

Ansel Adams: The Essence of Photographic Aura through the Lens of the Optical Unconscious in Nature

In his seminal essay “Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Walter Benjamin describes the concept of aura, stating how it compels a viewer to “seek the tiny spark of accident, the here and now” in a photograph’s details (Benjamin 202). He asserts that modern photographs are devoid of aura by their reproductive nature, lamenting their lack of tradition and historical context. To him, aura is what grants a work of art its ability to provide a reflective experience. Without aura, art would be a meaningless distraction that is drained of its authenticity through the process of reproduction (Benjamin 203). On the other hand, Knizek challenges Benjamin’s ideas about artistic aura, claiming how photographs retain their aura and historical authority even after going through mechanical processes. According to Knizek, it is what the viewer assigns to the meaning of a photograph that defines its aura, suggesting Benjamin’s interpretation of aura as a definition that “distracts the beholder from the true aesthetic values” of a work of art by pointing to aura as a feature outside the realm of the art itself (Knizek 358). Arianne Conty, a scholar of philosophy, helps reconcile this conflict of ideology by focusing on the role of the optical unconscious in aura’s ability to influence our perceptions of the past. Her article “They Have Eyes That They Might Not See: Walter Benjamin’s Aura and the Optical Unconscious,” (2013) expands further on Benjamin’s concept of aura through the term “cult status,” which is the value given to a photograph derived from its rarity or originality rather than its aesthetic traits. Thus cult status represents the traditional sense of aura of Benjamin, which has been replaced by the unconscious aura, or optical unconscious, which has allowed images to directly interact with their audience through shared experiences without the corruption of intentions.

However, while Benjamin, Knizek, and Costy's writings address aura and how it can affect the viewer's perceptions of the past, photography has also the capacity to engage in relationships with its viewers by evoking emotions that span across time and place without prior historical context. Ansel Adams' "Clearing Winter Storm" serves as a prime example that the essence of a photograph is not in how it represents our experiences, but in how it connects us emotionally to the timeless aspects that permeate our world. The scene portrays an expansive valley blanketed in swaths of trees and crowned by a series of cliffs and outcrops that soar into the clouds. The hazy horizon dominated by fog and cloud cover combined with the sheer scale of the peaks inspire a sense of majesty and wonder reminiscent of our primal relationship with nature. Rather than attempt to manipulate our conscious perceptions, the photograph tries to tap into our emotional being through raw passions, making for a more intriguing aura that relies on the optical unconscious to transcend cult status because of its pristine, unaltered state. In this paper, I expand upon the definitions of the aura and optical unconscious by examination of Ansel Adams' photograph. I intend to show how the aura and the optical unconscious contribute to the impression of an image upon its viewer through the photograph's use of landscapes to establish relatable sentiments that transcend time and space. The visceral aspect of aura lends to a surreal experience that blurs the divide between the viewer and the photograph.

To better understand the role of aura in a photograph, one must first analyze Benjamin's definition of "aura." Benjamin proclaims how aura might be understood as the specific time and place of which an image or photograph was made. Emphasizing the importance of rarity and the permanence of a photograph's subjects, he declares that most reproductions lack aura because they are devoid of these traits (Benjamin 300). Yet in spite of its mechanical origins, Adams' "Clearing Winter Storm" challenges Benjamin's assumption by demonstrating the presence of

aura in its compositional subjects. The foreground features a varied landscape of tall forests in a valley floor dominated by dizzying peaks smothered in snow and ice in the aftermath of a frigid storm, reminiscent of a winter scape in the American wilderness. From the unyielding ridges that stand as monuments of the carved landscape to the prevalent fog and solemn trees standing tall, the photograph captures a sense of permanence in these features that see little change with the passage of seasons. There are also the small details that add vitality to the photograph's aura, from the waterfall cascading down the cliff face nearly hidden by the trees in the foreground to the pockets of vegetation still clinging to the hillsides. Taken together, they imbue Adams' photograph with an awareness of ambience that "opens up...the smallest details, clear and yet hidden enough to have found shelter in daydreams (Benjamin 203)," aligning with Benjamin's concept of aura in photography through the symbolic purpose of these subjects.

On the other hand, Knizek notes that Benjamin's version of aura can be seen as "extra-aesthetic" in relation to an artwork or image, serving as a trait that is imposed on a work of art by the viewer rather than the other "imaginary products of contemplation" derived from an artwork itself (Knizek 358). He then uses this fact to redefine Benjamin's aura, stating how the features Benjamin views as part of an image's aura are "imaginary and not perceptual," derived from the "oral tradition or art-historical research" of the viewer through his imagination (Knizek 361). Thus Knizek argues that reproductions cannot be seen as necessarily lacking in aura, since imagination can transmit through photography (Knizek 361). By this definition, aura can be seen as representative of the viewer's perceptions and collective experiences, which can be viewed as the core of one's optical unconscious. Such a sense of imaginative reality is evident in Adams' photograph, which is notable for radiating a dreamlike atmosphere through the integration of its myriad of natural features. Comparing the heights of the trees to that of the rocky outcrops and

cliffs, one gets a sense of majesty over the immense variations in scale as the trees are dwarfed by the shadows of the looming monoliths all around them. The misty cloud cover that dominates the background adds a sense of mystery, drawing in viewers to ponder as their imaginations run wild over the details of the scenery that may lie beyond. In this sense, the clouds serve as a symbolic canvas upon which viewers can imagine the valley in ways that fit into the logical patterns governing their experiences at the subconscious level. Even the setting of winter that is depicted, in spite of its ephemeral nature in the temporal sense, imparts a feeling of consistency with its annual cycles that allows viewers to transport themselves to this snowy landscape in slumber. All of this ties back into Knizek's idea of aura as a more personal endeavor that allows viewers the freedom to engage with works of art (Knizek 360), transporting them to "another dimension" through the lens of their own worldviews.

Yet for all the conflict surrounding what the aura entails between Benjamin and Knizek's interpretations, a key issue that is not addressed by Knizek in his analysis of Benjamin is the role of the optical unconscious in Benjamin's "aura." Though Benjamin does define the term, stating how the optical unconscious can be described as "the physiognomic aspects...of images" that lie in the "smallest details" which are often overlooked in real life (Benjamin 203), the role of the optical unconscious in aura is still left uncertain. Arianne Conty seeks to settle this debate by refining Benjamin's differing concepts of aura into a coherent view that involves the optical unconscious. In Benjamin's discussions about the decline of aura, Conty surmises how by his definition of traditional aura, Benjamin assigns cult status to an object, giving it a sacred quality (Conty 473). Conty then expands upon Benjamin's observation of the decline of such traditional aura with the advent of reproduction, stating how Benjamin sees it as "positive and liberating" for the fact that it "[destroys] the exclusivity of access" that separates images from their audience

(Conty 473). One can witness instances of this in Adams' photograph "Clearing Winter Storm," as its depiction of a natural landscape sets it apart from human hands and intentions. Whether it through the four peaks in the clouds, the vertical monolith rising into the sky, or the shadowy valley between the monolith and the peak, Adams' photograph possesses a complexity in how it is composed of many separate elements but still maintains a unifying theme throughout. Through these subtleties Adams' photograph speaks to Conty's interpretation of the role of the optical unconscious in aura: to remind us of what is "lost to our conscious mind" in time (Conty 479).

Of course, to better understand how the optical unconscious affects the idea of aura in photographs one must also examine the idea of "cult status" which Conty ascribes to traditional aura as its manifestation in how viewers perceive images. According to Conty, cult status had the effect of giving sacred qualities to images by "an ideology of wholeness and continuity (Conty 481)," which served to expand the divide between photographs and observers. She explains that by stressing the cult status of a work of art, a viewer's experience of it could be "controlled and manipulated" and thus giving an air of authority that transforms an image into a cult image (Conty 475). At first glance, Adams' photograph seems to fit with the idea of the cult image in presenting a complete picture of a scene in nature. Its smooth contours give some uniformity to the peaks as they blend into the surrounding valley, while the clouds make the photograph slightly cold and unfeeling in tone by suggesting greater forces at work. The placement of the subjects also suggests an awareness of perspective on the part of Adams, which ties in to what Conty describes as the "investment of the imagination" that gives power to cult images by displaying a "projection of consciousness" to the "non-human world of nature (Conty 476)." Yet the uneasy balance between the dark forest trees and the unevenly snow-capped monolith illuminated by patches of sunlight seem to conflict with Conty's definition of cult status as the

“alienating myth that reifies the subject as...whole and self-certain (Conty 482),” suggesting that there is more to aura than the contiguous whole that define cult images.

Elaborating on this basic idea of cult status as representative of traditional images and art, Conty proceeds by introducing how the decline of traditional aura has led to the prevalence of the optical unconscious in the reproduced image. She acknowledges how both natural and cult images have been “invested or endowed with the capacity to return our gaze,” which can be seen as their aura (Conty 476). But she adds that the difference is while cult images subject viewers to the will of “institutions of power (Conty 478),” natural images through the optical unconscious have allowed viewers to experience a “passive reception that allows the world...to appear of its own accord,” undermining the traditional aura of the cult object (Conty 477). Expanding further, Conty describes how reproduction has allowed “an image of the past...to surge into view,” allowing viewers to reconnect with their past experience and emotions by bringing them into the focus of the present (Conty 479). Such is the case with Adams’ “Clearing Winter Storm,” which lends its own sense of historical authority and power to meet our gaze through its use of contrast and lighting. As a black-and-white photograph, “Clearing Winter Storm” possesses a sense of antiquity that allows viewers to focus in on a snapshot of the past. Yet the ubiquitous nature of the subjects featured in the scenery stand as testaments to the photograph’s timeless qualities while inviting observers to look closer at the details. From the high resolution of the individual tree tops to the snow pack and jagged edges of the rocky outcrop with its free-flowing waterfall, the textures of the image provides us with a sense of peace for nature. One must also take into consideration the effect of the sunlight on the photograph, presenting a gleaming contrast to the gloomy, foreboding shadows of the cliffs and trees through an ambience in the shifting clouds and the reflections of light from the snow. Even the steep inclines of the peaks pique our interest

as they stand out against the nebulous cloud cover, drawing our eyes up toward their summits as we come to wonder at their divine implications and reach for the clouds. All this takes advantage of the optical unconscious to let our imaginations fuel the aura of the photograph, aligning rather well with Knizek's interpretation of aura as reflecting the viewer's imagination (Knizek 361) and how it has allowed us to break free and make our own emotional connections to images.

Through a profound exploration of the optical unconscious in shaping the aura of a photograph, we come to understand that the concept of aura may be more than just a reflection of the decline of the cult image in modern photography. As photographs shift from possessing the traditional aura of old to the unconscious aura that allows us to have the past come into our focus, one must consider the implications of such a dramatic shift in how we perceive and connect with our world through images. Beyond just providing emotional links to viewers through the aura of images, the optical unconscious sheds new light on how the decline of aura has allowed the world to appear to us beyond the control of the privileged cult image. It is the key that has freed viewers to reconnect with their world and past experiences rather than be dictated by ideologies how to interpret the world around us. As a representation of the collective human experience, the optical unconscious can be seen as a tool of empowerment that pushes viewers to appreciate the values of their imagination in the aura of the photograph.

Honor Code Statement: I pledge that I have not violated the honor code in any way with the writing of this paper.

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