

PROPHECY FULFILLED? WALTER BENJAMIN'S VISION AND STEVE REICH'S  
PROCESS

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## ABSTRACT

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This study examines Steve Reich's reflections on his early works in the context of Walter Benjamin's thesis in "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility." While Reich's thoughts as expressed in interviews and selected writings show a similar attitude to Benjamin's toward changes in human perception, Benjamin's notion of auratic demise in the age of technical reproducibility is challenged by Reich's understanding of the role of technology in music and the effects of gradual musical processes.

Reich's assertions regarding the aesthetic autonomy of his compositional process are reminiscent of Romantic ideals of art, particularly those embodied by the "poeticized" as defined by Benjamin in "Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin." However, the means by which Reich claims to have reintroduced artistic autonomy are those that Benjamin attributes to aura's deterioration, such as impersonality and gradual presentation of the artistic subject. This study determines that, while Reich uses mechanical process to accommodate the change in human perception as Benjamin anticipates, aura is not eliminated as proposed in "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility." Although the "here and now" of the original is destroyed, aura survives through the authority and transcendent nature of musical process, and singularity is achieved by the unique reception of individual audience members with each hearing. Reich's work may not politicize aesthetics as Benjamin predicts, but through the authority of autonomous

musical process and the decentralization of interpretation, the fascist aestheticization of politics may still be averted in the age of technical reproducibility.

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## INTRODUCTION

“People imitating machines was always considered a sickly trip; I don’t feel that way at all, emotionally. I think there’s a human activity, ‘imitating machines’, in the sense in which (say) playing the phase pieces can be construed; but it turns out to be psychologically very useful, and even pleasurable. So the attention that kind of mechanical playing asks for is something we could do with more of, and the ‘human expressive activity’ which is assumed to be innately human is what we could do with less right now.”<sup>1</sup>

Composer Steve Reich made these comments in a 1971 interview with his British colleague Michael Nyman. At the time, much of Minimalism was considered counter-cultural, if not counter-intuitive. Reich’s statements regarding mechanical process as artistic inspiration and his understanding of creative expression and the individual’s role as performer and audience member were contrary to prevailing attitudes. Still today, Reich’s compositional process and reflections regarding the minimalist musical movement remain central to its identity, and similarly, the very same academy of art music remains relatively reticent regarding the genre.

In his recent book *Absolute Music, Mechanical Reproduction*, Arved Ashby notes American musicologists’ reluctance to engage the effects of music recordings and other media

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<sup>1</sup> Steve Reich, “Steve Reich,” interview by Michael Nyman (1971), *The Musical Times* 112 (March 1971), <http://0-www.jstor.org.maurice.bgsu.edu/stable/956399> (accessed November 18, 2010): 230.

on art music.<sup>2</sup> He writes that this “intellectual neglect” betrays these scholars’ resistance to acknowledging any “vernacular practice for so-called classical music.”<sup>3</sup> These same inclinations have led to the general silence among musical scholars regarding Minimalism. Whether it be its commercial appeal or unconventional structure, many academics have expressed various reasons for not recognizing this counter-movement to serialist and aleatoric music as art music, and relatively few comprehensive studies are to be found. Yet, regardless of its stature as art or pop music, the representatives of Minimalism have enjoyed an increasingly significant presence in the American and international art scene since the 1970s.

Reich has carved out a remarkably successful and noteworthy niche within the international music community. Not only has he successfully pursued a full-time career as composer since the mid-seventies, but awards and recognitions, such as a recent Pulitzer Prize in 2009, are a testament to the high esteem in which others hold his work. This study is an analysis of technology’s role in Reich’s early compositions and its aesthetic implications. Whether technology is essentially good or bad for art is not the question. (This study acknowledges that technological developments have always played a role in art, and such debates are often overly simplistic and do not address the actual issues of the historical and present reality.) The primary focus will be Reich’s commentary on his compositional process from roughly 1965 through 1971, a period in which the term *Minimalism* was coined and the austerity of Reich’s compositions truly reflect the connotations of such a label. Although some attention will be paid to the form and structure of his pieces, reference will be made to these aspects of music theory only insofar as it assists in the understanding of Reich’s more general assertions regarding his

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<sup>2</sup> Ashby Arved, *Absolute Music, Mechanical Reproduction* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2010), 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

work. Various authors have already written meticulous quantitative analyses of Reich's use of phasing technique and augmentation to initiate musical process. The following study abstains from documenting such exacting data of individual works and seeks instead to draw broader aesthetic conclusions regarding this stage in Reich's career.

The framework for this study is drawn from the writings of Walter Benjamin. Most do not associate musicology with Benjamin, whose writings dealt much more directly with literature, photography, and film studies. He himself stated to both Adorno and Max Horkheimer that the field of music was quite "remote" from his own studies.<sup>4</sup> However, his essay "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit" ("The Work of Art") and its assertions regarding technology and aura challenge and inspire theories of interpretation and reception for all contemporary art forms.

Steve Reich's affinity for technological experimentation in his compositions and the political implications critics often attach to his work seem to align well with Walter Benjamin's observations concerning art in the age of technical reproducibility. That said, "Music as a Gradual Process," Reich's most substantial statement concerning his early works, exposes the superficiality of such an assumption. His account of musical process points to an auratic essence in his music rather than its absence, as Benjamin predicts. Close reading reveals that Reich's understanding of musical process as autonomous and his composition's ritualistic function challenge Benjamin's prediction of aura's demise. Such a reemergence is facilitated though,

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<sup>4</sup> Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence, 1928-1940*, ed. Henri Lonitz, trans. Nicholas Walter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999) 119 quoted by Mirko M. Hall. "Dialectical Sonority: Walter Benjamin's Acoustics of Profane Illumination." *Telos* 152 (Fall 2010) 83; and Walter Benjamin, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910-1940*, ed. Theodor W. Adorno and Gershom Scholem, trans. Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) 549 quoted by Hall.



through using the technological means prescribed for the politicization of aesthetics as presented in “The Work of Art.” Additionally, the potential existence of aura following the advent of technical reproduction must compensate for the shift in human perception that Benjamin documents.

The amount of debate and commentary “The Work of Art” has undergone in the past few decades points to its resilient quality, but even those who see Benjamin’s commentary as grossly inadequate and inaccurate, see it as somehow relevant enough to address in their work.<sup>5</sup> Andrew Benjamin, editor of the collection *Walter Benjamin and Art*, attributes an intangible and elusive quality to Benjamin’s thought: “. . . it is impossible to remain strictly Benjaminian . . . Benjamin’s *oeuvre*, while establishing directions, resists any straightforward formulation in terms of unequivocal theory.”<sup>6</sup> It is with this in mind, that this study explores Steve Reich’s thoughts on musical process in the context of Benjamin’s statements in “The Work of Art.” This is not an effort to construct or defend any unequivocal theories, but rather an attempt to navigate the waters of Reich’s early works using Benjamin’s notions of aura and writings about the

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<sup>5</sup> In an essay entitled “How to Make Mistakes on So Many Things at Once—and Become Famous for It,” the authors write: “Once homage has been paid to the essay’s originality, once one acknowledges that the present critique of Benjamin owes much to Benjamin himself, we are amazed by the number of mistakes cheerfully gathered by the essay, and by the deep misunderstandings of most phenomena, both modern and historical, which it reveals.” (Antoine Hennion and Bruno Latour, “How to Make Mistakes on So Many Things at Once—and Become Famous for It,” in *Mapping Benjamin: The Work of Art in the Digital Age*, ed. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and Michael Marrinan [Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003], 91.)

<sup>6</sup> Andrew Benjamin, introduction to *Walter Benjamin and Art*, Walter Benjamin Studies Series (London; New York: Continuum, 2005), 2.

modern audience as a compass, which points to themes of concern not only within the arts but greater society as well.<sup>7</sup>

Both Benjamin and Reich embrace the available technical tools and seek out positive possibilities of their application. Each acknowledges the quality and genius of past artistic efforts and artifacts, and both hold hope for future endeavors as well. But, while they commonly recognize the futility of nostalgic attitudes and reactionary ideologies, their historical circumstances are substantially different. Just as the fascist aestheticization of politics drove Benjamin to write “The Work of Art,” Steve Reich has commented more than once that his aversion to Serialism is in part rooted in its unsuitability for the American audience of the fifties and sixties, a place far from “the dark-brown angst of Vienna.”<sup>8</sup> This divergence of experience is reflected in their attitudes toward the role of politics in art.

Every historical and aesthetic argument Benjamin pursues in “The Work of Art” is posited toward the end of establishing what he calls the *politicization of art*.<sup>9</sup> This treatise was a response to the Nazi party’s adoption of historically ritualistic emblems and symbols as representations of its political movement. This cultic currency was then intensified through widespread campaigns using the mass media of the day. Benjamin refers to this phenomenon as the *aestheticization of politics*, a practice that he argues inevitably leads to war.<sup>10</sup> The aim of his essay is to establish a communist response, one that does not rely on cult value but seeks to bring the material reality to the fore through art. Benjamin promises that the politicization of art will be

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<sup>7</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit,” 3rd ed. in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, vol. 1, pt. 2 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1991), 477.

<sup>8</sup> K. Robert Schwarz, *Minimalists* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1996), 56.

<sup>9</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Das Kunstwerk.”

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

achieved through the proper application of technology in the arts and serve as a viable and imminent alternative to fascist propaganda and the Nazis' abuse of mass media

Steve Reich's tape pieces *It's Gonna Rain* and *Come Out* are now common entries in music history and music theory texts. They each implement his well-known phasing technique and are telling markers of the political and historical circumstances surrounding their creation. More than one critic has commented on the powerful way in which *It's Gonna Rain* encapsulated the foreboding and fearful uncertainties of the height of the Cold War, and *Come Out* is a chilling testimony to the racism and police corruption found in Harlem of the 1960s.<sup>11</sup> However, Reich denies that political intention is a driving force behind his work, and while he admits that others will attach political meaning to art, he does not believe it to have the capability to directly inspire wide-ranging or impactful political change.

One should not however infer from these facts that Reich's expectations of his art are defeatist. He prefers instead to consider audience reception in a more pluralistic manner than those who attach wide-sweeping political meaning to artistic endeavors. Reich highlights the possibilities of a uniquely meaningful experience for each individual. In his essay "Music as a Gradual Process," he attributes "a particular liberating and impersonal kind of ritual" to the listener experience.<sup>12</sup> In fact, this essay is widely regarded as an uncompromising and over-

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<sup>11</sup> In his essay, "Musical Virtues," Mitchell Morris's description of *Come Out* is a prime example of the weight that this piece carries for many. He writes: "When we hear [Daniel] Hamm's words fade into procedure we hear an actual human being ground up in an infernal machine that resembles bureaucracy, administration, or any other incarnation of the principle of disengaged instrumental reason in the way it so easily disarticulates meaning from the bodies bearing it." (Mitchell Morris, "Musical Virtues," in *Beyond Structural Listening?: Postmodern Modes of Hearing*, ed. Andrew Dell'Antonio, [Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2004], 63.)

<sup>12</sup> Steve Reich, "Music as a Gradual Process" in *Writings on Music: 1965-2000*, ed. Paul Hillier (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 36.

reaching treatise on compositional process. But, as Robert K. Schwarz aptly wrote in the introduction to his book *Minimalists*: “When you start a revolution, you are inclined to argue the most extreme position first, and only later move toward compromise. And the minimalists were no exception.”<sup>13</sup> In their effort to reclaim transparency lost in Serialism and surmount the anarchy found in aleatoric music, composers such as LaMonte Young, Terry Riley, Philip Glass, and Reich pursued unfalteringly an austerity of means in virtually all musical elements: rhythm, harmony, melody, dynamics, and instrumentation.

In the midst of this revolution, Reich was a formidable figure. Despite his reservations regarding politics and art, Reich aggressively and doggedly worked to establish and promote the minimalist movement through his compositions and public discourse. Although he gradually gained a loyal and enthusiastic following, he endured intense criticism in his early career. Many reviewers were (and remain) disturbed by what they perceived as a tyrannical structure in his music and found Reich’s use of repetition to be tedious. Following a performance of *Drumming*, the German music critic, Clytus Gottwald, summed up his opinion saying: “Ich habe den Eindruck, man versucht der Artikulation der Zeit dadurch zu entgehen, daß man sie tots schlägt.”<sup>14</sup> The same critic also unforgivingly described Reich’s work as “Fließbandmusik” or “conveyor-belt-music” in his 1975 article for *Melos/Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*.<sup>15</sup>

Reich responded through a letter to the same journal later that year. He closes his address writing: “Ich kann mir nichts Schlimmeres denken als eine Komposition, der ein rascher Erfolg

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<sup>13</sup> Schwarz, 11.

<sup>14</sup> Clytus Gottwald, “Signale zwischen Exotik und Industrie: Steve Reich auf der Suche nach einer neuen Identität von Klang und Struktur,” *Melos/Zeitschrift für Neue Musik* 1, no. 1 (1975): 6.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

beschrieben ist, die aber keines geistigen Aufschwungs mehr fähig ist, wenn man sie zum zehnten oder gar hundertsten Male hört. Die Botschaft, die ich meiner Musik mitgebe, enthält die aufrichtige Hoffnung, daß sie ihren Hörern, göttlich und menschlich, für längere Zeit Freude bereiten wird, als Sie oder ich leben.”<sup>16</sup> This quote contains the core consideration of the following discussion: Can ritual survive reproduction, after all?

The content of this study is divided into three chapters. The first chapter outlines aspects of Benjamin’s essay that are most relevant to the analysis of Reich’s thoughts regarding musical process. It focuses on the circumstances required for aura’s existence and the causes of its demise. In chapter two, Benjamin’s and Reich’s shared affinity for technological media in art is briefly explored, and the core elements of music as a process are considered in light of the Romantic heritage of aura. This section uses Benjamin’s early essay on lyric theory “Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin” to render a more detailed impression of Benjamin’s aesthetic theory prior to “The Work of Art,” and it establishes the auratic tendencies in Reich’s vision of his compositions. The final chapter examines the relationship between the technical apparatus and the human experience of art. Benjamin and Reich see similar uses of technology as integral to art, but where Benjamin understands these techniques to provide an alternative to the auratic experience, Reich seeks to extend aura’s relevance through such means. This discussion includes themes such as reproducibility as an aesthetic value, mechanical control, and ritual. Over the course of this section, one can consider Reich’s innovations as a composer and the ways in which his music adapts to and accommodates the unique demands of the contemporary audience member’s state of mind.

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<sup>16</sup> Steve Reich, “Steve Reich Schreibt an Clytus Gottwald,” *Melos/Zeitschrift für Neue Musik* 1, no. 3 (1975): 200.

CHAPTER I  
AESTHETICS AND POLITICS: AN ALTERNATIVE TO AURA

The following is an overview of the aspects of “The Work of Art” that are most relevant to an analysis of Steve Reich’s views. At the center of Walter Benjamin’s essay is the concept of *aura* and its demise in the age of technical reproducibility.<sup>17</sup> *Aura* embodies such powerful but elusive characteristics as transcendence, uniqueness, singularity, and authority. This term is, however, far from unequivocally defined in the course of Benjamin’s account. Rather, his descriptions of *aura* provide more often the circumstances by which *aura* may exist and its effects instead of further clarifying its defining characteristics. Much of this ambiguity is no doubt due to *aura*’s dependence on human perception and the fact that audience reception of the artwork is affected by both nature and historical influences. Benjamin writes that the cult value of art is supplanted by an “exhibition value” as the technology of reproduction evolves. Rather than being created with the epitome of the original in mind, the artwork’s value in its reproduction becomes the standard of quality.

A testimony to Benjamin’s foresight is the way in which Reich stresses the enduring nature of true art, the ability of a piece to remain mysterious in the face of countless hearings. Reich also addresses the evolving needs of contemporary lifestyles and the resulting human perception. He seeks to engage the audience member accordingly through innovative artistic

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<sup>17</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Das Kunstwerk,” 477.

means as inspired by technology. However, Reich also describes his listeners' experience as ritualistic and attributes to his compositions such auratic qualities as uniqueness and authority, especially in their multiplicity. These affirmations and contradictions of Benjamin's thesis guide the selection of topics for the following inquiry into Benjamin's notion of aura and the state of art as he anticipates in the age of technical reproducibility.

In the beginning of his essay, Benjamin develops a historical narrative of the use of technology in art. While aura is necessarily tied to the cultic, this value metamorphoses over time from magic, to religion, to beauty, and finally to the inherent value of art itself. While these transitions depend in part on other historical circumstances that impact human perception, advances in reproduction techniques also greatly influence audience participation and the reception of art. The culmination of these advancements is a complete separation of the human hand from the artistic process. A significant leap is made from lithography (which in and of itself was integral to increasing the quantity and flexibility of graphic art on the market) to photography, a process that relies on the eye rather than the hand. The speed of perception with which the eye can process makes art accessible, in such a way as never before.<sup>18</sup> Consequently, the distance and authority of art deteriorates until the cult value, even as maintained by the secular notion of "beauty," dissipates.

In Part II of "The Work of Art," Benjamin states, "Noch bei der höchstvollendeten Reproduktion fällt *eines* aus: das Hier und Jetzt des Kunstwerks – sein einmaliges Dasein an dem Orte, an dem es sich befindet."<sup>19</sup> The "here and now" of a work of art are essential to its authenticity. This requirement holds particular meaning for music. Not only is listening a

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 474-475.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 475.

temporal experience, but the original of a musical work could rest with the score, its debut performance, or even elsewhere.

According to Benjamin, manual reproduction aided the original in maintaining its authority through the designating mark of a copy. Technical reproduction, however, eats away at this authority in two ways. First, a technical reproduction, such as a photograph, can manipulate the perspective of the viewer in a manner that one's naked eye could never behold the original. Second, the technical reproduction can supplant and transport the original to settings or situations that could never contain it in its original form. The very production method of photography and film are such that there is no true singular original. These processes not only obscure the unique time and place of the original, but also increase the artwork's accessibility, thereby depreciating its exceptionality. While the ultimate embodiment of this breakdown is found most fully in film, it is not strictly a sudden shift. Benjamin associates this degradation of aura already with the advent of woodcuts and identifies the aesthetic notion of "l'art pour l'art" as an effort to delay this inevitable loss in the face of photography.<sup>20</sup>

After providing examples of more general historical circumstances that influenced and lent themselves to gradual change in human perception, Benjamin provides an example of aura in natural terms. After using a branch and mountains as an illustration, he writes: "Diese letztere definieren wir als einmalige Erscheinung einer Ferne, so nah sie sein mag."<sup>21</sup> In this description of aura, Benjamin highlights the transcendent and singular nature of auratic art. The spatial paradox, that a distance will exist no matter how close the audience is, underscores the transcendent nature of auratic art and may be connected to sensory-perceptual and cognitive

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 481.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 479.



disorientation, such as Peter Fenves observes in Alexander Baumgarten's metaphysical reflections and Nietzsche's description of "disinterest."<sup>22</sup> His comments also emphasize the authority and uniqueness of aura; no matter how closely one may approach an artwork, its original "here and now" cannot be fully grasped. In his discussion of Benjamin's terminology and the writings of the 18<sup>th</sup> century philosopher, Alexander Baumgarten, Fenves recalls that Baumgarten legitimized the existence of singularities, anomalies that one can distinguish as different from all other items, but cannot definitively describe how or why.<sup>23</sup> One could argue that the singularity of an auratic object is confirmed not only in its one-time appearance, but also by the insurmountable distance it poses, which prevents a detailed account of its existence as a wholly unique artifact.<sup>24</sup> The degradation of the "here and now" of the artwork depends on both a change in its material nature and a shift in audience reception.

Benjamin asserts that, as a product of technical reproduction, "[d]as reproduzierte Kunstwerk . . . in immer steigendem Maße die Reproduktion eines auf Reproduzierbarkeit angelegten Kunstwerks [wird]."<sup>25</sup> The emphasis of value no longer rests with the original. This may be seen in Reich's comments regarding his works' quality; his litmus test is the level of interest maintained by the hundredth hearing. Benjamin writes that worth is now determined by how successfully the work translates into large portable quantities, and singularity is

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<sup>22</sup> Peter Fenves, "Is There an Answer to the Aestheticizing of the Political?," in *Walter Benjamin and Art*, ed. Andrew Benjamin (London: Continuum, 2005), 65.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>24</sup> Fenves primarily discusses these concepts in the context of Benjamin's notion of distraction, which is presented later in "The Work of Art" as a contributing factor to the decline of aura. While it may be a diversion from Fenves' interpretation to insert his observations here, I think it is appropriate to acknowledge these as parallels to aura, since both Nietzsche and Baumgarten precede the age of technical reproducibility and the definitive decline in aura Benjamin addresses.

<sup>25</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Das Kunstwerk," 481.

undermined. Additionally, the technical process changes the dynamic of audience reception. When discussing the difference between film and theater in Part VIII, Benjamin highlights how another essential change in the process of presentation undermines aura: the camera and editing process come between the actor and his audience. The actor is presenting himself for the camera, and this leads to the audience members becoming *testers* of the material, because there is no human presence adapting to and engaging the audience.<sup>26</sup> One affirmation of this lack of human presence is the film industry's promotion of personality outside the studio. The major consequence of this absence is that the cultic value cannot be revealed to those who possess the state of mind of one who is testing. Personality's lack of presence in art is also a topic of discussion in "Music as a Gradual Process." But, once again, while Reich sees a similar correlation between artistic method and the audience's disposition, his conclusion carries dissimilar implications.

This shift in human perception does not solely rely on the material changes in artwork reproduction, but also on larger historical circumstances. Benjamin writes that slow-motion in film introduces finite details of familiar motions that would be otherwise unseen by the naked eye. He likens this heightened consciousness to that of the new awareness gained through psychoanalysis.<sup>27</sup> Such awareness depreciates the authority of the work of art, because art ceases to be a medium. Jan Mieszkowski writes: "The authority of the 'here' and 'now' is realized only when 'here' and 'now' become 'then' and 'there.' . . . However we understand reproducibility to lead to the withering of aura, it is not because it introduces a difference or distance that was lacking in the original, since distance is precisely what is cultivated by the rituals of auratic art,

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 488.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 498.

mediacy rather than immediacy.”<sup>28</sup> Robert Kaufman also recognizes a lack of distance as the core hindrance to the auratic experience. In his discussion of Benjamin’s analysis of Shelley and Baudelaire in *The Arcades Project*, he writes that Baudelaire is too close to “grasp” allegory as Shelley does. Everything in contemporary society is too immediate and “so blank and busy that reflective experience seems unattainable.”<sup>29</sup> Interestingly, Reich seeks to reclaim this “reflective experience” through gradual musical processes, and he even asserts that one can escape the psychological pressures of the modern day by the same means. This difference will be examined more closely later.

Many have mourned the loss of reflective experience in the face of media bombardment and ever-present consumerism. Benjamin does not, however, simply end his observations at this juncture and depart grieving. Instead, he demands that this monumental transformation of human perception be examined and its implications for artistic production and reception be explored. Through this effort, he develops his notion of the *distracted critic* and, using film as his medial model, outlines the new potentials for art and its role in society.<sup>30</sup> Although the audience member is stripped of the traditional means of concentration and the necessary auratic distance, this does not mean that the work of art itself cannot be engaged in a productive manner.

In his essay “Reception in Distraction,” Howard Eiland discusses the concept of *distraction* as understood by Walter Benjamin. He highlights two attitudes toward distraction found in Benjamin’s writings on Brecht and in “The Work of Art” that are then further discussed

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<sup>28</sup> Jan Mieszkowski, “Art Forms,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*, ed. David S. Ferris (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Press, 2004), 40.

<sup>29</sup> Robert Kaufman, “Aura, Still,” in *Walter Benjamin and Art*, ed. Andrew Benjamin (London: Continuum, 2005), 136.

<sup>30</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Das Kunstwerk.”

in *The Arcades Project*.<sup>31</sup> Eiland comments on the opposition between what he labels as, *mere* distraction and *productive* distraction.<sup>32</sup>

The general notion of mere distraction in the over-stimulating, hectic present-day is an idea with which most are familiar. Many bemoan the negative results of overly demanding schedules, sensory-bombarding multi-media, and an ever-present consumerism. People no longer control their lives but are cast about from one pressing task to another or, worse, from one meaningless preoccupation to the next. In terms of art using a technological medium, Eiland argues that Benjamin sees mere distraction as an occurrence in which, “. . . the experience is one of being mastered by the apparatus . . . instead of mastering it for the good of humanity.”<sup>33</sup>

Positive distraction, on the other hand, is “distraction as a spur to new ways of perceiving.”<sup>34</sup> The consequences of technologization are not all negative. The pace of present-day life conditions one to have a “high-speed vigilance” of sorts.<sup>35</sup> One can see this need for vigilance described in a note for Part XIV, in which Benjamin describes *Chockwirkungen*: “Das Bedürfnis, sich Chockwirkungen auszusetzen, ist eine Anpassung der Menschen an die sie bedrohenden Gefahren. Der Film entspricht tiefgreifenden Veränderungen des Apperzeptionsapparates.”<sup>36</sup> While most threatening circumstances require this vigilance, it opens new possibilities for art and reception. Such is the state of mind of the distracted critic that

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<sup>31</sup> Howard Eiland, “Reception in Distraction,” in *Walter Benjamin and Art*, 3.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>36</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Das Kunstwerk,” 503.

Benjamin describes in Part XV of “The Work of Art.”<sup>37</sup> Although the concentration required for auratic artwork can no longer be maintained, a new reception among the masses may be cultivated.

This new reception is an inversion of the former mode of artistic experience. Earlier, people could reflect on a given work of art, and in the course of their concentration, they would then enter into the given object of inquiry. In the contemporary state of distraction such a deeply reflective reception is not an option. However, Benjamin maintains that the audience and art may still come together, but now, the artwork is absorbed into the individual. Architecture embodies most fully such a collective and habituated reception.<sup>38</sup> Here, he distinguishes between what he labels as *optical* and *tactile* perception.<sup>39</sup> Traditional, aura-oriented attention is primarily optical, whereas the habitual receptive state that he associates with architecture is more reliant on tactile sensation.<sup>40</sup> In fact, Benjamin argues that habituated reception is most important during historical shifts, such as in the age of technical reproducibility.<sup>41</sup> Similar arguments are made by the proponents of Minimalism, who embrace a less linear form of music that orients itself around musical elements other than harmonic progression, the key to the majority of Western art music prior to the avant-garde of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 505.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 504.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 504-505.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 505.

<sup>42</sup> Elaine Broad, “A New X? An Examination of the Aesthetic Foundations of Early Minimalism,” *Music Research Forum* 5 (1990): 55.

In the epilogue Benjamin addresses the difference between aestheticization of politics and politicization of aesthetics. Fascism seeks to direct the masses, while maintaining property relations as they presently exist. It allows the proletariat the opportunity for self-expression, but never cedes to them their rights. This, in turn, leads to aestheticization of politics; the *Führer cult* brings the masses into submission through using mass media to promote values of that cult. He goes further, arguing that the ultimate end of such movements is always war.<sup>43</sup> The culmination of “art for art’s sake” and promotion of aura in the age of technical reproducibility is self-destruction as the epitome of aesthetic pleasure.<sup>44</sup>

Spurred on by the sweeping fascist movements in Europe and their devastating use of mass media for propaganda, Walter Benjamin sought to identify a new interpretation of art and history that might counter the reigning fascist forces in Western Europe. Consequently, he asserts that through technical reproduction, aura is destroyed, and singularity is lost. At first glance, this appears to be a tragedy, but as Benjamin develops his theories regarding apperception and the objectification of art, one sees that the audience gains power and discretion. The loss of cultic value leads to gains in accessibility and authority for the public in their engagement of the work of art. As the equalization related to reproduction value and the scientific takes place, the draw of auratic authority is usurped, thereby eliminating it as a weapon that may be wielded by tyrants. As the transcendent declines, the material reality comes to the fore. This is the trigger for the politicization of art. As immediacy forces out the possibility of symbolism and representation, it fends off misleading and abusive transplantation of allegory.

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<sup>43</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Das Kunstwerk,” 506.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 508

Although the jaded viewer may no longer enjoy the “shimmering” aura,<sup>45</sup> the symbols and associations with the former auratic do not possess the sway that they once did. The public is no longer susceptible to the ensuing disorientation of the transcendent auratic experience, and therefore, less likely to be assuaged by self-expression and more inclined to perceive the material reality and demand rights. As the public adapts to this new orientation and function of art, a new order may flourish, and all the while evading the inevitability of war as required by fascist regimes.

As Steve Reich’s comments to Michael Nyman regarding “human expressive activity” reveal, he also associates a kind of bondage, albeit on an individual level, with common assumptions concerning the role of art and its relationship to humankind. He is equally suspicious of an art existing solely for individual cathartic purposes. He, however, ascribes a continued authority and exceptionality to art despite the substantial influence technical means may have. In fact, Reich understands the power of art to be so great that it may stand independent of politics and is not destined strictly to the either/or that Benjamin insists upon in the “Work of Art.”

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<sup>45</sup> Kaufman, 122.

## CHAPTER II

### TECHNICAL TRIALS AND ROMANTIC AFFINITIES

My initial motivation to consider Steve Reich's thoughts on composition in light of Walter Benjamin's canonic essay, "The Work of Art," grew out of two basic observations. First, Reich's early and most ground-breaking compositions were tape pieces or directly inspired by his experimentations with electronic technology. Second, throughout his career Reich has produced compositions containing political material.

As is often the case, further reading and contemplation have revealed a more complex system of correlations than preliminary research exposed. Benjamin's dearth of writings dealing specifically with music and Reich's unswerving, insistent definition of musical process challenge the once seemingly straightforward parallels. The following commentary concerns Benjamin's aesthetic theory of aura and whether Reich understands his compositions to retain this quality, despite a genesis using technical reproduction. This analysis is restricted to Reich's early works and his reflections thereon, because this period is his most "minimal" and contains pieces that fulfill the requirements of gradual musical processes most consistently, thereby providing examples of concepts expressed in his 1968 essay. In his writing Reich presents a potent argument for the quality and worth of musical process as an autonomous entity with ritualistic meaning. These assertions challenge Benjamin's prediction of aura's demise.



This chapter contains two major sections. In the first, a brief summation of Steve Reich's early experimentations with technology highlights similarities and divergences in Reich's and Benjamin's notions about technical reproduction and its influence over art. The second section traces the parallels between Reich's assertions about the nature of musical process and Benjamin's study of lyric theory in "Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin." The justification of this comparison rests upon the understanding that much of auratic decline is a "jettisoning of romanticism-identified notions" and an "abolition of the contiguous concept of aesthetic autonomy."<sup>46</sup> Benjamin's essay on Hölderlin gives an idea as to his understanding of Romanticism and autonomy, and this provides a good testing ground for Reich's writings and their potential embodiment of auratic ideals.

### **Technology**

As mentioned in Chapter 1, Walter Benjamin asserts that the authenticity and authority of the original is undermined by technical reproduction in two ways. First, a reproduction can manipulate the original in such a manner that its presentation of the work of art exposes details that the naked eye could not have beheld in its natural perception of the original. Second, the original may be removed from its initial circumstances and placed in situations that would have never accommodated the artwork in its original form. In Steve Reich's works (and in the case of any technical reproduction of music), the second example is obvious. Although few can fit a late Romantic orchestra in the living room, many can listen to Mahler's second symphony in the comfort of their homes with the corresponding digital music library. While this is a topic of interest (and even concern) for much of the fine art music community, the first of Benjamin's

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<sup>46</sup> Kaufman, 122.

means of auratic depreciation provides more intriguing possibilities for discussion. In his writings Reich touches on a number of compositional and performance concepts that may be manifestations of Benjamin's declarations concerning technical reproduction. The following provides some background information concerning Reich's experimentations with tape music and electronics.

By far the most famous outcome of Reich's work with technical reproduction is *phasing* technique, but his less notorious endeavors with electro-mechanical means and music are also well worth consideration. His preoccupation with gradual process and the potentials of technical reproduction extended beyond the confines of phasing technique, and these efforts provide a larger perspective of Reich's experimentation with electronics. Interestingly, more than one of his early compositions were associated with film, the artistic medium featured in "The Work of Art." In 1964, Reich's contribution to the movie *Plastic Haircut* implemented a collage technique, in which he sought to gradually introduce ambiguity through over-dubbing loops of excerpts from a sports-themed record.<sup>47</sup> Inspired by slow motion in film, Reich conceptualized another piece in 1967 entitled, *Slow Motion Sound*. He wanted to augment a clip of recorded speech to such a point that the glissandos and melodic aspects of spoken language were highlighted. The technology at the time could not fulfill this vision, because the frequency and pitch could not be maintained as desired.<sup>48</sup> The connection to Benjamin here is clear – not only was Reich involved with the art of filmmaking, but he was fascinated by and experimented with the aural possibilities of two featured techniques in Benjamin's essay: montage and slow-motion.

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<sup>47</sup> Keith Potter, *Four Musical Minimalists: La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, Phillip Glass*, Music in the Twentieth Century, edited by Arnold Whittall (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 162-163.

<sup>48</sup> Steve Reich, "Slow Motion Sound (1967)," in *Writings on Music, 1965-2000*, edited by Paul Hillier (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 26-29.

Inspired by mechanical process, *phasing* is a method of canonic structure achieved through two voices playing a short pattern or *basic unit*<sup>49</sup> (this may be a short recorded clip or a brief melody) in unison and gradually accelerating or decelerating one voice to shift it out of sync. This process can be continued until the voices are once again in unison or *in phase*.<sup>50</sup> In his interview with Michael Nyman, Reich said, “What tape did for me basically was on the one hand to realize certain musical ideas that at first just had to come out of machines, and on the other to make some instrumental music possible that I never would have gone to by looking at any western or non-western music.”<sup>51</sup> Initially, Reich was not even certain if a human could execute phasing and the minute gradual acceleration required. The following statement reinforces just how exceptional Reich thought the mechanical origins of his compositional concept to be: “Unfortunately, it seemed to me at the time impossible for two human beings to perform that gradual phase shifting process, since the process was discovered with, and was indigenous to machines . . . Finally, late in 1966 . . . I found to my surprise, that while I lacked the perfection of the machine, I could give a fair approximation . . .”<sup>52</sup> Clearly, no one person can complete a phase with the absolute accuracy of a machine, but soon after his first three phasing tape pieces, Reich composed *Piano Phase* for two live performers. In this work, the human is once again the primary actor in the artistic process, but the structure of the pieces finds its foundation in a mechanical process. Such a detachment from personality and creative genius is seemingly right

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<sup>49</sup> Potter, 169.

<sup>50</sup> The following link contains an audio file of Peter Aidu’s (solo!) rendition of Reich’s first phasing piece for live performers, *Piano Phase*: <http://www.archive.org/details/top.09> (accessed March 12, 2011).

<sup>51</sup> Reich, “Steve Reich,” 229.

<sup>52</sup> Steve Reich, “Piano Phase” in *Writings on Music, 1965-2000*, edited by Paul Hillier (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 22.

on track with Benjamin's thesis. However, Reich's statements in "Music as a Gradual Process" insist that his compositions maintain a singular, transcendent nature, even while acknowledging the sterile character resulting from their origin as ideas "indigenous to machines."<sup>53</sup>

His experimentations with electronic mediums culminated in the form of the *Phase Shifting Pulse Gate* device, a complex electronic channeling apparatus that determines the rhythm or phase shifting of corresponding sounds.<sup>54</sup> Unlike many of his previous efforts, he found that, in this case, technology depreciated the musical value of the subsequent works, *Pulse Music* and *Four Log Drums*, and never used the device again. In *Writings on Music*, he explains:

. . . the 'perfection' of rhythmic execution of the gate (or any electronic sequencer or rhythmic device) was stiff and unmusical. In any music that depends on a steady pulse, as my music does, it is actually tiny microvariations of that pulse created by human beings, playing instruments or singing, that gives life to the music. Last, the experience of performing by simply twisting dials instead of using my hands and body to actively create the music was not satisfying. All in all, I felt that the basic musical ideas underlying the gate were sound, but that they were not properly realized in an electronic device.<sup>55</sup>

He was able soon to realize "these basic musical ideas" more satisfactorily in *Four Organs*, the first in a series of compositions using no electro-mechanical means.<sup>56</sup> Revealed here are Reich's

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<sup>53</sup> Reich, "Steve Reich," 229.

<sup>54</sup> Steve Reich, "The Phase Shifting Pulse Gate—Four Organs—Phase Patterns—An End to Electronics," in *Writings on Music, 1965-2000*, edited by Paul Hillier (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 38-41.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

conservative ideas concerning performance and the nature of music. Unlike Benjamin, he sees the essence of music and its structure as timeless. Even if he innovatively re-invents these elements as inspired by machines, his return to live, strictly human performances confirms his remaining commitment to musical experience through conventional means.

Although he acknowledges that even these works are part of a structural legacy resulting from his early experiments with taped materials, Reich does not possess a Benjaminian view of the impact of technology on the nature of art. For almost two decades following his attempts with the Phase Shifting Pulse Gate, Reich wrote pieces solely for instruments and voices, avoiding any sort of electronic manipulation besides volume magnification provided by microphone. During this hiatus, he even wrote, “Electronic music as such will gradually die and be absorbed into the ongoing music of people singing and playing instruments.”<sup>57</sup> Later in this same brief statement from 1970, Reich predicts that pulse and a “clear tonal center will reemerge as basic sources of new music.”<sup>58</sup> Aspects of these comments betray that Reich shared with Benjamin problematic prognostic skills. However, they also show that his view of music history does not contain the dramatic change that “The Work of Art” professes. Instead, Reich holds electronics to be no different than other resources that may be particular to a culture or community and inform the arts accordingly.<sup>59</sup> Later in his career, Reich returned to incorporating electronics through his extensive use of the sampling keyboard in *Different Trains* and

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<sup>57</sup> Steve Reich, “Some Optimistic Predictions (1970) about the Future of Music,” in *Writings on Music, 1965-2000*, edited by Paul Hillier (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 51.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>59</sup> Steve Reich, “An Interview with Composer Steve Reich,” interview by Emily Wasserman (1972), *Artforum* 10 (1972): 45.

collaborations with his wife and film-maker, Beryl Korot, but he insists that while these are useful sources for innovation, they do not impact the nature of music any more significantly than natural materials and resources have in the past.

### **Aesthetic Theory**

In his article “Aura, Still,” Robert Kaufman writes that in the Romantic Era, aura and autonomy were simultaneous and synonymous.<sup>60</sup> Walter Benjamin claims that such notions are no longer possible in the age of technical reproducibility and calls for a necessary but positive departure from these aesthetic requirements through the politicization of aesthetics. However, over the course of his article, Kaufman questions the finality of the death of aura and points to instances in which he recognizes a reemergence of aura in artwork of the postmodern era. Similarly, other scholars have discredited aura’s extinction in the decades following Benjamin’s pronouncement.<sup>61</sup> It is with this possibility in mind that I would like to examine Reich’s thoughts on musical process, as presented in his landmark essay, “Music as a Gradual Process.” This collection of succinct and bold assertions regarding the nature of Reich’s compositions as process and product paint an aesthetic perspective that seems to hearken to the bygone age of late Romanticism.

In many of Steve Reich’s early writings and interviews, one can trace Romantic tendencies. He shows an uncompromising allegiance to the authority and autonomy of his music as a self-determinate product. However, even more notable is the culmination of his thoughts concerning “music as a process” and the total and simultaneous synthesis of content and form. It

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<sup>60</sup> Kaufman, 122.

<sup>61</sup> Timothy Lenoir and Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, editors’ preface to *Mapping Benjamin: The Work of Art in the Digital Age* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), xiv.

is reminiscent of the argument Benjamin developed in his dissertation concerning the Romantic philosophical considerations of the work of art as a self-justifiably sovereign system in and of itself, one that “does not need to be understood with reference to a theory or moral doctrine.”<sup>62</sup> This line of thinking is already apparent in Benjamin’s 1914 essay “Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin,” where he outlines quite deliberately and with much detail the characteristics of what he calls *das Gedichtete* or *the poeticized*. These characteristics found in Benjamin’s introduction exhibit a sense of unity and total integration on all levels of artistic practice and product that Reich seems to have adopted as well and expressed in his essay, “Music as a Gradual Process.” The following comparison seeks to investigate what Jan Mieszkowski asserts to be the main question concerning Benjaminian aesthetic theory – if lyric is “the art of art,” then the core of the issue is not how poetry differs, but rather recognizing the poetic in other art forms.<sup>63</sup> Noting the similarities in “Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin” and “Music as a Gradual Process” provides a starting point that is useful for considering the compatibility of aura as expressed in “The Work of Art” and the *it* that Reich refers to when describing the intangible nature of musical processes.

In clarifying the nature of the poeticized, Benjamin writes, “Nothing will be said here about the process of lyrical composition, nothing about the person or world view of the creator; rather, the particular and unique sphere in which the task and precondition of the poem lie will be addressed.”<sup>64</sup> Reich’s essay begins: “I do not mean the process of composition but rather pieces

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<sup>62</sup> Mieszkowski, 36.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>64</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin,” in *Selected Writings*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, vol. 1, 1913-1926 (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 18.

of music that are, literally, processes. The distinctive thing about musical processes is that they determine all the note-to-note (sound-to-sound) details and the overall form simultaneously.”<sup>65</sup> The preceding statements demonstrate the exceptional and determinate nature of their subjects. The poeticized and musical process are systems independent of the human creator, and they organize themselves according to the requirements of their own sovereign sphere.

As David Wellbery notes in his essay “Benjamin’s Theory of Lyric,” Benjamin’s *anaclitic* definition of the poeticized draws on writing from Humboldt, Goethe, and Novalis concerning lyric theory.<sup>66</sup> He uses this philosophical tradition as the starting point for his clarification of the poeticized and sums up his key point: “As a category of aesthetic investigation, the poeticized differs decisively from the form/content model by preserving within itself the fundamental aesthetic unity of form and content. Instead of separating them, it distinctively stamps in itself their immanent, necessary connection.”<sup>67</sup> Wellbery remarks that this assertion is rooted in the authority of classical Romantic aesthetic theory. Such a unity of form and content is also a central aspect of Reich’s attitude toward composition. He writes, “Material may suggest what sort of process it should be run through (content suggests form), and processes may suggest what sort of material should be run through them (form suggests content).”<sup>68</sup> Such a symbiotic relationship extends as well to praxis for each thinker.

In the *praxis-oriented* definition, Wellbery understands Benjamin’s notion of the *Aufgabe* serving as the *Erfüllung* of a work to be rooted in classical aesthetic theory. Aristotle’s *poesis* is

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<sup>65</sup> Reich, “Music as a Gradual Process,” 34.

<sup>66</sup> David Wellbery, “Benjamin’s Theory of Lyric,” in *Benjamin’s Ground: New readings of Walter Benjamin*, ed. Rainer Nägele (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988), 43.

<sup>67</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Two Poems,” 19.

<sup>68</sup> Reich, “Music as a Gradual Process,” 34.



not simply a practical understanding of an activity that is extrinsically imposed, but rather an innate existence that is come to exclusively and unavoidably through the activity itself.<sup>69</sup> The autonomy of a task (both in its process as well as being) is absolute; it is not the result of an external teleological force. Once again, Reich's statements concerning the autonomous, authoritative and deterministic nature of musical process find common ground. "The distinctive thing about musical processes is that they determine all the note-to-note (sound-to-sound) details and the overall form simultaneously."<sup>70</sup> The consequences of this total surrender to this musical process are repeatedly stated in "Music as a Gradual Process": "Once the process is set up and loaded, it runs by itself." And: ". . . I accept all that results without changes." Finally: "sound moving out away from intentions, occurring for their own acoustic reasons."<sup>71</sup>

In addition to its autonomy, the poetized has a dualistic nature of sorts. Within this sphere there are two elements that must be robustly present in order for the work of art to maintain its integrity of form. Benjamin writes: "Life, as the ultimate unity, lies at the basis of the poetized. But the more prematurely the analysis of the poem – without encountering the structuration of perception and the construction of an intellectual world – leads us to life itself as poetized, the more the poem proves, in a strict sense, to be more material, more formless, and less significant. Whereas, to be sure, the analysis of great works of literature will encounter, as the genuine expression of life, not myth but rather a unity produced by the force of the mythic elements straining against one another."<sup>72</sup> Likewise, Reich seeks to maintain a tension of

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<sup>69</sup> Wellbery, 44.

<sup>70</sup> Reich, "Music as a Gradual Process," 34.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Two Poems," 20.

perception and intellect. Perception is rooted in a rich Western tradition of philosophic inquiry. Aesthetic theory itself is derived from the Greek word “aistheta” meaning “perceptions,” and Reich carries on the tradition of wrestling with the “relationship between the sensation and thinking, between the sensible and supersensible.”<sup>73</sup> Although he stresses “perceptibility” in “Music as a Gradual Process,” he sees intellect as equally necessary for beauty. He opens a short vignette for the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* writing: “Schön ist ein Wort, das ich persönlich zur Beschreibung von Musik verwende, die ich nicht nur sinnlich ansprechend, sondern auch wirklich intelligent finde.”<sup>74</sup>

The *structural* definition for the poeticized parallels Reich’s thoughts on compositional form and structure. Its relation to the previous two regarding the maintenance of the qualities of autonomy and synthesis is fairly apparent in earlier observations. Once more, Benjamin sees “Einheit” as essential. However, Wellbery notes that this relational order found in form more precisely is “Identität.” He writes, “Das Gedichtete is a sphere of relations and each apparent element is really only a bundle of these relations . . .”<sup>75</sup> Reich’s respect for this identity and its fulfillment through these self-propelled relations is clear when he discusses improvisation. He considers improvisation and musical process to be mutually exclusive because of the absolute and simultaneous determinate nature of the musical process. This is the major distinction between some Eastern musical traditions or psychedelic rock and phasing technique. Personality in performance has no place in gradual musical processes.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Mieszowski, 42.

<sup>74</sup> Steve Reich, “Beautiful/Ugly,” *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* 6 (1994): 29.

<sup>75</sup> Wellbery, 45.

<sup>76</sup> Reich, “Music as a Gradual Process,” 36.

Benjamin continues: “The method by which the poeticized is represented testifies to its nature as a domain set against two limits. The method cannot be concerned with demonstrating so-called ultimate elements. For within the poetized no such things exist . . . it must be evident that it is not the elements but relations that are at stake, since the poeticized itself is, after all, a sphere of relation between the work of art and life, whose unities themselves are wholly ungraspable.”<sup>77</sup> One can also find further evidence of Reich’s stress on relations, rather than individual elements in his essay “Texture – Space – Sound.” His description of compositional choices and their effects follows: “The overall texture is made up entirely of multiples of the same timbre, which texture highlights the overall contrapuntal web with its many resulting patterns which the listener can hear. . . . Thus, multiples of identical instruments with the same timbre were acoustically necessary in my early pieces to create the overall contrapuntal web and particularly the ambiguity as to where the down beat is . . .”<sup>78</sup> No one element of his music stands out. Rhythm is Reich’s main concern and in this sense given priority, but it is manipulated in such a way as to obscure the traditional rhythmic organizer, meter.

This ambiguity lends itself to the final *methodological* definition of Wellbery. Here, Wellbery quotes Saussure: “it is the [theoretical] viewpoint that shapes the object.”<sup>79</sup> The poeticized is both the product and object of inquiry. Similarly, Reich writes that while a musical process is self-propelled, audience reception is varied depending not only on outside

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<sup>77</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Two Poems,” 20.

<sup>78</sup> Steve Reich, “Texture – Space – Survival,” *Perspectives of New Music* 26, no. 2 (1988) <http://0-www.jstor.org.maurice.bgsu.edu/stable/833197> (accessed November 18, 2010): 273-274.

<sup>79</sup> Wellbery, 46.

circumstances, such as venue, but also on which submelodies or harmonics the individual discerns from the intricate timbrally and dynamically homogenous contrapuntal patterns.<sup>80</sup>

Although Reich's commentary on his own work may not parallel Benjamin's vision of the poeticized perfectly, the similarities are striking. Most apparent is a shared notion of autonomy. Both the poeticized and musical process are systems independent of their creators and the audience. The self-determinate nature of musical process requires a sort of submission, not only on the part of the creator, but also of the audience member. Reich is careful to note that entering the sphere of the musical process is voluntary, even if the results of the process must be accepted once in the music's sovereign space.<sup>81</sup> This means that if aura exists in his work, new parameters cannot be imposed from without. The simultaneously forming acoustic details do not allow for meddling; the autonomy of the musical process cannot be violated in such a way. Not only would this deter the aestheticization of politics, but it also leads one to question if a politicization of aesthetics as described by Benjamin can take place. Both of these theories imply a manipulation of art, whether through adding meaning or molding aesthetics by some other means. True autonomy does not tolerate such treatment. Furthermore, it has already been shown that Reich does not grant to technology the transformational qualities expressed in "The Work of Art." However, this does not conclusively show that his methods and works preserve aura. Some of the very means by which Reich claims to maintain the authority and autonomy of his compositions are those directly linked to the decay of aura. Human perception has yet to be discussed in detail, and further ramifications of technology and mechanical reproduction's

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<sup>80</sup> Reich, "Music as a Gradual Process," 35.

<sup>81</sup> Reich, "An Interview," 46.

corresponding aesthetic techniques must also be more closely examined. Through this we may come closer to a better understanding of Benjamin's and Reich's writings.

### CHAPTER III

#### REVELATION IN REPRODUCTION

The previous chapter examined musical process and sought to establish the assertions in “Music as a Gradual Process” to be a gateway to the possible reemergence of aura. In the following, I will investigate the potential stumbling blocks of this theory. A common thread in all of these concerns is perception, both in the Benjaminian sense and as expressed in Reich’s thoughts about compositional process. The means by which the composer makes his works perceptible are the very same that are cited by Walter Benjamin as contributors to the decay of aura. According to Benjamin, gradual presentation of the artistic subject eliminates art’s capacity to serve as a medium, and the multiplicity of the work of art destroys the existence of an original “here and now” thereby eradicating singularity and aura itself. However, Reich believes that the perceptibility of his work and the consequent listener experience allows audience members and performers to fulfill some of the very standards of aura that Benjamin holds to be extinct or at least inaccessible. Among the issues of contention are reproduction value, mechanical control, the effects of gradual presentation, and ritual. By weighing these themes in light of their worth and characteristics as understood by each, one can create a constellation that reveals both limitations of Benjamin’s vision as well as instances in which his foresight is uncannily applicable to Reich’s assessment of the aesthetic scenario in the decades following publication of “The Work of Art.”

### **Reproduction Value and Reification**

Benjamin states that: “Das reproduzierte Kunstwerk wird in immer steigendem Maße die Reproduktion eines auf Reproduzierbarkeit angelegten Kunstwerks.”<sup>82</sup> This aspect of Benjamin’s argument has particular meaning for music as an art form. In fact, it lies at the heart of the question of auratic decay. In his essay “Benjamin on Art and Reproducibility: The Case of Music,” Rajeev Patke writes: “In the visual or plastic arts, the copy cannot bespeak or embody the unique material history of the original, nor its rootedness in tradition, which contributes to its authority and aura. In the case of music, the notion of a unique history cannot really apply to the score or script as material object. Since music comes into being in time as performance, to treat authority or authenticity as attached to its physical objectification would mean little more than making a fetish of the score.”<sup>83</sup>

As Reich clarifies the perceptibility of musical process, he makes a point to distinguish his style from that of contemporary movements, such as aleatoric music and Serialism. In Reich’s view, both of these compositional methods are strictly intellectual. There is no perceptual structure that the listener can discern when hearing the organization of the sound, because this organization has, in the least no audible organization, if not an intentional grounding in indeterminacy. Through seeking to reestablish a connection between aural sense and the abstract organization of sound, Reich seeks to achieve a balance between the intellectual and sensory-perceptual values of music and to return to the audience a more active role in their listening experience.

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<sup>82</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Das Kunstwerk,” 481.

<sup>83</sup> Rajeev Patke, “Benjamin on Art and Reproducibility: The Case of Music,” in *Walter Benjamin and Art* ed. Andrew Benjamin (London: Continuum, 2005), 200.

The definition of “chance music” found in *The New Harvard Dictionary of Music* displays just how converse the aleatoric movement is to Reich’s work: “Music in which deliberate use is made of chance or indeterminacy . . . The indeterminate aspect may affect the act of composition, the performance, or both . . .”<sup>84</sup> As stated in the previous chapter, Reich does acknowledge that indeterminacy contributes to the power of musical process through “unintended, psychoacoustic by-products of the intended process.”<sup>85</sup> However, Reich clarifies that even when composers such as John Cage have a definite process and accept the resulting composition, it is not audibly perceptible. “The process of using the *I Ching* or imperfections in a sheet of paper to determine musical parameters can’t be heard when listening to music composed that way. The compositional processes and the sounding music have no audible connection.”<sup>86</sup> In *Music of Changes*, Cage’s “process” of using the *I Ching* was initiated by tossing coins, which then informed pitch, rhythm, and dynamics. Likewise, even the much more meticulously structured form of Serialism is not audibly perceptible. The complex patterns and variations may only be discovered through close score analysis and with the aid of matrices. One could argue that because of this lack of audible perception, such works run the risk of reification, because one must use the score in order to analyze and interpret the music.

Reich, on the other hand, did not even use scores during his early career, other than as archival artifacts. His short melodic material allows musical processes to be learned by rote.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> *The New Harvard Dictionary of Music*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., s.v. “aleatory music.”

<sup>85</sup> Reich, “Music as a Gradual Process,” 35.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Steve Reich, “An Interview,” 46.



This simplicity, in turn, combined with the gradual acceleration of his “infinite canon”<sup>88</sup> enables the process and self-propelled form to be audibly recognizable. This perceptibility allows minimal music to be more accessible than the other two movements. Reich also returned to maintaining a tonal center in his absolute pieces (those following *Come Out* and *It’s Gonna Rain*), which augments the appeal of his works to a broader audience than the increasingly exclusivity of the more academic-oriented trends in chance and serialist music.

Many proponents of Serialism and Aleatorics saw a return to tonality (even one with an ambiguous modal character, as in Reich’s compositions) as a step back in the “progress” of the New Music movement in Europe following World War II.<sup>89</sup> Although his essay makes apparent that Reich clearly understands his compositions as self-referential, those of the New Music establishment understood his tonality and his desire that his music be a pleasing and exhilarating experience for the audience as compromising aesthetic quality in order to enhance exhibition value. Reich would readily concede that his understanding of the nature of music is not compatible with such “progressives.” In fact, he repeatedly notes the formal heritage of his compositions through stressing the canonic and contrapuntal nature of his work. His approach to canon may have been innovative and inspired by electronic devices, but he acknowledges the traditions from which he draws. Interestingly, these include not only significant composers of Western fine art, such as Perotin, Machaut, and Bach, but also features of non-Western ritualistic traditions like interlocking rhythm.<sup>90</sup> Just as he does not acknowledge the material medium to be

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<sup>88</sup> Reich, “Music as a Gradual Process,” 34.

<sup>89</sup> Mario Vieira de Carvalho, “‘New Music’ between Search for Identity and Autopoiesis: Or, the ‘Tragedy of Listening’,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 16, no. 4 (1999): 127.

<sup>90</sup> Paul Hillier, Introduction to *Writings on Music, 1965-2000*, by Steve Reich (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 3.

as revolutionary as Benjamin, he is more conservative than many of his contemporaries in his assessment of the extent that music can rationally progress, citing the timeless value of compositional methods of the past.

### **Mechanical Control**

Although Reich's efforts to provide interesting, accessible compositions for the listening public rankled many in the academy, still another concern was that his attitude toward music as authoritative and his compositions' acquiescence to musical processes were too constraining and inhumane. When discussing distraction in Chapter I, Howard Eiland categorized two types of distraction, mere and positive. He also postulates two possible outcomes in the age of technical reproducibility: human mastery of the mechanical apparatus or technology dictating humankind.<sup>91</sup> Reich's critics have argued that his early music was fascist and a fulfillment of technology encroaching upon human autonomy. Just as Chaplin's character in *Modern Times* leaves the assembly-line, his body helplessly convulsing in the ever-repeating movements required by his labor, phasing requires humans to mimic a mechanical process.

For his critics, the imitation of machines points towards human subordination to the technical apparatus. However, general fears of a technological take-over of the arts have arisen in virtually every episode of mechanical advancement, and as shown above, both Reich and Benjamin hold positive expectations of the possibilities technology creates for art, even though Benjamin's historical narrative affirms that technology has informed art for centuries prior to the present. Additionally, Reich's experience with the Phase Shifting Pulse Gate reveals that he indeed makes a distinction between mechanical inspiration and intrusion. In that case, he admits

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<sup>91</sup> Eiland, 9.

that the technical means were overpowering and that this, in the very least depreciated, if not eliminated, the inherently experiential value of music. He also states in “Music as a Gradual Process” that the essence of musical process lies with the reception of the audience, which is in part shaped by the performers’ human imperfections in executing the process.

Many readers of Reich’s essay are so caught up in his demands for a self-determined process that they fail to see the ways in which he allows for contingency and the human factor. As much as he may stress the authority of musical process, the root of his works’ power lies in the performers’ and listeners’ various experiences. This is reflected in an interview for *Artforum* given in 1972. He said, “I want something to be totally observable, absolutely out in the open – except that even though it’s within the grasp of everyone listening, and is totally perceivable, it’s still impossible to hear all at once . . . because although the actual number of patterns being played in my music is limited, when they mix simultaneously in your ear there are an infinite number of them you can select to concentrate on.”<sup>92</sup> As has been demonstrated, his reflections following his experiments with the Phase Shifting Pulse Gate device give further evidence of his inclination toward art as a dynamic process. He expresses the need for human imperfection and “microvariations” in order for music to possess “life.”<sup>93</sup>

Much of the intensity and strictness found in Reich’s essay is due to the prevailing opinions and artistic movements of the time. He is seeking to re-establish the notion of art as autonomous and promote what he understands to be the positive outcomes of engaging in a creative activity where personality or immediate impulse is not at the center. He describes the attitudes in the sixties about composer input, as follows: “There’s a certain idea that’s been in the

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<sup>92</sup> Reich, “An Interview,” 44.

<sup>93</sup> Reich, “The Phase Shifting Pulse Gate,” 45.

air . . . and I think it's a very injurious idea . . . It is that the only pleasure anybody who is a performer (be it dancer or musician) could get was to improvise, or in some way to express his or her momentary state of mind. If anybody gave them instructions or material to work with, this was immediately equated with political control or with negative action."<sup>94</sup>

Some of his critics have likened the restrictions of his processes to fascism. He sees this activity as more closely related to the discipline of eastern meditative practices: "By voluntarily giving up the freedom to do whatever momentarily comes to mind, we are as a result, *free* of all that momentarily comes to mind. The extreme limits used here then have nothing to do with totalitarian political controls imposed from without, but are closely related to yogic controls of the breath and the mind."<sup>95</sup> Not only do these statements reject the idea that fascism is at the root of Reich's music, but they also call for the listener to play an active role in the artistic process, thereby fulfilling much more closely the description of positive distraction than that of its counterpart. As he refers to the "yogic controls of the breath and the mind," one can once more see the unity of the sensory-perceptual and intellectual that he seeks to maintain through his art.

As Benjamin witnessed the fascist aestheticization of politics, he pinpointed the primary persuasive power of their propaganda to be that of aura. The masses were not only placated by the promise of self-expression but also willing to live under dictatorship. Reich, on the other hand, recognizes in aura the opposite. Rather than luring the public into a trap, Reich's musical process liberates through creating a space and experience free of personality and whatever societal preoccupations or pressures one may undergo. The authoritative system of musical process is so different from that of the daily life that one does not inform the other. Although the

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<sup>94</sup> Reich, "An Interview," 46.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

listener experience is not a mindless escape, it is an opportunity to shed the shackles of the modern world and pursue an exceptional state of both spirit and mind.

The preceding discussions of reproduction value and mechanical control address two primary and conflicting criticisms of Reich's work. The first claims that he compromises artistic quality through returning to tonality and considering the desires of the audience, while the other condemns his compositions as too mechanical and lacking the human element. This very contradiction affirms that Reich's efforts to provide the listener with an exceptional experience through voluntary submission to the authority of the musical process have achieved a balance that honors the autonomy of both listener and art.

### **Technical Tools as Auratic Means**

Reich's anticipations concerning audience reception are not the only indicators as to his command of the technical apparatus and his response to modern society's state of distraction. One can also examine his techniques for tape music and the subsequently inspired pieces. The following observations are divided into three categories: interruption as an artistic method, the seamless nature of technical products, and finally, the effects of the "gradual process" as understood by Reich.

Eiland offers one more observation in his commentary that relates to the topic of Reich's compositional technique. He sees interruption as a central concept in Benjamin's theory of distraction. The "principle of interruption" is a common element in both Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* and the method of montage, the two primary approaches for engaging those in a state of distraction.<sup>96</sup> When executed, phasing also embodies this principle. Once a shift has

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<sup>96</sup> Eiland, 4.

achieved the next rational subdivision and created another submelody, it is soon interrupted by the resumed acceleration of the moving basic unit. The tempo manipulation in a phasing piece causes the basic unit to continually interrupt itself as the self-reflective process unfolds.

Ironically, the perceived seamless<sup>97</sup> nature of phasing and film editing is even more important to Reich and Benjamin than their means of interruption. In her contribution to *A New History of German Literature*, Lindsay Waters captures the essence of this paradox well, writing:

To Benjamin's mind, film was a particularly compelling medium since it seems to present reality without human intervention. Film makes the art form transparent, or, as Benjamin formulates it, "the equipment-free aspect of reality has become the height of artifice; the sight of immediate reality has become the 'blue flower' in the land of technology" (SW 4:263). As we watch, we are led to ignore the function of the machine, but it is there . . . The illusion of organic perfection that was the goal of German Romanticism—symbolized by the quest for the blue flower in Novalis's *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (1802)—has been replaced by an immediacy achieved, ironically, by total artifice. Film is perceived as seamless, but in fact it is nothing but seams, having been assembled from vast numbers of shots that have been edited and re-edited, cut and chopped and then sutured together.<sup>98</sup>

Although Reich does not cut and suture material in this same manner, he does achieve a seamlessness through perpetual repetition. Each phasing piece is a microcosm of reproducibility

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<sup>97</sup> Schwarz, 61.

<sup>98</sup> Lindsay Waters, "The Machine Takes Command," in *A New History of German Literature*, ed. David E. Wellbery (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 792.

– a temporal illusion, where even a phase achieved through the deceleration of gradually slowing the tape leaves the impression of forward motion.

Perhaps the most apparent conflict in Reich's means of composition with Benjamin's thesis is found in the usage of extremely gradual presentations of the artistic subject. This technique is one that Benjamin relates to the heightened consciousness, symptomatic of a culture influenced by psychoanalysis, and as Kaufman and Mieszkowski observe, this increased awareness eradicates the experience of art as a medium, thereby eliminating aura itself. While the effects of Reich's conceptual piece *Slow Motion Sound* might mirror such expectations, his writings about gradual process as accomplished through phasing and other augmentation techniques concentrate on very different results in audience reception. A gradual musical process makes possible the continued interest in and discovery of details, according to Reich. "Listening to an extremely gradual musical process opens my ears to *it*, but *it* always extends farther than I can hear . . ." <sup>99</sup> This notion of very close and intimate examination of a work that is beyond reach or comprehension is quite similar to the illustration of aura provided by Benjamin in "The Work of Art": "Diese letztere definieren wir als einmalige Erscheinung einer Ferne, so nah sie sein mag."<sup>100</sup> Reich's reflections on the perception of the musical process were quite contrary to those of his contemporaries. As mentioned above, through the gradual temporal nature of phasing and its short motivic material, Reich hopes to present a work that allows the listener to follow the development and transformation of his work aurally.

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<sup>99</sup> Reich, "Music as a Gradual Process," 35.

<sup>100</sup> Benjamin, "Das Kunstwerk," 479.

At first glance, this level of accessibility would appear to indicate a lack of auratic distance, a precursor of critical reflection.<sup>101</sup> Reich's reflections, however, do not concur with Benjamin in this instance. He maintains that this heightened awareness does not preclude the "mysteries" of a given musical process. Although the process is quite regular and has an "intended" format, "these mysteries are the impersonal, unintended, psychoacoustic by-products of the intended process." Through this, Reich claims to achieve a "liberating" and ritual-like experience for the listener, which shifts "attention away from *he* and *she* and *you* and *me* outward toward *it*."<sup>102</sup> Submelodies and harmonics will be discovered or perceived differently by various audience members and when listened to multiple times.<sup>103</sup> In an interview for *The Musical Times*, Reich explained the gradual process found in *Four Organs*, and Michael Nyman commented: "So one has to learn to listen in a fundamentally different way."<sup>104</sup> Reich then affirmed this and claimed that the processes he pursues allow a shift of attention from personal preoccupations to a strict concentration on the impersonal process at hand.<sup>105</sup>

It is as though Reich is reacting to the very effects of psychoanalysis that Walter Benjamin uses in his essay as an illustration of historical influences on human perception. Music as a gradual process redirects the typical process of self-reflection. Rather than engaging in the common practice of pop-psychology and connecting every interaction and observation to the sub-conscious, Reich invites the listener to leave personal preoccupations behind and enter the sphere of music as process. There one finds freedom and can participate in the ritual of

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Reich, "Music as a Gradual Process," 36.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>104</sup> Reich, "Steve Reich," 230.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.



experiencing the unfolding task at hand. Paradoxically, he claims that concentrating on acoustics “occurring for their own reasons” is a psychologically helpful experience.<sup>106</sup> One could maintain that Reich is drawing simultaneously on the Romantic philosophy of the authority and autonomy of art as well as on non-Western musical traditions, where ritual remains central. He then uses them to respond to the very state of human apperception which Benjamin describes. At first glance, one might conclude that this impersonality would exclude aura, just as the “tester’s” state of mind in Part VIII of “The Work of Art” cannot perceive aura. However, according to Reich this very condition of impersonality provides an escape from the psychoanalytical mindset of daily life, and distance from this mentality reintroduces ritual.

### **Reichian Ritual**

At the core of Benjamin’s theory is the de-mystification of art. Its previous connection to ritual is severed. Reich speaks of ritual often in his conversations regarding musical processes. Significant characteristics of his music are similar to non-Western traditions that continue to pursue music-making as a means of communal ritual. However, musical elements from Balinese and African traditions alone do not guarantee the presence of cult value, and Reich does not define the object or orientation of the ritualistic experience attached to musical processes. As Benjamin demonstrates in his essay, ritualistic value is flexible, and one could argue that such a distinction is not necessary for the cultic value to maintain its authority. The Scottish theologian William Robertson Smith introduced a controversial theory regarding ritual in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He proposed that the myth is secondary to ritual, and this view also compliments the pluralistic attitudes present in the communities of San Francisco and New York in which Steve Reich

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<sup>106</sup> Reich, “Music as a Gradual Process,” 35.

lived.<sup>107</sup> Although Reich was probably not familiar with Smith's work, it is likely that he shared a similarly liberal view of ritual.

Horst Wenzel provides an equally affirming description of ritual in the postmodern age, writing: "In a functionally differentiated society, the collective gaze is dispersed and robbed of its directional ability by the multiplicity of media. Precisely because of this, the resuscitation and re-establishment of collective and individual rituals promises an experience of authenticity, a secondary auraticization in a secondary performance culture that connects the cultically oriented, prebook age to the postbook age."<sup>108</sup> Reich's ambiguity regarding the object of the ritualistic experience does not indicate an impotent cult value. It reinforces instead his statements regarding individualized reception and verifies ritual's relevancy and potency in a pluralistic postmodern environment.

The first topic of discussion in this chapter was the inherent role of reproducibility in music as an art form. In explaining the transcendent nature of musical process, Reich says: ". . . the actual number of patterns being played in my music is limited, when they mix simultaneously in your ear there are an infinite number of them you can select to concentrate on."<sup>109</sup> This statement echoes Benjamin's prediction regarding art produced for its reproduction value. However, in Reich's description of musical process, authenticity and singularity are preserved, as these characteristics are produced by the audience members themselves. This means that

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<sup>107</sup> Erika Fischer-Lichte. *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual: Exploring Forms of Political Theatre*, (London: Routledge, 2005), 30.

<sup>108</sup> Horst Wenzel, "The Reverent Gaze: Toward the Cultic Function of the Artwork in the Premodern and the Postmodern Age," in *Mapping Benjamin: The Work of Art in the Digital Age*, ed. Timothy Lenoir and Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 220.

<sup>109</sup> Reich, "An Interview," 45.

audience appeal then plays a central role in the presence of aura. So rather than supplanting cult value as Benjamin describes in Part V of “The Work of Art,” exhibition value becomes an auratic prerequisite, in that it entices the listener to enter the realm of ritual.

As each item in this chapter was discussed, many of Walter Benjamin’s descriptions regarding changes in human perception and the transformative powers of technology were confirmed. However, these changes do not ultimately result in aura’s destruction. Reich uses the new medial methods provided by technical reproducibility to procreate an innovative auratic experience for his diverse and evolving audience. The “here and now” of the work of art is indeed eliminated by mass reproduction, and singularity of the original is inconsequential in contemporary art reception. Aura may no longer be founded in the original as it was in previous eras. This does not, however, lead to its extinction. Aura is simply transferred from its home in a unique object to the unique interpretation by an individual of the autonomous and authoritative artwork as mass produced.

Aura is not destructed in the age of technical reproducibility, but rather decentralized. Transcendence and uniqueness are no longer determined by outside authorities, such as religious institutions or the aesthetic standards of the academy, or the material existence of the original. The aesthetic autonomy of the work of art is the driving force behind perception and its complexity allows for variance in reception. This means that the very emblems that earlier possessed aura may still carry transcendent possibilities, but an outside centralized authority, such as embodied in the Führer cult, can no longer determine a single-minded path for the masses, because the people themselves now possess interpretive authority within the prescribed limits of the artwork. The “here and now” exists when one voluntarily engages in an intensely intimate but never comprehensive intellectual examination of a work of art, whose sensory

stimulation provides a reprieve from the heightened psychoanalytic awareness required by the everyday contemporary environment, as described by Benjamin in Part XIII of “The Work of Art.” This reprieve reestablishes the necessary distance for critical reflection, and the inherent authority of musical process and its ungraspable complexity, combined with the technological methods used to accommodate other aspects of contemporary human perception, fulfill the additional required conditions of aura.

## CHAPTER IV

## CONCLUSION

Following the brief sketch of aura as presented in the “Work of Art,” background of Reich’s experiments with technology in his early career was provided. At the close of this section, Reich’s opinion of developments in electro-mechanic means within the context of music history were found to be far more subdued than the revolutionary attitude Benjamin holds. Reich does not see the impact of technical reproduction as significantly different from that of other material innovations that have shaped and influenced musical creativity in the past. However, he does acknowledge that phasing technique and other gradual processes he worked out in his compositions “just had to come out of machines.”<sup>110</sup> In this sense, Reich fulfills the hybrid of man and machine that Benjamin proposes<sup>111</sup> and underestimates the substantiality of musical process as “indigenous to machines.”<sup>112</sup> Auratic geniality now rests not solely in the human mind, but is a result of human interpretation of and innovation with technological processes. Reich revives Romantic ideals of autonomy and ritual to reintroduce aura. But, this reemergence is based on mechanical processes and the musical structures that materialize from them. Only

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<sup>110</sup> Reich, “Steve Reich,” 229.

<sup>111</sup> Waters, 794.

<sup>112</sup> Reich, “Steve Reich,” 229.

then is the artistic product suitable for the modern listener and the changes in human perception as observed by Benjamin.

In an analysis of Serialism, Aleatorics, and Minimalism, Elaine Broad discusses the *non-narrative structure* of the minimalist and experimentalist musical movements.<sup>113</sup> The majority of Western music history revolves around teleological narratives. In fact, non-narrative music is not to be heard since Perotin and the Notre Dame School of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, one of the traditions which Steve Reich cites as informing his compositional ideas. Along with Cage and Boulez, Reich also has drawn inspiration from Webern's notion of "beauty in the erection of pure structures."<sup>114</sup>

Structure as the source of musical beauty rather than stories as implied by the narrative or goal-oriented models of most Western tradition brings to mind Benjamin's discussion of architecture – a form of art that allows habituated reception. One of the most challenging aspects of Minimalism is that it is a more atmospheric form than those to which audiences and critics were (and remain) accustomed. Clytus Gottwald cited one listener's response to a televised program of Reich's music in the early seventies. The caller wittily asked: "Merkt Ihr denn nicht, daß Eure Platte einen Sprung hat?"<sup>115</sup> This comment reinforces just how contrary to former expectations non-narrative form is. To appreciate this listening experience, one must develop, as Michael Nyman noted, "a fundamentally new way of listening."<sup>116</sup> Minimalism's repetition and steady pulse do not contain "points of culmination" or conflict.<sup>117</sup> These differing sensory-

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<sup>113</sup> Broad, 52.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>115</sup> Gottwald, 6.

<sup>116</sup> Reich, "Steve Reich," 230.

<sup>117</sup> Broad, 58.

perceptual and intellectual practices of receiving music are reminiscent of Benjamin's distinction between optical and tactile perception. Through its non-narrative form, Minimalism provides a new mode of reception for the contemporary listener. Rather than continuing to necessitate the traditional state of concentration as with goal-oriented music, this structurally-based style is more habituated or tactile.

The material uniformity of both Minimalism and mass reproduction reintroduces contingency through providing flexibility in audience reception. In the case of Minimalism, the lack of voicing and rhythmic accents enables the listener experience to be self-guided. The absence of a clear harmonic progression and the corresponding goal-orientation also ensures more freedom for the public and is adapted to the contemporary state of distraction. The ever-present repetitive nature of Reich's pieces allows a familiarity that might be compared with the habitual reception that Benjamin describes. The prevailing narrative-based Western music of previous centuries can be viewed as an exercise that requires concentration of the optical senses, whereas the minimalist non-narrative structure provides a space for the tactile engagement.

Broad's observations concerning Steve Reich's vision of his compositions affirm its exceptional nature, not only relative to teleological forms but also in comparison to his contemporaries within Minimalism:

Reich does not intend to lull the listener into a trance as Riley and especially Young tend to do. He wants the listener to be aware of detail—an awareness without involving anticipation or recollection. But if the music is objective and thus no psychological tension is created that needs resolution, it exists without the “subjectivity of the listener”—why listen at all?

In one sense the listener is only a witness to the process in a passive way; yet, because the music is without directionality, this allows him/her room for *personal experiential interpretation*. Anti-teleological art does not permit itself to be objectified—we need to participate in it.<sup>118</sup>

This paradox of passivity and participation embodies the spirit of Benjamin’s distracted critic. Awareness of detail and elimination of subjectivity echoes the objectivity in film that Benjamin identifies, and finally, the possibility of “personal experiential interpretation” through a lack of “directionality” enables a ritualistic experience, as Reich describes.

The word *Zerstreuung* can mean either distraction or dispersion, and *Sammlung* means both concentration and collection. Let us consider how Benjamin’s notions of reception in Part XV of his essay are changed when the respective latter definitions are applied. Earlier, people would collectively gather in one place to reflect on a given work of art. Over the course of their concentration, they would then enter into the given object. In the present state of dispersion, such communal reception of art rarely occurs. For instance, music listening takes place more often individually, as people enjoy a personal music library compiled on their computers or in devices such as an iPod. With this understanding of *Zerstreuung* and *Sammlung*, a new value of art is revealed. Benjamin maintains that, even with the concentration required to enter into a work of art, person and art may still abide in one another, but now, the artwork enters into the individual. This means that one may carry it wherever one goes. With this in mind, the original time and place of the piece is no longer the mitigating factor, but rather portability determines worth.

Liberation is achieved through the distance from self-reflection and personal interest that the autonomous sphere of musical process provides and through the ritualistic experience one

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<sup>118</sup> Broad, 59.



may have within. Reich is revitalizing two of the major components of aura that Benjamin declares extinct through inspiration from the very medium that was initially charged with aura's demise. Reich has never couched his thoughts with reference to "The Work of Art." However, he does address significant factors in Benjamin's discussion. Toward the close of his essay about art and Benjamin, Mieszkowski discusses reflection and contingency.<sup>119</sup> In a very literal manner, music as a gradual process reflects on itself. As it transforms from a brief melody or clearly spoken line to a complex contrapuntal piece, the initial effect is echo-like, and its utmost complexity is simply the result of the initial phrase repeated and shifted within its own system. Reich's input as composer was only to choose the materials with which to run the process. Even the rate of acceleration was ceded after he began using live musicians as the medium, rather than tape. As previously stated, the contingency of these processes lies primarily with the listener. Their experience is in large part dependent on the process, but never at the whims of composer or performer. In this sense, such a stringent format for composition fights against any political tyranny. The sphere of the artistic experience is determined by the artistic process itself, but the way in which an audience member engages the subject is unique to that individual. The reinstatement of Romantic aesthetic ideals and ritual allows aura to reemerge, as the audience enjoys a world free from the historical circumstances, such as the effects of Freudian theory, that insist on immediacy.

In "The Machine Takes Command," Lindsay Waters writes that Benjamin's contemporaries were aghast at excluding authenticity as a criterion for artwork, but Benjamin knew that the inevitable developments of mass culture should not be shied away from, but rather

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<sup>119</sup> Mieszkowski, 48-52.

engaged and thoughtfully considered.<sup>120</sup> Benjamin rightly recognized the break-down of the original's authority and authenticity, as found in its "here and now." But, Steve Reich's innovations in using a technological medium as a means of musical process reveal that, despite a change in audience reception and the new possibilities of technical reproduction, aura can exist. It is found in the aesthetic autonomy of the self-determinate work of art, whose identity, as a network of relations, is perceived uniquely at every occasion it is withheld. The age of technical reproducibility does signal a substantial shift away from the former experience of art, but this reality does not demand an irreversible end to aura. It is true that aura is no longer experienced through a unique object. However, its authority and singularity are discovered conversely through each individual's *unique reception* of the artwork in its multiplicity.

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<sup>120</sup> Waters, 793.

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