

Art in Peril

The Plight of the Viewer

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Abstract

As Walter Benjamin discussed in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* more than seventy years ago, the dissolution of the aura of a work of art has equalized our social relation to the work of art. The liberation of art from an exclusive upper class status symbol has placed all viewers on equal footing in terms of their experience, but disappearance of the aura has eroded the perceptual worth of art. This work attempts to evaluate the current state of the aura of the work of art, as affected by the prevalence of commodity and the parasitic influence of kitsch on our modern world.

Author's Note

During the creation of this discourse, it was my choice to use an engendered language when referring to a singular viewer, artist, etc. multiple times along a single line of thought. The choice of referring to an individual with terms such as him, himself, his, was intended to maintain the flow of the work as a whole, and as such I did not resort to using a his/her hybrid expression. Although the term 'mankind' or 'humanity' could have been invoked in some cases throughout the work, in the sections that focus on the singular interpretations of an individual, based upon their past experience, I encountered a problem maintaining a consistent syntax. The shortcomings of my ability to discuss the individual and any associated referents aside, the hardships of representing a gender neutral, self-possessing consciousness in my native language remains a issue for another treatise.

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I. Introduction

Works of art possess the ability to act as an indicator of social status, as well as the ability to act as a representative of a historically active experience. It is not the fault of the artist that the possession of a work of art used to be intimately associated with the economic position of the owner, but this is a reality that still persists into the present day. Formerly, an aristocrat or an independently wealthy individual would commission a painting from a single artist, purely for the purpose of hanging the painting on the wall. Art created for this purpose became an outward sign of the position of the purchasing bourgeoisie, in which each non-essential object in their possession takes on a physical manifestation of their overall wealth.

Works of art that pre-dated mechanical forms of reproduction were largely considered singular entities. Since these works of art were unable to be reproduced in exactitude, there was only one original to occupy a physical space. Although, “in principle a work of art has always been reproducible,” there was never a sufficient number of reproductions to distribute a work to a global audience, as is possible today¹ Thanks to this physical limitation on reproduction, the singular work was instead empowered as a commodity. Although value is generally superficial associated added to the work in response to a societal need to classify its worth, it is derived from the combination of the time and effort the artist spent creating the piece as interpreted by the targeted buyer. If the buyer wished to be seen as a respectable member of society, the work of art must be afforded great worth as perceived by both the social elite and the peasantry. Since the exchange of a commodity was a relatively common method of transaction, discounting methods of bartering, it was possible for an individual to buy their way into the upper echelons

¹ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 218.

of a society purely based upon how large an estimated social worth they possessed in the form of fine works of art.

How then, do we determine the monetary worth of a work of art? How do we determine the social value of a work of art? Assuming that the work of art itself remains relatively constant, and barring any physical deterioration encountered during its years of exhibition, it extends through the ages as an untouched relic of the creative process, there remains a value embedded in its very existence. This specific quality of a work of art may be explained through the exposition of a property known as the aura. Aura is an indivisible part of work of as a whole, and is responsible for helping to shape the viewing experience with regards to how the work is presented *in time* to the viewer. Since there is only one physical location for any original, non-reproducible work, it exhibits, “its presence in time and space,” and is perpetually anchored to, “its unique existence at the place where it happens to be.”² The aura is the one constant of the work, regardless of how the viewer encounters it, whether as a critic, or as an owner, or as an uninterested viewer. Even the artist, who shares an existence with the work, will find a unique interaction with aura and its representations based upon his experience of creation.

The work in question may be a family heirloom handed down through the generations, which is intended to remain a centerpiece of the parlor to commemorate the memory of a pertinent experience from the past. Even a long lost original work, having found its way through second hand dealers until an astute collector stumbled upon it at auction and returned home with an authentic piece by a master artist, maintains a presence about itself, one that is perhaps more mystified by its untimely separation and eventually re-discovery. Regardless of the historical interactions that a work of art is bound by, the piece itself exists not only in the physical and temporal space of world history, but also in within its own sphere history which can be explored

² Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 220.

by studying the specifics of its creation at the hands of the artist. Although the physical method of construction does not explicitly change the interaction of the piece with the viewer, it is within the choices during construction that the sometimes unconscious drive of the artist can be seen.

Over the course of history, art has advanced from the profile drawings of the Egyptians, to the birth of perspectively accurate representations during the renaissance, to the technological wonders of film editing and digital media processing. During these periods, whenever art was created regardless of its purpose, the aura has faithfully followed and incorporated itself into the work of art in order to continue to provide a living historical record of each piece. The aura, however, may only advance so far. Mass production offers the artist the ability to circulate many copies of a work very rapidly, in such uses as the poster, the flyer, printed periodicals, and other rapid social disbursement vehicles. Oil painting, sculpture, and other forms of non-mechanically reproduced art have been hard pressed to redefine themselves amidst a new emphasis on the quantitative circulation of an image. The effect of a work upon the entirety of the global society has become, in some cases, more important than the overall quality of the image as represented to the viewer. As a result, the aura offers little to no individualized meaning to the viewer, and art as a whole, thanks to the loss of the aura, has degenerated into a practice concerned only with the production and sale of art as commodity.

II. Aura

All works of art possess an aura, and it is this feature which allows them to transcend the immediacy of the moment in which they are viewed. From the first instant in which the work takes shape, to the physical location of the work in the parlor or elsewhere, the presence of the aura remains the direct perceptual link between the artist and the viewer. Following the assumption that there is only *one* work of art (and while being reproducible, there is only one

original from whence the reproductions come), the telltale signs of the artist's efforts provide the skeleton for the aura. The period during which the work was crafted remains visible on the surface, as seen in the changes the artist made from the original design or perhaps as a fluctuation of daily moisture content that altered paint hues ever so slightly. Regardless of how the elements of construction individually affect the work, the work itself rests before the observer not as an object devoid of historical grounding, but as an acting result as a portion of the artist's consciousness realized in a physical form.

Although no claim can be made that the mere creation of an object composes the aura, it is through a parallel existence with the act of creation that the aura manifests itself. The artist must rely upon his inspirations and previous training to begin a systematic expression that allows the viewer to understand that, "the uniqueness of a work of art is inseparable from its being embedded in the fabric of tradition."³ This tradition includes such distinctions as the school of thought the artist belongs to inasmuch as it dictates how forms and space and color must be handled within the work. The work of art, "unites the very same relation of doing and undergoing...that makes an experience to be an experience," which can only be discovered through the recreation of the series of memories or emotions present within the artist at the moment of inception.⁴ "The artist embodies in himself the attitude of perceiver while he works," and crafts something that maintains an active self-presence while specifically taking into account the awareness of the viewer to be.⁵ Creation without intent does not afford a work of art an aura, but creation guided by the self-assured artist endows the work with the ability to interact with a viewer on a personal level.

³ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 223.

⁴ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 48

⁵ *Ibid.*, 48.

After an aura has been established, the work itself must possess a link to nature, or to civilization, or to some part of reality from whence its creation was derived and expressed in its chosen medium. It is not necessary for the viewer to understand the link to reality, but there must be something to ground the aura within the experience of the artist and within the realm of worldly perception. An artist may choose to experiment stylistically over the course of a career, or create a number of works while in a specific phase, but the previous experiences of learning and instruction permanently tie the artist to the exterior world. Even if the only connection to reality in a work is the presence of the aura, this still allows the work a meaningful interaction with a viewer. Emphasis upon past lessons may wane, and the exposition of new and radical forms of art from elsewhere may persuade the artist to reevaluate some interpretations of former styles and tendencies, but the past remains a concrete part of the experience which defines the artist as an artist, and binds the artist to the aura.

“An experience has pattern and structure, because it is not just doing and undergoing in alternation, but consists of them in relationship,” as a process which shows that there are clearly identifiable methods of construction and linear paths of thinking within the creation of the work as a whole.⁶ Each artist may have problem areas that they strive to perfect in the preliminary studies for a piece, or perhaps the artist follows a set routine in order to create the elements they are most comfortable with at the beginning of the creative process. These overall strengths and weaknesses of the artist must be addressed within the medium of the work, or the artist, “will not be aware of what he is doing and where his work is going.”⁷ The work of art is not the result of a mere whim of creation, but rather a total effort of the artist to declare in a clearly visible manner the nature of his thoughts, and the nature of the experience he wishes to represent. The visible

⁶ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 44.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 45.

expression of the artist's thoughts then becomes the first interaction point between then aura and the viewer.

Action taken towards a canvas, towards a sculpture, or through the use of a lens, is the result of a careful and measured choice by the artist as a means to an end. A properly chronicled tradition expects that, "each brushstroke must satisfy an infinite number of conditions," since the experience to be represented is not a static moment in time, but rather a comprehensive portrayal of a moment chosen within the strand of the artist's existence.⁸ To recreate a lifeless snapshot of a moment does no justice to the gravity of the interactions between the painter and the painted, between the sculpture and the subject. Should an artist successfully recreate the feeling of the fluid existence of a moment and, "awaken the experiences which will make their idea take root in the consciousness of others," they have achieved their goal of adequately showing the viewer that the work must be considered alongside all facets of experience to remain experientially valid.⁹ This communication is not an active dialogue between artist and viewer, since the work stands alone without any clarification from the artist. Instead, it is the job of the paintbrush, the job of the chisel, the job of the tools used during creation to remain true to the thought and creative process of the artist by hinting at the passage of time before and after the chosen moment. It is the recognition of the work by the viewer as being more than the sum of its temporal and physical parts which brings its historical tradition to life before the eyes of the viewer.

⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense*, 15.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

III. The Viewer

The relationship of the viewer to the work of art is the juxtaposition of the physical viewing of a piece of art with the individual comprehension of that which exists before the viewer. The distinction that, “flowers can be enjoyed without knowing about the interactions of soil, air, moisture, and seed...they cannot be *understood*,” leaves an uneducated viewer with a significantly different experience of the work as compared to an individual who understands these relationships and the effect upon the flower as embedded in a historical reality.¹⁰ Within this example it is possible to see that the overarching historical background of the viewer, the messy amalgamation of lived experience and self-referential knowledge, is pitted against the permanence of the aura to produce a new experience derived directly from the viewing.¹¹

To view a painting requires the viewer to study the work in question based upon, “how [he has] already experienced the meaning of paintings through reproduction.¹²” Due to the bond between the viewer and their past experience, it is impossible to exist in the presence of a work without recalling or considering previous interactions and internalized knowledge, even at a subconscious level. Any addition to self-referential knowledge gained from interacting with a work of art is not the result merely of sensory interaction with the aura, but rather a comprehensive interaction between the senses, memory, and any preconceived notions about viewing and art.

The one component of a work of art that is not self-contained by the viewer is the relationship of the viewer to the location where the work of art is exhibited. The viewer brings with him certain notions about the specific location where the work is placed, regardless of his

¹⁰ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 12.

¹¹ I refer to self-referential knowledge as the interpretation of all previous experience by the viewer, as actively applied to the viewed object.

¹² Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 31.

intent to focus only upon the work of art as in a vacuum from outside influences. Since a work of art can only exist in a single place, and because its history is tied so closely to the expression of its aura, the viewer cannot help but react to the surrounds at large. These reactions on the part of the viewer, perhaps eschewed as nothing more than a weakness of resolve towards the goal of viewing the work of art, are in reality the continued assertion that, “the authority of art [is] inseparable from the particular authority of the preserve.”¹³ The authority of a work of art, in this sense, is equated to the effect that the aura has upon the viewer, and as such, ties the location of the work of art directly to the aura of the work.

Any attempt at studying the life of an artist with the expectation of discovering a secret clue to the interpretation of a work of art remains a frivolous activity. The life of the artist does not interact with the work of art, at least not when the work of art exists in the presence of the viewer. Although it is possible to, “observe the movements of an unknown animal without understanding the law which inhabits and controls them,” these movements will remain nothing but a detached series of actions lacking a deeper meaning.¹⁴ A similar phenomenon may be encountered when researching the life of an artist and discovering that through some terrible hardship, he developed a way of representation that asserted itself throughout the entire body of his work. While this knowledge does enlighten us with regard to the procedural steps taken during the construction phases, the knowledge of these steps does not further assist the interpretation of the completed work as a whole. Any peculiarities or common matters of construction are already preserved within the aura of the piece, and are offered to the viewer as a byproduct of seeking out multiple works by the same artist. It is the task of the viewer to instead uncover the message the artist placed in the work of art, through the realization that, “the artist

¹³ Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 32.

¹⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense*, 25.

embodies in himself the attitude of the perceiver while he works.”¹⁵ But what good are the perceptions attached to a work if the viewer is unable to have an experience, or to approximate visualization beyond the merely mechanical?

Since the aura exists as a manifestation of the physical and temporal history of the piece, a work of art stands as more than just a frozen remembrance of time. There is a living quality that surrounds it, and that in turn requests an interaction worthy of animated entity. This interaction happens only while the viewer is actively engaged with the work, where the ability, “to see, to perceive, is more than to recognize,” suggests that mechanical sight recordings and the creation of easily digestible thought image is insufficient to properly explain the experience.¹⁶ The experience goes much deeper than a surface level conclusion that yes, there is a work of art in front of the viewer, and yes, it is composed of colors, and yes, it work done on a canvas, or chiseled from stone, or an expertly welded bronze statue. When focusing on the great many parts of the work, “we observe at once that it is impossible...to decompose a perception, to make it into a collection of sensations, because in it the whole is prior to the parts.”¹⁷ The work of art, as reinforced by the aura, is not merely the final addition of each separated element of the artist’s isolated creativity, but is instead the embodiment of all his history prior to construction, and continues acting in history even as the work remains embedded in the present. The work of art is able to share its aura, its timeless collection of knowledge with the viewer, but only if the viewer is willing to take a small amount of time to give the work more than a mere glance.¹⁸

¹⁵ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 48.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Primacy of Perception*, 15.

¹⁸ Aura here is compared to the ‘timeless collection of knowledge’ to show that it is a constant, while at the same time actively adapting through work of art in regards to the exhibit environment. Political structure and its whims may weaken or strengthen the social importance of fine art, and although the work of art does not change in its physical nature, this altered social outlook affects how the work may represent itself to the viewer. If sufficient distance separates the viewer from any residual knowledge surrounding either the creation of a work of art or the

This knowledge, this aura, is tied to both the physical construction of the work and to the larger history of the artist at the time of creation; the work offers a complex jumble that the viewer is tasked to make sense of. Although the viewer might wish to focus on the relationship of different colors within a work, or on how expertly the artist accounted for detail in a sculpture, the expression of these traits cannot become part of a proper experience unless they are considered as an active whole. For when Dewey suggests that when, “we are only passive to a scene, it overwhelms us...and we do not perceive that which bears us down,” it is only through a recognition of a passive interaction that the viewer can begin to understand that the elements of a work of art are not to be treated as a multiplicity of separate parts.¹⁹

Returning to the example that references the enjoyment of a picture of flowers, without knowing the process by which flowers grow and reproduce, we realize that knowledge of the painting as it exists in the viewer’s mind may sometimes offer clues not readily visible in the work’s raw presentation. To understand the holistic association of a work of art, as influenced by knowledge surrounding the artist, the viewer must, “summon energy and pitch it at a responsive key in order to *take in*,” what the work has to offer.²⁰ The viewer is required to hurl himself headlong into the work of art, and after immersion in its total product, escape from his viewing with a greater understanding of both himself and the work. This action is only possible through the interaction with the characteristic of the work known as the aura, the only portion of the work that is capable of a continuous interaction with any number of viewers over the course of the entire lifetime of the work. Cézanne, in his work, “began to paint all parts of the painting at the same time,” since his philosophy of rendering dictated that he attempt to capture the single

social attitude in existence at the time of creation, it does not lessen the experience, but rather transforms the experience into one that favors the discovery of the constructional and representational elements within the work.

¹⁹ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 53.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 53.

moment in its passage as honestly as possible.²¹ Viewing a work by Cézanne with the knowledge of his method of representation immediately following his inspirations offers the viewer, during the act of viewing, a chance to approximate the feelings and emotions bound up within Cézanne as his painted world took shape on the canvas.

The viewer cannot trust that his knowledge of a work is sufficient to expose the subtleties of the message which the artist attempted to convey. If the viewer applies any knowledge of the artist, concerning himself only with the structure and formation of individual elements, he neglects the structure of the work of art as a whole as defined in its historical perspective. To passively understand a work of art by isolating its parts, with no bearing upon one another is akin to attempting to read a schematic where each component is drawn in a different scale and with a different base unit of measurement. Knowing the exact composition of each piece in the schemata without understanding their relation and association to each other in the final product denies the viewer the conceptual image of what the schematic is trying to convey. In much the same way, a work of art strives to bestow upon the viewer a sense of what all the parts, when taken with regard to the inspiration of the artist and expressed individually in the work, were trying to represent before being separated in the formation of the work itself.

IV. The Gaze and Perception

In order to, “perceive, a beholder must *create* his own experience,” and he must summon to his immediate consciousness any knowledge of relations to the work of art in front of him.²² Experience as such takes on a historical perspective, where there is a fusion of the aura with the relevant reflections of the viewer towards the work. To define the term ‘relevant reflections’

²¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense*, 17.

²² Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 54.

here does not mean that the reflections are required to pertain to the life of the artist, or to the overarching social status during the work's creation, but is intended to include any previous knowledge which the viewer may apply towards the work during the exchange between him and the work. The result is that the viewer becomes part of, "an encounter with the history which has allowed the work to come down to [his] own age."²³ Perception is directly tied to the exchange between the viewer and the viewed, and this exchange is result of the viewer determining his historical perspective to the work as a whole.

The interaction of the viewer and the work of art is not the same as the distant look of the owner upon the artwork that he owns and over which he maintains absolute control, but is instead the result of an arrangement forged between the viewer and the aura. As mentioned before, the aura itself allows the viewer to interact with the work of art, and to use the aura to generate a new comprehension of how the specific work fits into the previous lived experienced of the viewer. "The viewer is situated within a visual field, not outside it," and must recognize the totality of the work in reference to his plane of existence, as another facet of experience he is now required to integrate into his being. Once acquainted with the visual field, the viewer must now relate his place in the field compared to the existence of the aura, and must determine the influence of the aura upon both his cognitive and sensory perceptions. It stands that, "the perceived thing is...rather a totality open to a horizon of an indefinite number of perspectival views," as determined by how the viewer situates himself within the visual field.²⁴ Perception, then, is the direct result of the viewer existing in the proximity of the original work and the aura, with an understanding of his own place within the visual field.

²³ Arato and Gebhart, *Essential Frankfurt Reader*, 227.

²⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Primacy of Perception*, 16.

It is only through an acceptance of the notion that, “only where things can be seen by many in a variety of aspects without changing their identity,” does it become possible to comprehend their place as embedded in reality.²⁵ Since a work of art generally exists in the public sphere, at least in terms of its exhibitiv nature (and therefore, its aura), a work always has had the potential to present itself to a sizeable audience. When exhibited in the public sphere, the relationship of the aura and the work of art to the public change in response to the power struggle that maintains the existence of the public sphere itself. Since, “perception is understood as an act in the sense that it transforms the object of the gaze,” the viewer, who has always been tasked with taking an active role in the viewing of a work, may now begin to understand the reason for looking *at* the work.²⁶ Although the viewer must become engaged in an exchange with the aura in order to arrive at a new understand of his old knowledge as compared to the work of art before him, he must focus as the active participant and render a gaze as directed upon the aura.

Since it has already been established in this discourse that the aura is a pseudo-living entity, existing as the expression of the total past of an object as its relation to its moment in exhibition, the aura may be considered the subservient entity of this interaction. The passive viewer, whom does not attempt to extract anything from experience, retains an equal visual footing with the work of art, and it is precisely for this reason that the passive viewer cannot experience a work of art as fully as an active viewer. The reasoning behind this presupposes the conceptual slavery of the viewed, who as the acted-upon object is subject to a dismissal of all freedoms, “that [are] undermined by the look of the Other.²⁷” The subject-object positioning of the experience, as defined by the choice of the viewer to take an active or a passive role during

²⁵ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 57.

²⁶ Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, 288.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 289.

its interaction with the work, becomes the key to proper interaction with the aura. The problem that now arises is that since the aura is supposed to maintain the record of the entire history of the work, and is supposed to provide each viewer with a new experience to add to his current interpretation of the world of art, how can it continue to do so as a subservient part of the exchange with an active viewer?

The aura itself is not capable of rendering a gaze upon the viewer, but if the viewer does not select himself to be the subject contemplating the work of art, the aura cannot become the object of the gaze, and cannot be added to the internalized experience of the viewer. For when Jay points out that, “the one who casts the look is always subject and the one who is its target is always turned into an object,” the lack of an entity to cast the gaze removes any subject-object distinctions from a potential viewing of a work.²⁸ The aura of a work of art remains an equal to the viewer until such a time that the viewer selects of his own accord to *actively view* the work of art, under which condition the aura surrenders its freedom of existence and its historical perspective to the viewer.

Since the aura remains tied to all aspects of the work from construction, to detail work, to exhibition, this restricts the aura in that it cannot grow and mature beyond the finished product of the work of art. Although the aura may change as history progresses and political and social attitudes towards the art change, the effect of an individual person upon the aura is non-existent. In the case where another viewer observes a fellow viewer in the *act of viewing*, however, we begin to encounter, “the problem of knowing how...experience is related to the experience which others have of the same objects,” as well as the associated language games that attempt to reconcile this disconnect.²⁹ Suddenly the primary viewer actively looking at a work of art casts

²⁸ Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, 288.

²⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Primacy of Perception*, 17

his gaze upon a fellow viewer, transforming his fellow into an object that is contemplating and interacting with the work of art as well. Knowing nothing of the experience of this second viewer, other than the apparent reality that the second viewer is *looking at* the work, the aura reacts with regard to the primary viewer as being subservient to multiple viewers. In subservience, however, the aura becomes a part of the space of appearances where two viewers are actively engaged when one or both recognize the other's viewing of the work of art and its aura. Since, "power is what keeps the public realm, the potential space of appearance between acting and speaking men, in existence," the recognition of the gaze of the other viewer forces the aura into a position of equal importance as the viewers.³⁰ As long as the work of art is being *looked at* by multiple viewers, it affords each viewer an existence in the space of appearances that lasts only until one of the aware viewers breaks contact with the aura and his fellow viewer. Once this connection has been severed, the aura and the work of art as a whole, returns to an existence as an object of contemplation in a vacuum, as just a work of art and no longer a socially interactive experience.

The problem inherent in individual perception (and active viewing as a result), is that it is, "intertwined not only with the scientific and rational intellect, but also with the artistic imagination," an aspect of the viewer that likely differs greatly between two isolated individuals.³¹ Perception remains an individual experience, and although the viewer may describe the general arrangement of his thoughts, and the exactitudes of how a work affects him, he cannot impart his specific view upon the outside world, forever separating the experience of an individual viewer from all other viewers. The viewing of another viewer occurs only occasionally in the presence of singular work, since there are only so many individuals that can

³⁰ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 200.

³¹ Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, 306.

physically exist in close enough proximity to view the piece as a detailed whole consisting of its independent parts. Working under the assumption that each individual viewer is entirely unique by virtue of his upbringing and previously encountered experience, it is possible to conclude that each individual viewer will have a unique experience with the work of art in question. Attempts to communicate this difference are flawed from the start, since, “we cannot account for the situation by saying that [one viewer sees] something in [his] own world and that [he attempts], by sending verbal messages, to give rise to an analogous perception in the world of [the other viewer].³²”

Language remains an inferior method of communication when discussing images and interpretations, and all that each viewer is left with is the need to describe how the work of art makes him feel. Feelings, however, are just another awkward attempt to express the individual reactions to the outside world. “The experience of great bodily pain, is...the most private and least communicable of all [feelings],” in the sense that the viewer (or in this case the injured) cannot adequately describe the manner of the feeling and impart an equal pain upon the curious observer.³³ In a mass produced world of art designed to be specifically distributed among a wide arrangement of viewers, the problem of viewing another viewer begins to define the relationship between viewer and art more so than the contribution that the aura may make to the collective experience of an individual viewer. Recognizing the reality that language cannot serve as a tool to share the experience encountered before a work of art, the viewer may instead choose not to attempt to share his experiences. As such, the awareness of the viewer to the other viewers interacting in the same way accounts, coupled with his inability to properly communicate with the outside viewers, accounts for a portion of the breakdown of the aura in the age of mechanical

³² Merleau-Ponty, *Primacy of Perception*, 17.

³³ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 50-51.

reproduction, not as the driving force behind the weakening of the aura but as a byproduct of the recent technological advancements.

V. Breakdown of the Aura

With the advent of photography, lithography, and film as mediums for artistic representation, these emerging technologies effected a change in the preeminence of the aura. Artists working within these new mediums took advantage of their compatibility with the widespread mechanical reproduction of their content, which in turn led to an, “[emancipation of] the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual.³⁴” No longer is it necessary for an interested viewer to contact a private collector or to visit a gallery seeking an experience with a work of art. Instead, mass production liberated art from the stuffy, status symbol that it once was, and placed it on the street corner available to any individual who could afford the listed price. Art as a whole was also freed from the ritual of perfection during creation, as in the case of film where a scene could be completely re-shot many times over if the reactions of the actors did not suit the tastes of the director.³⁵ All at once the notion of art as a social symbol was replaced with the notion of art as an experience intended for the masses specifically through the repeated replication of a selected array of images.

Works of art in the possession of a wealthy individual that were not permanently exhibited was a wasted expense before mechanical reproduction, since for these paintings it is through their public offering of, “sights of what [the viewer] may possess,” that they enter into an exchange where the aura and the viewer are involved.³⁶ It is the owner who wishes to inspire feelings of awe in his guests and to rejoice in his excellent taste, while the owner, with or without their

³⁴ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 224.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 230.

³⁶ Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 85.

conscious consent, is allowed to feel a sense of pity or disdain towards the viewers. The viewer, who is ideally an inferior member of society when compared to the owner, cannot escape the desire to marvel at this base accumulation of wealth, even if the possessions offer a reflection on the artist as works which were created for something beyond exhibition in the parlor. The destruction of the aura places these works of art in a context where all, “its authority is lost,” and the viewer is asked to merely look at the works and determine his own interaction with the visual representation the artist created.³⁷ Without a definitive authority to dictate proper viewing procedure, and without the pesky notion of a class divide always in creeping forward from the rear of the viewer’s mind, the work of art finds itself and its aura available to the masses without reservation.

This shift of perception removes the viewer from the space of appearances and turns them into an introspective viewer, forcing them to apply all outside knowledge as effectively as possible to the isolated quantity of knowledge that exists within them. As such, “modern property has lost its worldly character and [is] located in the person himself,” leading to a disintegration of knowledge in regards to works of art.³⁸ If each viewer is tasked to hold the entirety of his experiences within him, and is tasked to view art not in relation to the art but in relation to him, art as a social and expressive force begins to weaken. Granted, art as a social element was used for the purpose of representing the divide between the wealthy upper class and the lowly workers. And yet, it was this unfortunate history of ownership that directly composed the aura of the work of art based upon its location in time and the social structure. The removal

³⁷ Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 33.

³⁸ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 70.

of the social structure requires a redefinition of art since, “the art of the past no longer exists as it once did,” leaving an empty shell where the former social order once stood.³⁹

Liberation of art from its social stronghold may seem on the surface to be a great opportunity for a reevaluation of art as a whole, provided art can incorporate the whole of society into its being. However, care should be taken to remember how experience and aura are represented to the viewer. Since aura exists as an entity founded in the history of an object, it remains centered around the continued existence of a unique work of art that is non-transferable and non-reproducible on a mass production scale. With the destruction of the notion of the one work of art, the aura became instantly vulnerable since a mass produced object has no true original. Mass reproduction of works of art, and inherently, the removal of the aura forged in the ritual of singular creation, is not, “in itself a disaster – except if one believes that art is...the expression of an individuality of genius assisted by an elite craftsmanship.⁴⁰” The aura of craftsmanship as tied to painting, sculpture, and the physical arts specifically is weakened because of the reality that it is, “in no position to present an object for simultaneous collective experience,” without a firm grounding in its own historical record.⁴¹ Perception, as noted earlier, is not merely a mechanical recognition of the lines, colors, forms and other components of a work of art, but is the result of an active effort by the viewer to synthesize a new experience from the addition of his previous knowledge to the aura and presence of a work of art. With a weakened aura, the viewer may no longer derive the perspective of the work’s temporal placement from the work itself, but must turn to the significance of quantity as experience by a united human viewing.

³⁹ Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 33.

⁴⁰ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 74.

⁴¹ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 238

A lack of ownership of a work of art also impinges upon both the experience of the viewer and the inherent meaning behind the work itself. Let us assume that a wealthy individual commissioned a number of oil paintings for the sole purpose of displaying them in a specific location. Upon completion, the paintings will inherit a secondary status whereby they come to exist as, “objects which can be bought and owned,” and are no longer exclusively works of art.⁴² Before mechanical reproduction, these paintings would have exhibited an aura solidifying the dominance of the patron over that of the viewer. In the present era of mechanical reproductions, change the focus from paintings to silk-screens or lithographs, and suddenly there is no traditional place where these printings are supposed to exist. The oil paintings are not to be traded for goods or services, and should never be removed from their place of exhibit as symbols, so long as the owner wishes to exhibit them as a commodity. The lithographs, however, become part of a fluid existence, whereby they may plaster the walls of a dormitory as decorative addition one day, and become part of a piñata or artistic collage the next. The only difference between these two existences is that the oil painting is held in reverence of its singular existence in order to preserve the aura, and the lithographs may be used, abused, and disrespected without any concern for the aura.

A loss of concern for the aura, however, does not mean that art as a whole becomes a forgotten pleasure or that there is no way for a viewer to focus his gaze upon a work of art and step away from his viewing experience as an enlightened individual. If the aura perishes at the beneath the loss of the singular nature surrounding a work of art, the purpose of the viewer changes in relationship to art as a whole. No longer is it merely enough for a viewer to encounter an image, make a conscious decision to *look at* the work, and believe that he is satisfied. Instead, it is now desirable to research the history of a work or art in relation to its

⁴² Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 85.

historical presence and to apply this knowledge directly to the viewer as opposed to the work of art. This leaves the viewer contemplating not the exchange between himself and the aura of a piece, but rather, “the experience of seeking to give meaning to [his life], of trying to understand the history of which [he can become an active agent].”⁴³ The loss of the aura of a work of art requires the viewer to instead enter into an exchange with the work of art while recognizing that anything learned must be applied not to the knowledge of what and how art is perceived, but rather to the self-knowledge of the individual that defines his existence.

VI. The Unique Nature of Film

Film has been an especially destructive force, preventing any aura from forming beyond its own internal creations, and questioning the nature of any remnant auras elsewhere. Film is so prohibitive towards the aura because both photography and motion pictures specialize in showing, “the raw effect of matter, the impact created by the immediately given.”⁴⁴ Motion pictures admittedly attempt to use a series of impact moments strung together to tell a story, or to show a progression of time, or any number of other active displays to the viewer. Photography, on the other hand, relies on the instantaneous nature of what it captures, and since aura has been established as the result of the entire historical record of a work, it makes it very difficult for an aura to even exist.

Admittedly, the artist working with still photography must develop the pictures and must be aware of how he handles the negatives and takes an active role in the production of the final image, but the creation phase of the photograph takes but a split second. Thanks to this minimalist nature of works of art using film, “pictures neither explain what they show nor do

⁴³ Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 33.

⁴⁴ Arnheim, *Psychology of Art*, 119.

they tell us how to judge it,” a problem that is bound up in the nature of their creation.⁴⁵ Where another form of art (most particularly sculpture or painting) would have no problem with explanations and implied judgments, the passive nature of the photograph relegates the medium to an existence that common requires assistance to pinpoint the relevant components. A curious side effect of the passive existence of the photograph is that any reproducible image may be tailored to inspire a specific feeling in its audience, whereby, “the meaning of an image is changed according to what one sees immediately beside it.”⁴⁶ If this is true of still photographs, that they can share and absorb the validity of any images in close proximity, then does the same principle apply in regards to the motion picture and the deliberate arrangement of images in a sequence?

Motion pictures exist as an object to be perceived, much in the case of any other work of art. Within a motion picture, the images are selected and shown to the viewer without consent; in a photograph, the meaning is often hidden within the captured moment and requires text or specific focus on all the elements of the shot as a whole. Under the assumption that, “a film is not the sum total of image but a temporal *gestalt*,” we determine from the start that the worth of the motion picture is a result of both what is shown and what is not shown.⁴⁷ The desired portions of a shot must be carefully selected in order to highlight the specific turn of events to further the story. The film must remain true to itself because, “the film does not mean anything but itself,” as it leads the audience towards the conclusion of whatever plot or idea it attempts to depict.⁴⁸ Film exists in much the same realm as music, in that it only interacts with the viewer when it is in the process of playing, just as music is only a corporeal element when it is actively

⁴⁵ Arnheim, *Psychology of Art*, 118.

⁴⁶ Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 29.

⁴⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense*, 54.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 57.

being created by a performer. In both these cases, it is nearly impossible to allow for the presence of an aura, because there simply is nothing for the observer to do but remain passive.

Motion pictures are still able to provide the viewer with an interaction that does not require him to take an active role, namely the expression of the perceived. A motion picture may, “directly present to us that special way of being in the world...which we can see in the sign language of gesture and gaze,” suggesting that although itself unable to exist beneath the gaze of the viewer, it can show the viewer an adequate approximation of gaze in its subject matter.⁴⁹ Motion picture then remains a form of art set apart from the viewing audience, and although it may approximate with greater clarity the perceptual interactions of its characters, the aura created by these approximations exists in reference to the characters within the film.

VII. Aura and Commodity

With the aura under attack from all sides, and the technological ability to reproduce vast quantities of commercial goods increasing, the work of art is forced to redefine its niche within society as a whole. One result of the displacement of the aura is that the worth value of a work of art can be dramatically altered based upon its association with a commodity. If a work of art becomes the fixture of ownership, if a wealth individual wishes to purchase the work, in the attempt to promote his own social status by acquiring the work, he will find that he has greatly altered the aura associated with the work. The work will have, “become impressive, mysterious, because of its market value,” and the sudden increase in its worth has little to do with its merits as a work of art and everything to do with its desirability as an object.⁵⁰ The work of art is then redefined as a commodity, something to be lusted after, something that holds great worth only

⁴⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense*, 58.

⁵⁰ Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 23.

because of demand or opinion, and which is now more materialized than when a work of art was used explicitly as a status symbol by a wealthy individual. The worth value of this commodity, however, is not calculated in terms of a use value, but is instead calculated in terms of a perceived worth.

Advertisements in the modern day also function in terms of their perceived worth not as informative entities, but as peddlers of their images. The focus is not on their artistic worth, or on the aesthetic value of what they display, but rather on the use value to be derived from the products they offer. These infringements upon our consciousness carry a proposal, “to each of us that we transform ourselves, or our lives, by buying something more,” regardless of whether the need for something more even exists.⁵¹ These advertisements maintain an aura of their own, but it is an aura always driving towards the future, always shouting, yelling, pointing, telling the consumer to buy, buy, buy. There is no reprieve for the viewer, no escaping the permanence of this message that, “the power to spend money is the power to live,” as the advertisements suggest, as the buyer ideally sees himself after taking in this message.⁵² While this aura does represent the place of the advertisement within a historical context, it is a context of anticipation which neglects the past and does not allow the viewer to look at the image and arrive at a better understanding of his place in the world. With an aura turned ever towards the future the coexistence of the individual with the work is impossible, since the goal of the work is to imbue certain feelings of insufficiency and to inspire the viewer to address these shortcomings by buying a product whose aura carries the message that all will be fixed once the purchase is made.

In much the same was as advertisements carrying a message of viewer inferiority, the film industry carries the message of sensationalism, adventure, and first rate entertainment as

⁵¹ Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 131.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 143.

properties of its products. Film at first was nothing more than a curious art form, able to capture an instant in time quite accurately, albeit without a satisfactory explanation of the significance of the instant. It was not until the motion picture became a commodity that product placement and large advertising budgets began to overshadow the plot of the movie, as the emphasis moved from concern over the content towards the raw marketability of what the image the movie was attempting to sell. For it is only through the, “development of a commodity to the point where it becomes the dominant form in society,” that validates this change in the industry.⁵³ After this development, however, it is not just the changing shape of the marketed goods and services that are altered, but also the position of the laborer who contributes to the creation of these commodities. Once the laborer becomes affected by the emergence of the commodity as the driving point of the society, he encounters, “the commodity ruling over all lived experience,” including his own in relation to his production within the motion picture.⁵⁴

The actor involved in the production of films as intended for profit, or the movie star, if the actor is a well known, popular performer, is subject to a breaking of his own personality, as he is required to fit perfectly into the role designed for the film. The industry as such, “preserves not the unique aura of the person but the...phony smell of a commodity,” that serves the subject of the movie more truly than it serves the purposes of the actor.⁵⁵ This betrayal of the actor is the direct result of the demands placed upon him by the nature of film as a medium, whereby, “man has to operate with his whole living person, yet forgoing its aura.⁵⁶” Although the film as a whole may contain an aura relevant to the movements of the characters within its space, and an exterior aura relevant to the viewer watching the film, the actor is denied the aura because of the

⁵³ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 86.

⁵⁴ Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, 26.

⁵⁵ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 231.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 229.

ethereality of his actions on film. There is no guarantee that the first take will be the actual take used in the movie, and as such, it remains difficult for the actor ground himself in an historical context relative to the rest of the movie. Since the film may not be shot in a linear order but as a matter of convenience with regard to inside shots, outside shots, and on scene shots, any shred of aura that may have survived within the actor is summarily destroyed as the actor is asked to switch roles repeatedly. The notion of continuity and of a specific temporal location within the work of art is absent in a motion picture, when it is created as a commodity and is subject to filming schedules and a set release date. Here the actor as laborer has been relegated to a series of automated actions, which have no grounding in the aura of the individual, and which serve no purpose but the furthering of the motion picture as a commodity to be bought and sold.

The commodity has taken hold of all the facets of the motion picture, has deprived the actors of their aura, and has removed the viewer from an active experience with the art form. Advertisements and photomontage have attempted to force a perpetual binge lifestyle upon the consumer, uttering false promises of fulfillment for the continued purchase of commodities at the expense of the individual being able to realize his place in the world. The current state of the work of art, spun out of control by the commoditization of the art forms as a whole, has progressed too far to maintain a historical perspective even when attempting to return to the paintings and sculpture which were objects of social status before the age of mechanical reproduction. It is too late because another form of art, namely that form referred to as 'kitsch,' which feeds upon the social standards and reprocesses them, has encountered the ripe feeding grounds of the present situation of art.

“Kitsch has become an integral part of our productive system,” whereby it approximates the real culture surrounding a society, turns it into an easily marketable concept, and proceeds to

produce as many copies as the market can sustain.⁵⁷ The use-value of this phenomenon never enters into the equation, since its entire purpose is to create as many commodities as possible, without concern for where the ideas originate and how they will be produced. Kitsch exists as nothing more than a glorified parasite, which siphons material from, “a fully matured cultural tradition,” reinvents or alters the material, and attempts to pass this half-truth off as a genuine product.⁵⁸ There is no concern for the aura of these commodities, since they possess a historical significance for only as long as they remain a viable product to be sold and profited from. This attempt at making a facsimile of true works of art by discounting their aura and enhancing their appeal, coupled with its relative success through proof of its continued existence seems to herald the end of works of art that possess any aura at all.

VIII.A Look Back at Perception

The work of art has invariably evolved throughout history, from the first pictorial expressions on cave walls, to the multimedia collage made possible by interaction with the World Wide Web. The current state of the work of art is as perilous a danger as it has ever faced, with the a commodity crazed society holding the reins of production, and the subversive existence of kitsch attempting to beg, borrow, and steal just to produce such a commodity. Since the mediums of the age of mechanical reproduction have by their very expression weakened the aura, they have destroyed the necessary component for an active exchange as determined by the viewer. The viewer must now search for meaning on his own terms, in relation to an ever expanding global market, where the singular works that remain are heavily guarded and exhibited as a spectacle to the world.

⁵⁷ Greenberg, *Art and Culture*, 11.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

Searching for a new meaning of art allows great potential for growth, provided the viewer reflects upon the nature of the encounter. With the notion of the aura fading from the work of art, the work no longer provides a record to be *looked at* and the viewer must adapt accordingly. Art, in its base form, should always contain at least the hints of the desire or the skill of the artist, and since the creative process cemented the base of the aura, the viewer cannot abandon the foundation of the aura that remains. The visual and physical clues to construction do not replace the totality of the aura, but they help to assuage the feeling of the loss of an aura that survived for centuries before the age of mechanical reproduction. Art then, must be created for the sake of art once more, neglecting the social relevance of art, neglecting its ability to act as a commodity, and neglecting its loss of a singular existence. Art must be given to the public to muse over, to contemplate.

If there is potential for reproduction, the work should be distributed while emphasizing the fact that the existence of multiple copies provides a universal aura, so long as the viewers are aware that the work they see before them is also the object in the gaze of many more. Art must be distributed to the rich, to the famous, to the destitute viewers living in cardboard boxes, not so that these viewers may all have the same experience, but so that the notion of a historically relevant gaze can be rekindled, so that the former religious aversion to art may be broken at the hands of the masses. The only hope of disassociating art from commodity comes through the free circulation of a work of art, which remains largely unfeasible in a heavily capitalist society where all actions have a monetary expense. Art can escape from the plight of a dwindling aura and offer itself as a worthy visual object once again, if the art of today remains focused on its substance, even at the cost of its marketability and acceptance.

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