Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) pioneered the now commonly held theory that our ability to conceive of authenticity in the arts is historically contingent on their mechanical reproducibility. In medieval times, standards of authenticity were only applied to texts. Revered buildings and artworks were substituted with newer copies when they began to decay without anyone ever accusing the restorer of forgery. This began to change with the invention of woodcuts in the late 15th century, and the ensuing increase in circulation of faithful reproductions of ancient buildings and artworks, which made it possible for a larger audience to monitor changes to the originals. The emergence of preservation as a professionalized bureaucracy beginning in the 1830s owed much to the invention of photography, which made the first national surveys economically possible. Photography was enthusiastically adopted by preservationists because it also led to new methods of authentication, such as easily comparing minute carving details from distant buildings to establish and date construction techniques. But Benjamin warned of a downside: photography also diminished the building’s authenticity by framing out (or negating) some of the key qualities that made it authentic in the first place, namely: its uniqueness, its singular physical context, the living traditions and uses it served, and its endurance in time. A photograph could not deliver the qualities that made the building unique, but it compensated for it by offering a new quality: constructed proximity. It brought buildings from distant places to the viewer, allowing a sort of focused, magnified and decontextualized attention that was not possible in person. In other words, photographs did not simply document buildings, they also fundamentally altered how we experienced and understood their nature. The direct experience of a historic monument was rare. But photographs were a mass medium, and had become the culturally dominant way of experiencing architecture, eroding the cultural significance of the original. Benjamin’s prescient analysis explains contemporary arguments in favor of demolishing historic buildings, as long as they are properly documented. The insight that photographs influenced our perception of reality led Benjamin to study how they could be used politically to shape public opinion and even cultural behavior. Born in 1892, Benjamin witnessed the political use of photography and film to influence mass behavior, first under the bellicose militarism of Wilhelm II, then under Hitler. As a student in Thuringia he became interested in the relationship between aesthetics and politics, influenced by the educational reformer Gustav Wyneken, but broke with him over his 1914 lecture praising war. He studied philosophy at Freiburg University, and by the early 1920s began collaborating with the newly founded Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, which assembled neo-Marxist intellectuals who shared his interest in the role of aesthetics in politics and social engineering. Their collective intellectual achievements formed the Frankfurt School of critical theory. Benjamin committed suicide before completing his history of the early nineteenth century Parisian shopping arcades, which aimed at analyzing their architecture in relation to their representations, uses and associated practices (e.g. shopping, fâner); an effort at recovering cultural memory that prefigured, and in many ways still surpasses in ambition, much of today’s analyses of intangible cultural heritage.

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