

Exercise 2 - MCAT CARS

Writing MCAT Questions

The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity. Chemical analyses of the patina of a bronze can help to establish this, as does the proof that a given manuscript of the Middle Ages stems from an archive of the fifteenth century. The whole sphere of authenticity is outside technical – and, of course, not only technical – reproducibility. Confronted with its manual reproduction, which was usually branded as a forgery, the original preserved all its authority; not so vis-à-vis technical reproduction. The reason is twofold. First, process reproduction is more independent of the original than manual reproduction. For example, in photography, process reproduction can bring out those aspects of the original that are unattainable to the naked eye yet accessible to the lens, which is adjustable and chooses its angle at will. And photographic reproduction, with the aid of certain processes, such as enlargement or slow motion, can capture images which escape natural vision. Secondly, technical reproduction can put the copy of the original into situations which would be out of reach for the original itself. Above all, it enables the original to meet the beholder halfway, be it in the form of a photograph or a phonograph record. The cathedral leaves its locale to be received in the studio of a lover of art; the choral production, performed in an auditorium or in the open air, resounds in the drawing room.

The situations into which the product of mechanical reproduction can be brought may not touch the actual work of art, yet the quality of its presence is always depreciated. This holds not only for the art work but also, for instance, for a landscape which passes in review before the spectator in a movie. In the case of the art object, a most sensitive nucleus – namely, its authenticity – is interfered with whereas no natural object is vulnerable on that score. The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced. Since the historical testimony rests on the authenticity, the former, too, is jeopardized by reproduction when substantive duration ceases to matter. And what is really jeopardized when the historical testimony is affected is the authority of the object.

One might subsume the eliminated element in the term “aura” and go on to say: that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art. This is a symptomatic process whose significance points beyond the realm of art. One might generalize by saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to meet the

beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced. These two processes lead to a tremendous shattering of tradition which is the obverse of the contemporary crisis and renewal of mankind. Both processes are intimately connected with the contemporary mass movements. Their most powerful agent is the film. Its social significance, particularly in its most positive form, is inconceivable without its destructive, cathartic aspect, that is, the liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage. This phenomenon is most palpable in the great historical films. It extends to ever new positions. In 1927 Abel Gance exclaimed enthusiastically:

“Shakespeare, Rembrandt, Beethoven will make films... all legends, all mythologies and all myths, all founders of religion, and the very religions... await their exposed resurrection, and the heroes crowd each other at the gate.”

Presumably without intending it, he issued an invitation to a far-reaching liquidation.

Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,”
Illuminations. New York, Schocken Books, 1968, Pgs. 217-251.

For each category below, create one CARS question stem derived from the passage above.

Main Idea

These are general questions dealing with the cardinal issues of the passage. Main idea questions are designed to see if you grasped the central theme of the passage as a whole.

Author's Tone

This type of general question asks whether you understood the author's point of view on the subject of the passage. These questions are often the most subtle. Is the author being critical or supportive. Is their tone objectively neutral or biased and partisan? The differences among the answer choices in tone questions can sometimes be hard to tease out.

Thematic Extension

These questions are in the same family with the Main Idea or Tone questions, which deal with the passage as a whole, but Thematic Extension questions ask you to take the author's argument or point of view and draw a conclusion about another subject or derive a broader proposition.

Specific Inference

These questions will identify a specific section of the passage and ask for an interpretation that goes a little deeper than the explicit reference, asking you to read 'between the lines.' These questions are often about judging the shade of meaning the author puts on a word within a specific context.

Facts & Information

On one level these questions are a test for your retention of specific facts or concepts stated in the passage. However, on another level, they are a test of how well you synthesized and retained the organization and flow of the passage. This is because often the process of answering this kind of question involves returning to the passage to find the information.