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The Aura of the Object and the Work of Art: A Critical Analysis of Walter Benjamin's Theory in the Context of Contemporary Art and Culture

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Abstract: This text is a critical interpretation of Walter Benjamin's theory in the context of the contemporary situation in art and culture. Benjamin's innovative method of analysis and key concepts in art theory and their simultaneous research and political function are carefully reconstructed. This critical analysis is centered on the main concept of Benjamin's philosophical aesthetics, the concept of 'aura'. This analysis shows how Benjamin mixes and replaces the aura of the work of art with the aura of the historical object. Benjamin's main thesis about the loss of the aura of the work of art in the age of its technical reproducibility is disputed. Technical reproducibility does not take away the aura of the work of art, but separates its aura from the aura of the historical object. Auraticness is inherent in every work insofar as it is a work of art. The aura of the historical object does not disappear in modernity either. With the emergence of historical and aesthetic consciousness, of the historical and art museum, the almost mechanical production of auratic objects began in modernity. As a result of the critical analysis of the concept of "aura", the main binary oppositions that frame Benjamin's theory of art—art with aura/art without aura; art with cult value/art without cult value; aestheticization of politics/politicization of art—are questioned. At the end of this text, the key lines of analysis proposed by Benjamin in an attempt to make sense of the radical changes in art since the beginning of the 20th century are used to outline the contemporary situation in art and the changes in perception with which it is associated.



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1. Introduction

At the beginning of "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility" (final version of the text—1939), Walter Benjamin places a quote from Paul Valéry, in which the French poet emphasizes the importance of technical changes for understanding the situation in the arts in modernity. Valéry is adamant that the major changes in the field of science and technology at the beginning of the 20th century could not but affect the technique of art and change the concept of art itself. Benjamin tries to make sense of this very change and to propose a new type of analysis and new concepts with which to understand the radical changes that have taken place.

The new type of analysis that Benjamin proposes is inspired by Marx's analysis of the basic relations of the capitalist mode of production. He hopes that by adapting the Marxian type of analysis to the field of art (i.e., analyzing the relations and mode of production of works of art), he will be able to outline the tendency of the development of art under existing socio-economic conditions. Benjamin explicitly emphasizes that he has no intention of reflecting on the question of what art will be after the seizure of power by the proletariat or in a classless society. He is convinced that the new analysis and the new concepts for understanding art that he offers will contribute to the radical changes in the existing class society.

Benjamin's text has a dual function. It is both a step in the field of art theory and an aid in the revolutionary struggle to create the new classless society. This struggle also has its dimension in the field of art politics and the new concepts proposed by Benjamin should help the formation of revolutionary demands in it. In other words, in order to create the new art of the new society, new concepts must first be created, with the help of which the radically new situation in art and its new tasks can be adequately understood. The old aesthetic concepts, Benjamin notes, that fascism mainly serves ("creativity" and "genius", "eternal value" and "mystery") must be rejected. The new concepts he proposed ("aura", "cult value" and "exhibition value"), according to him, could not be used for the purposes of fascism.

In Benjamin's perspective, not only has art radically changed in modernity, but also art theory, which can no longer, as with "bourgeois" autonomous art, stand aloof from social and political changes and conflicts, but must take a position in them. The theorist's work is not apolitical, because all theoretical concepts have their own political dimension. They either protect the existing socio-economic order or create opportunities for its revolutionary transformation. This also applies to concepts in the field of art theory, which at first glance seem as far from the political as possible, such as the concept of "aura", for example.

The radical changes in art from the first decades of the 20th century, according to Benjamin, are due to the appearance of photography and cinema, i.e., of the new technical means of producing and reproducing images, which are rapidly becoming new technical means of creating works of art. Traditional art (painting, sculpture and graphics) reacted to these new technical means with the emergence of the doctrine of "art for art's sake" (Benjamin calls it "theology of art") and later with the emergence of the idea of "pure" (abstract or without -subjective) art (Benjamin calls it "negative theology"). The most radical reaction, however, is that of the Dadaists, who alone realize that photography and cinema have not simply rendered art's mimetic representation of visible reality meaningless, but have destroyed its "aura" and "authority", changed its function. Benjamin sees their work as an example of a conscious destruction of the aura of the work of art in order to expose this central experience of modern man with socially conditioned reality.

With the advent of photography and cinema, according to Benjamin, art was finally freed from its "cult value", which persisted even after its secularization. The social meaning of art (its intrinsic "use value") is no longer grounded in religion and cult, but in politics. These radical changes in art, questioning its traditional concept, are combined with a radical change in the perception of art. The individual aesthetic contemplation of unique works of traditional art has been displaced by the collective consumerist perception inherent in the masses. Benjamin does not use the adjective "consumer", but the description he gives of the new type of perception warrants calling it that: "the entertaining masses...submerge the work of art in themselves" (Benjamin 2022, p. 72).

2. The Paradox of "Authenticity" of the Work of Art in Modernity

Radical changes in art and its perception are socially conditioned. They are the result of the modernization of society, the basis of which—according to the Marxist view shared by Benjamin—is the establishment of capitalist relations of production. Changes in society, culture and art are changes in the "superstructure" that result from changes in the "base" (production relations), but become visible only later. By the second half of the 1930s, when Benjamin wrote his text, they were, according to him, clearly defined.

Traditional arts (painting, sculpture and graphics) have lost their social significance because their structure no longer corresponds to the new socio-economic conditions in which modern man finds himself. The emergence of the avant-garde (and especially Dadaism) is the ultimate attempt of traditional art to make itself adequate to the new socio-economic conditions and the new perception born from them. However, this experience is limited by the structure of traditional art. Photography and especially cinema have displaced traditional art because their structure corresponds to the new socio-economic conditions.

Capitalism creates the masses, mass production and mass consumption. It turns man into a commodity, i.e., alienates him from himself. This self-alienation is due to the capitalist relations of production, but it also has its projections in the modern urban way of life that arose on the basis of these relations. Benjamin describes the experience of life in the modern city, the experience of the masses and with the masses, as a continuous series of shocks. This new experience with reality also forms a new perception of art. Cinema, by its very structure, corresponds only to this new experience and new perception. This, as already mentioned, is not individual concentrated contemplation, but collective diffused perception.

Benjamin's text does not pretend to be simply a more adequate (relative to traditional aesthetics and its basic concepts) description of the situation in art at the beginning of the 20th century. It is an attempt to outline the trend and formulate "revolutionary demands in the politics of art", that is, to assist the future revolutionary change in society, which must be carried out by the "proletarianized masses" (Benjamin 2022, p. 77). Benjamin's analysis shows, however, that the masses are indifferent to traditional art in its most revolutionary manifestations, i.e., to the avant-garde. Their attitude towards the work of Picasso, for example, is "most reactionary" (Benjamin 2022, p. 59). In such a case, the question that Benjamin indirectly poses is: With the masses rejecting the avant-garde in traditional art and seeking primary entertainment in the cinema, how can the cinema contribute to the future revolution?

Benjamin's answer is that entertainment does not necessarily preclude the acquisition of critical content and new forms of perception. He is encouraged by the mass response to Chaplin's socially critical films. For him, this "progressive" reaction is proof that entertainment does not exhaust the attitude of the masses to art. In his attempt to defend such a possibility, Benjamin turns to the traditional perception of architecture. Architecture, when we do not look at it as tourists, Benjamin writes, is perceived not contemplatively, but through use, i.e., "tactile". Benjamin is convinced that the "distracted state" (Benjamin 2022, p. 73) in which the masses perceive cinema is not an obstacle to the assimilation of new forms of perception. Therein lies the revolutionary significance of cinema, beyond the overtly revolutionary content it may have. Benjamin is not so much interested in the content as in the form and structure of the cinema, as well as in the changes in the perception of the masses who are its main audience.

Having once substantiated the possibility of absorbing new contents and forms of perception through the cinema, at the end of his text, Benjamin dwells on the fact that fascism very successfully took advantage of these new possibilities and succeeded in mobilizing the masses with the help of the cinema. It turns out that the distracted perception of the masses, which Benjamin hopes will be useful in favor of the revolution, is used by fascism in exactly the opposite direction—not for a radical change in production relations, but for their confirmation. Fascists, according to Benjamin, used cinema solely to enable the masses to "express themselves" (Benjamin 2022, p. 77). Cinema screenings, which offer the spectacle of mass events such as demonstrations, sports competitions and, above all, war, have a decisive importance in this direction. Fascism's primary effort is "to aestheticize political life" (Benjamin 2022, p. 78). The aestheticization of war, Benjamin notes, is the culmination of this process. In it, man's self-alienation has reached its limit in the enjoyment of his own destruction.

Benjamin believes that this negative way of mobilizing the masses has its alternative: "Communism responds to this by politicizing art." (Benjamin 2022, p. 81) It is the last sentence in Benjamin's text that raises many questions. Does the politicization of art that Benjamin has in mind boil down to the propaganda Soviet cinema glorifying the labor of the masses? In his text, Benjamin gives such an example—"Three Songs for Lenin" by Dziga Vertov. It turns out that fascist propaganda can only be answered with communist propaganda, and this is the only way to make revolutionary use of cinema and art in general. In a modern context, we can say that advertising also relies on the distracted perception of the masses, on which Benjamin placed revolutionary hopes.

“Aura” is the central concept that Benjamin introduces into the theory of art. With the advent of photography (especially reproductions) and cinema, to repeat his thesis, art lost its aura. What is the aura of the work? Benjamin introduced this concept for the first time in an earlier text of his, “Little History of Photography” (1931), and defined it thus: “The strange entanglement of place and time: the unique sense of distance, however close the subject may be.” (Benjamin 2011, p. 112). In “The Work of Art...” he repeats this definition almost verbatim: “a unique manifestation of a distance, however close it may be” (Benjamin 2022, p. 28). However, in the later text, one more is added to it: the aura is the “authenticity” and “authority” of the work, which is rooted in “its unique existence in the place where it is located” (Benjamin 2022, p. 22).

However, the concept of “authenticity” that Benjamin adds to the definition of aura does not apply only to works of art. It applies to any historical object. Benjamin’s use of this concept enables us to understand that for him the traditional work of art is first and foremost a historical object. This is the “base” of the work of art, and its ability to be something or to be an object of aesthetic contemplation is the “superstructure”. The emergence of the mass technical production of images through photography and cinema changes the “base”, which leads to changes in the “superstructure”—the loss of the aura as the appearance of a distance. Mass produced or reproduced images have no aura. Auras only own unique, handcrafted items.

Benjamin reduces the work of art to an object, and the creation of a work of art to production (so goes one of Benjamin’s texts, *The Author as Producer* 1934), and thus actually loses sight of it. We can say, in the spirit of Benjamin, that a modern work of art is an object with a specific function—an object to be seen. Other things are things to use, and the work of art is a thing to look at. The concept of “exhibition value” that Benjamin introduces to describe secularized art has such a meaning. However, with the advent of historical and archaeological museums in modernity, objects for use become objects for viewing, but this does not turn them into works of art. If we start from the object, as Benjamin does, we cannot get to the work of art.

The work of art, Benjamin reminds us, originally had a magical function. Later it became part of the religious cult. The real use value of a work of art, he says, is its “cult value.” In the process of secularization and the emergence of autonomous secular art, the “cult value” gradually gave way to its “exhibition value” (the analogy with the concepts of use and exchange value is obvious) and finally disappeared with the emergence of photography and cinema. The “cult value” of the work derives from its ability to represent a distance in a unique way in the cult. Is this not just an effect of the religious cult? If this is the case, then the cult can turn any object into a work of art with cult value, even a rough stone.

In modernity, Benjamin argues, “authenticity takes the place of cult value” (Benjamin 2022, p. 31). However, as we have already specified, “authenticity” is not inherent only to works of art, but to any historical object. Why, then, does Benjamin argue that cult value survives only in works of art? The contradiction is obvious: either every historical object has a cult value, even one that was never part of a cult, or the cult value is inherent only in the work of art, and then it is not related to and does not derive from its artifactual character. Benjamin’s mind unconsciously fluctuates between the two possibilities. He refers the aura once to the “historical objects” (Benjamin 2022, p. 28) and then to the “cult image” (Benjamin 2022, p. 31).

Benjamin claims that the advent of machines in the production of works of art took away its aura. At the same time, however, he fails to analyze this paradox that the “authenticity” of the work of art in modernity, as he himself notes, is also established technically, “through chemical and physical analyses” (Benjamin 2022, p. 22), i.e., with machines (microscopes, devices for chemical and physical analysis, X-rays, lasers, etc.). It turns out that authenticity is not given to us immediately, but is produced technically. The primary condition for the possibility of this process of “production” of authenticity is, of course, the formation in modernity of a historical consciousness.

“Authentic” historical items whose “authenticity” is established by technical means possess an aura only to the extent that they can become symbols. It has already been said that with the emergence of historical consciousness embodied in historical and archaeological museums, historical objects become objects for viewing. They can be seen in three different ways: as carriers of information about a destroyed historical world, as symbols of that historical world, or as beautiful objects. In the first case we study them with our eyes, in the second we contemplate them and think about them, and in the third we indulge in purely aesthetic contemplation. The first two ways of perception can be attributed to any historical object, while the third only to some (to beautiful objects). Most often, in our actual experience with historical objects, we mix up these different ways of seeing. When we contemplate a historical object as a symbol, it acquires an aura.

The aura of the historical object at first sight has the function of the aura described by Benjamin in relation to the cult work of art. The historical object-symbol represents in a unique way a destroyed historical world. He circles around her, he has left his mark on her and in her. She brings it to the viewer’s presence, but precisely as destroyed, i.e., as unavailable. The cult work of art does the same, but what it manifests, as Benjamin writes, is fundamentally “the unapproachable” (Benjamin 2022, p. 30). The aura of the historical object, as well as the possibility of becoming a symbol, is a function of time and contemplative attitude, which have made the accessible inaccessible. The aura of the cult work of art, as well as its ability to appear, is immanently inscribed in it. The inaccessible that it appears is truly inaccessible, and has not become inaccessible.

The aura of the thing and the aura of the cult work have an identical function—they are one distance, however close it is. However, the aura of the object is something added to it, while the aura of the cult work is inseparable from it. It has no other function than that of appearing, i.e., of being a symbol. A cult work can be seen as a historical object as well as a secular work of art, but then they disappear as works of art. Similar to looking through a window, when we cannot see the landscape in front of the window and the glass of the window at the same time. Either we see the historical thing or we see the work of art. We cannot see them at the same time.

We have already said that Benjamin reduces the work of art to a unique, handmade object. When he states that the aura of the cult work of art continues to exist in the secular work of art, he means that the secular work of art (until the advent of photography and cinema) continues to be a unique, handmade object. The work of art in modernity has an aesthetic rather than a religious function, i.e., the “superstructure” has changed but the “base” has remained the same. The “base” changed only at the beginning of the 20th century with the advent of new technical means.

Benjamin’s understanding of the work of art, as well as the type of analysis he offers, cannot account for the changes that occur in art in its transition from religious to secular art, that is, from art subordinate to the cult to autonomous art. In both cases, the “base” remains the same. It cannot explain the genre, thematic and stylistic changes that occurred in art from the Renaissance to the beginning of the 20th century. It cannot explain the difference between an instrumental craft item and a work of art. Both are produced in the same way—by hand. Both in modernity are put on display in museums, different museums to be sure, but in them both objects and works of art are put on display for viewing.

Things acquire an aura when they are taken out of use, displayed, and contemplated, as works of art or natural objects are contemplated. Historical objects acquire an aura and become symbols only in modernity, and the condition for this possibility is the development of both historical and aesthetic consciousness. This is paradoxical because they work in opposite directions. Historical consciousness contextualizes and aesthetic consciousness decontextualizes a thing. However, both must be present for it to become a symbol. The aura of the cult artwork cannot, as Benjamin thinks, derive from its materiality, because before modernity historical objects do not have their aura, they are not “authentic”.

Is Benjamin not right, after all, when he claims that secular works of art continue to have cult value? Yes, that is right. A veritable cult develops around individual works of

art. Not so with historical items in museums. We can contemplate them as symbols, but this does not turn them into an object but a kind of secular cult. What distinguishes a piece of art from a work of art? Neither unique craftsmanship nor a contemplative attitude are enough to see an object as a work of art. However, the opposite is true—a change in perception can easily turn a work of art into a historical item. That is how the antiquary sees it.

3. The Aura of the Historical Object

Before we try to define what a work of art is, let us once again return to the cult work of art. What does it represent and what is its function? The cultic work of art depicts the God or gods and provides or facilitates the believers' relationship with them. Initially, the statues in the temples were perceived as the gods themselves, later—as their images. The images are so created as to suggest the inaccessibility of the gods or God, i.e., to manifest their inaccessibility (make it present), not to denote it. This was one of the ways Benjamin defined the aura.

Cult works of art may well not be originals, but copies, even photographic copies. In modern Orthodox churches, one can very often see icons, which are technically reproduced copies of highly revered examples of icons, glued on a wooden board. Even if we accept this practice as a departure from tradition, it nevertheless testifies to something very important—originality and uniqueness are not essential to the cult work of art. According to the Orthodox tradition, the first icon is an imprint of the water-washed face of Christ on a cloth, the so-called Holy Ubrus. The essential thing for us in this tradition is that the image on the first icon is an imprint.

Secular works of art no longer necessarily have the task of depicting God or the gods, nor of providing or stimulating the believers' relationship with them within the cult. A new aesthetic perception has emerged that seeks and admires the beauty of works of art. Secular works of art no longer necessarily have the task of depicting God or the gods, nor of providing or stimulating the believers' relationship with them within the cult. A new aesthetic perception has emerged that seeks and admires the beauty of works of art.

But what is beauty in art? Benjamin does not deal with this question directly because he does not want to enter the rut of traditional aesthetics. In "The Work of Art..." he prefers to talk about the "exhibition value" of a beautiful work of art. In the later text dedicated to Baudelaire, however, we read the following: "In the beautiful, the cult value manifests itself as the value of art" (Benjamin 2000, p. 205). In the experience of the beautiful, there is something of the elements of the cult experience, and this is the experience of the likeness—"we should define the beautiful as the object of experience in a state of likeness" (Benjamin 2000, p. 205, note 70). The similitude of which Benjamin speaks, and which the medieval man found with ease in the world, is of a non-sentient nature (such as the similitude between the stars and man in astrology). Beauty is a non-sensuous likeness. Benjamin again quotes Valéry: "The beautiful probably requires a servile imitation of what is indefinable in things" (ibid., note 70).

It turns out that Benjamin formulates in two different and even opposite ways the passage of the cult value in the modern work of art. He once said that in modernity "authenticity takes the place of cult value" (Benjamin 2022, p. 31, note 8) in the work of art. In his later text, however, he claims that the cult value is manifested in the "beautiful" (Benjamin 2000, p. 205). This contradiction is due to the already commented identification of the historical object with the work of art. It is enough to separate them to remove the contradiction. The cult value of the work of art in modernity passes into its aesthetic value.

The most powerful theorization of the modern idea of the beautiful belongs to Kant. He defines the beautiful as a sight that evokes a sense of pleasure (Kant 1993). But this is a distanced pleasure. The viewer must distance himself from both the knowledge of the beautiful object and his interests and desires in relation to it. The beautiful is disinterested enjoyment, Kant tells us. The pleasure that we feel at a distance from the beautiful sight is caused by the free play of our cognitive faculties, which discover in the beautiful a

purposefulness, but without a goal. Everything in what we call beautiful seems to be aimed at a goal (a concept), but it remains unknown. Therefore, the beautiful cannot be reduced to any concept of the object we call beautiful.

In Kant's concept, the beautiful is both accessible, i.e., knowable in principle, and inaccessible, i.e., unknowable—expediency without a goal. Its availability is not actual, but a promise. In the same way that the community of taste is not actual but promised by the judgment of taste. In this sense, even in the beautiful there is something inaccessible. This is even more true of the sublime, the other central concept in Kant's aesthetics. The sublime represents to us the very inaccessibility (of the ideas of reason) to the imagination and the senses (however, with the help of the imagination and the senses). In the sublime, community of taste is not promised.

In both the beautiful and the sublime, there is something inaccessible, which in the one case seems in principle surmountable, but is actually insurmountable, and in the other seems absolutely insurmountable. That is why philosophers such as Hegel are not wrong, who do not fundamentally distinguish the beautiful from the sublime. The example Benjamin gives to illustrate his idea of aura actually combines elements of Kant's descriptions of the beautiful and the sublime. "When, on a summer afternoon, resting, we follow with our eyes a mountain range on the horizon or the line of a branch that casts a shadow over us—that is to say, we breathe in the aura of those mountains, of that branch." (Benjamin 2022, p. 28). The mountain ranges lead us to Kant's examples of the sublime in nature, at the same time the spirit and body "rest", which is inherent in the perception of beauty.

We have referred to Kant to show that the sublime and the beautiful cannot be completely distinguished; and in this sense, the distinction between the cultic and the secular work of art cannot run along the lines of the cultic/sublime—secular/beautiful divide. In fact, it is precisely the beautiful work of art that can form around itself a quasi-cult community of taste. This community derives not from the aura of the thing, but from the aura of the work of art—from its character of exhibiting the beautiful which is never fully accessible.

In order to define even more clearly what the work of art is, we will use one of the three basic concepts by which Gadamer defines art in "The Relevance of the Beautiful" (1977)—the concept of "symbol". The old concept of symbol, according to Gadamer, has not lost its meaning in relation to art, even in its most radical manifestations in the 20th century. Gadamer defines the symbol as follows: "this singularly separate thing is presented as a piece of being that refers to its corresponding to its complementary with an inviolable existential whole part" (Gadamer 2000, p. 56). For Gadamer, the symbol and the symbolic "constitute the meaning of the beautiful and of art" (Gadamer 2000, p. 57).

Every work of art has the structure of the symbol, whether it is symbolic or not, whether it is subject or non-subject. The work of art is not self-identical as a material object, but demonstrates itself as part of a meaningful-sensual whole, which we as viewers, readers, listeners have the task of fulfilling, i.e., to update. However, the missing part does not exist beforehand and outside the work. It does not have the character of a pre-formulated meaning encoded in the work to be decoded. The missing part is only accessible within the work and access to it is not guaranteed by any code. However, it is not the result of arbitrary design on our part. Interpretation is neither decoding nor design, it is a dialogue; and as with any dialogue, it has an event character. Something emerges in the dialogue that was not there before. It connects the dialoguers into a whole without erasing them. Dialogue is also not pre-constrained by any goal.

What is particularly important for us in Gadamer's interpretation of the work of art as a symbol is his understanding that "what is accomplished through art is not a pure exposition of meaning" (Gadamer 2000, p. 59). This means that in the work of art we always have "the duality between discovery, exposure and concealment and sheltering" (Gadamer 2000, p. 59). Gadamer acknowledges that he owes this interpretation of the work of art to Heidegger, who in "The Origin of the Work of Art" (1936) developed the idea of

the work of art as both “exposing” a world and “producing” the earth (Heidegger 1993). There is something fundamentally inaccessible about the work of art, which allows us to see in Benjamin’s definition of aura a characteristic of the work of art in general, rather than a definition of the traditional work of pictorial art.

Theodor Adorno in his *Aesthetics* also interprets Benjamin’s definition of aura of the cult work of art as a characteristic of the work of art in general. He calls it the content of the work: “the aura is not only—according to Benjamin’s thesis—the here and now of the work of art, it is what refers beyond its givenness—its content” (Adorno 2002, p. 75). Content is a misleading term because it can be understood as the accessible meaning of the work. But elsewhere in his text, Adorno specifies that the aura of the work is: “that by which the dependence of its moments (of the work) points beyond it, and each individual element can point beyond itself...something flying away, escaping” (Adorno 2002, p. 393).

Every work of art is auratic insofar as it is a work of art. This applies even to works of art that fight against their auraticness or symbolism, such as those of the Dadaists and their followers from the second half of the 20th century to the present day. These works remain connected to what they deny. Moreover, insofar as they have an artificial character, they inevitably acquire the aura of the historical object. This is particularly evident in the works of the Dadaists. Their works can be found in art museums today and have acquired the aura of the historical object in a downright mechanical character. There is nothing more mechanical than the aura of the historical object. The modern tendency to museify the past from the most insignificant object to entire cities and natural parks (this is also an interesting phenomenon—the transformation of natural objects into historical ones) is actually a superproduction of an aura (of historical things) which gradually paralyzes our existence and gives it the character of a permanent participation in a cult procession.

The aura of the work of art should not be confused with the aura of the historical object, as Benjamin does. The work of fine art is to the greatest extent material, and therefore it is easiest to mix and confuse the aura of the work with the aura of the thing. We would not make such a mistake if it were a novel, for example. The aura of the novel or poem and the aura of the book in which they are printed as a historical object are very different things. The blankets of photography and cinema take away the material character of the work of art and thereby take away the aura of the thing from it, but not the aura of the work of art.

Benjamin himself admits in “Little History of Photography” that early portrait photography was not without an aura. In it, people are surrounded by “an aura, an environment that gives their gaze, passing through it, fullness and confidence.” (Benjamin 2011, p. 118) This aura is inherent in “the person portrayed, a representative of the ascending social class”, but there is also its technical aspect—“the absolute continuity of the transition from the brightest light to the darkest shadow” (Benjamin 2011, p. 118). Later, according to Benjamin, the aura disappears from photography because the technique changes, as well as the social type of those portrayed. The aura disappears from the photographs “with the expulsion of the shadow from the high-power lenses and with the degeneration of the imperialist bourgeoisie” (Benjamin 2011, p. 120).

In “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technical Reproducibility”, Benjamin also notes that the aura was present in early snapshot photography. He explains this observation that contradicts his own theory with “the cult of the memory of distant or deceased loved ones” (Benjamin 2011, p. 38). These two explanations are quite different. In the first case, the aura is the result of the choice of object and shooting technique, and in the second—it is the result of the viewer’s projection. What is important for us, however, is that Benjamin realized that photographic images can possess an aura. How it explains its appearance or loss is not essential. Contrary to the logic of his own text, Benjamin talks about the aura of the image and shows that technological art is not fundamentally devoid of aura. This means that the loss of the aura cannot be the result of the new technical means of production per se.

Photography and cinema, insofar as they have material carriers, are not completely deprived of the aura of the historical thing. It was only with the advent of computers

and digital devices that this aura of fortune telling completely disappeared from them. However, to the extent that photography and cinema can become works of art, and this today hardly anyone doubts, they have the aura of a work of art. Even the most banal photographs and documentary footage are not without an aura. They do not merely affirm the existence of something, but alienate and deny it. Photography testifies that what was captured in an instant and the place where it was captured is no longer there. Therefore, any photograph can be contemplated as a symbol of the passing of time and death. The more banal a photograph is, the more time and death are palpable in it. In photography, the aura of the historical object has been transformed into the aura of the image, and this is something new. Objects-images appear for the first time in photography.

Photographs, or some photographs, may have an aura, but reproductions, according to Benjamin, do not. It is reproductions, and not so much photographs, he writes, that take away the aura and authority of works of art. This is true provided, however, that they are perceived in a consumerist way. Benjamin gives such an example with the attitude of the masses towards reproductions: “to be brought closer” to things spatially and humanly is as passionate a desire of the modern masses as their tendency to overcome the uniqueness of any given by perceiving its reproduction” (Benjamin 2022, p. 28).

In fact, reproductions cannot take away the aura of works of art when they are perceived from the position of a developed aesthetic consciousness, which sees, in the reproduction, a negation of the original, but also its paradoxical affirmation. The aura of the unique historical object is lost in the reproduction, but the reproduction is itself a historical object and over time acquires its own object aura. The aura of the artwork is not completely unavailable in the reproduction. It loses her energy and remains veiled, but still draws attention to herself. In these cases, art lovers usually frame the reproductions and hang them on the wall, giving the paintings a secondary character. Reproductions are capable of capturing the aura of the image, but not the aura of the item.

The most essential characteristic of the loss of aura, Benjamin emphasizes, is the explosion of tradition, that is, the separation of the work from the historical context in which it arose and to which it bears witness. However, this explosion of tradition occurred long before the advent of modern technical means of reproduction. It takes place with the emergence of the aesthetic consciousness in modernity, which detaches the work of art from the context in which it was created and from the non-aesthetic functions it performed. The institutional embodiment of aesthetic consciousness is the art museum, in which works are detached from the context in which they were created and functioned. The space of the museum is an ideal space in which the works exist outside of time and history. What they all have in common is their aesthetic quality, which outlives the context of their origin.

Reproduction brings to an extreme what began with the appearance of the museum—decontextualization. A reproduction completely decontextualizes a work of art, but also dematerializes it (to some extent), turns it into an almost pure vision. In this sense, the process of turning the work into a pure phenomenon began long before the advent of photography and cinema, and will not end with them. We can imagine that the next step is the holographic image, which will completely dematerialize the work of art and bring it closer to a dream, to a lucid dream.

Benjamin criticizes early theorists of cinema such as Abel Gans, Severin-Mars, and Alexandre Arnoux for “attributing cult elements to it with unparalleled recklessness” (Benjamin 2022, p. 41). Abel Gans sees in the emergence of cinema a return to the hieroglyphic writing of the Egyptians; Severin-Mars sees in the cinema a true home of dreams, “both poetic and real”; Arnoux compares cinema to prayer. These enthusiasts, according to Benjamin, have failed to understand that cinema completely separates the work of art from the cult. Hollywood has gotten the better of this, Benjamin insists, by artificially creating a cult around movie stars.

Today, after more than a century of cinema, it seems that enthusiasts have caught on to something that Benjamin missed. Cinematic works of art create a cult around them similar to the cult surrounding some of the great paintings or sculptures of the past, which has

nothing to do with advertising and PR. Even the phrase “cult film” arose. A cult film is a film that moviegoers watch again and again, identify with it. They know every scene and every line of the movie by heart, yet they do not stop watching it. They are no longer interested in the content of the film, which they have fully absorbed, but want to be in contact with the aura of the cinema-images. It is inexhaustible. In his text “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” (1939), Benjamin quotes Valéry’s definition of the work of art: “We recognize the work of art in that no idea which it awakens in us, no mode of behavior, which offers us, they cannot exhaust it or bring it to an end” (Benjamin 2000, p. 211). The “cult film” is just such a work of art, as is the “cult photograph,” although Benjamin cites Valéry to refute such an attempt.

In addition to “Little History of Photography” and “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technical Reproducibility,” Benjamin thematized the aura in another text—the already mentioned “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire.” Here, the aura is defined as the experience of the returned gaze. “To capture the aura of a phenomenon is to endow it with the ability to return the gaze” (Benjamin 2000, p. 212). In a footnote to this sentence, Benjamin clarifies: “This endowment is the source of all poetry. Where man, animal, or inanimate object, thus endowed by the poet, opens his eyes, they draw him away; the gaze of nature awakened in this way dreams and draws the creator after his dreams” (Benjamin 2000).

Poetic ability turns out to be the ability to see the aura of things, that is, to see things as seeing, as responding to our gaze. The peculiarity of the gaze is that it simultaneously appears to the one who is looking and at the same time makes him inaccessible. The viewer is both his gaze and beyond it, he is transcendent. This is another translation of the idea of the appearance of distance, which remains distance, however close it may be.

In a sense, we can paraphrase Benjamin’s idea with the help of Martin Buber, who argued that there are two fundamental relations or attitudes to the world: I-Thou and I-It (Buber 1992). Aura experience is an I-Thou relationship. Poets and artists more easily and more often than other people establish such an attitude towards reality.

Baudelaire, according to Benjamin, is the poet who in “Flowers of Evil” thematized the experience with the disintegration of the aura in the modern world. What is this loss due to? Modern society, the modern urban way of life, the dominant capitalist relations have made it almost impossible for the poet to endow things with a look, i.e., with an aura. These terms they have dehumanized man, they have emptied the eyes of modern man. This is a central motif in Baudelaire’s poetry, with which Benjamin deals extensively. The eyes of modern man’s self-estrangement are impassive, or, when awakened to life, are “the eyes of a predatory animal, scanning for prey and at the same time for danger that pursues it” (Benjamin 2000, p. 215).

Baudelaire saw these eyes in the images of courtesans painted by Constantin Guy. Benjamin goes further and sees in those eyes, devoid of vision, the eyes of modern man altogether. “That the eye of the inhabitant of the great city is overloaded with a protective function is beyond doubt. (. . .) The reassuring gaze does not need the dreamy obsession with distance.” (Benjamin 2000, p. 215). The modern city subjects man to continuous shocks that make contemplation, the dreamy look at the distance, the experience of the aura impossible. Baudelaire, according to Benjamin, was clearly aware of this and was willing to pay the price to acquire the sense of modernity: “the disintegration of the aura in the shock experience” (Benjamin 2000, p. 218).

The loss of sight in the eyes, i.e., of the aura, can be understood as a kind of translation that Benjamin makes of the theme of alienation in modernity, which Marx deals with. Alienation is due not only to the economic relations in capitalist society, which were studied in detail by Marx, but also to the specific social conditions of life in the modern city, generated by the capitalist mode of production. Benjamin, unlike Marx, is interested in alienation as a specific feeling and perception inherent in modern man. Baudelaire is the poet who succeeds in creating this feeling in his poetry.

Benjamin particularly appreciates Baudelaire’s poetry because it expresses modern alienation, but does not seek a way out of it, but surrenders to it completely. Baudelaire,

Benjamin writes, “falls under the spell of sightless eyes and without illusion surrenders to their power” (Benjamin 2000, p. 214). There is a fascination in the empty eyes, the last that the distance-obsessed gaze can achieve. We must realize, however, that the experience of the disintegration of the aura that interests Benjamin in Baudelaire’s poetry is not yet a non-auratic experience. It is an experience of aura awareness, which is impossible without the experience of the presence of the aura and without the distance-seeking gaze. This experience is the last mode of presence of the aura in modernity, through its absence. This is the reason for the attraction for the poet of the sightless eyes, in which “absence remains intact” (Benjamin 2000, p. 214).

Benjamin speaks of the experience of aura in two senses: in relation to works of art and in relation to the perception of reality. The two plans are linked. In modernity, the social and economic conditions of life lead to an auraless perception of reality and to the emergence of a technological, non-auratic, according to Baudelaire, art. Photography and cinema, because of their technological nature, offer us images devoid of aura, which correspond to the specific experience of modernity—the disintegration of the aura. In other words, in them, alienation is a structural element, just as alienation is a structural element of the modern way of life.

On the occasion of Baudelaire, however, something else became clear. The experience of the disintegration of the aura is inherent to the one who has the experience of the aura. Only he is capable of experiencing and surrendering to a paradoxical pleasure of this absence. The absence of the aura is the limit of experience with the aura that Baudelaire reaches. However, the fact that Baudelaire thematized in his poetry the disintegration of aura in modernity means that his own poetry is devoid of aura? This question can also be understood in this way: Is Baudelaire’s poetry still poetry? Because, as already mentioned, for Benjamin the auratic experience is the basis of all poetry. If this is true, then it would have to be said that even poetry such as Baudelaire’s, expressing the experience of the disintegration of the aura in modernity, remains possible only as arising from the auratic experience of the world. This is the paradox of modern poetry. Although it expresses the experience of the disintegrating aura, it is not completely detached from the auratic experience, but paradoxically testifies to it in its negation.

The same can be said about Benjamin’s texts, which thematize the disintegration of the aura in art and in the perception of socially conditioned reality. They are also only possible thanks to experience with the aura, i.e., of the “bourgeois” aesthetic consciousness and experience with the world. For the “proletarianized masses” as Benjamin describes them, the experience of the disintegration of the aura is completely unavailable. The question immediately arises:

If only thanks to auratic experience we can understand what we have lost in modernity, then how can we deny modernity, but not to return to the pre-modern way of being, but for the sake of a future culture, art and society? How can the masses, without becoming “bourgeois” to the extent that Marx, Baudelaire, and Benjamin are bourgeois, though “betraying their class,” make a revolution?

It was said at the outset that Benjamin, following Marx, offered a type of analysis of the conditions of production in art which, according to him, should lead to “certain prognostic requirements” (Benjamin 2022, p. 17), similar to Marx’s analysis of capitalist relations of production has prognostic value regarding the future of capitalist society. However, Benjamin does not offer any prediction about the future of art, and this makes a strong impression.

When analyzing dialectically the relationship between painting and the new technical means of reproduction (photography and cinema), Benjamin formulated the most important task of art as follows: “to create a demand for the complete satisfaction of which the time has not yet come” (Benjamin 2022, p. 66). Following this understanding, Benjamin sees in photography and cinema forms of art that fully satisfy the demands created by the avant-garde at the beginning of the 20th century. Cubism and Futurism for Benjamin are “inadequate attempts of art to account for the penetration of the apparatus

into reality" (Benjamin 2022, p. 70). Dadaism, for its part, "attempts through the means of painting (or literature) to produce the effects that today's audiences seek in the cinema" (Benjamin 2022, p. 67).

The new searches obviously arise from changes in the social conditions of life and the role of technology in them. Art, in this sense, is a reflection of the changes in society, and the basis of these changes is the development of technologies, i.e., of the productive forces. In Marx's historical-philosophical concept, the development of the productive forces leads to a change in the relations of production, which in turn lead to changes in the superstructure (politics, law, morality, art). Cinema is the art that corresponds to the perception that arose in the conditions of advanced industrial capitalism, which has entered a phase of sharp class contradiction. Traditional art has lost its historical significance. It continues to exist, but it has essentially exhausted its capabilities.

In order for the cinema to create demands that it is unable to satisfy, it is necessary for radical changes to occur in the conditions of life in society, which will create a new perception. This new perception should in turn give rise to new forms of art in which it can be satisfied. At their most radical, these art forms would arise in the new classless society. Benjamin, however, refuses to dwell on these future radical new forms of art. He only claims to outline a trend he describes as the politicization of art.

However, is Benjamin's refusal to predict the future development of art not a symptom that the dialectical view of art history is problematic? Is the idea not that the possibility of new art forms is contained as an unsolved task in the old a retrospective dialectical illusion?

4. Conclusions

Let us finally try to describe the situation in art today, starting from the main lines of analysis that Benjamin offers in his theory.

Photography and cinema have long been part of the collections of modern and contemporary art museums. They are perceived as completely equal means of creating works of art, alongside the traditional ones. In the field of visual arts, traditional media (painting, sculpture and graphics) coexist with new ones (photography and video). Many of the works of art are multimedia in nature, i.e., they combine elements of traditional and technological arts.

Cinema continues to be the most popular art, along with pop music, but there is now a distinct tendency for it not to be perceived collectively. Audiences in movie theaters are decreasing at the expense of viewers in front of televisions, computers and even phones. Technological development has allowed what in the past was the privilege of only the rich—private screenings—to now be available for the poorest. Pop music remains the only mass art that continues to be perceived collectively and by much larger masses of people. In Benjamin's time, there were no outdoor concerts in front of an audience of millions.

Technological development (the advent of digital technology) also allows anyone to be a photographer and cinematographer. The distinction between photographers and cinematographers, i.e., producers of images with technical means, and the audience is erased from the point of view of possessing the technique of production. The production costs of creating photographs and (digital) films have fallen dramatically and do not involve the mass production of copies in advance to recoup costs, as Benjamin writes about classic film.

What are the masses today? These are not those "proletarianized masses" (Benjamin 2022, p. 77) that Benjamin talks about, i.e., the masses of factory workers and unemployed in the big cities who live in similar conditions and have a similar way of life and behavior. People with little education and limited access to cultural goods. Today's masses are by no means identical to the working class. We can no longer speak of a working class in the classical sense of the word. The workers are neither poor nor uneducated. Their way of life is not significantly different from the life of clerks, doctors, civil servants, etc. Today's masses are not something socially and culturally homogeneous. The avant-garde artist, the university professor, the big businessman, the politician also, at certain moments of their

lives, become mass people—when they shop in the mall; when they are having fun at a rock concert or watching an uproarious thriller.

The distracted perception that Benjamin attributed to the masses is still present today, but it is not socially typed and is dynamic. We change, to a greater or lesser extent, our perception and attitude towards reality. At certain times we are reflective or contemplative, and at others we indulge in consumer magic. One can certainly draw some social profile of those who are more reflexive in their attitude to art than those who are more consumerist, but the boundaries between these ideal types are fluid. The social mobility of modern liberal societies, as well as the mobility of perception, is greatly increased.

The modern urban lifestyle, which Benjamin describes as a series of continuous shocks, has changed significantly. It is increasingly complex and carrying potentially more shocks, but also increasingly well organized. Shocks have not disappeared from our lives, but after more than a century of experience with this way of life, we cope with them much better. The dreamy and contemplative gaze has not completely disappeared in the cities. Even on the contrary, the development of urban architecture sometimes offers, even in excess, opportunities for aesthetic contemplation, as in utopia cities such as the new capital of Brazil, entirely organized around aesthetic contemplation. At the same time, many of the representatives of the urban middle class are moving to the quiet suburbs of the megacities.

Art, in many of its manifestations, is highly politicized and artists do not hide this. They openly advocate with their works for certain civil and political causes, most often for the protection of collective minority rights or the protection of nature. These works, regardless of the medium used, approach information encoded in visual text, garnished with effective visual rhetoric. The authors of such works do not strive for aesthetic durability, but for the political effectiveness of the message. They have no particular meaning and value, outside the context of the present, and do not strive for it. The posthumous fame of the artist or work has no meaning for such artists and works. Only the present matters. Collecting and exhibiting such works in museums is no longer exhibiting works that have eternal aesthetic value, i.e., which can offer each viewer the only thing that outlives history. Rather, they are exhibited in museums as a historical document of a past event. They are not expected to evoke aesthetic pleasure, but historical knowledge. The name of one of the largest forums for contemporary art—Documenta, in Kassel—can be used to name contemporary art museums in general.

There is one essential difference between contemporary politicized art and the politicized art Benjamin is talking about. Contemporary politicized art is not under the tutelage of the party-state, it does not pass through party censorship. It is an art that is no less individualistic than a non-politicized art that strives for complete aesthetic autonomy. It is not subject to a uniform style, does not follow strict iconographic schemes, does not have a strict genre, thematic and plot system. It is ideologically motivated art, but it is not responsible to any party authority for how it interprets that ideology. Ideology is interpreted freely and individually. There is of course a paradox here, contemporary politicized art takes advantage of all the freedoms won by the non-politicized autonomous art of modernity.

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