

## WALTER BENJAMIN'S DEFINITION OF THE *AURA*

For Benjamin, technology has developed to such an extent that the cult value, or auratic mode, of an art object is in the process of being eliminated from the human aesthetic experience. But in its retreat, it does not *give up the ghost* readily:

It falls back to a last entrenchment: the human countenance. In the cult of remembrance...the cult value of the image finds its last refuge. In the fleeting expression of a human face, the aura beckons from early photographs for the last time. This is what gives them their melancholy and incomparable beauty.<sup>1</sup>

There seems to be a tone of regret, here, at the demise of the aura. Indeed, this tone is seen elsewhere when he talks of the new technological developments within photography which 'put the darkness [the aura] entirely to flight.'<sup>2</sup> Even so, Benjamin does not, in fact, lament the loss of the aura. He sees it as an opportunity in the history of technology and the history of humanity for social change, primarily as a weapon in the struggle against Fascism. I think it is fair to say, however, that there is an ambivalence on Benjamin's part concerning the demise of the aura.<sup>3</sup>

So, 'What, then, is the aura?'<sup>4</sup> The *locus classicus* would appear to be:

We define the aura...as the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be. To follow with the eye—while resting on a summer afternoon—a mountain range on the horizon, or a branch that casts its shadow on the beholder, is to breathe the aura of those mountains, of that branch.<sup>5</sup>

However, this is not entirely the correct definition as intended by Benjamin; it is unbalanced because it leaves out the core constituent of the aura—its *authenticity*. Not only does it lead to a lack of balance, but it also leads to misrepresentation, and even misunderstanding. For

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin, W 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility.' (Third Version) in Eiland, H & Jennings, MW (eds.) *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings vol.4 1938-1940* (Belknap Press: Mass. 2003) pp.257-258; (this version is claimed to be the 'significantly revised version' p.270); hereafter, Benjamin's essay will be referred to as 'Work of Art.' The phrase *give up the ghost* is not used by Benjamin, but I couldn't resist using it.

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin, W *One-Way street and Other Writings* (Verso: London 1998) pp.247-8

<sup>3</sup> This is not a criticism; it may prove to be a great strength of the essay

<sup>4</sup> Benjamin, W 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility' (Second Version) in Jennings, Michael W (Gen. Ed.) *Walter Benjamin: selected writings Vol. 3 1935-1938* (Belknap Press: Mass., 2002) p.104

<sup>5</sup> 'The Work of Art' p.255;

example, Richard Wolin, when discussing the *work of art* essay, states: ‘Thus, Benjamin defines the aura as “the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close [an object] may be.”’<sup>6</sup> Wolin emphasises the *spatial* aspect when he defines the aura in this way, despite the fact that he acknowledges the significance of Benjamin’s use of words like *authenticity*, *authority* and *history*. This casual misrepresentation by Wolin is surpassed by Leo Manovich who seems to completely misuse Benjamin’s employment of the concept of aura. In his book *The Language of New Media*, in a section on telepresence, Manovich discusses simultaneous communication with a place that is physically remote. In his discussion, he looks at two key theoreticians of the old and new media: Paul Virilio and Walter Benjamin. He says both solve the problem of the boundary between the observer and the observed in the same way: they put ‘spatial distance’ between the two; and both see technology as ‘destroying this distance’. Manovich says ‘Benjamin defines aura as “the unique phenomenon of a distance.’ Here, in defining aura in this way, Manovich puts the emphasis on spatial *distance*. What Manovich is actually doing is corroborating the collapsing of *physical* distance—near and far, and the vastness of geographical space—by technology (which is bemoaned by Virilio) with an inexact recourse to Benjamin’s notion of the aura. Thus, *via* two-way telepresence one ‘can affect change on material reality over *physical distance in real time*.’ (my italics)<sup>7</sup> This may very well be so, however, Benjamin’s concept of the aura has got absolutely nothing to do with *physical distance*.

For Benjamin, the use of the term *distance* (in a physical sense) is only used in relation to natural objects (and even here distance is defined as the *semblance* of distance) and not in relation to historical works of art. What seems to be neglected is that Benjamin used the example of ‘a mountain range on the horizon, or a branch’ as a way of *illustrating* his definition of the concept of the aura. Two pages earlier, he had begun his explication of the aura: ‘even the most perfect reproduction [lacks] the here and now of the work of art—its unique existence.’ Importantly, it is this unique existence that bears its history (its changes over time and its provenance). Crucially, the ‘here and now of the original *underlies* the concept of its *authenticity*,’ and it is this *authenticity* that eludes technological reproduction. When technological reproduction places the work of art in a new setting (for example, choral work enjoyed in a private study), it is the *here and now* of the work of art that is devalued,

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<sup>6</sup> Wolin, R *Walter Benjamin: an Aesthetic of Redemption* (Columbia Press: New York 1982) p.187. Wolin, who doubtless understands and knows Benjamin better than me (I just think he’s too casual with the definition), takes this quotation from *Illuminations* edited by Hannah Arendt, which contains an earlier version of the essay but which, nevertheless, contains all the relevant details

<sup>7</sup> Manovitch, Lev *The Language of New Media* (The MIT Press: Mass., 2001) pp.170-173

and consequently, the work of art's *authenticity* is lost in the process. Significantly, we see, that the process of technological reproduction:

touches on a highly sensitive core, *more vulnerable than that of any natural object*. That core is its authenticity. The authenticity of a thing is the quintessence of all that is transmissible from its origin on...[its] historical testimony... And what is really jeopardised when the historical testimony is affected is the *authority of the object*. (my italics)<sup>8</sup>

Clearly, there is a dimension here in the historically constructed work of art that is not in the natural object: the core of authenticity. This core contains and transmits all the constituents that comprise it and make it what it is. Once this core has been lost through reproduction it has a momentous affect on the art object: the object loses its authority. It is the loss of authority that leads to the loss of aura: '[W]hat withers in the age of the technological reproducibility of the work of art is the latter's aura.'<sup>9</sup> Benjamin then goes on to *illustrate* the concept of the historical object's aura by analogy to the aura of a natural object (which does not have the core of authenticity):

The concept of the aura which was *proposed above* with reference to *historical* objects can be *usefully illustrated* with reference to an aura of *natural* objects. We define the aura *of the latter* as the unique *apparition* of a distance, however near it may be. To follow with the eye—while resting on a summer afternoon—a mountain range on the horizon or a branch that casts its shadow on the beholder is to breathe the aura of those mountains, of that branch. (my italics)<sup>10</sup>

The aura of a natural object, therefore, is defined in terms of the *apparition* of a distance, what Benjamin elsewhere calls the *semblance* of distance.<sup>11</sup> And in respect of the natural object (and which also applies to the historical object), it does not matter whether the object is actually physically distant like a mountain range or whether it is close by like the branch of a tree (close enough to cast a shadow on the subject)—physical distance is not the issue.<sup>12</sup> Distance is a metaphor for *separation*, and the *screen* that separates the object from the

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<sup>8</sup> 'Work of Art' pp. 253-254; my italics within the indented quotation and throughout this paragraph

<sup>9</sup> 'Work of Art' p.254; in Benjamin, Walter *One-Way street and Other Writings* (Verso: London 1998) he defines it: 'What is aura exactly? A strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close the object may be.' We could accept this if it wasn't elaborated elsewhere.

<sup>10</sup> 'Work of Art' p.255

<sup>11</sup> Benjamin, Walter *One-Way street and Other Writings* (Verso: London 1998) p.259

<sup>12</sup> Benjamin's note (11th) on p. 272 of 'Work of Art' is instructive: 'The cult image remains "distant, however near it may be."'

subject is its authenticity. This is what is 'usefully illustrated' by the analogy with nature. Of course, some historical objects are physically distant (for example, the Mona Lisa is secluded behind a glass screen in the Louvre) but that is just the object being physically distant in addition to being *distinct* as an object of authority by virtue of its authenticity. Thus, in order to have a more balanced understanding of the aura, the following definition of Benjamin's aura should apply: *the aura is the manifestation of authenticity as a mode of separation.*