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Aura as Productive Loss

By Warwick Mules

Ambivalence

An ambivalence lies at the heart of Walter Benjamin's concept of aura. [1] As outlined in his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," aura is simultaneously the decayed perception of art objects in historical time, *and* the affirmation of a desire to "bring things closer" (223) in the "now" (*Jetztzeit*) of contemporary life. [2] On one hand aura signifies distance from the origin that the art object expresses, while on the other hand, aura is an expression of distance in proximity – a condition of technologically produced presence, or *tekhne*.

The theme of technologically produced presence is also pursued by Martin Heidegger in "The Question Concerning Technology," where he develops the idea of *tekhne* as a mode of revealing, that is, the bringing into presence of something through technical skill (12-13). [3] Both Benjamin and Heidegger are concerned with the ontological implications of technology; its effect on human being situated within a technologically mediated world. *Tekhne* is positive in that it brings to presence that which was merely potential. Thus, to read aura exclusively in terms of decay and loss is to overlook its affirmative effect as productive of technologically mediated life. Aura is not loss pure and simple, but something that actively produces loss. Aura is, in effect, a disjunctive experience of what I am terming "productive loss."

In order to read Benjamin's essay like this I will need to overcome an objection that Benjamin himself seems to make about aura: that it is an experience with a finite historical trajectory in early photography, and that it constitutes a dead end in art, surpassed by more progressive post-auratic practices, especially in avant-garde film and photography. I will argue that, far from being something rendered obsolete by new technologies, aura and auratic experience is accelerating in intensity and scope, as the phantasmagoria of capitalist consumer culture becomes ever more deeply embedded in new technological forms. [4] Aura has taken on an aspect of the real that now requires renewed efforts on the part of critical theorists and creative artists alike, to unpack its illusory structures and to expose its power to deflect sensory experience into pseudo-presence, or false origin.

Susan Buck-Morss has noted a certain creative and restorative imperative in Benjamin's work. She writes that Benjamin "is demanding of art [that it] undo the alienation of the corporeal sensorium, to restore the instinctual power of the human bodily senses for the sake of humanity's self-preservation, and to do this, not by avoiding new technologies, but by passing through them" (5). In the art work essay, Benjamin himself suggests that the human sensorium – the relation of the senses in the human body – is changed by technological mediation, creating "new kind[s] of perception" in different historical contexts (Benjamin, "Work of Art" 222). By reading aura as productive loss, I am suggesting a way of re-engaging with Benjamin's thought that takes us on this other path, away from an art or critical practice at odds with contemporary technologies,

towards one that works “by passing through them” (Buck-Morss 5). My aim is to read Benjamin in such a way that a certain sensory and cognitive interconnection might take place through the body’s contact with singular and proximate life, as an experience of the “to come” or immanent futurity.[5] To do this requires an undoing of those auratic experiences that deflect and resolve the senses into closed audio-visual environments; it requires a “passing through” contemporary media technologies in their desire to create self-enclosed image worlds.

Origin

The world invoked in Benjamin’s art work essay is relativistic, open and dynamic. Everything is at odds with everything else, and forces are pulling in different directions at the same time. Perspectives are relative to the position from which one looks, while the act of looking is itself inhabited by perceptions that it does not command. This dynamic relativism reaches into the very movement of Benjamin’s argument, which constantly traverses its own assertions, turning itself inside out in a contradictory play of ideas. The result is to undo and open up ideas to new ways of thinking, to pave the way for a future thought offered by displacing the very terms under which Benjamin’s argument is put.

This style of essay writing reflects on Benjamin’s concerns for origins and their basis in metaphysical reasoning, reaching back to early periods of his writing. In the preface to *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin writes of the origin as a kind of violence that tears away within a “maelstrom” of forces:

Origin means ... that which springs forth out of coming-to-be and passing-away. Origin stands in the flow of becoming as a maelstrom which irresistibly tears the stuff of emergence into its rhythm. (qtd in Weber, “Genealogy of Modernity” 468)

From this perspective, origins are not primary, but secondary effects of primary forces that are themselves non-original. In this case, aura is not original; it does not emanate from some originating source that remains separated from its effects. Rather, original and effect are conjointly present in a disjuncture or “flaw in being” (Stiegler 193) at the heart of experience itself. [6] Benjamin’s task is to make this disjuncture show itself as a supplemented origin, something that is both inside and outside the experiencing subject. At stake here is a new way of conceiving experience, as a surface of affects that prefigure the subject and subjective reasoning – a life-giving materiality of productive loss, or the production of presence as the lost origin initiated by the coming of *tekhne* within the order of things.

Marks

Let me now introduce a set of terms proposed by Benjamin in a much earlier essay to the art work essay, entitled “Painting, or Signs and Marks” (1917). In this essay Benjamin makes a distinction between marks and signs. Signs are lines inscribed or imprinted on a material surface. They lead to meaning through reference. But in perceiving signs, the material surface disappears. Perception thus harbours a hidden surface, which Benjamin describes as a “surge” – an expression of residual materiality inhabiting perception itself. [7] He calls this a *mark*. The mark emerges from the medium on which the sign is printed or inscribed – a surging forth that persists and endures. This is not dead inert material, but rather a materiality that carries life itself, as experienced matter (that is, material capable of bearing experience).

At stake here is the very status of subjective experience within print and electronic mediated culture. To account for this, we need to shift focus momentarily to another of Benjamin’s early essays, entitled “On the Program of the Coming Philosophy” (1918). Here Benjamin engages in a critique of the Kantian dualism of subject and object. In Kant’s formulation, subjective experience

