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## Reading Walter Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*: The Concept of Aura and its varied Implications

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**ABSTRACT:** In his literary-critical writings, Walter Benjamin developed the notion of 'Aura'. 'Aura', for him, is the 'unique', 'here and now' of a work of art. The industrialization created the atmosphere of mass-reproduction, leaving the artwork not untouched. With the reproduction of the artwork, the authenticity of the work of art was gradually eroded. The loss of authenticity went hand in hand with the creation of a situation, in which the call towards the cultic/ ritualistic value of the 'original' was broken. Childhood as the last aura represents the tension between 'proximity and distance'. The distance created by the film vis-à-vis the audience; the masses, prepared the ground for the masses to assume the role of critic. The socio-cultural transformational value of the destruction of aura represented itself in the mobilization of the masses against the aesthetics of war engendered by the cult of fuhrer during the epochal stretch of fascism.

**Key Words:** Aura, Authenticity, Film, Fascism

Embarking on a critique of 'aura' in Benjamin's work it is imperative to outline the notion of dialectical thought, which dominantly shaped moment the thought his critical treatment of art. The historical analytical method, which Benjamin subscribed to, related to the Marxist tenet of dialectical materialism. In line with this framework of the thought-system, Benjamin astutely resorted to the analysis of art and artwork in terms of the real material conditions of cultural and social relations. One of his singular dialectical perspectives of the philosophical matrix of analysis is summed up in his unique idea of 'dialectics at still stand'. This idea represents a radically new way of looking at the concept of time. In reference to this idea, Benjamin advocated the urgency to perceive a moment of dialectical movement not only in the pattern of development, but also in the suspension of time. The suspended moment of time adjuncts the forces of past and future in such a moment, in which the revolutionary rupture in time takes place. The extensive implication of this notion applies to the understanding of cultural, aesthetic and socio-historical frameworks undergoing a radical transformation at a particular stage of time, deriving its strength from the dialectical material philosophical understanding. Given the presence of this philosophical insight, it is not out of place to note that Benjamin's understanding of 'Aura' corresponds to his uniquely distinct concept of time. 'Aura', in his oeuvre, takes the form of a category which reflects the art and artwork located at a juncture, where the forces of past and future suffuse to charge the artwork with a dimension that oscillates ostensibly as much forward as backward. Any understanding of artwork stands at the theoretical pedestal, where it has to be perceived in terms of its potential that it receives from its location in past, from its positioning in present, and its situation in future. These interspersed domains affect and throw their weight on the perception of its reception, judgment and appropriation.

In his essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Benjamin has argued that the reproduction of the work of art continued in human history intermittently and in leaps. This reproduction manifested itself with a highly remarkable intensity in the age of industrialization. Benjamin conceived his thesis of 'aura' and its disappearance in this very image of history of the extensive proliferation of the forces of production as speculated by Marx concerning the superstructure of the production, which Benjamin refers to at the outset of this essay on the work of art. Benjamin seeks to establish that the most essential and irreplaceable cornerstone of a work of art emanates from its one-off location in a given time and space. As he argues, this kind of location, contentiously 'unique location' represents the authenticity of the work of art. If one were to agree that the conditions of reproduction represent an on-going distance from the original location of the art work, authenticity of the work of art

undergoes gradual jeopardy. And Benjamin contends, what is really subtracted in this process is the 'aura' of a work of art, for aura inhibits in the notion of authenticity of the work of art. Conscious of the fact that the idea of 'original' resides in the changing temporal terrain of history, which Benjamin testifies to in his argument about the changeability of tradition (-s), he relates the concept of authenticity to the idea of 'original' and argues: "The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity" (I). Accentuating the thesis of the correlation of authenticity with the historical terrain in which the changing notion of 'original' is located, he emphasizes the authenticity as the historical testimony. Benjamin had insisted that a work of art experiences the appreciations and judgment guided by transforming necessities of history. Strengthening this perspective about the work of art and its particularity in terms of 'authority' he writes about the loss of aura during historical process: "And what is really jeopardized when the historical testimony is affected is the authority of the object. One might subsume the eliminated element in the term "aura"..." (II). The incessant interrelationship between the authenticity and history is one of the core arguments about the concept of 'aura' in Benjamin's thought-system. History, as a precise illustration of the stages of time encounters inexorable breaks in continuity. Concerning the works of art, these breaks mirror their historical value for a definite stretch of time, in the frame of which somewhere the border between old and new evokes itself. As such, at each stage the aura, *i.e.* the location of the work of art in 'here and now' of time is established anew. This fact is argumentatively established in Benjamin's essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, in which he comprehensively and exhaustively outlines the transformed values ensuing from uninterrupted innovations in the mediums of creation of the works of art. He dwells on the development of the representational dynamics from lithography till photography and beyond that up to the appearance of film as a work of art. In line with this argumentative framework of Benjamin, it can be safely assumed that aura is broken with the caesura of the history of representation in the works of art. This idea of caesura or rupture and its correlation with jeopardized state of authenticity or authority of the work of art informs the philosophy of history of artwork in Benjamin. He vigorously countered the conception of history as a denomination of linear progress and proposed a dialectics in history, according to which at a particular point of time, past and present enter into a moment of collision, in which memory unleashes the radical rupture in the course of historical progress.

In the age of the intensification and extension of industrialization, the idea of the 'original' form of the work of art finds itself subjugated to a new kind of its reception. The copies inundate the scenario of art. The industrialization achieves the canonization of the copies, for copies are sold out commercially for the purpose of the acquiescence to the pulls and demands of market-relations. On account of the proliferation of the copies of the original, the commodification of the work of art gains ground. Thus the masses, for the first time, enter into the circulation of the works of art by virtue of its subjugation to the dominance of market-relations. Adorno has called this situation the age of the emergence of the 'culture-industry'. The 'original' location; *i.e.* 'here and now' stands hard put to resist this commodification and the 'aura' is subtracted from the copies. The individual receiver of the works of art bewilders the copy, but this bewilderment goes hand in hand with the reification of the work of art. Being exposed to the mass-consumption, the moment of bewilderment transforms itself into the moment of exhibition creating the possibility of critique. This moment refers to the exhibition-value or the fetishism (III) of the copy.

This on-going process of replication, in a positive sense in the course of the history of works of art, witnesses a tumultuous change. The cult value of the works of art subordinates itself to its total corrosion. The ritualistic values are broken in that the quasi-mystical coverage of the work of art is incontestably unveiled and demystified. Of such a moment, Benjamin writes: "Certain statutes of gods are accessible only to the priest in cella; certain Madonnas remain covered nearly all year round; certain sculptures on medieval cathedrals are invisible to the spectator on ground level. With the emancipation of the various art practices from ritual go increasing opportunities for the exhibition of their products" (IV). Arguing in the same direction, explaining the receding of the cultic and ritualistic value of the work of art, Benjamin contends: "...for the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual. To an ever greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility" (V).

The word 'reproducibility' represents the optimistic tenor of the reproduction which brought into effect the subtraction of aura from the work of art. Just as the aura of statues are broken in the moment of the magnificence of the reproduction, the aura of authorship is destined to collapse in the moment when the reader not only indulging in reading the great works acquiring his accessibility to 'great' creations, rather becomes able to become himself a writer too. This cataclysm emanates from the innovations brought into force by the irreversible course of industrialization. About this shift in the history of reading/writing, Benjamin writes: "With the increasing extension of the press, which kept placing new political, religious, scientific, professional, and local organs before the readers, an increasing number of readers became writers-at first, occasional ones. It began with the daily press opening to its readers space for "letters to the editor". And today there is hardly a gainfully employed European who could not, in

principle, find an opportunity to publish somewhere or other comments on his work, grievances, documentary reports, or that sort of thing” (VI).

Only in one respect, Benjamin retains the conceivability of the non-distortable existence of the cult. That cult is the cult of the face of the early life, the childhood. He puts forward his contention: “For the last time the aura emanates from the early photographs in the fleeting expression of human face. This is what constitutes their melancholy, incomparable beauty” (VII).

That photograph perpetually invites us. Childhood also enchants and at different points of life communicates with the self. This communication and invitation is a dialectical one, and a healthy one. The essentially retained and in the lifetime inviolability of the memory of the childhood fulfils the need to resuscitate the present sphere of the deserted and unfrequented state of existence. About this kind of the dialectics Benjamin has written at some length in his *Little History of Photography*. He writes there: “Experience of the aura...arises from the transposition of a response characteristic of human society to the relationship of the inanimate or nature with human beings. The person we look at, or who feels he is being looked at, looks at us in turn. To experience the aura of a phenomenon we look at means to invest it with the ability to look back at us” (VIII). When Benjamin invokes childhood with the capacity to address to the melancholy and beauty, he is presenting a picture of life, which consistently meets our existential demand. Human life is incontestably enveloped with the marks of gloom and happiness; *i.e.* melancholy and beauty. The melancholy of the present needs to be smoothened and the beauty of life has to be held back, remembered, retained and preserved, in the least the ‘crumbling’ the memory attached to it. In appreciation of this matrix of life, Benjamin employs the force of memory. In his essay on Proust, Benjamin underlines this kind of ‘rejuvenating’ power of memory of the past and argues: “This is the work of the *mémoire involontaire*, the rejuvenating force which is a match for the inexorable process of aging. When the past is reflected in the dewy fresh “instant”, a painful shock of rejuvenation pulls it together once more...” (IX). Making this assertion, Benjamin articulates the tension between the past and its entwinement with the receding and yet not fully receded, yet always recharged semblance of the awesome present. The past does not subscribe to tenuousness and the present illuminates with the tenaciousness. While understanding the discourse of past and present under the rubric of ‘memory’, it is relevant to note the singular and compelling conception of the operation of aura from a distinct dialectical perspective of the ‘proximity and distance’.

Benjamin outlines the aura emanating from the dialectic of ‘proximity and distance’ arguing that “We define the aura of the latter as the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be” (X). This kind of aura reigns on hallow created by the eminence of the person. They live in eternity through their works left behind after their effacement from the earthly domain of a given time, albeit a given historical -stretch. Uncontestably, their physical belongings are imbued by the memory of their existence in ‘here and now’. Once they pass away, the objects which they possessed and left behind after they passed away, takes on the tinge of hallow. These hallow rest on the imagination of the immortality attached with the objects, for their immortality rests on the immortality of the owner. In his *Little History of Photography*, in this regard, Benjamin writes about Schelling’s coat that “the very creases in people’s clothes have an air of permanence. Just consider Schelling’s coat. It will surely pass into immortality along with him: the shape it has borrowed from its wearer is not unworthy of the creases in his face” (XI). In each following generation, Schelling’s hallow would be perceived differently, thereby substantiating the changing historical context of Schelling and the changing contexts of the remembrance [Gedächtnis] of his image.

One of the central theses of Benjamin’s concept of the reproduction of the work of art relates to the argument that the reproduction places the receiver in a distinct relation to the object produced. This assumption attests the axiomatic proposition that the reproduction involves the project of reaching out to the recipient or audience. Benjamin contextualizes the essence of reproduction imbedded in the production of film in this theoretical framework. He postulates the inevitable necessity of the presence of the receiver in the process of the technical reproduction and writes about the technical reproduction as follows: “By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own peculiar situation, it reactivates the object reproduced” (XII). The technical production, which Benjamin here is talking of, refers to his position on film as an artwork. The film confers such a value to the represented objects that the masses find themselves in a position of engagement with the reality. Benjamin argues that the actor acts before the changing perspectives of camera and hence in his performance, he remains distanced from the audience. This distance enables the audience, the masses to assume the role of critic. About the historical phase of the presence and mobilization of masses as a prerequisite for the production and reception of film, Benjamin writes: “Both processes are intimately connected with the contemporary mass movements. Their most powerful agent is the film” (XIII). It is this historical context of the destruction of aura in the production of film which accompanies Benjamin’s hypothesis of the destruction of the aura of photography by the production of film. He wrote: “Just as lithography virtually implied the illustrated newspaper, so did photography foreshadow the sound film” (XIV). It must be clearly

understood that Benjamin theorization of the destruction of aura involved in the production of film by cuttings (XV) in shots goes hand in hand with the awareness of the masses as becoming the critics (XVI) of social reality. It is with the entry of the masses as the recipient of film as a work of art that the revolutionary message of the work of art is actualized for the first time. The masses function not only as the critics of reality, rather also the agent of perspectival change of social reality. Benjamin underlines: “We do not deny that in some cases today’s films can also promote revolutionary criticism of social conditions” (XVII).

As the critical agent in the process of social process, the masses become instrumental in yet another instance of the destruction of aura. This aura relates to the Fascist cult of fuehrer [leader of the Third Reich in Germany 1933-1945]. At this all-important juncture of history, when the masses understood and engaged themselves with the destruction of the cult of fuehrer, they rallied against the aestheticism of war. The fuehrer cult of Fascism thrives on the aura of the valorised beauty of war. Benjamin writes as to how the war is conceived as beautiful by the Fascists: “War is beautiful because it establishes man’s dominion over the subjugated machinery by means of gas masks, terrifying megaphones, flame throwers, and small tanks” (XVIII). This kind of beauty can be questioned, challenged and rebutted strongly by the masses, who undertake the task of de masking this valorisation of war. The valorisation informs the sublimating of war. Benjamin had written as to how the sublime can be repulsed: “The uniqueness of a work of art is inseparable from its being imbedded in the fabric of tradition. This tradition is thoroughly alive and extremely changeable. An ancient statue of Venus, for example, stood in a different traditional context with the Greeks, who made it an object of veneration, than with the clerics of the Middle Ages, who viewed it as an ominous idol” (XIX). For Benjamin, the idolization of war and anesthetization of politics is to be countered with the politicization of art. He writes at the end of his *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*: “This is the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic...Communism responds by politicizing art” (XX). This assertion corresponds directly with the argument with which Benjamin had begun his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*: “The concepts which are introduced into the theory of art in what follows differ from the more familiar terms in that they are completely useless for the purposes of Fascism. They are, on the other hand, useful for the formulation of revolutionary demands in the politics of art” (XXI).

## CONCLUSION

This paper highlights the relevance of a work of art in terms of its location in the ‘here and now’, which represents its aura in historical-stretch. The value of the work of art undergoes transformations according to the caesura of history. For example, in the tradition of the enlightenment, Goethe’s works related to the assertion of humanism. In our age, Goethe is being interpreted in terms of its potential to address to the questions of the global capital. Benjamin attached value of aura to the childhood, which is substantiated in the autobiographical writing of his own childhood in Berlin about the turn of the century. Benjamin contends that the film as an artwork destroys the aura of action, as on the one hand the actor stands before the constantly changing angles of the camera and on the other hand his presence is subjected to the incessant edition. However, Benjamin’s thesis of aura carries a positive moment. Once the aura of a work of art is destroyed, it acquires the capability to suit the demands of history with the caesura of cultural and social questions. Benjamin does not intend to reduce, in the same vein, the artistic value of film by its constant ‘cutting’ of the actions, albeit the ‘original actions’, rather he-in a vital posture- underlines his thesis that film, for the first time, equips the audience, the masses with the critical capacity to reflect on the social crises. Benjamin, continuing his hope on the masses, emphasizes that the masses as the receiver of the cult, break the cult (breaking the cult for Benjamin signified the destruction of aura) of fuehrer and act as the agent of history thwarting the sublimating of the fascistic war.

## ENDNOTES

(I). Benjamin, Walter: *Illuminations*. Edited and with an Introduction by Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken Books. 1968. Print. p. 220.

(II). Benjamin, Walter: *Illuminations*. Edited and with an Introduction by Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken Books. 1968. Print. p. 221.

(III). Fetishism stands for the relationship between people and material objects which allows for the establishment of the false models of causality for natural events.

(IV). Benjamin, Walter: *Illuminations*. Edited and with an Introduction by Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken Books. 1968. Print. p. 225.

(V). Benjamin, Walter: *Illuminations*. Edited and with an Introduction by Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken Books. 1968. Print. p. 224.

(VI). Benjamin, Walter: *Illuminations*. Edited and with an Introduction by Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken Books. 1968. Print. p. 232.

- (VII). Benjamin, Walter: *Illuminations*. Edited and with an Introduction by Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken Books. 1968. Print. p. 226.
- (VIII). Benjamin, Walter: *Little History of Photography*.  
[www.totuusradio.fi/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/benjamin-little-history-of-photography.pdf](http://www.totuusradio.fi/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/benjamin-little-history-of-photography.pdf)
- (IX). Benjamin, Walter: *Illuminations*. Edited and with an Introduction by Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken Books. 1968. Print. P. 211.
- (X). Benjamin, Walter: *Illuminations*. Edited and with an Introduction by Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken Books. 1968. Print. p. 222.
- (XI). Benjamin, Walter: *Little history of Photography*.  
[www.totuusradio.fi/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/benjamin-little-history-of-photography.pdf](http://www.totuusradio.fi/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/benjamin-little-history-of-photography.pdf).
- (XII). Benjamin, Walter: *Illuminations*. Edited and with an Introduction by Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken Books. 1968. Print. 221.
- (XIII). *Ibid.*
- (XIV). Benjamin, Walter: *Illuminations*. Edited and with an Introduction by Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken Books. 1968. Print. 219.
- (XV). “There is no such place for the movie scene that is being shot. Its illusionary nature is that of second degree, the result of cutting.” Quoted from Benjamin: Benjamin, Walter: *Illuminations*. Edited and with an Introduction by Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken Books. 1968. Print. P. 233.
- (XVI). “The film makes the cult value recede into background...by putting the public in the position of critic...” Quoted from Benjamin, Walter: *Illumination*. Edited and with an Introduction by Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken Books. 1968. Print. p. 240.
- (XVII). Benjamin, Walter: *Illuminations*. Edited and with an Introduction by Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken Books. 1968. Print. p. 231.
- (XVIII). Benjamin, Walter: *Illuminations*. Edited and with an Introduction by Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken Books. 1968. Print. p. 241.
- (XIX). Benjamin, Walter: *Illuminations*. Edited and with an Introduction by Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken Books. 1968. Print. p. 223.
- (XX). Benjamin, Walter: *Illuminations*. Edited and with an Introduction by Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken Books. 1968. Print. p. 242.
- (XXI). Benjamin, Walter: *Illuminations*. Edited and with an Introduction by Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken Books. 1968. Print. p. 218.