

Weekly Assignment 7. The Aura and its Elimination

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7. *Explain what Benjamin meant by 'aura', and why he thought that the technological reproduction of art would eliminate it.*

The word "aura" used by Benjamin refers to the authority of the original artwork. He understands this authority in both ontological and appreciative ways.

In ontological sense, the original artwork is unique and can be distinguished from its copies and reproductions. A piece of painting can be copied by other artists, but there is only one original artwork, unable to be replicated in perfect preciseness. Therefore, we tend to treasure this unique and unreplaceable original artwork, forming the so-called "aura".

In appreciative sense, it is only the original that is able to provide us with the aesthetic experience of the artwork to the fullest extent. As is demonstrated above, it's unlikely for us to replicate the original artwork precisely limited by the technology level in most cases. As a result, a massive amount of details is lost in the process of reproduction, and it's difficult to avoid possible mistakes made in reproduction that misrepresent the artwork. We have to see the original if we seek best aesthetic experience, and this gives the original artwork the "aura".

The technological reproduction is gradually eliminating the aura of the original according to Benjamin. He demonstrates that both the substantive duration and the historical testimony of the original is jeopardized by reproduction, which finally affect the authority of the object. (Benjamin, 1936) As the technology advances, it becomes more and more possible for an artwork to be precisely replicated. When the original and the reproduction are unable to be distinguished, the authority in both ontological and appreciative senses

withers, and the aura of the original fades away. Moreover, many new art forms are born suitable for precise replication, and there is no such thing as “original”. For example, when a photographer posts his works on Twitter, the public are free to download the certain photos onto their own devices, and it would be weird to talk about the “original” photo. Above is how technological reproduction eliminates the aura of the original.