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WALTER BENJAMIN'S AURA CONCEPT IN THE DISCOURSE OF VISUAL STUDIES

Answering the question about the nature of an aesthetic experience, Walter Benjamin elaborated a notion of the aura. Complex and vague, it is still one of the most consistent conceptions, indicating the unseeable component of the visual experience. Benjamin developed his aesthetic theory in response to the particular cultural and historical situation he witnessed. However, his concepts remain relevant for the analysis of the today visual culture. The article discusses the questions of the aura's nature and how it managed to transform in unison with our perception in the age of mechanical reproduction. Ultimately, the article provides the reconsideration of the conceptual pair – the copy and the original – in the context of modern visual discourse.

Keywords: artwork, visual experience, perception, original, copy, reproduction.

There are two primary methodological positions in the visual culture studies. According to the first of them, images are symbols.^{1,2} As any symbolic system, they have an inner structure, grammar, and, consequently, they can be read and interpreted. The adherents of the second position insist that images don't simply represent some hidden meaning. First of all, images affect. It means that images cannot be just read, they must be experienced^{3,4}. If we cannot analyze images unless we experience them, then there is something significant in them that cannot be seen, something that is not depicted, and it needs to be indicated to make working with image space not only effective, but possible at all. From this perspective, Walter Benjamin's idea of aura and auratic experience is indicative. It opens the question image perception, an exhibition space and the effect of being in this space.

Walter Benjamin is a theorist who paved the way for the visual theory from the art criticism to philosophy. The publication of his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* opened a discussion that propelled the development of the visual discourse and ultimately led to the institutionalization of the visual studies as an independent academic field. In this essay, he considers photography and cinema as transformative practices and sees a connection between them and replicable nature of culture. As a consequence, he builds a link between these practices and a modification of the human perceptive scheme. He insists that reproducible artworks affect the way we perceive an aesthetic experience. Thus, he shifts the theoretical focus from the purely aesthetic issues to the anthropological ones. And in the core of his study of a visual experience appears the notion of the aura.

How Benjamin understands the aura

The aura is hardly a calibrated concept but rather a metaphor. Still, art critics, philosophers, and researchers of culture continue clarifying its meaning and defining its role in the discourse of aesthetics. What is particular about the aura? What theoretical problems Benjamin was up to solve by introducing this notion? And, most importantly, how such vague concept can help us to clarify the structure of visual experience?

Speaking roughly, the aura is a specific way the unique art object affect a beholder. According to Benjamin's definition, the aura is a peculiar mix of a space and time: the «unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be»⁵. At the same time, he emphasizes that the desire of masses to bring art closer is as strong as the tendency to prefer the reproduction to the original⁶. Benjamin repeatedly points

¹ Mirzoeff, N. (1999). *An Introduction to Visual Culture*. London: Routledge.

² Sturken, M., Cartwright, L. (2009). *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

³ Mitchell, W.J.T. (2002). Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture. *Journal of Visual Culture*, no. 1, 165-181.

⁴ Belting, H. (2005). Image, Medium, Body: A New Approach to Iconology. *Critical Inquiry*, no. 2, 302-319.

⁵ Benjamin, W. (1968). The Work of Art in the Age of Technical Reproduction. *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books, 222.

⁶ Benjamin, W. (1968). The Work of Art in the Age of Technical Reproduction. *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books, 223.

out the importance of the aura's topicality – here and now ("Hier und Jetzt") and the problem of loss of the aura due to the desire to bring the artwork closer to a beholder and the audience masses^{1, 2, 3}.

Explicitly the term *aura* Benjamin uses in a few of his works, the main of which are *A Short History of Photography*, *On Some Motifs in Baudelaire*, *The Work of Art...*, and incomplete and untranslated *Passages*. Nevertheless, he addresses the auratic issues and experience in most of his works on the philosophy of culture, literary criticism and essays on arts.

The first mention of the aura we can find in Benjamin's autobiographical notes, in diaries in particular⁴. These records indicate his efforts to clarify the essential features of the aura in order to clear up the notion of the theosophical interpretation. He points out that the aura is inherent in all things, not on some of them – the statement that ultimately comes in direct contradiction with the further Benjamin's aesthetic interpretation of the term. The aura gets fundamentally transformed with the smallest move of an auratic object, i.e. the object to which the aura belongs. This aura is by no means a magic radiation, as it's described in vulgar books on mythology. On the contrary, Benjamin states, that the aura is rather like an ornament, a decorative circle in which the thing or the being is eternally drowning. "Probably nothing can demonstrate the aura better than Van Gogh's paintings, where to all things – as you can describe it – it [the aura] is drawn-to (*mitgemalt*)"⁵.

More consistently Walter Benjamin defines the aura in *A Short History of Photography* (1931)⁶. Addressing a history of the art of photography, he describes the movement from the daguerreotype and commercial use of portrait photographs to photography as a diagnostic of reality – the study of surrounding objectivity, the skill of focusing on details that reflect the context better than panoramic images.

In particular, Benjamin mentions the prominent urban photographer Eugène Atget, who left several thousands of images of Paris. On these photos, we don't find the "most important" sights, the pictures of Parisian life as we imagine it. Atget's Paris is empty streets, shop windows, and sleeping beggars. He was interested in forgotten and neglected, and therefore these pictures also appeal to the exotic, pompous, romantic sound of the names of cities. They suck aura out of reality, like the water of the ship, going down, comments Benjamin's the way in which Atget showed the city⁷. For Benjamin everything that is on the conveyor, everything that follows the fashion or any trends is non-auratic. Anything to what we append a sense or impose the *mise en scène*, anything that we try to adjust contrary to its pure presence – is a factor of losing an aura.

Reproducibility and the loss of the aura

In the essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Benjamin questions not only aesthetic or social aspect of the art reproduction. Instead, he tries to trace the retrospective and perspective of the shifts in the technical means of reproduction; their effects on our ability to perceive and evaluate art in general. Finally, he sees the risk of reducing the axiological dimension of creativity due to the automatic replication of artworks.

Benjamin's concerns were caused not by the possibilities of reproduction as such. It surely wasn't an invention of his modernity – starting from the Guttenberg's invention of the printing press in 15th century, techniques of mechanical reproduction have been considerably branched out and improved. However, he claims that from the invention of photography in the 19th century we have been witnessing a qualitative shift in the mechanization of the reproduction process.

For the first time in the process of pictorial reproduction, photography freed the hand of the most important artistic functions which henceforth devolved only upon the eye looking into a lens⁸.

¹ Benjamin, W. (1991). *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit. Gesammelte Schriften. Bd I.* Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 471-507.

² Benjamin, W. (1991). *Kleine Geschichte der Photographie. Gesammelte Schriften. Bd. II.* Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 368-385.

³ Benjamin, W. (1991). *Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire. Gesammelte Schriften. Bd. I.* Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 605-655.

⁴ Benjamin, W. (1991). *Autobiographische Schriften. Gesammelte Schriften. Bd. VI.* Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 212-215.

⁵ Benjamin, W. (1991). *Protokolle zu Drogenversuchen. Gesammelte Schriften. Bd. VI.* Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 588.

⁶ Benjamin, W. (1991). *Kleine Geschichte der Photographie. Gesammelte Schriften. Bd. II.* Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

⁷ Benjamin, W. (1991). *Kleine Geschichte der Photographie. Gesammelte Schriften. Bd. II.* Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 378.

⁸ Benjamin, W. (1968). *The Work of Art in the Age of Technical Reproduction.* In Hannah Arendt (ed.). *Illuminations.* New York: Schocken Books, 219.

Identical replications no longer depend on the skills of an artist or the talent of a theatrical actor. Thus, as a result of the discovery of means that enable perfect copying, the role of the initial, original work in the reproduction process changes. The original can maintain its authority regarding the handmade replica, but not to the technical copy. Thus, the perception of an artwork changes together with its historical and spatial context. All these transformations Benjamin connects with the loss of the aura.

It is worth noting that copying in art existed long before the modern means of reproduction. Along with etchings and imprinting the engravings, there was a tradition of the self-copying – when the artists themselves made copies of their own works. Some of them had students and apprentices who made copies of the master's works. Nevertheless, Benjamin insists that there is a fundamental change in the way of reproduction: the photograph devalues the meaning of the master's hand¹. Its function moves into equipment (camera) and an eye. For the artist in the technological era, artistic skills and technique lose their importance. As Benjamin put it, now it's more essential than the well-trained hand is a capacity to see, notice, tweak the camera, fixate the image, make it apparent, and make it visible. Benjamin asserts that the artist today doesn't create any images, he/she simply makes visible that was not visible before. Thus, with the invention of the camera, an artwork loses its authority, its initial meaning. This is what the loss of an aura means.

An aura is gone the moment it loses a person behind it. It is a person, who localizes the artwork in its uniqueness, even when it comes to reproduction. If the copy is made by a person, not by a machine, it still may have an auratic effect, because even though it repeats an example, is an act of creation, unique and special. It is a person who makes work the formula of an auratic object – "Hier und Jetzt". With this uniqueness comes inaccessibility.

Inaccessibility is another important characteristic of the auratic object; moreover, Benjamin calls it an inalienable feature of any cult image. Due to inaccessibility, the time-spatial significance of the aura is highlighted again. In the works of Benjamin, we find numerous descriptions of the aura emphasizing the same: «a unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be»², «a unique manifestation of a distance, however near it may be»³, «a unique manifestation of a distance»⁴.

Inaccessibility is a necessary feature of an object that is cultivated and worshiped. Yet through a reproduction, copying, duplication of an iconic object, its image gets closer to the masses, losing its time-spatial coordinates, becoming an anonymous product of a neutral, homogeneous space of a conveyor production.

Benjamin states that, from the middle of the 19th century, an art started its way to masses, due to, first of all, the using of mass production technologies in art. Eventually, the masses turn to be an influential factor in the art industry development. The very possibility of art industrialization Benjamin called albeit an inevitable, but an explicit negation of the essence of art as such. The loss of the aura due to the loss of the uniqueness of the artistic object leads to replacing the pure creative space with the space of homogeneous circulation of anonymous copies.

Benjamin acknowledges the auracity of photography, at least in its early forms, but cinema for him is not an artistic but an industrial product. The process of creating a cinema is dehumanized; a person is fully replaced by technology. Accurately calculated and staged picture (a frame) has nothing in common with a living and spontaneous presence of an actor. There is nothing to say about the uniqueness of this frame because the technique of its creation breaks the fixation in specific space-time coordinates.

Cinematography hampers our experience because of its possibility to multiply the archives of voluntary memory (*mémoire volontaire*)⁵. Eventually, it inevitably reduces the play of our involuntary memories. Besides, cinema mechanically deforms our perception of temporal and spatial relationships. Regardless of a natural distance, it stimulates the shock feelings that hold our mind in a modus of a constant

¹ Benjamin, W. (1968). The Work of Art in the Age of Technical Reproduction. In Hannah Arendt (ed.). *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books, 219

² Benjamin, W. (1968). The Work of Art in the Age of Technical Reproduction. In Hannah Arendt (ed.). *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books, 222.

³ Benjamin, W. (1991). Kleine Geschichte der Photographie. *Gesammelte Schriften. Bd. II*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 378.

⁴ Benjamin, W. (1991). Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire. In *Gesammelte Schriften. Bd. I*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 647.

⁵ Benjamin, W. (1991). Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire. In *Gesammelte Schriften. Bd. I*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 647.

mental defense. Finally, by its structure, cinema reduces our ability to look back. Quoting Baudelaire in the essay *On Some Motifs in Baudelaire* Benjamin describes this effect as «eyes [...] that have lost their ability to look»¹. Thus, cinema is not just a practice that requires another type of perception but the one that changes the very nature of aesthetic experience. Benjamin insists that cinematography forms an own subject of perception, and it's not an individual but a mass.

Modern Russian film theorist and philosopher, Oleg Aronson writes that Benjamin's understanding of mass as subject differs from a traditional Cartesian interpretation of a cogito². The mass is not here a type of subject that is active and imaginative meaning-producing subject. For Benjamin, the mass is just a consumer, whose perception tends to be relaxed, unfocused, and distracted.

Reception in a state of distraction, which is increasingly noticeable in all fields of art and is symptomatic of profound changes in apperception, finds in the film its true means of exercise³.

Obviously, understanding of cinema according to which it is not even an art form is radical. Later, Siegfried Kracauer and Theodor Adorno admitted that Benjamin wrongly considered cinema as a tool invading an artistic reality, trying to replace in this reality a human with techniques and instruments.

The tendency of bringing an art closer to masses makes Benjamin lament the high art forms. The art that did not seek ways to please, it did not move towards the public, did not change itself for others. For Benjamin, cinema is a product that presupposes a batch production and is aimed at acquiring. Thus, by its nature and purpose, cinema is a non-auratic object.

The aura appears at the same moment it vanishes.

For Benjamin, the aura is a child of a tradition. The latter he describes as a 'thoroughly alive and extremely changeable' phenomenon that builds the ground for a uniqueness of artwork.¹⁷ It is a tradition that enables an art object remain original, deep, and influential. Tradition builds up space where secularization is not yet completed and where the object retains its original ritual meaning. Being rooted in tradition, artwork, regardless of its efforts, cannot be free from its initial cult purpose. This is what makes an actual cause of an aura.

In contrast to traditional art critique, Benjamin refuses to evaluate the artworks in terms of their quality. In his opinion, when we define some work as genius one, our assessment leads to hierarchization. He considers any attempt to set a hierarchy of values in the art as a manifestation of chauvinism. At the same time, Benjamin he reserves the right to recognize the aura and originality of an art object, comparing it to a temporary and repeatable nature of a copy. No quantifications, comparisons, or gradations. The aura is the only indicator of an artwork, and we cannot measure it.

French philosopher and art theorist Georges Didi-Huberman analyzing the aura, notes that its loss does not mean its disappearance. The loss means rather a decline, a deviation, a transformation.⁴ He claims that the changes in the mode of an artwork existence are just stages, elements of a historical cycle of an artwork life. Thus, the aura is a contextual formation that is fixed in a particular chronotope. What differs Didi-Huberman's interpretation from Benjamin's view on an auratic moment, is that he considers such a moment as not the only possible one. He insists that the aura is contextual. It means that not the act of creation defines whether the artwork is auratic, but the moment when this artwork meets a beholder. The quality of such contact is a real measure of the aura.

Tradition, as Benjamin understands it, is a fixated context. It is the precise point of time and space that imprints the artwork in history as a single, original object. Unlike it, a copy is devoid of such place in history and is initially a potential multiplicity. The uniqueness of the moment in which the artwork is created makes possible for it to have the aura. But how can we experience it?

Walter Benjamin describes such experience as an imperceptible moment of the world that we can catch only when it's gone. The aura shows up when it disappears. Oleg Aronson notices that an aura doesn't exist by its own. It doesn't have any effect; we cannot record it.⁵ We can report it when we notice its absence. Art critic and philosopher, Boris Groys similarly interprets Benjamin's aura. In Groys's article

¹ Benjamin, W. (1968). *On Some Motifs in Baudelaire*. *Illuminations*, 189.

² Аронсон, О. (2009). Лекция 6. Политика образа. Воспроизведение и повтор (по работам В. Бенямина). Из Аронсон, О., Петровская, Е. *По ту сторону воображения. Современная философия и современное искусство. Лекции*. Нижний Новгород: ИФ РАН, 117–145.

³ Benjamin, W. (1968). *The Work of Art in the Age of Technical Reproduction*. In Hannah Arendt (ed.) *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books, 240.

⁴ Диди-Юберман, Ж. (2001). *То, что мы видим, то, что смотрит на нас*. Санкт-Петербург: Наука.

⁵ Аронсон, О. (2004). *Язык времени. Вступительная статья. Из Жиль Делез Кино*. Москва: Ad marginem.

*A Topology of Modern Art*¹ he claims that the aura appears the same moment when it vanishes. German art theorist Miriam Hansen understands the aura in a similar manner. She says also that “only in the process of disintegration can the aura be recognized, can it be registered as a qualitative component of the (past) experience.”²

Not the art object itself but an experience of it causes the aura

Benjamin's aura has two primary characteristics:

- It is a here-and-now moment. An art object is unique due to the particular temporal and spatial coordinates of its creation. The aura is a manifestation of this unrepeatable sacral moment of creation through the contact with the work of art.

- Aura is a distance, however close it may be (einmalige Erscheinung einer Ferne, so nah sie sein mag).³ The aura disappears when we don't want to move towards an art object and instead, try to bring it closer to us, tearing it out from its original place.

According to Benjamin, there is a fundamental difference between the copy and the original, which indicates each of them. No matter how perfect the copy is, it never reaches the level of uniqueness intrinsic to the original. Neither the primacy nor the technique of the reproduction can help replace the original. There is always something that is non-reproducible. This is "something" and is its authenticity (*Echtheit*).

On the other hand, Aronson rightly asserts that if there is something that can be reproduced or at least something that we want to repeat, then it is the originality, the uniqueness of an object.

Nevertheless, Benjamin insists that the distinction between the copy and the original lies not in the visually noticeable otherness (technical reproduction nullifies such differences). This distinction exists in a non-perceivable way, as the aura.

Therefore, as the last instance of distinction, the aura is addressed only when there is a copy. Consequently, the main idea advocated by Groys, Aronson, and Hansen is that the aura appears (at least, fixed) together with a copy in the age of mechanical reproduction.

Deliberately or not, Benjamin does not indicate this controversy in his concept of the aura. In the reproduction as such, he sees only the threat to the pure forms of art and a depreciation of the creativity in general.

Walter Benjamin wrote his *Work of Art* essay in a particular historical context. He witnessed the politicization of art, a creation of a homogenous culture space that utterly resisted uniqueness and worshipped anonymous copies. Thus, in mechanical reproduction, Benjamin saw a clear threat to a freedom of creativity, which is why his voice was so uncompromised. He was right about the impact of new technologies on the way we perceive the art – our visual experience has fundamentally transformed. However, reproducibility not only has not dissolved the aura but has enabled it to appear in a wider variety of forms. Reproducibility has become a basic mode of modern art that is replicable by its nature. It doesn't mean it lacks originality. It means that we need to reconsider the very idea of the original regarding the way we perceive the images today.

Copies make art closer. Benjamin considered it as a threat to an aesthetic perception in general. The distance is removed in daily practice: we listen to the music online (the highest level of displacement); we hang a copy of a *Girl with a Pearl Earring* in bedrooms. We are not accustomed to unique objects; everything for us is fundamentally familiar. *Mona Lisa* ceased to be a single specific object for us decades ago. Its numerous reproductions have created a special cultural code in which the picture hanging in the Louvre does not exhaust the meaning of the image itself and does not lock the chain of its development. The question of whether *Mona Lisa* will exist if the original is destroyed is not unsolvable anymore. My answer is yes, the image of *La Joconde* will continue to affect. Moreover, perhaps the death of the original will give a new impetus to this image. And this answer is not a call for destroying the originals.

The original gets benefits from reproductions. The copies make it accessible and, thus, meaningful for the viewer. Artworks continue to exist, but their influence extends, surfing in the aesthetic space and going beyond its limits. The reproduction does not take away the status of the unique from the original object. It seeks to become independent from the initial object. When we stop looking for the shadow of the original behind the reproduction, we let the copy show its aura.

¹ Гройс, Б. (2006). Топология современного искусства. *Художественный журнал*, 61/62. <<http://xz.gif.ru/numbers/61-62/topologiya/>>.

² Hansen, M.B. (1987). Benjamin, Cinema and Experience: The Blue Flower in the Land of Technology. *New German Critique*, no. 40, 189.

³ Benjamin, W. (1968). On Some Motifs in Baudelaire. In Hannah Arendt (ed.) *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books, 188.

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