Ray—were *not* grouped in this way, given images showing *solo* presentations for such major players. Yet other likely juxtapositions for Disney’s “wolf pacifier” are suggestive.

Consider Filippo Morghen’s etchings from 1764 that depict some of the lunar antics described in *The Discovery of a World in the Moone* (1638) by theologian and scientist John Wilkins.³⁸ Here, for instance, a great bird is shown on a cargo ship with wings extended, propelling forwards the seafaring moon-folk with each vast flap. Seen from the other side of the Industrial Revolution, by workers in 1930s New York, empathies were maybe mostly with the bird, who drives technology while enslaved to it. If other-worldly distance was suggested by the black and white imagery, then the bright colors of Disney’s *Three Little Wolves* perhaps brought the “pacifier” machine—designed to mete out retribution, this time on creature as culprit, with technology at the ready—within reach. At the same time, the sequence of four frames, which emulate the zooming facility of a film camera, opened up the very mechanics of animation and cinema to critical reflection.

Consider Rube Goldberg’s contemporaneous designs as attributed to (and modelled by) “Professor Lucifer Gorgonzola Butts”—for instance his invention “for keeping a buttonhole flower fresh,” complete with revolving pinwheel, loaded bow and arrow, opening cigar lighter, melting block of ice and leaping seal, all borne on the professor’s shoulders through elaborate pipework and poised ready to squirt water on the flower on his lapel. Reportedly inspired by strolling through a machine gun battle between two sets of dapper gangsters, the preposterously point-missing utility of the professor’s mechanical ingenuity hovers precisely over the urban chasm of racketeering warfare. Turning then to the four Disney frames, technological inventiveness is taken out of the hands of a mockable academic and put into the trotters of a pig, to stupendous effect

³⁶ Contrast El Lissitzky’s work, with Sergei Eisenstein, for the Soviet pavilion at the “Internationale Ausstellung des Deutschen Werkbunds: Film und Foto” in Stuttgart in 1929, with the installation overseen by Dziga Vertov; and László Moholy-Nagy’s contribution, under Walter Gropius, to the German Werkbund’s section of the “Exposition de la société des artistes décorateurs” in Paris in 1930, leading to his *Raum der Gegenwart* commission for the Landesmuseum in Hannover, 1930, as I mention later.

³⁷ Press release, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY. Available at: https://www.moma.org/documents/moma_press-release_325075.pdf

³⁸ In the catalog for “Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism” the original for this work is attributed to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY. Available at: https://www.moma.org/documents/moma_catalogue_2823_300061909.pdf; today these etchings are credited to the Brooklyn Museum, New York, NY. Available at: <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/artists/3512/objects>

in subduing the big bad wolf. While the latter figure was seen to represent the Great Depression at the time of Disney's runaway success with *Three Little Pigs* (1933), then by the time of *Three Little Wolves* this same figure had become a German-speaking patriarch who, while comic, warranted more than a pot of boiling water to deter him. To the extent that the domestic aggression of the Nazis was thereby invoked, and insofar as the military machinery ultimately mobilized by the US in response to internationalized attack is presaged by the "wolf pacifier," then the gathering social urgency around technological developments is brought into play.

In sum, in this pocket of the exhibition the curatorial selection addresses not only the visual inventiveness of "fantastic machinery" over many years but something of the then present and future stakes for specific groups of people. Pushing back against auratic paternalism, individuation and distancing, this is arguably an example of art's exposability in action.

Steamboat Willie—as now credited to both Walt Disney and Ub Iwerks—has transferred into the collection at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and features in their publication *MoMA Highlights*.³⁹ But it appears not to have been included in an exhibition at the institution since 1942. If it has accrued aura through museological acquisition then it has experienced only limited exposability. Meanwhile, its digital reproducibility online has ensured a massive and increasing audience: it is steadily approaching six million views on YouTube, where the Walt Disney Animation Studios uploaded it a little less than a decade ago. Here there is pure availability in action, without any discernible social engagement. For what it is worth, even online comments are currently disabled.

The Fifth Whistle Blast: As Publics, Are We Ready?

In the first two versions of his "Work of Art" essay, Benjamin hails the Russian-turned-Soviet Eccentric as "the first to inhabit the new fields of action [*Spielräume*] opened up by film."⁴⁰ Here we are also alerted to the relationships with American slapstick comedy and Disney cartoons, as cinematic developments of Dada strategies. On this basis, I want to turn briefly to two films by Grigori Kozintsev and Leonid Trauberg, co-founders of the Factory of the Eccentric Actor (FEKS) in Petrograd in 1921—approaching these as constellating works in between *A Woman of Paris* and the "marvelous and fantastic machines" of Barr's MoMA exhibition.

A fantastical comedy, *The Adventures of Oktyabrina* (1924) satirized the NEPmen taking advantage of private enterprise under Lenin's New Economic Policy, accusing them of channeling the leading anti-Soviet politicians in the US, UK and France, and capitalist imperialism more generally. Oktyabrina is the young superheroine who vanquishes these foes of the State, with the help of fellow Komsomol members and miraculous feats of technology and engineering. In this strong while absurd role, Zinaida Tarakhovskaya led this first film by the FEKS—produced just as cinema was being rekindled under the NEP, in tune with the State's programme of industrial development and in spite of impoverished circumstances. True to the compilation of manifestoes published in the *Eccentrism* booklet in 1921, *The Adventures of Oktyabrina*

³⁹ Harriet Schoenholz Bee, Cassandra Heliczner, and Sarah McFadden (eds.), *MoMA Highlights: 350 Works from the Museum of Modern Art, New York* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2013), 114.

⁴⁰ Benjamin, "Work of Art" (Second Version), 118.

drew on the thrills of the circus, music hall, pulp fiction and the funfair, with “Chaplin” or “Charlie,” “Marinetti” and “Tatlin” all addressed as interlocutors and, even more so, a mass audience. The ambition was to be artistically unconventional and yet popular, with quick-fire utilitarian mechanisation celebrated over traditional high culture as a source of inspiration. It now proves difficult to analyse why its success was only modest, since all prints have apparently been lost. But it is tempting to see in a description of its “most unassuming” episode, which saw a group of “people cycling over the rooftops,” a visionary moment of devised collective flight impossible to appreciate at the time. As Yuri Tynyanov would judge in his article of 1929, “The Revolution created a remarkable cinema but did not have time to realise that it had done so.”⁴¹

Alone (1931) was released shortly after the FEKS had wound up but it was again the work of a small team around Kozintsev and Trauberg. In line with the “cultural revolution” of the first Five Year Plan, societal construction—and specifically regional development in Soviet Central Asia—was the theme and Social Realism now more the aspiration. Yelena Kuzmina played the female lead—portraying a newly trained teacher leaving her life in Leningrad for a post in Altai. Given the severe restrictions on facilities for audible screenings in the USSR at the time, the film was released simultaneously in parallel versions, as a silent movie and – at the Khudozhestvennyi in Moscow, the first Soviet cinema to be suitably equipped, the year before – with a soundtrack. This soundtrack included only one line of spoken dialogue, relying far more on the noises of new technology and a musical score by Dimitri Shostakovich. Contrapuntal, it maintained some of the surprise tactics of the Eccentric days and has been described as prompting shocked laughter among initial audiences.⁴² Lilya Kaganovsky has recently built on the work of Kristin Thompson, Ian Christie and Richard Taylor, among others, to suggest that the technological dimensions of the soundtrack voiced the new State under Stalin, ringing alarm calls of totalitarianism by association.⁴³ The film circulated internationally (according to Leyda because of the Shostakovich music)⁴⁴ at a time when the circulation of international films within the USSR was dwindling dramatically.⁴⁵

Strategically benefitting from historical and geopolitical jump cuts, we may now set both these works by Kozintsev and Trauberg into relation with *A Woman of Paris*—in order to confound any consensus on female role models in film of the era—and, with “Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism”, to complicate the threats and marvels of technology at the time. Revisiting all these works together in the present day, we exercise their exposability, even while—in the case of *The Adventures of Oktyabrina*—this rests on disparate fragments: isolated frames and recollected descriptions. If Benjamin

⁴¹ Yuri Tynyanov, “On FEKS,” (*Sovietsky Ekran*, no. 14 [2 April 1929]: 10, trans. Richard Taylor) in *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents 1896–1939*, ed. Richard Taylor and Ian Christie (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 257.

⁴² Neya Zorkaya, *The Illustrated History of the Soviet Cinema* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1989), 107.

⁴³ Lilya Kaganovsky, *The Voice of Technology: Soviet Cinema’s Transition to Sound 1928–1935* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2018), 40–69.

⁴⁴ Jay Leyda, *Kino: A History of the Russian and Soviet Film* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1960), 283.

⁴⁵ Denise J. Youngblood, *Movies for the Masses: Popular Cinema and Soviet Society in the 1920s*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 20.

draws our attention to fields of play/action potentially opened up, then the Eccentrics demand a blast on our whistles as we enter in.⁴⁶

Coda: Exposability and the Way Beyond “Display”

When Benjamin first drafted his essay “What is Epic Theatre?” he hailed the work of Bertolt Brecht for presenting the stage to the public not as a “magic circle”⁴⁷ or “spellbound zone”⁴⁸ [*Bannraum*], but as an “exhibition space” [*Ausstellungsraum*]. We might imagine that the attractions of this exhibitionary realm may have lost its political allure for Benjamin when the Nazi’s opened their “Degenerate ‘Art’” exhibition in Munich in 1937, in order to showcase what they branded as “Cultural Documents of Bolshevism and Jewish Work of Decay.” In that context, works by El Lissitzky, Piet Mondrian, and Hans Richter, among others plundered from the Landesmuseum in Hannover, were presented in an awkward proximity that denuded them of the “Abstract Cabinet” [*Kabinett der Abstrakten*, 1927–28] that Lissitzky had designed for them in their museological home, with the intention of activating those visiting. The artist referred to this Hannover project as the second of his “demonstration spaces” [*Demonstrationsräume*, c. 1926],⁴⁹ naming a further potential realm for artistic encounter. Meanwhile, Benjamin has provided us with another alternative, which develops the sense of activating visitors, spectators or audience members: that of a field of play or action, a *Spielraum*. How are we to navigate these options now? My proposal is through the durational fields and future-focused promise of exposability.

Without attempting to enter into the philosophical legacy of the German term *Darstellung*,⁵⁰ nor even to flesh out its nuanced use by Benjamin across diverse texts, I would like to bring in an understanding that, while sharing *Ausstellung*’s root in the verb *stellen* (to place), points more towards a taking-place—to something activated situationally. This builds on *Ausstellbarkeit* as exposability, in particular, rather than as exhibitability. In his published version of “What Is Epic Theatre?” (1939), Benjamin answers his titular question with an assertion that it is “less the development of action than the presentation [*Darstellung*] of situations.”⁵¹ With felicitous concurrence, Alexander Dorner in *The Way beyond “Art”*—at least as translated into German by his widow, Lydia Dorner, in 1959—picks up the same term, going on to use *darzustellen* when referring to “the new reality” that with Lissitzky he attempted in the “Abstract Cabinet” in Hannover, and *dargestellt* for “the new vision” he and László Moholy-

⁴⁶ The opening statement of *Eccentrism* involves “Four blasts on the whistle!”—for the actor, director, dramatist and artist respectively—before announcing that “For the fifth whistle blast—from the public—we are ready.” Grigori Kozintsev, Georgi Kryzhitsky, Leonid Trauberg and Sergei Yutkevich, *Eccentrism* (1922, trans. Richard Taylor) in *The Film Factory*, 58.

⁴⁷ Walter Benjamin, “What is Epic Theatre?” (First Version), in *Understanding Brecht*, trans. Anna Bostock (London: New Left Books, 1973), 2.

⁴⁸ In her brilliant essay on El Lissitzky’s exhibition-making, Maria Gough offers this translation. See M. Gough, “Constructivism Disoriented: El Lissitzky’s Dresden and Hannover *Demonstrationsräume*” in Nancy Perloff and Brian Reed (eds.), *Situating El Lissitzky* (Los Angeles, CA: Getty Research Institute, 2003), 77.

⁴⁹ Translated by Helene Aldwinckle as “Exhibition Rooms,” ed. Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, El Lissitzky: *Life, Letters, Text* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1968), 362. Contrast Gough, “Constructivism Disoriented.”

⁵⁰ In English see, for instance, Martha Helfer, *The Retreat of Representation: The Concept of Darstellung in German Critical Discourse* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996).

⁵¹ In Benjamin, “What is Epic Theatre?” (Second Version.), 18, translation altered.

Nagy intended in the follow-up “Room of Our Time” [*Raum der Gegenwart*].⁵² I want to suggest that the exposing or staging of art—which specifically moves us from display or presentation, toward a call to collective imaginative play or social action—is what we might borrow most productively from Benjamin today.

Exposability, underscored by *Darstellung* as much as *Ausstellung*, insists that art operates in concert with the circumstances in which it is encountered—situationally, historically, and geopolitically. We might say that it proves conscious of the exhibitionary context, of the situation of exposure, so that it both magnifies and is magnified by the particular and transitory here-and-now—operating through the commons temporarily convened, with future chapters in other settings to be experienced and debated distinctly.

The question is not whether something of interest is art, but whether art *takes place* when it is shared, through the exercise of exposability. The follow up question is not *is this good art?* but rather: what exposure value is, was, or might yet be realized? What social entanglement—what politics enmeshed with aesthetics, what criticality anchored in affectivity, what negotiation of difference and identification—may be prompted?

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⁵² Alexander Dorner (1947, trans. Lydia Dorner), *Überwindung der “Kunst”* (Hannover: Fackelträger-Verlag Schmidt-Küster GmbH, 1959), 20.