

Walter Benjamin: The Work of Art in the Age of
Technological Reproducibility

by

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Walter Benjamin: Art, Aura and Authenticity

- “The way in which human perception is organized - the medium in which it occurs - is conditioned not only by nature but by history.” (23)
- Addresses the impact of technology (photography and film) in the (re)production of not only art, but of any type of visual information overall.
- Explores the concept of the Aura in relation to the notion of authenticity of an original (art)work.

What is the Aura?

- Defined as the spiritual identity, the status and the authority of being the original (art)work; an object with a particular history and unique qualities that make it all its own.

“A strange tissue of space and time: 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.” (23)

How is the Aura lost?

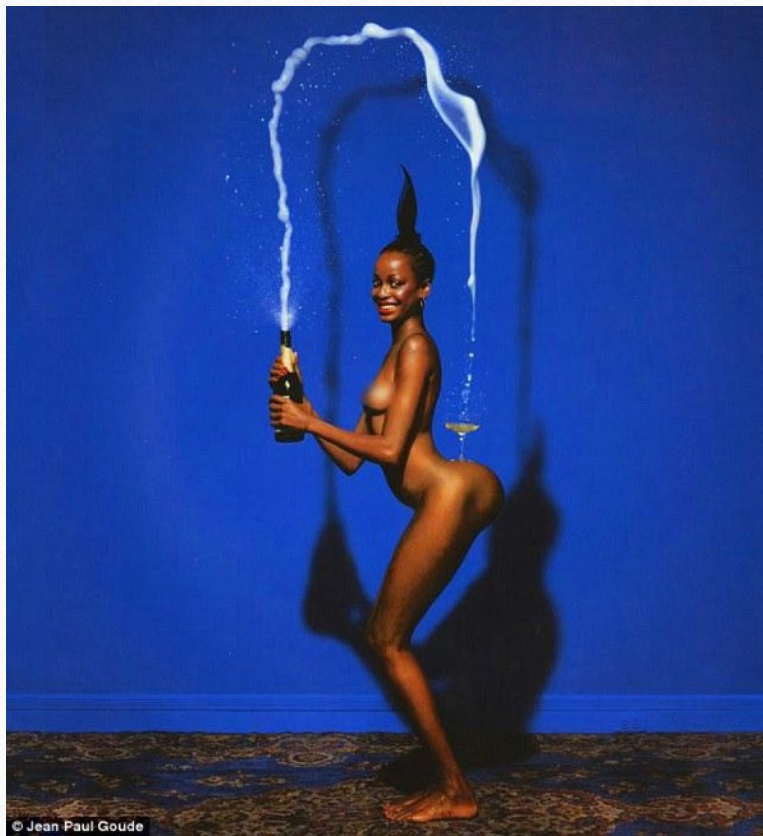
“For the aura is bound to his presence in the here and now. There is no facsimile of the aura.” (31)

- Loss of a singular authority within the work
- Not been reproduced



Can the *Aura* exist in contemporary art?

- Originality
- Authenticity
- Nothing about that piece can be reproduced
- Creates a mythological space



Art: is it more authentic than reproduced images?

According to Benjamin, yes!

- A copy of an artwork will always lack “a certain something” (i.e. the Aura)
- The Aura provides the legitimacy accorded to the object by a lengthy historical existence.

“The authenticity of a thing is the quintessence of all that is transmissible in it from its origin on, ranging from its physical duration to the historical testimony relating to it.” (22)

The Birth of Venus iPhone 7

vs



Is it possible to have Benjamin's ideal of "art", online in contemporary society?

- What does this mean for individuals (i.e. freelancers, graphic designers, bloggers/vloggers, etc) whose livelihoods are based on creating art online? Or even for those who just do it for creative fun and pleasure?
- Does it mean that the (art)work they are (re)producing online from an original work are actually "losing" something? Are they simply wasting their time?

The Role Technological
Reproduction plays in shaping
Aesthetic Experiences

Traditional and Modern Meanings

Traditional Imagery

- Authenticity and uniqueness are rooted in the idea of tradition.
- Originates from worship of art in rituals and religion as something greater than humankind.
- This included artwork in the Classical Era with Roman, Greek, and Egyptian art. It was connected to their early cultures, beliefs, and philosophy.
- This changed in the Renaissance era with the worship of secular beauty in paintings.

Changes with Mechanization

- Technological reproduction allows art to be liberated from ritualism; it can be accessed and viewed by others. It is not restricted to an elite.
- Began with emergence of new technology such as photography and film in the 1890s.
- Raises debate over what is considered to be art, and questions authenticity and what is considered to be 'pure' imagery.
- Example: Debate over status of photography in regards to paintings in 1900s.

Photography & Painting Debate

- Painters wanted their work to distance itself from reality, to be a more subjective representation of life.
- Photographers and filmmakers used the camera to dive into reality, to examine life in all its beauty and all its flaws.



Two Polarities

Cult Value

- Has a physical, historical endurance.
- Art is kept among a certain group and not shared with others.
- Its authenticity is rooted in tradition or religion, and this creates its value.
- Art is meant to be sacred and protected.

Exhibition Value

- Can be technologically reproduced.
- A larger scope for distribution.
- Not limited to tradition.
- It has a mass existence.
- Art becomes a construct, something fluid that changes over time.

Key Differences

- Greek art was made to last forever, has eternal values that could be handed down to different generations.
- Film's character is based completely on its reproducibility, and ability to improve its quality.
- It is an example of an art form that must be put together, and whose form can be changed, altered, and improved.
- Film and photography are an antithesis of traditional art that was created with a single stroke or mould, such as portraits, statues, and carvings.

What is More Valuable?

One Ancient Artwork



Multiple Copies of a Classic Film



Group Activity: Class Discussion

- Is it possible to experience and appreciate art online?
 - How might technology, virtual reality and the Internet affect art?
 - Will new media make galleries obsolete?
 - Are artists such as Da Vinci, Michelangelo and Van Gogh still considered valuable as (digital) reproductions?

