

Aura as Productive Loss

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that Walter Benjamin's concept of aura should be understood as something that actively produces loss in the technological mediation of the past and the present. The production of loss occurs in the disjuncture between the past and the present when looking at one photograph through another in which the past is experienced in the present as a spark of contingency, the future in its anteriority as potential to be rediscovered. By following the trace of technical mediation inscribed in the images, we uncover the archival future of technological becoming of media objects in which one technology supplements, competes with, and overthrows another in the struggle for hegemony in the phantasmagoria of industrialized capitalism.

KEYWORDS

Walter Benjamin, aura, technological mediation, *teckhne*, photography, phantasmagoria.

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 *tekhnē* 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 is limited to what the cogito needs to produce objects. Anything else is discarded or ignored. For Benjamin this is a severe restriction of experience, which is systematically reduced to the already known. Instead, Benjamin wants to access what he calls "a pure and systematic continuum of experience" (105). In this case experience is not *for* a subject poised to make something of it; rather, experience is absolute – the materiality that conditions all categories of life.

Absolute experience is originary in the sense that instead of originating in a single moment of inception, it originates everywhere and all at once. In this case there can be no pure origin: all origins are contaminated by the "flaw in being" (Stiegler 193), or the mediation of being by *tekhne*. A disjuncture occurs at the heart of being when technological mediation separates experience from the origin while trying to overcome it at the same time. The task of technology is to restore the origin, but from a point of disjuncture. Benjamin's answer to this conundrum is to make the disjuncture visible as a surface of affects. The mark, which, if we recall, is the material surface on which signs are printed or inscribed, becomes the barely visible trace of a disjuncture between being and *tekhne*; evidence of the continual yet self-defeating struggle by technology to overcome the separation of experience from its origin.

Images

In his later writings on technological reproduction, Benjamin renames the mark aura, as a redemption of experience from the flaw of technological mediation. Aura is the (false) essence or non-technological aspect of a technologically produced experience that opens access to the original. But this access is not direct. Rather, it becomes foiled by its own embeddedness in *tekhne*. If we return to the other essay Benjamin wrote about aura, entitled "Little History of Photography", published in 1931, we can see this argument clearly spelt out.

Here Benjamin searches for aura in an old nineteenth century photograph of the photographer Karl Dauthendey and his fiancée:

Immerse yourself in such a picture long enough and you will realize to what extent opposites touch ... the beholder feels an irresistible urge to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency, of the here and now, with which reality has (so to speak) seared the subject, to find the unconscious spot where in the immediacy of that long-forgotten moment the future nests so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it. (510)

The experience that Benjamin writes of here is the uncanny presence of the past in the present, in which the subject is "seared" into reality by

photographic technology. The viewer sees the past as a prefiguring of the present, but retrospectively, as an aura or false origin. But in unpacking this complex auratic gaze, Benjamin exposes the point of contact between past and present (the “spark of contingency”) as the conjoining of opposites (“opposites touch”), a dialectical image of time unfolding in two directions at once. Suddenly a certain residual excess appears, a stiffness and permanence of posture and disposition that even reaches into the clothing of the subjects themselves: “the very creases in people’s clothes have an air of permanence” (“Little History” 514). It’s as if the very presence of the sitters were somehow resisting their own photograph image, pulling themselves back into time passed.



Karl Dauthendey and fiancée



Franz Kafka as boy

A little further on in the essay, Benjamin discusses another photograph, this time one of the boy Franz Kafka posing in a tableau setting of palm fronds and a fake tropical landscape, looking out with “immense sad eyes”. A comparison between the two photographs reveals something more. Here are Benjamin’s comments:

This picture in its infinite sadness, forms a pendant to the early photographs in which people did not yet look out at the world in so excluded and godforsaken a manner as this boy. There was an aura about them, a medium that lent fullness and security to their gaze even as it penetrated that medium. (516-17)

Traversing the two images reveals a simulation in the later one, suggesting profound alienation from what appears to be a natural state visible in the earlier photographs. Here, Benjamin’s gaze reveals aura as false origin; as the consequence of looking at earlier images from the perspective of a later time. In fact, what Benjamin does here, is to extract the structure of perception itself as a *chiasm*, or crossed temporality in which an original condition is staked as the prefigured ground for further technique: “Here, too, we see in operation the law that new advances are prefigured in older techniques” (517). Remembering that the photograph of Kafka is more technically advanced, then we can conclude that changes in technique and technological operations do not wipe out aura; rather they summon it up; they make it

visible as a fading permanence; an original state that can only appear retrospectively, from within contemporary techniques that have made the earlier techniques obsolete, fossilizing them into a kind of historical permanence. [8]

Here we are opened into a struggle in which competing perceptions are played out in terms of a disjuncture between new and old technologies. [9] What is at stake in this struggle is the capacity to extend the experience of life-as-perception into the future in terms of technologically conditioned social strata vying for visibility within cultural formations defined by media circulation. Class becomes visible as a certain kind of auratic experience emanating from specific photographic images as if it were permanently and naturally present to the viewer – “the very creases in people’s clothes have an air of permanence” (“Little History” 514). But this experience is itself fraught with the trauma of the originary flaw defined historically in terms of competing techniques for making things visible. The image of the boy Kafka can only be seen through the aura of bourgeois permanence, which is thus extended through time. Yet the Kafka image breaks with the seeming continuum between the past and the present, thereby destabilizing the hegemony of the bourgeois self-image at the perceptual-technological level. Benjamin’s own readings reflect this, as he feigns to read with the aura, as if it gave a direct access to the origin, but simultaneously reveals how the aura is produced as an effect of technological obsolescence in the mode of a false originary experience.

Benjamin’s readings here suggest that each photograph is a mark that reproduces the trace of previous techniques configured in the very form of the image itself, as aura or productive loss. Photographs allow us to see the world as it was, but in order to do so, they bear traces of a struggle between competing visions of world-origin accessed in the moment of perception.

Phantasmagoria

In the art work essay, Benjamin presumes that the destruction of aura by mechanical and electronic reproduction is not a bad thing because it will release an emancipatory *tekhnē* that will allow the masses to appear to themselves in their true form, leading him to champion Soviet media, as well as avant-garde and experimental film making. However, this has not come to pass, as capitalist modes of production and consumption have subsumed both auratic and post-auratic experiences into the mass commodity market sphere. Aura remains as the residual contact with originariness – the attempt by capital to restore to commodities their magical quality as auratic things, seen for instance in the mythologising of modern advertising. This was the way Marx viewed commodities as part of the “phantasmagoria” of capitalism. [10]

Phantasmagoria constitute image worlds which immerse the human body in a technologically mediated environment (Buck-Morss 22). They bracket out the connection between the body and the outside world, substituting synthetic experiences composed of visual and tactile images that affect the body in predetermined ways. Cyberspace is a phantasmagoria, but so too is a department store. Phantasmagoric experience is now emerging as the

dominant form of technological mediation in global culture (Highmore 14). Its aura requires urgent critical attention.

The aura associated with phantasmagoria is subject to a double loss, equivalent to a mutation in the capitalist mode of production. Let me explain. If we consider that the production of commodities depends on the mobilisation of human desire, then desire itself has seen three distinct changes over the last two centuries. Initially there was a desire to promote products (the emergence of commodities in the nineteenth century). But this was gradually replaced by the desire to promote the desire for products (the selling of “lifestyle”), followed by yet a further stage, the one we are currently going through, where the desire to promote desire is itself replaced by the desire for production itself (the selling of “us” as corporate producing machines under the sign of the logo) (Mules, “Capitalism” 147). In this current stage, the sign no longer mediates between the past and the present through a material medium which disappears in the aura of the retrieved original (the era of classical realism and the perfectibility of the art object as a seamless unity). Rather, the materiality on which the sign is inscribed becomes visible as a kind of informational mist, spreading into every nook and cranny of the world. Aura no longer summons up a lost original, but is itself the lost origin that magically appears everywhere and all at once. Material becomes immaterial, and presence, no longer consigned to an unapproachable origin, becomes fully and immediately available as pseudo-effect, the effect of a returned origin that had never left in the first place. This is the site of a profound illusion in which the loss of the loss of aura leads to a spurious gain: the body seemingly enlivened by its own self-presence.

We see this phenomenon everywhere in today’s “control societies” in which individuals are encouraged to see themselves as self-directed and self-motivated: free-wheeling consumers and entrepreneurs in a dematerialised world of images and codes.[11] The body is reduced to a techno-organic substance affected directly by manipulative techniques. Aura is reinvested in the body as an immediate experience of “being connected” where the outside world seemingly dissolves in the presence of a far more enticing virtual world, full of new possibilities for interconnection. But the material world won’t go away. It persists as a stubborn residue, insisting that the body remain where it is: earthed in an historical *milieu* composed of the traces of outdated techniques and calculations that retain their power to affect contemporary life (Mules, “Contact Aesthetics and Digital Arts”).

A critique of the phantasmagoria of capital thus needs to begin at the interface between the material and immaterial modes of experience in which bodies are historically produced. Here, I want to recall Susan Buck-Morss’s comments, that we “undo the alienation of the corporeal sensorium, [in order] 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). I suggest that we need to engage with the phantasmagoria of contemporary experience, by unpacking the complex structure of perceptual experience that they produce. This can be done, I suggest, by following the *mark* as the material tracing of a struggle to make the original show itself. In earlier media forms the mark manifested as aura, as the restoration of lost origin. In contemporary media forms, the

origin has not been lost, but finds itself everywhere as a quasi-divine mist – the mist of cyberspace. The mark, as the material surface of the sign, no longer retreats in the light of perception, but is itself the substance of perception in a new configuration of the sensorium.

Access to the movement of the mark can be had by a careful reading of images in the way Benjamin himself undertakes, combining an archaeological revealing of the crossed temporality of the original and its after-affect with a genealogical account of the techniques of making images.[12] The aim should be to detect the remediation of one image in the other as a figure or trait that tries to erase itself in its appearing – as the false ground of the origin.[13] It is this effort of self-erasure that reveals as it conceals – an effort that is as much part of the reading as it is actually “in” the images and their historical emergence that I am calling productive loss.

The critique of aura that I have presented here is not undertaken to restore the lost origin, nor to re-unify the body in an immanent material experience free of technological mediation. Rather, it is to clear a space from within the immateriality of contemporary experience; to make contact with an “outside” that is materially present as the yet-to-be realisation of some other form or mode of life. The emergence of this new form of life can only take place through the effort to disentangle the materiality of experience from the structures and imperatives of dematerialised culture, by unpacking its aura, and by creating new material configurations out of the debris of what remains.

Endnotes

[1] This has been noted by a number of commentators, in particular Rodolphe Gasché (185). In preparation for this paper I have drawn on a number of sources for commentary on Benjamin’s concept of aura, including Gasché, van Reijen, Weber, Gelikman.

[2] *Jetztzeit* should be thought of not as a *punctum*, but as an event. The “now” of contemporary life is not equivalent to a unitary moment cut off from the past, but an eventuating, or a complex temporal phasing. In Benjamin’s terms, *Jetztzeit* is the disjunctive gathering of all potential events in the singular event that explodes the telos, or the predictable unfolding of causal history. See Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” especially numbers XIV, XVI XVII and XIX. See also Löwy 99.

[3] In Aristotle’s sense, *tekhnē* (making) involves bringing things to their end by means of rational action or operation; the technique of applying means towards an end, an efficiency of thought and action (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1140a). Here we might say that the *tekhnē* of technology in general is to actualise a potential; to make present that which is absent (*in potentia*) as a means of gaining control over life and life experience. Heidegger refers to this as Enframing (20) – the gathering of material as “standing-reserve” (ready and available) by technical means as a way of ordering and commanding. All *tekhnē* in modernity is, as Bruno Latour puts it, concerned with control at a distance.

[4] See Weber (“Mass Mediauras” 89, 104) for the persistence of aura in technological reproduction: “what Benjamin calls the ‘decline of aura’ emerges here not as its simple elimination but as alteration, which, however, turns out to repeat what aura always has been: the singular leave-taking of the singular, whose singularity is no longer that of an original moment but of its posthumous aftershock” (104-105).

[5] The “to come” is an experience of futurity as a break or disjuncture in the continuity of linear time. The “to come” is radically open and cannot be predicted or represented. It is an edge, or limit that goes beyond what a limit limits, without leaving that limit. See Jacques Derrida’s idea of the “to come” as a “future present, a future modality of the living present (65), and Jean-Luc Nancy’s idea of an edge as “the exposed part or dimension of the singular” (47).

[6] Stiegler refers to the flaw in being as the “de-fault of origin ... [or] originary technicity” (193)

[7] Here I follow Caygill. I have developed these ideas elsewhere (see my article “Creativity, Singularity and Techné: The Making and Unmaking of Visual Objects in Modernity”)

[8] Benjamin’s theory of temporality means that the past is always unfinished: “[Benjamin] wants the past to present itself as unfinished to the political-theological viewpoint” (Bolz and van Reijan 18). The unfinishedness of the past presents itself as a fading away of the present in its disjunctive relation to the past which becomes seemingly unapproachable. Benjamin thus attempts to demystify the past by making it yield itself materially as a false or pseudo-origin, which is nevertheless originary. Benjamin’s argument leads to questions not only of technological change and its effect on the capacity to see and know the world, but also of the future as the “to come,” the very possibility of a future other than as a projection of the present as it is currently known. Jacques Derrida’s concept of spectrality and the “haunting” of the present by the past within the opening of the “to come” is relevant here (Derrida 64-65). See also endnote 5.

[9] This section of the paper was presented as part of a paper entitled “Media Sense: the reproduction of sense at the interface between old and new media technologies,” at the *MiT5: Creativity, ownership and collaboration in the digital age* international conference, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA, 27-29 April, 2007.

[10] See Capital, Vol. 1 “The Fetishism of the Commodity and its Secret” (Marx 163-177)

[11] For control societies see Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations* 177. Deleuze develops his idea of control societies as a transformation of Foucault’s disciplinary societies. See Hardt and Negri, *Empire* (23-27) for a development of the idea of contemporary capitalism and control societies. See also Mules (“That Obstinate Yet Elastic Natural Barrier”) for the transformation of individuals into “dividuals” in control societies.

[12] In a similar fashion, Michel Foucault calls for a critique of affective history as origin-affect (*Ursprung*) through a dual archaeological and

genealogical approach, following the lead Nietzsche provides in *The Genealogy of Morals*.

[13] Remediation is “the way one medium absorbs and transforms another” (Lister 52). See also Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin’s book *Remediation: Understanding New Media*.

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