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**The Impact of Technological Reproduction on
the Production and Experience of Art**

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Abstract

Technological reproduction in art refers to the process of creating copies or replicas of original works using various techniques such as casting, printing, photography and digital technologies. Throughout history, these technologies have transformed both the production and experience of art, by making artworks easier to replicate and access beyond their original contexts. However, these technologies also raise important questions surrounding originality, authenticity and ownership. Walter Benjamin's concept of 'aura' provides a useful framework for understanding how reproduction alters the viewer's experience of an artwork as it explains the shift away from 'originality' towards mass accessibility and exhibition value. This paper examines two seemingly different case studies: nineteenth century architectural casts found at the Victoria & Albert Museum and AI generated imagery inspired by Studio Ghibli. It concludes that, while technological reproduction has democratised access to art and accelerated artistic reproduction, it has also blurred the distinction between the original and the copy, thus transforming how art is experienced and valued.

The distinction between the original artwork and the copy is a central issue when assessing how technological reproduction has transformed both the production and experience of art. Walter Benjamin's essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' provides a key theoretical framework for understanding how reproduction has altered the viewer's relationship with art, particularly through the shift from 'cult value' to 'exhibition value'.¹ Benjamin argues that traditional artworks possessed an 'aura', a unique presence rooted in their originality, physical existence and historical context. In pre-modern societies, artworks were often deeply embedded in ritual, religion, and tradition, meaning their value derived not only from the aesthetic qualities of an artwork but from their originality and limited accessibility. Religious statues and idols, for example, functioned as objects of "cult value", which Benjamin described with a sense of 'sacred' or 'magical power' inseparable from their physical presence. As a result, making copies of an artwork was initially undervalued because their value and authority came from the fact it was original and one of a kind.

¹ Walter Benjamin, The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and the Other Writings on Media <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1nzfgns.6> [Accessed 15 April]

Benjamin argues further that mechanical reproduction, particularly through photography and film, disrupts the concept of 'cult value'. Modern technologies have enabled artworks to be copied, circulated, and viewed beyond their original settings, transforming how audiences encounter art. Benjamin argues also states that the "aura" of the reproduced artwork has been diminished, since the artwork is no longer experienced as a singular, irreplaceable object but as something that could exist in multiple identical forms across different contexts. Benjamin consequently states technological reproduction has led to a shift that has transformed not only how art is produced, but also how it is perceived, interpreted, and valued by audiences.¹ This is evidenced in the case studies below which show us how technological reproduction becomes increasingly valued for its visibility and accessibility rather than its exclusivity or meaningful functions.



Fig. 1. The Cast Courts, The West Court, 1873, plaster and electrotypes, Victoria and Albert Museum, London

The Cast Courts at the Victoria and Albert Museum provide an early example of how technological reproduction has transformed both the production and experience of art. The Cast Courts are historic galleries which house large-scale plaster casts and electrotype reproductions of some of the world's most significant sculptures and architectural monuments.² These reproductions were created through highly skilled but efficient processes designed to capture the precise surface details of original works. Plaster casts were produced by placing moulds directly onto the surface of the original structure before filling them with wet plaster to create an accurate replica.³ Similarly, electrotypes were produced through a process patented by Elkington & Co., in which copper moulds were formed using electrical charges to produce

¹ Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and the Other Writings on Media* <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1nzfgns.6> [Accessed 15 April]

² V&A, *History of the Cast Courts: The Victoria and Albert Museum* <https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/history-of-the-cast-courts> [Accessed 15 April 2026]

³ *Monuments in Flux: Architecture and the Power of Reproduction* (Princeton University Press, 2017) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv2fccv2f.4> [Accessed 15 April 2026] pp. 6-8

highly detailed metallic reproductions.¹ This shows that technological reproduction transformed the production of art by making it easier and faster to replicate multiple copies.

The Cast Courts also transformed the experience of art because viewing architecture and sculpture was no longer site specific. The Courts allowed visitors to encounter multiple monuments side by side. This experience would previously have been impossible for most nineteenth-century audiences, particularly when travel remained limited and a pastime reserved for the social elite. Technological reproduction therefore democratised access to art by enabling wider audiences to study and experience important cultural objects that they otherwise may never have encountered. This reflects Benjamin's argument that reproduction shifts art away from ritual and exclusivity towards exhibition and accessibility. Moreover, reproductions in the Cast Courts transformed the experience of art as they were valued as important educational tools throughout nineteenth-century Europe. It allowed artists, students and the general public to study architecture, sculpture, and design in close detail, often more effectively than photographs, which at the time were less widely circulated. However, these reproductions were also connected to broader systems of imperial knowledge and cultural authority.² By collecting and displaying reproductions of significant European monuments within British institutions, museums such as the V&A reinforced ideas of cultural ownership and imperial power. Technological reproduction therefore not only expanded access to art but also shaped how cultural history and colonialism was presented to audiences.³

At the same time, the Cast Courts raised important debates surrounding originality and authenticity and ownership. As these reproductions closely resembled the original monuments, distinctions between the "authentic" artwork and the copy became increasingly complicated. This reflects Benjamin's argument that mechanical reproduction diminishes the unique "aura" of the original artwork because the reproductions are separated from their original history and spatial context. While it can be argued that original works remain more informative for understanding their social and historical context, in certain cases some of the reproductions have greater historical value. For example, many of the casts in the V&A preserved details that no longer survive on the originals themselves. This demonstrates that reproduced works could hold significance rather than exist as merely inferior copies.⁴ This is further evidenced by the fact that attitudes over the value of copies shifted over time. Initially copies were valued as an educational tool and were understood as separate from the original artwork. Later, greater value was placed on originality and authenticity which we continue to see in the art world.⁵ Yet in recent years, copies have started to be valued again. The first nineteenth century casts have become more valuable as they showed minimal ageing or damage compared to the original sculptures and monuments. Consequently, the reproductions have become historically valuable in their own right, not only because they democratised access to art, but also because

¹ David Scott, *Studies in Conservation: Electrotypes in science and art*, (Taylor & Francis Group, 2013) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42751820> pp. 190-194

² David Scott, *Studies in Conservation: Electrotypes in science and art*, (Taylor & Francis Group, 2013) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42751820> pp. 1

³ V&A, History of the Cast Courts: The Victoria and Albert Museum <https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/history-of-the-cast-courts> [Accessed 15 April 2026]

⁴ Monuments in Flux: Architecture and the Power of Reproduction (Princeton University Press, 2017) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv2fccv2f.4> [Accessed 15 April 2026]

they have become important records of cultural heritage, challenging the idea that authenticity alone determines artistic value.

The concept of technological reproduction is further complicated by the emergence of AI-generated digital art. AI systems have transformed the production of art by creating new images within seconds, based on patterns learnt from vast, online data sets of existing artworks. Unlike mechanical technological reproduction, which is a copy of a physical object, AI-generated art produces new digital images inspired by traditional artistic styles which blurs the boundary between imitation and originality. As a result, AI has increased access to the tools for artistic image production, accelerated the pace of image production, and fundamentally altered the experience of art itself as it challenges traditional ideas of copyright, ownership and originality. A clear example of this was the viral trend of AI-generated 'Ghiblified' portraits. In May 2024, Open AI introduced a multimodal AI system which allowed users to create pictures from a written description rather than simply respond to conversational prompts. Users could upload images and ask the AI to recreate them in various art styles such as the Ghibli animation style.¹ During an official presentation, Open AI developers took a selfie and asked the AI to turn the image into an animation movie frame resembling scenes from classics such as *Spirited Away* and *The Neighbour Totoro*. This went on to become a trend on social media with thousands of users creating 'Ghiblified' portraits of themselves. However, what appeared to be a harmless and nostalgic trend also exposed deeper concerns surrounding modern technological reproduction, particularly regarding artistic ownership and copyright.

In the UK, according to the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988, copyright is a form of intellectual property (IP) protection that applies to "original literary, dramatic, musical or artistic works, sound recording, films or broadcasts and typographical arrangement of published editions".² Under the Act, 'artistic work' is defined as a graphic work, photograph, sculpture or collage, irrespective of artistic quality, a work of architecture being a building or a model for a building or a work of craftsmanship. While UK copyright law exists to protect artists work for their lifetime in addition to seventy years after their death, the current law was created before the rise of AI-generated imagery so struggles to address the complexities of AI-generated artwork.³ In the case of Studio Ghibli, Open AI used datasets that include millions of online images including copyright works to train their systems. Since copyright law traditionally protects specific, physical works rather than artistic styles themselves, AI-generated reproductions occupy a legal grey area. This is because Open AI argues that the generated images that have been created using their system do not directly copy existing frames or characters and therefore do not infringe copyright law. However, the popularity of these 'Ghiblified' images relies precisely on audiences recognising the clear visual connection to Studio Ghibli's distinctive artistic style. This demonstrates that while AI has increased accessibility to artistic production by allowing a wider range of users to create digital images

¹ Vrinda Abrol Ghibli-fication of Pictures: Threat in the Guise of Trend, (IEEE, 2025)
https://ieeexplore.ieee.org/abstract/document/11340991?casa_token=vRP0pjGYtLAAAAA:jSCb3A69sHIL9hmvZIsZbKG2kfw2C3sPtr_ZQyppTcBy9Lm8hnpZwgTu9H5ypONsgWlbi9HiQ

² Legislation.gov.uk, Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988
<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1988/48/section/1> [Accessed 20 April 2020],

³ Legislation.gov.uk, Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988
<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1988/48/section/1> [Accessed 20 April 2020],

quickly and easily, it has also weakened traditional ideas of copyright, artistic originality and authorship.¹

Moreover, modern forms of technological reproduction have altered the experience of art. In the case of Studio Ghibli, the original films were once appreciated for their distinctive visual style which blended hand draw animation, soft colour palettes with immersive storytelling that moved audiences. However, Ghibli image reproductions while personalised and entertaining, have reduced this style to something mainly appreciated for its aesthetic appearance. As a result, technological reproduction has made the experience of art simpler and arguably more meaningless, as audiences engage more with the visual effect than the creative, original intention behind a work. For example, the studio's animations are traditionally hand-drawn by a teams of artists, including Hayao Miyazaki (one of the founders of Studio Ghibli). They use simple materials such as pencils and watercolours to create their detailed landscapes. Unlike AI generated art, the production process for Studio Ghibli is time-consuming and can take several years to complete as even a single scene requires thousands of individual drawings.² The thought, level of attention to detail and craftsmanship make the studio's film valuable. The human element and originality are what helps the audience connect with the films. This shows that AI-generated reproductions of the Studio Ghibli style can be viewed as disrespectful to the manual and creative process involved in producing the film. While AI-generated imagery can imitate the visual appearance of a Ghibli animation it cannot replicate the originality or the authenticity of the work. Thus, technological reproduction in a sense reduces the immersive experience of art by creating easily consumable aesthetic content that audiences engage with only briefly before moving on.

Furthermore, Ghibli reproductions have altered the experience of art because they reduce appreciation for originality and meaning behind original works. Although these AI-generated images may appear whimsical and visually enchanting, they lack the emotional depth that Studio Ghibli films offer. The popularity of the "Ghibli filter" encourages audiences to engage only with the surface-level aesthetic of the animation style rather than the ideas, messages, and artistic choices embedded within the films themselves. As a result, art becomes something instantly consumed and shared online for entertainment, rather than something deeply interpreted and experienced.

¹ Deckker Dinesh, Dreams and Data: Ghibli Style art, copyright, and the rise of viral AI Imagery (International Journal of Global Economic Light, 2025)

² James Linghorn, *'Studio Ghibli's landscapes and animation: Design, Characteristics and Process*, (Canterbury Christ Church University, 2019) pp. 6-23



Fig. 2. OpenAI, Normal image of my sisters and I converted into animation by Ghibli filter, 2025, AI-generated imagery, England



Fig. 3. Studio Ghibli, Princess Mononoke in the forest from the film, 1997, animation film, Japan

The original Ghibli films are significant because they educate audiences on a wide range of social and environmental issues. Many of the films explore the dangers of overconsumption in modern society, environmental destruction, ecological imbalance, and the importance of empathy and respect between people.¹ Nature and ecology are central themes throughout Miyazaki's work, with forests, villages, rivers, and landscapes carefully designed to communicate meaning and atmosphere. In films such as *Princess Mononoke* and *Spirited Away*, the settings are not simply decorative backgrounds but rather reflect important themes such as, conflict between humanity, industrialisation, spirituality, and nature. Each landscape

¹ James Linghorn, '*Studio Ghibli's landscapes and animation: Design, Characteristics and Process*, (Canterbury Christ Church University, 2019) pp. 6-23

carries significance, encouraging viewers to reflect on humanity's relationship with the environment. Additionally, the films draw heavily from Japanese Shinto beliefs, folklore, and mythology, which give the animations spiritual and cultural depth.¹ Every visual detail reflects intentional artistic choices made by Hayao Miyazaki in order to shape how audiences interpret the story and emotionally connect with the characters and settings. This demonstrates the original films rather than reproductions transform the experience of the artwork because the AI-generated Ghibli reproductions remove these layers of meaning from the artwork. Instead of engaging with the films' moral lessons or ecological themes, audiences use the filter simply to aestheticise selfies or everyday photographs for social media. This alters the experience of art because complex artistic works become simplified visual aesthetics that can be endlessly reproduced and consumed without reflection. This shows that technological reproduction often separates artwork from human creativity and originality from an artwork which simplifies the experience of the artwork.²

Conclusion

Technological reproduction has continually transformed the way art is produced, experienced and valued. From the nineteenth century reproductions in the Cast Courts to contemporary AI-generated imagery inspired by Studio Ghibli, reproduction has expanded public access to art while also challenging ideas about authenticity and originality. The Cast Courts demonstrate how reproduction has enabled audiences to encounter artworks and monuments beyond their original location, making art more accessible and educational. It has also complicated the notion of the 'original' as reproductions in the Cast Court context developed their own historical value despite the fact that they lacked the 'aura' described by Benjamin. A similar challenge can be applied to modern forms of technological reproduction. AI-generated imagery such as the 'Ghibli style' filter demonstrates how technology can imitate artistic styles instantly and on a massive scale. Although AI generated imagery increases accessibility, it also undermines authorship, ownership, and originality. In the case of Studio Ghibli, AI-generated imagery overlooks the careful craftsmanship and storytelling that define Studio Ghibli films and creates a easily consumable, superficial experience of art. Ultimately, both historical and contemporary examples show that technological reproduction can democratise access to art while transforming the experience of art by dealing with the dynamic relationship between originality, copyright and value.

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¹ James Linghorn, *'Studio Ghibli's landscapes and animation: Design, Characteristics and Process*, (Canterbury Christ Church University, 2019) pp. 6-23

² Odell Colin, *Studio Ghibli: The Films of Hayao Miyazaki & Isao Takahata* (Kamera Books, 2023)

