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Exploring the Aura

In *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Walter Benjamin argues that the development of cheaper and faster methods of reproduction leads to a decrease in a work's "aura." The purpose of art has fundamentally changed from a unique ritualistic practice to a consumer-focused and distraction based process. John Davis, on the other hand, disagrees with Benjamin, specifically on his ontology of art, and his overemphasis on the importance of the aura. By examining different mediums like painting, film, and architecture, we can see the strengths of Benjamin's argument.With the help of Davis, we understand its weaknesses and points that he has neglected to cover altogether, including an examination of the state of the aura in the present day.

Benjamin's essay is focused around the concept of the "aura." As Davis points out, Benjamin does a poor job of explicating the term by providing an ambiguous and inconsistent definition. Davis defines Benjamin's concept of the aura as the "power to generate a sense of reverence consequent upon the viewer's belief in an artwork's uniqueness, authenticity, and embeddedness within tradition…" (3) The uniqueness mentioned in the definition is a product of the time and space that a particular work of art was created in. When artwork is reproduced, Benjamin argues, its aura and value are always depreciated, because no matter how advanced

reproduction methods will be, the original time and place it was designed for can not be replicated.

To understand exactly what the aura is, it might be helpful to compare it to Scotus's concept of haeccity, which is defined as "a non-qualitative property responsible for individuation and identity" (Cross). This definition sounds just like that of Benjamin's aura, but the two terms can be distinguished by looking at a few examples. When the *Mona Lisa* was stolen, for instance, there was a desperate search for the lost work because it was the one and only original; both the aura and haeccity of the piece mattered. But, imagine making a copy of this famous work. This new copy would have its own haeccity, but would have no aura. It is not an authentic original made by Leonardo. Not only would this new copy have no aura, but just by existing, it would depreciate the aura of the original copy. The haeccity of the original would not change, because it is still obviously the *Mona Lisa*, but the uniqueness, or the aura, would be diminished according to Benjamin.

The originality and authenticity of an artwork is essential to its aura, but so is its "embeddedness in tradition" and temporal-spatial uniqueness. When Benjamin talks about tradition, he refers to magic or religious ritualistic use of art. Considering something like the *Woman of Willendorf*, it can be assumed that there was a particular function of this object. It most likely represented some sort of fertility goddess, designed to increase the yield of these ancient gatherers. In a similar manner, old cave paintings were probably drawn to improve hunting success rates. Following the magic rituals, religious ones also started to emerge. Ka statues in ancient Egypt were constructed to provide a resting place for the souls of the dead, and icons in Christian churches were created to help people pray to God. When art is reproduced, this

part of the aura is definitely lost. Modern day people would not use the *Woman of Willendorf* in an attempt to increase fertility, and even if they did for some reason, it would not be in exactly the same way as these prehistoric people. This tradition is a product of the specific time and place that these works were created, which leads us to the last defining feature of the aura.

A copy of a painting or statue will never be seen in the same historical context as the original, which is arguably the single most important feature of a piece of art. The meaning, appearance, and purpose of a painting or sculpture is derived from where and when it was made. Some of the most famous and influential art of all time has contained politically charged, time-sensitive messages. Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People* commemorated the overthrow of Charles X earlier that year. Picasso's *Guernica* raised awareness of the atrocities committed by the Spanish Nationalists. El Lissitzky's propaganda poster *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge* was meant to inspire the Bolsheviks during the Russian Civil War. The French revolutionary, the Spanish Nationalist, and the Bolshevik would all inherently react differently to these artworks than somebody viewing them today These works can be reproduced, but the context they were created in can not be.

Politically focused works are the best examples to illustrate the importance of historical context, but it is an essential part of any work's aura. Even works that seem straightforward like Courbet's *The Stone Breakers* or Millet's *The Gleaners* can only properly be appreciated with knowledge of the circumstances it was created in. Realist works like these directly opposed the French Academy and the highly dramatic scenes that were characteristic of the time period (Rubin). None of this historical tension is carried over when a copy is made, and it even detracts from the original's power.

Now that the aura has been defined, its general fragility becomes apparent. Benjamin argues that because of technological advancements and mass consumption, the aura is declining at a rapid rate. “Just as water, gas, and electricity are brought into our houses from far off to satisfy our needs in response to a minimal effort, so we shall be supplied with visual or auditory images, which will appear and disappear at a simple movement of the hand, hardly more than a sign” (Benjamin 2). With such widespread propagation of art, people fail to appreciate it in the same way. Benjamin claims the invention of the photograph and film marked the greatest shift in both why we create, and how we perceive art.

The birth of cinema is one of the worst things that could happen for the aura because as Benjamin asserts, the photograph, and therefore film, is a type of reproduction. When we see a landscape in a movie, we are not actually viewing the landscape, but the picture of a landscape through the lens of a camera. It is essentially a picture of a picture. It is not authentic. Even in this most basic sense, part of the aura is lost, but the film manages to distort this aura in other ways as well.

One of the biggest mistakes of the film is the division it creates between the actor and the audience. “The film actor feels as if in exile,” laments Pirandello (Benjamin 7). Unlike the actor in a play, he is unable to adapt to the crowd, and as he stares into the lens of a camera, he is constantly reminded that he is just a part of some product to be consumed. Even without assuming that the film will be used for monetary gain, the whole film process represents a “shriveling of the aura” (Benjamin 8). It is an inauthentic mechanical contrivance. The camera chooses what the audience sees, unlike in painting or sculpture. Benjamin makes the famous analogy that the magician is like the painter while the surgeon is like the cameraman. The

magician swiftly and seamlessly guides the observer's attention to where he wants. The surgeon on the other hand is intrusive, using fancy equipment to artificially get the job done (9). This intrusiveness leads Benjamin to the other major flaw of film, that of the mindless audience.

The mindless audience is created from the many cuts, visual tricks, sound effects, and other "optical tests" (Benjamin 7) of the film. "No sooner has the eye grasped a scene than it is already changed," remarks Benjamin (11). This is the exact opposite effect of looking at a single painting. When viewing a painting, the observer can look at it, take it all in, and fully appreciate it at his own pace. The movie viewer can not afford this luxury. "I can no longer think what I want to think. My thoughts have been replaced by moving images," cries Duhamel in the essay (Benjamin 11). This high energy shock effect of the film leaves the viewer with a lesser experience, and puts the masses in a state of distraction, similar to the state in which something like architecture is typically viewed in.

Benjamin maintains that architecture is fundamentally different from other mediums because it not only has a visual use, but a functional one as well. This distinction causes it to be viewed in a state of distraction, a sentiment echoed by Benjamin's concluding words that "the public is an examiner, but it is an absent minded one" (12). When a person views a building in New York City, they are also probably driving around, or at least trying to hold their own on the busy sidewalks. Add these minor distractions to hundreds of other buildings of all different shapes and sizes surrounding the one you are attempting to view, and it is impossible to fully appreciate it in the same way as you would a painting in a museum. In these circumstances, the visual appearance of a building is almost never the primary focus. This could be (one of many reasons) why Wright's Fallingwater is hailed as one of the foremost architectural beauties.

Unlike other buildings, it is isolated in nature, with no buildings or other distractions to keep the viewer from appreciating it. Its solitude helps it retain whatever aura it had in the first place, but just like film, architecture can not obtain the same aura of traditional works.

John Davis, in his aptly titled *Questioning 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction': A Stroll Around the Louvre after Reading Benjamin,* picks apart Benjamin's essay bit by bit, starting with an examination of the definition of aura. Davis is not satisfied with how Benjamin defines and uses the term aura. He traces how Benjamin uses it throughout time, to show how it constantly changes to support his own position. He comes to the conclusion that the aura is nearly impossible to define in the way that Benjamin tries to, and its importance is extremely overemphasized by Benjamin.

Davis traces the notion of the aura throughout history, using examples to point out some flaws in Benjamin's argument. He immediately exposes the unsteady grounds that the concept of the aura is rooted in by pointing out that ancient sculptures that appear to be genuine, like the *Apollo Sauroctonus* and the *Aphrodite of Cnidus*, are in fact copies (5). This difficulty in distinguishing between original and copy raises several questions about the aura, all ones that Benjamin would probably have an even more difficult time defending. It could be said that because these are known to be copies, they act as "testimony to the auracratic power of that lost original" (Davis 5), but Benjamin never bothers to note this. If the difference between the auracratic and non-auracratic is this difficult to tell apart then maybe the aura does not even matter. This point provides strong evidence that it does not, or at least not as much as Benjamin believes.

Davis continues to provide examples that attempt to destroy the idea of the aura. It is documented that Veronese had an "assembly line production" (Davis 6) near the end of his life. Even back then, painting was, at least somewhat, market focused and people were in a sense paying for the name. They either did not know that they were paying for something that was not by Veronese, or they just did not care. Shortly after, Davis provides the anecdote of Frenchman Charles de Brosses who actually preferred "beautiful copies of famous paintings" to "originals by minor masters" (6). Simply put, "the uniqueness of the original in the sixteenth century was by no means fetishized in the way that the (Benjamin's) essay would have us believe" (Davis 6). As long as the artwork that was purchased served its function of looking nice, it did not really bother people that it may not be as authentic as they anticipated. Either way, these customers could still explain to their guests that the painting was by the same genius who created the *Feast in the House of Levi* and *The Wedding at Cana*, and neither one would know that this is not exactly the truth.

Obviously both Benjamin and Davis make valid points throughout their essays. It would be foolish to deny that no part of the aura is lost in the modern age of reproduction, but like Davis claims, Benjamin does his fair share of exaggerating. Benjamin's theory for the cause of the loss of aura is not totally correct. Benjamin insists that mechanical reproduction depreciates the aura of artistic pieces, and although this undeniably speeds up the process, the cause relies solely on mass consumption. The two are usually thought of as inextricably linked, but they are two distinct phenomena.

Davis hints at the distinction when he brings up the current situation of the *Mona Lisa*, and with an in-depth analysis, the difference between reproduction and consumption becomes

clear. Trying to view the *Mona Lisa* at the Louvre today is a miserable experience. There are hundreds of other people trying to view the image simultaneously, pushing one another out of the way in an attempt to get a better view, or a picture of it on their phone. Even the person who manages to squeeze to the front of the crowd, would find themselves roped off about twenty feet away from the portrait that sets behind bulletproof glass. The experience would be slightly different than if you viewed the same painting in the early sixteenth century as it set in Leonardo's workshop. Benjamin would still agree on this point, but no matter the level of reproduction and regardless of whether the photograph or movie was invented, the same situation would still exist. This is clearly not how the *Mona Lisa* was meant to be viewed, and it exemplifies well the loss of aura, but this a direct and inevitable result of a larger population, and in turn, mass consumption.

Reproduction as the sole cause of the loss of aura is a stretch. Benjamin attacks the idea of the film, and while he does not explicitly equate aura with value, it is obvious that he does not think highly of the medium either. Benjamin says that film devalues the aura of other mediums, and has no aura of its own. This is blatantly false. Films create their own unique sense of aura; something that cannot be measured against that of painting. Fantastic works like *Inception* or *The Shawshank Redemption* should not be dismissed just because they have been processed through a camera. They explore themes and stir up the viewer's emotions just as any other great work of art would do.

It is also generally difficult to understand why a method of reproduction like the photo is a threat to aura, while painting is not. Is painting not just the original method of reproduction? Benjamin would argue that a photo of a beautiful landscape is not authentic, and somehow with

the same logic also argue that a painting of the same landscape is. The photo actually alters the original image less than that of the painting. Even in the case of something like abstract or surrealist art, the painting is just a reproduction of the vision inside of the artist's mind onto the canvas. Benjamin does not explain how the one method of replication is bad for the aura, while the other is the one that creates it in the first place. Both are necessary processes for recreating an image for others to see, and because of this, neither should be viewed as harming the aura.

Despite all of Benjamin's talk about the withering of the aura, it is still not actually a (practically) solvable problem. Davis is correct in positing that the aura is overvalued by Benjamin, but even if we assume all of what Benjamin says to be correct, there is not much that could, or should be done to stop the process from happening. This may be why Benjamin himself does not even attempt to supply a solution. Technological advancement and larger amounts of consumption are inevitable, and a loss of the aura is a small price to pay for all of the benefits that come with it. Thinking back to Benjamin's analogy comparing art to the availability of water and gas, this claim makes all the more sense. It is downright foolish to think that we should abolish water and gas supply networks just because we may not be as grateful for it as we were before it was invented. The same reasoning applies to art. Yes, viewing the *Mona Lisa* amidst a massive crowd at the Louvre or on a phone's five inch screen while browsing Wikipedia is not the best ways to experience this art, but it is much better than not being able to experience it at all.

It is worthwhile to examine how the aura has held up since Benjamin wrote his 1935 essay, and to anticipate the future of the aura, assuming it has one. With the invention of the internet, the rise of social media, and the creation of websites like Youtube, Instagram, and

Snapchat, it is safe to say that Benjamin is rolling in his grave. Over one billion hours of Youtube are watched every day ("Youtube for Press"). At the end of 2017, 3.5 billion snapchats were sent out daily ("Snapchat"). Benjamin did prophesize this increase in production and consumption, although even he probably did not imagine things on a scale this large. Choosing to look at examples and statistics like this leads to the conclusion that the aura has not just been killed, but brutally murdered.

Let us also look at new types of media that have originated since *The Work of Art*, like video games. The debate of whether or not they qualify as art can be saved for another time, but as a commercial based consumable medium, they can at least be discussed in the same light as film. At first glance video games appear to be an enemy of the aura. They are commercial products, which contradicts the "traditional use" element of the aura. In most cases they are much "busier" than the film (especially comparing it to the films that Benjamin would have been talking about), with a lot more moving parts to distract the viewer. Looking past these obvious flaws however, video games have a lot to offer in terms of preserving the aura. Using Benjamin's definition, they are less of a reproduction than that of the photo or movie. The visuals you see while playing a video game are direct representations. The graphics you see are exactly the way the "artist" has created them; they have not passed through any alteration. The only thing that really stands between the participant and the "art" would be the controller, but even Benjamin could be convinced that this adds to the aura of a work. One thing that infuriated him about the film, was the lack of agency the viewer had. They were subject to what the cameraman let them see. With a video game, the viewer is allowed (for the most part) to experience it however they would like, and at their own pace, just like they would a painting.

Obviously video games do not provide the best case for the claim that the aura is suddenly back in full force, but it does raise some thought-provoking points and provide hope that it may not be as doomed as originally thought. Just like Benjamin, it is impossible to know what types of new art and technology will appear in the next century. Maybe something similar will come along that will completely reverse the traditional, aura destroying, direction society is headed in. Either way, it is ultimately decided by the masses. The medium that they support will be the one that reigns supreme, whether it is a friend to the aura or not.

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