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Post Internet

Notes on the Internet and Art
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The cultural theorist Walter Benjamin is perhaps best known for his observation that the mechanical reproduction of unique works of art eliminates the “aura” or ritualistic cult value around these works. He writes: “Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be.” A mass-produced photograph of the *Mona Lisa*, for example, is not going to call for a ritualized pilgrimage to see it “in-person” and take-in its aura in the same way that the original is able to accomplish every single day at the Louvre. Instead of bemoaning this withering-away of aura due to mechanical reproduction, though, Benjamin turns on the point, suggesting that both the religious undertones and the focus on the individual which are suggested by aura are, in fact, a tool of fascist politics and that reproducible media, especially film – with its radically more dispersed and instantaneous modes of reception – open the door to an art conducted in the name of communism.

In this widespread reading of Benjamin’s theory of media, though, there is no clear-cut understanding of what it is exactly that Benjamin means by “aura.” As commentators such as Miriam Hansen have pointed out, Benjamin’s writings seem, at times, to celebrate the demise of aura, and, at other times, to demonstrate a certain nostalgia for it, if not suggesting that aura still, in fact, exists – albeit through very different means – in reproducible media such as photographs of people who are now dead. Likewise, there is a certain murkiness surrounding the ways in which Benjamin defines aura, both in the “Work of Art” essay and beyond it.

One way to understand his use of the term is that it denotes a quality which does not emerge from within the work and emanate out, but is rather accrued in time through both the work’s testimony to history and the trajectory of its social transactions through this history. That is, the aura around a work is not beauty or a magic which originates from the inside of the object, but a conceptual field around the work accrued through time as it reflects back upon its own history as a material object. In what follows, I’ll discuss Benjamin’s use of the term aura in these terms and, then, briefly consider its relevance to digital media reproduction.

Benjamin's earliest usage of the term "aura" occurred during one of his writing experiments while under the influence of hashish. He describes it here as an "ornamental halo, in which the object or being is enclosed as in a case." What one can gather from this description is that it is something external – "ornamental" – to the object; there is nothing magical *inside* the case of aura; the aura is generated by the case itself.

Later, in his essay "A Short History of Photography," Benjamin considers the influence of *time* on this "ornamental halo." He describes aura here as "a peculiar web of space and time: the unique manifestation of a distance, however near it may be." There is a suggestion in this description that aura involves not just the space of the physical object, but an invocation of linear time. This interest in the effect of time in the experience of a work puts Benjamin outside of many other theorists of the phenomenology of the art experience. For example, it contrasts with what Michael Fried, in his essay "Art and Objecthood," terms "presentness" or a sort of atemporality in the work of art. Whereas, for Fried, the most powerful art objects exist outside of time (and, thus, outside of theater) – continuously re-creating themselves anew every moment – the auratic work of art, for Benjamin, creates a sense of distance around itself by actively invoking a continuum of time (a continuum which would be eliminated by mechanical reproduction).

In one line of thought in Benjamin's writing on the subject, he discusses the experience of time in the aura of a work of art in relation to the materialist history through which the object has existed.

He points to this in "The Work of Art" essay, writing:

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.

The auratic authority around an object, then, is – again – not generated by something *inside* the object as if it were magic, but rather through an "ornamental halo" accrued through the object's testimony to a period of history. The fact that the object was there in a certain corner of historical time is what affords it any more authority than an identical object which did

not experience that history, much less a reproducible photograph of the object.

Related to this is the idea of provenance or the history of ownership of a work of art. If a particular painting has been passed through the hands of famous collectors for centuries, what one would find auratic about the painting is not the alchemical effect of the artist's application of paint to canvas, but rather the series of transactions from one historical figure or collecting institution to another over time. For example, if one can say that the *Mona Lisa* possesses any sort of aura for its viewers at the Louvre, it is not necessarily because they find it to be a particularly beautiful painting, but rather because of its history and prominence in the museum's collection. Art historians and aficionados may be entranced by its formal qualities, but the aura of the work for the public is, in Benjamin's terms, accrued through the painting's testimony to its history.

Benjamin also relates this to collections of objects other than works of art. For example, in his essay "Unpacking My Library," Benjamin discusses the value of the books in his collection in relation to their historical testimony and provenance. He writes, "The period, the region, the craftsmanship, the former ownership – for a true collector the whole background of an item adds up to the magic encyclopedia whose quintessence is the fate of his object." This relates to the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai's understanding of commodities as having a "social life" in which value around the object is accrued and lost depending on how it is socially transacted. For example, one of my favorite t-shirts belonged to my father when he was roughly the age I am now. When I see that t-shirt, it possesses, for me, a ritualistic value – an "ornamental halo" related to the transaction which led from my father's wardrobe to my own. If I had purchased an identical t-shirt at a retail store or even a thrift shop, my entire relationship to it would be different; its provenance would be a mystery to me and, thus, diminish the t-shirt's aura.

In the 20th century modernity which Benjamin experienced, he saw this sort of aura to be withering away as the mechanical reproduction of images diminishes the relationship of the mass public to unique works of art bearing traces of historical time. On the one hand, there is something bittersweet about this rupture, but, on the other hand, it presents a window – not on an artistic level per se, but on political one. All authority in the object which could be potentially utilized by the forces of fascist politics is challenged, opening the door to a new relationship of art and politics, one based on dispersion and the communication of communist political ideas.

In the age of digital reproduction, which would seem to even more radically destroy the possibility of aura, though, there is, paradoxically, a form of aura which persists not in relation to objects, but to information.

On social bookmarking sites like delicious.com, for example, works of net art become valuable based on the way in which the link to the work is transacted. If an artist produces a work and shares it through the Internet, the work can either stop there and be ostensibly forgotten or it can be bookmarked by another user, re-blogged elsewhere on the Web, or generally digitally dispersed. Additionally, the work can be re-versioned – meaning that it is appropriated, changed, and further re-circulated through the Internet as a mutation of the original. As all of this dispersion occurs, the “original” information on the Internet gains a certain aura – an “ornamental halo” or “a peculiar web of space and time: the unique manifestation of a distance, however near it may be.” Additionally, this aura is enhanced by the particular provenance of its trajectory through the Internet. If the information is collected and re-circulated by Internet users who have been bookmarking and re-blogging for long enough to have developed a proven “track record” as opposed to a user lacking a proven track record, then the aura of the information is further increased.

I recently viewed the original YouTube video which inspired the widespread “Double Rainbow!!” meme. In the video, an apparently stoned man – YouTube user Hungrybear9562 – is looking out onto a beautiful mountain landscape in which two rainbows are in the sky. He’s so profoundly moved by the site of the “double rainbow” that he begins an emotionally overwhelmed ramble in which he shouts “Double Rainbow!! Oh my God!!” and generally expresses his stoned enthusiasm for the vividness of the rainbows. Prior to my viewing of the original video, I had only come across versions of the video created by other YouTube users. When I did view this original video, the information it contained possessed an aura based on how widely the meme it inspired had been virally spread through the Internet. If the video had not been so widely dispersed, then it would have lacked that “ornamental halo” around the information it contained. For works of net art, this principal applies, as well, but with a slightly different emphasis. The aura of a work of net art is not necessarily based on its dispersion through mass culture, but through the a combination of both mass dispersion and dispersion through the smaller community of net artists and fans of net art.

For Benjamin, aura is a complicated term. One way to understand it is that it is, first, not synonymous with beauty. Aura is something placed onto the object by history as it is travels through social transactions. He believed, or at least advocated for, the idea that when objects with this aura around them are photographed and re-distributed, the aura is necessarily lost and that, furthermore, this loss of aura around the way works of art are received in culture creates an opportunity for an art based not on ritual, but rather politics. However, in the contemporary moment in which culture is radically more technologically reproduced than it was even in Benjamin's time, a sense of aura in terms of the social transactions around the work persists, for better or for worse, in the form of memes.