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Introduction
»Aura« as an Operative Concept

I. The »aura« and its challenge – nostalgia or potential for the future?

The challenge of the object is linked to the challenge of the aura. The very concept, often misused to describe some hidden, ontological qualities of an art work, was invented to seize the potency of cultural artefacts within varying contexts and media. Is the concept still useful to understand the impact of an object that we encounter in a museum or in the media? The history of how the concept was used brings us closer to an answer than an all too ready attempt at defining it.

Walter Benjamin’s essay «The artwork in the age of its technical reproducibility,» written and rewritten between autumn 1935 and 1939 and passed on to us in four different versions, one of them in French, had to wait until the 1960s before widely being discussed. Some of his friends, such as Bertolt Brecht, were not interested in the text, and the only one who commented on it to the author at length, Theodor W. Adorno, saw it as an attack on the autonomy of art, the strongholds of a truly critical media practice. In the late 1960s, authors such as Helmut Heienbühl and Hans Markus Enzensberger read it in order to sharpen their strategies of creating a politically interventionist art, far from Adorno’s utopias of autonomous art as a realm of freedom. Today, Benjamin’s essay is one of the most fundamental readings for art historians interested in media theory, but also one of the most controversially debated and, in that sense, still one of the hardest to understand.

Some of the most salient ideas seem to be beyond discussion – but they are not the reason why the text is still so powerful. Let us begin with these ideas generally attributed to Benjamin, in order to try to go beyond them in a profitable way. For Benjamin, the most radically reproducible artwork was a photograph and a film, thus a technical image that exists only as a copy, having no original, only visible as a reproduction. Benjamin opposes it to an original, handmade piece and its claim to authenticity. In the era of reproducibility – from the invention of the woodcut and other graphic techniques to the spread of photography to a media system dominated by film – also the original artefacts are seen as potentially reproducible. Thereby, they tend to lose their »aura«.

Benjamin did not lament the loss of the »aura«. For him, film, discussed as the last step in a de-auratization of the medium, was an efficient way of democratizing art. Although he was aware of the increasing power of the media industry, for him, in the hands of the masses, especially in a communist society, film could be a means to re-appropriate a form of life otherwise marked by all the capitalist forms of estrangement, in a Marxian sense. His decision to underline the emancipatory instead of the disciplining effects of the medium – if we consider the invention of the sound film, still relatively new at that time – was more than a naïve form of adhering to Soviet proletarian culture, which pretended to link the producers to the spectators. Instead of describing an effect of film, he incited the working class to exploit its potential – in a Brechtian sense. Up to the »Arab spring« and before the recent discoveries of worldwide data espionage, the Internet had also often been idealized as a primarily democratizing instrument of mass communication. Similarly, Benjamin did not yet see the movies as part of the »cultural industry,« later attacked by Horkheimer and Adorno as an organized way of integrating the dark side of man, suppressed since the Enlightenment, into capitalist, fascist or Stalinist disciplines of life. To him, Chaplin was more important – he demonstrated that film could attack a form of life dominated by the capitalist treatment of work as merchandise and by the fetishism of commodities. When he spoke about film, Benjamin did not mean the Hollywood system, Griffith, the continuity montage and its power to inscribe the spectator into the collective singular of a uniform mass of »one-dimensional« consumers, but rather the Soviet movies by Dziga Vertov or by Sergei Eisenstein. His ideal was film, considered in a certain sense as a non-auratic, democratized medium, guaranteeing, in principle, to every worker the right not only to see a movie, but to figure in it.

Benjamin developed his concept in the context of a media system established only since the 1920s. It was marked by the weekly news in cinema and by the invention of reportage in the illustrated press, thus, by images existing only as reproductions. In order to sharpen the instruments linked to the notion of the aura, we have to reininsert the most famous text, «The artwork in the age of its technical reproducibility,» into the context of his oeuvre.

Benjamin never defined what the »aura« is. For him, it is an operational concept he uses in order to describe something that relates an art work – or simply a picture, such as a photographic portrait, or an artefact – to a media system and that appears in moments of change in personal and collective perception. He agreed with analysts such as Paul Valery or Siegfried Kracauer in historicizing perception and considering it as conditioned by the media and by what Foucault would call the visual dispositive of a given period. Before Foucault and Foucauldian authors such as Jonathan Crary, Benjamin was one of the first to understand the historicity of media cultures and the discursive contexts of perception. It is thus just as important to consider the notion of »auras« within the context of media cultures as to oppose an original art work to its reproductions.

Sometimes, the notion of the »aura« is simply reduced to certain fetishist properties of art works exploited in commercialised museum politics. Some critical historians of art use this as a reason to fight the very notion. While preparing this section together with Régis Michel, we had controversial discussions on the issue. In a world marked by biopower and ever more systemic forms of exclusion – genocide being the ultimate consequence – it is understandable that the discussion on the »aura« seems too »auratic« in itself to bolster fights for political ethics even in the realm of institutions such as museums and media. Is the concept of the aura useful for sharpening the functions these institutions have in fulfilling society’s needs for mimesis – radically understood as the way a community imagines itself and its own conditions –, instead of commercializing leisure and infotainment? When we planned the section together with the CIHA and the colleagues responsible for its institutions, we wanted, from the beginning, to include a world marked by biopolitics into our discussions. Contemporary art, operating with video and other media, was to be considered as a critical forum for dealing with systemic forms of global injustice and exploitation. Furthermore, we saw Nuremberg, the city where the international congress for art history was planned to take place, as a challenge to discuss the Nazi past, also of art history, and the actuality of genocide, actual or cultural. When cultural and artistic heritage is destroyed
for political reasons – at the time, the remembrance of the destruc-
tions in Timbuktu was still fresh –, when other forms of exclusion
even from global conceptual arts have to be taken into considera-
tion, we did not want to merely focus on selected (mis-)conceptions
of the »aura.« Unfortunately, the differences concerning not the
direction of our work but the intellectual informing it were,
in the end, so great that Régis Michel and some other col-
leagues felt unable to bring the cooperation to an end. Conside-
ring Benjamin’s »aura« as a superseded concept, compatible, as we
were told, only with a diluted understanding of biopolitics, was only
one aspect of the conflict. Another aspect was cooperating with a
world organisation of art history such as the CIHA which most of
the speakers in the section consider as necessary, even desirable,
although nobody suffers from the illusion to think that the CIHA
is more perfectly democratic than other world-wide organisations. We
were very lucky when Bordeaux-based philosopher Guillaume Le
Blanc, a specialist in questions of Foucault, biopolitics, and »care,«
was prepared to co-chair the section – and to enrich the discussions
in a sense we agreed about from the beginning.

II. Time inscribed into presence: three aspects of the aura

II.1. Awakening: auralic experience at the threshold between media
systems
In general, Benjamin’s notion of the »aura« is not ontological,
but operative.11 From its first appearance in »A small history of
photography« (1931), it is linked to change, whether in individual
experience or in the collective ways of perception.12 Benjamin’s
repeated definition of the aura in spatial terms as »the unique
appearance of a far distance, as close as it might bee has obscured
the equally important temporal aspect of the notion.13 »Aura first
designates what is new in the early photographs by David Octavius
Hill, in the »Fisherman’s wives in New Haven.« Benjamin uses the
term to describe the difference of experience, such as that
condensed in photographs, to earlier forms of aesthetic experience,
such as that conveyed through painted portraits. He sees the early
photographers as accomplices of their models while both realize
the new form of presence conferred to them by the new medium,
capable, so to speak, of burning a hole for reality into the picture.
When the women avoid looking into the camera, they seem to feel
something like their being present beyond interpretation, outside
the traditions of signification conveyed through earlier media and
the established codes of cultural semiosis these are linked to.
Benjamin first described what he experienced during his drug
experiments in terms of the »aura« under the effect of opiates,
the things appear to be embedded in their surroundings like in a
veil. Also in his reading of Van Gogh, he stresses the harmony of
things within their almost ornamental ambiance. What is decisive,
however, is that this experience, under drugs, is visible only in the
moment of awakening.14 In the same way, it is only when an old
media system – such as portrait painting, for example in small
vignette portraits – is substituted by a new one – such as pho-
tography – that its original context survives as the »aura« of the
objects belonging to the context which is about to fade away. At
this very moment, the ways of perception, the aesthetic potentials
of the older as well as of the newer media system suddenly become
apparent. Both reveal themselves as historically contingent ways
of »aesthetic« – a quality not of the thing, but of its appearance in its
medium and in conscience. The historical time of the medium and
its context inscribes itself into what a spectator sees, as the diffe-
rence between the older and the newer form of encountering what
he actually perceives. Benjamin already developed these ideas in
his theory of surrealism and the way it arrives at »profane illumina-
tions« by recurring to things and media that have just gone out of
fashion.15 »Aura« is linked to change: of the mood of experiencing,
of the medium.

II.2. Aura in relation to trace: the non-auratic and the wrongly
auratic
The second notion of the aura is also linked to photography, as well
as to film. In »The artwork in the age of its technical reproducibility,«
Benjamin describes the loss of the »aura« in film – a medium lacking
an original – without any form of nostalgia. The loss of the aura is
linked to the capacity of photography and film to confer visibility to
things hitherto unseen, by transforming the image into a description
of the scene of a crime, into the autopsy of a social situation, into
the protocol of the unconscious. Bettine Menke has inscribed the
»aura,« used, in a dualistic tension with the notion of »trace.« Whereas the aura marks the afterlife of something gone, a trace leads us to something previously invisible.16 Menke’s trace leads to a radically positive aspect of the loss of the aura: the dem-
cratization of the media – and of a form of aesthetic experience
that allows to seize and to deal with aspects of social and psychic
life hitherto out of reach. Benjamin understands that any artificial
attempt at reconstructing the »aura« by just re-using traditional
forms of expression has to be opposed: whether in attempts at aesth-
eticizing photography or in a form of aestheticism, he knew from
the symbolists and from Proust. Also strategies of »aestheticizing
politics« had to be fought by politicizing aesthetics instead. What
we often describe as »auratic« in an art work in a museum, Benja-
min defines as its »exhibition value.« It is linked to practice: first to
mere transportability, thereby to visibility for many people, then to
the possibility of interpreting the work within many possible constel-
lations – or, more precisely, to use it as a »piece of evidence in the
historical process«, finally to adding efficacy to the object in the
context of diverging interests. The opposite of the »exhibition value
is the »sculpt value.« Exhibition value thus is the contrary of restoring
or commercializing the »aura« of the work through aesthetic rituals!
Exhibition value is an objectifying – not an »auratic« – notion. In
each concrete case, it is defined through a form of practice uniting
aesthetic and political aspects.

II.3. Latency and the »dialectic image«: potentials and readings
A third aspect of the »aura« can be found, in a more diffuse way,
in some of Benjamin’s late essays, gravitating around the »Arcades
project«, as well as around Charles Baudelaire – most prominen-
tly in the essay »On some motifs in Baudelaire« (1939). Here, Benjamin
reads the poet as operating beyond all the obvious foundations of
his art, as the most revealing analyst of his time. The tone is pri-
marily pessimistic: when looking onto the merchandise – or into
the early camera – the prolonged gaze of the beholders is no longer
turned back. The photographer who had still been an accomplice
of Hill’s »Fisherman’s wives in New Haven« in a common discovery
of modernity, has, so to speak, become silent. Baudelaire, thus, lived
the Paris of the Second Empire as a period of the loss of the aura.
However, even the late Benjamin links the aura to Proust’s »mémoire
involontaire.« There is still the latent potential, in the objects, to pro-
vide a different impulse than the stimuli of publicity, linked to an
external return of novelty. This potential at providing illuminations
beyond any expectation is auratic.17 However, it is now linked to
his notion of the dialectical image, again an operative concept.18
The »dialectic image« is the meaning an image can take when it is put
into a »constellation« with another. The »constellation« is meant to
inspire a new reading that opens up the way for political practices
hitherto unknown. Adorno criticized Benjamin because he seemed
to allow for psychological dialectics only within collective conscious-
ness, not for objective dialectics in reality (in a Marxian sense),
thereby reducing dialectics to a form of psychological ambiguity instead of taking the process of capitalism creating the conditions of its own abolishment as the basis. For him, there is no Hegelian 3rd in the constellation, and thus no dialectics, no development in terms of thesis, synthesis and anti-thesis. Indeed, Benjamin operates against this thinking linked to evolution, development and progress, and in favor of a philological approach. He means what Didi-Huberman, in a synthetic reading of Benjamin, Kracauer and Carl Einstein, defined as anachronism: the appearance of something unfitting in the stream of traditions, cutting through discourses and ideologies instead of affirming their continuity.20

It is important, however, that the dialectic image is more than just a constellation, it implies the sudden activation of a practical potential. In that sense, in a moment of increased presence, a moment of the past can have more actuality now than it had for the people who lived it, so to speak before awakening from a dream. Anselm Haverkamp rightly insists that the dialectic images have to be read, not just seen.21 When an image interacts with another in such a binary, dialectic constellation, it becomes effective in a new and unforeseen way. Although the notion of the aura faded into the background in Benjamin’s later essays, the tension that is conferred to the present through being correlated to a historical past can be described as auratic. We might insist that whereas the aura is a figure of latency meaning – in the sense that Haverkamp gave to latency –, the dialectic image is a figure describing the activation of that latency through reading – a reading, however, leading to free action. Latency is not a transcendental quality of the object, it is a potential revealed to what we might define as the political aspect of its fortuna critica. Again, the auratic element is the inscription of concrete, historical time into what is experienced as the present. And again, the aura is hereby connected with a sort of awakening, like the one from the drug experiments: however, it is a political awakening. We know that the potential to redeem the present through opening it up for action, for Benjamin, was messianic: there is always the possibility to rearrange the circumstances by taking just the small step which is required to make them livable...22

Are we, thus, beyond the aura? As one of the first historians not of art, but of aesthesis, of the historical conditions of perception, Benjamin analyses the different historical and media conditions that participate in experience, also the experiencing of an (art-)work. If the context of the work fades, it remains captured in the aura. A superseded media system lives on in its objects, like phantom pain can be felt after the amputation of a limb. If what is lost is substituted by superseded aesthetic rituals, the aura has to be destroyed. Aura finally also stands for the connection between aesthetic experience and political action. In the dialectic image, the viconfiguration of present experience and a concrete past comes to a flash of consciousness prompting to act: an awakening, an interface between dream and future. The aura can be read as the latent capacity of an artefact to make us wake up. Here lies the strength of the notion.

III. Aura against fetishism: unravelling phantasmagoria

Contemporary artists following in the footsteps of Duchamp and Warhol often exploit the interplay of a commodity and a work of art. Already Benjamin’s use of the term aura is characterized by a tension which it has with what Marx has described as commodity fetishism.23 In his last writings, notable in the essay he wrote, in 1939, to publicly announce the Passagenwerk, he coined the term phantasmagoria to define the ensemble of dreams and promises inscribed not only into a single commodity, but into a capitalist ensemble, such as Paris as a built dreamscape.24 The notion of a wrong aura that needs to be destroyed seems to be close to the fetishism of those objects making up the phantasmagoria of commercialized biotopes.25 Wrongly auratic objects parade in the theatres of desire, thereby increasingly revealing their deceptive character. The more the commodification of work spreads spleen, annoyance and the type of malaise Freud spoke about in Civilisation and its discontents, the more the commodities were charged with imaginary satisfactions – substitutions for the very desires suppressed by the system of commodification the product was part of.26 Benjamin was one of the first cultural analysts to correlate economic with psychological fetishism. Cultural scientists such as Hartmut Böhme recently have increased our sensibility for the omnipresence of fetishism – considered as the survival of magic as the other side of cultures marked by the Enlightenment – in contemporary culture.27 Benjamin insists on the role a collector can have if he withdraws objects from their everyday context. The decontextualization can make the beholder reflect on the status the object has in the phantasmagoria we usually unconsciously participate in.
Ever since Duchamp, the destruction of the auratic aura has driven contemporary art beyond its limits. A video by Aernout Mik entitled »Touch, rise and falls and first exhibited in 2008 at the New Orleans Biennial may stand for a contemporary way of dealing with commercial fetishism in art. The artist introduces us to the transit zone of an airport, one of the most typical non-places of biopolitics. People are controlled; some of them have to undress. The security personnel search their bags, bringing their belongings into total disorder. However, there are also views of beautiful commodities on the shelves of a gift shop. But then, shopping and searching are combined in a rhythm of degrading and upgrading. The whole video is about things, plundered and destroyed, and about people who are deprived of them and thereby reduced to their mere corporeality – what Giorgio Agamben labels their »bare life. However, there is no primeval scenario of an original or, in Marxist terms, of a non-estranged way of dealing with these objects. They are the link between the people and the complex, globalized, industrial world, not with some idyllic life in a lost paradise. If, for example, we see the clothes through the perspective of a person who has been forced to get undressed, they are no longer commodities fetishized through imaginary promises, but the most personal belongings of that person. Here, the commodity, seen as an item satisfying primary needs such as clothing, is reduced, against Benjamin’s orthodox view, to its use value. The mere need makes the difference with phantasmagoria. The difference between the fetishist promises and the usefulness of a commodity resides not in an ontological quality, but in the operative use of the notion. The ongoing presence of things caught, by Aernout Mik, within a nightmarish process of being transformed into garbage is in itself revealing, not only of phantasmagoria, but also of something like a primordial right to get what is needed in order to cover one’s »bare life.

IV. Display, Nazism, genocide

When we look at Aernout Mik’s video, we experience how the playful destruction of objects turns into a serious depravation of men, an allusion to the systematic exclusion of people in transit – a segregation reminding us of the reality of a silent genocide, taking place, for example, in the Mediterranean sea in front of Malta or of Lampedusa.

What seems to be a playful interference with the aura of an art work can also turn into a disastrous infamy (figs. 1–2). In 1911/12, Wilhelm Lehmbruck realized one of his most famous works, entitled »The great kneeling woman. Her head is slightly inclined, while she is kneeling down, absorbed not by an object of reverence but caught in a meditative moment, maybe even while bathing. In 1937, the Nazis placed a painting that Lovis Corinth had painted several months before his death in the Munich exhibition of degenerate art. Entitled »Ecce homo, it shows Christ, crowned with thorns, between a knight and a doctor. In this religious travesty of three friends posing for the figures, Corinth invites us to painfully confront the human condition. In 1937, some Nazi »curators had the idea to make Lehmbruck’s sculpture kneel down in front of Corinth’s Christ, thereby mocking the expressive style of the painter, whom the Nazi politicians declared to have »degenerated after having suffered from a stroke in 1911. However, also the inward reflection of »The great kneeling woman is ridiculed through the arrangement, as well as a whole artistic system marked by ideocy exploited in favor of a special evaluation in literary and commercial terms – thus the inscription on the wall in the room in which the works were exhibited.

The very act of inserting Lehmbruck’s meditative figure into a narrow-minded form of narration is already part of a devastating mockery directed against everything that is not biologically trium-

![Fig. 2 Lehmbruck's Great kneeling woman placed in front of Adolf Ziegler, The four elements, 1937, Munich, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, in the exhibition Geschichten im Konflikt, Haus der Kunst, June 10, 2012–January 13, 2013](image-url)
of Nazism in the collective unconscious, and thus in an unspecific, nightmarish dreamscape. True commemoration has to identify the concrete places we still live in as the places of Nazi crimes in a factual way. However, even a public used to the generalized pathos of the never again very often opposes inscriptions in the public places, the railroad stations, the buildings and the museums where these crimes took place. Installations such as Müller’s risk to operate as a repressed form of cultural biopolitics, reactivating what has been suppressed instead of documenting the wrongly auratic.13 Lehmbrock’s sculpture kneeling down in front of Ziegler — that is an echo of cultural genocide, instead of a critical reflection about it.


Photo credits