

The concept of *aura* in Walter Benjamin's philosophy

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Abstract: *The principal focus in this paper will be to highlight the concept of “aura” as it was developed by W. Benjamin in the context of aesthetic-philosophical reflection, in connection with the discourse on the problematic features of modern and contemporary art, determined by the evolution of the technological world. Benjamin's writings propose a multidimensionality of the concept of “aura”. Thus, the aura can be illustrated with reference to the nature, to historical objects and phenomena, to sensitive experiences, to storytelling, but also to the aesthetic world and works of art. Describing works of art and some natural objects as having an aura, Benjamin identifies in the aura the features of authenticity and uniqueness that constituted them, as something that requires contemplation and immersion from the viewer. A special role in the philosopher's argument goes to the aura approach in connection with the evolution of the world of technology, especially in connection with the development and evolution of photography and cinema.*

Key-words: *aura; object's gaze; uniqueness; authenticity; technology; pseudo-aura; ornamental halo.*

1. Introduction

Between 1927 and 1928, in his observation “On Hashish”, W. Benjamin used the concept of aura for the first time. In this context, the philosopher questions about the aura of a person. Later, in 1931, in the essay *Little History of Photography*, he made a more systematic approach to the aura, and in this context he described early photographs as having a kind of aura. This theory will be used again in *The Work of Art* essay, where Benjamin makes the assumption that photography has no aura and where he talks about the fact that there can be no single type of aura, that there are instead many auras associated with diverse experiences. In this respect, aura is conceived as a general category of experience that applies to any object of perception. The essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility* is the place where Walter Benjamin develops and analyzes in more detail the concept of aura.

Benjamin proposes in his writings a multidimensionality of the concept of aura. Thus, the aura can be illustrated with reference to the world of nature, with reference to historical objects and phenomena, with reference to sensitive experiences, to storytelling, to the aesthetic world and works of art. Regarding the latter aspect, a special place in the philosopher's analysis belongs to the reference to the evolution of the world of technology, especially in connection with the development and evolution of photography and cinema. In this regard, when he made his first commentary on the concept of aura, which is found in an unpublished report on one of his hashish experiments, in March 1930, the philosopher noted: “Everything I said on the subject [the nature of aura] was directed polemically against the theosophists, whose inexperience and ignorance I find highly repugnant. ... First, genuine aura appears in all things, not just in certain kinds of things, as people imagine”².

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² Walter Benjamin. 2006. “Protocols of Drug Experiments”, *On Hashish*, trans. Howard Eiland. Massachusetts: Cambridge University Press, p. 58.

2. The multidimensionality of the aura concept

If we look at the multiple dimensions of the aura concept proposed by W. Benjamin, they refer to a series of uses of the concept, among which are noted three uses of its meanings. Among these are two main definitions, which the philosopher proposes in the works *Little History of Photography*, from 1931, respectively *On Some Motifs in Baudelaire*, from 1940³. The two main definitions refer on the one hand to the understanding of aura as “a strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance [apparition, semblance] of a distance, however near it may be (or, «however close the thing that calls it forth»)”⁴, and on the other hand to aura understood as a form of perception that “invests” or endows a phenomenon with the “ability to look back at us”, to open its eyes or “lift its gaze”⁵. The second meaning is taken up and developed by Benjamin in *The Arcades Project*, where he defines the aura as “the distance of the gaze that awakens in the object seen”: “But because these pictures, unlike scenery on a stage, are to be viewed from close up, the magic of distance is canceled for the viewer without his having to renounce the judgment of distance (...) my definition of the aura as the aura of distance opened up with the look that awakens in an object perceived”⁶.

Distance and proximity are two fundamental elements that Benjamin uses to describe auratic perception. Arguing in this sense, the philosopher brings to the fore the blurring of the distinction between the subject and the object of perception, referring to a text by Novalis: “In all predicates in which we see the fossil, it sees us”⁷. Through this, the philosopher suggests a type of view that transcends and destabilizes traditional scientific, practical, and representative conceptions of it. In addition, traditional linear notions of time and space, as well as clear traditional hierarchical differences between subject and object are destabilized. For, citing Hessel’s axiomatic insistence on the priority of the object’s gaze as a condition of physiognomic seeing or reading, Benjamin noted: “We see only what looks at us” and “the things I look at see me just as much as I see them”⁸. Thus, “the gaze of the object, however familiar, is experienced by the subject as other and prior, strange and heteronomous. Whether conceptualized in terms of a constitutive lack, split, or loss, this other gaze in turn confronts the subject with a fundamental strangeness within and of the self”⁹. There is then an auratic communion that can be established between subject and object. Thus, in his essay *Little History of Photography*, when he discussed the coat of the philosopher Schelling, Benjamin notes that, even long after Schelling died, we perceive his person in the coat itself. Thus, his coat is saturated with his aura. The aura of Schelling's coat derives from a long-lasting material relationship with the wearer's physique or, rather, with his physiognomy, and not from his unique status as a custom-made object¹⁰. Miriam Bratu Hansen identifies in these aspects of the aurative perception proposed by Benjamin on the one hand a topos of romanticism, present in the poetics of poets such as Ch. Baudelaire, P. Valery, R. M. Rilke and H. Von Hofmansthal, and on the other hand a reference to the register of the unconscious, including experience psycho-perceptual of the dream, which refers to phenomenological,

³ *Apud.* Miriam Bratu Hansen. Winter 2008. “Benjamin’s Aura”. In *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 34, No. 2: 336 - 375, Published by: The University of Chicago Press, p. 339.

⁴ *Ibidem.*

⁵ *Ibidem.*

⁶ Walter Benjamin. 2002. *The Arcades Project*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, p. 314.

⁷ *Apud.* Miriam Bratu Hansen, *op. cit.*, p. 345.

⁸ *Ibidem.*

⁹ *Ibidem.*

¹⁰ Walter Benjamin. 2008. “Little History of Photography”. In *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and other Writings on Media*, ed. by Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty and Thomas Y. Levin, 274 - 298. Cambridge, Massachusetts London: Harvard University Press, p. 281.

psychoanalytic and metapsychological thinking, present especially in the approaches of M. Merleau-Ponty, J. P. Sartre and J. Lacan¹¹.

To the two main definitions is added a third use of the term, which aims at understanding aura as a phenomenal evasive substance, ether or halo that surrounds a person or object that is perceived, encapsulating their individuality and authenticity. In this sense, the term used by Benjamin regarding his first “hashish impressions” must be associated with his more systematic elaborations, which he will make in his reflections on early photographs, in the essay *Little History of Photography*: “There was an aura about them, a medium that endow their gaze with fullness and security even as their gaze penetrated the medium itself. And once again the technical equivalent is obvious: it consists in the absolute continuum from brightest light to darkest shadow. (...) Orlik talks about the “comprehensive illumination” brought about by the long exposure times, which “gives these early photographs their greatness”. (...) It was this breathy halo that was sometimes captured with delicacy and depth by the now old fashioned oval frame. That is why it would be a misreading of these incunabula of photography to make too much of their “artistic perfection” or their “taste”. (...) After 1880, though, photographers made it their business to simulate the aura which had been banished from the picture with the suppression of darkness through faster lenses, exactly as it was being banished from reality by the deepening degeneration of the imperialist bourgeoisie. They saw it as their task to simulate this aura using all the arts of retouching, and especially the so-called gum print. Thus, especially in Jugendstil [Art Nouveau] a penumbral tone, interrupted by artificial highlights, came into vogue. Notwithstanding this fashionable twilight, however, a pose was more and more clearly in evidence, whose rigidity betrayed the impotence of that generation in the face of technical progress”¹².

Understood in this aspect of the aesthetic halo, the aura produces the highest degree of cognoscibility, which occurs in close connection with the object to which it refers: “aura or the aesthetic halo leaves the impression of directing the aesthetic experience, of identifying with the music, respectively with the dancer or the actor, but at the same time it puts a barrier between the receiver and the opera, all the more misleading as it is imperceptible. In this way, the work not only puts things in their true light, but also illuminates our identity”¹³.

With reference to this dimension of the aura, Scholem discusses about the use of the term in *Zohar* to refer to the “unique, individual spiritual form of each human being” or “principlum” of a person¹⁴. He considers that *individuationis* is a version of the idea of “astral body”, a psychic “emanation” of his own independent being” - an idea that returns to neo-Platonism and from there migrated into both Jewish mysticism and non-Jewish¹⁵. Scholem highlights two aspects of *tselem* theory that are particularly relevant to Benjamin's aura concept¹⁶. The first refers to “understanding of the *tselem* as a «personal daemon» that shadows and determines a person's being, less in the benign sense as the person's «perfected nature» than in the negative sense of an «antithetical self» or «adversary angel»¹⁷. As for the second aspect, it refers to the idea of *tselem* as a form of visionary self-encounter, for which he quotes at length a Kabbalistic text from the sixteenth century on prophecy: “the complete secret of prophecy to a prophet consists in that he suddenly sees the form of his self standing

¹¹ *Apud*. Miriam Bratu Hansen, *op. cit.*, p. 345.

¹² Walter Benjamin. 2008, *op. cit.*, pp. 282 - 283.

¹³ Mădălina Diaconu. 2001. *Ontologia operei de artă în lumina principiului identității*. București: Editura Crater, p. 105.

¹⁴ *Apud*. Miriam Bratu Hansen, *op. cit.*, pp. 370 - 371; Gershom Scholem. 1991. *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead: Basic Concepts in the Kabbalah*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel, ed. Jonathan Chipman. New York: Schocken Books, pp. 251 - 255; 270.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶ Miriam Bratu Hansen, *op. cit.*, p. 371.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

before him, and he forgets his own self and [is removed from it; *entrückt*] ... and that form [of his self] speaks with him and tells him the future”¹⁸.

Another aspect about understanding the meaning of the aura is related to the experience of *nature*. In this sense, W. Benjamin considered that aura is not an inherent property of people or objects, but refers to *the environment* of perception, naming a particular structure of vision, but one that is not limited to the visual. Thus, aura is interpreted itself as an environment that defines the gaze of the portrayed human beings: “There was an aura about them, a medium that lent fullness and security to their gaze inasmuch as it penetrated that medium”¹⁹. In this sense, Miriam Bratu Hansen identifies a phenomenal structure that the aura involves, which allows the manifestation of the gaze, inevitably refracted and disjunctive, and shapes potential meanings, taking into account the fact that Benjamin suggested that the aura as a medium of perception or perceptibility is visible only on the basis of technological reproduction²⁰.

With reference to the aura of the natural, the philosopher proposes the concept of *distance*. In this regard, in his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility*, Benjamin notes: “While at rest on a summer's noon, to trace a range of mountains on the horizon, or a branch that throws its shadow on the observer, until the moment or the hour becomes part of their appearance - this is what it means to breathe the aura of those mountains, that branch. Now, «to bring things closer» to us, or rather to the masses, is just as passionate an inclination in our day as the overcoming of whatever is unique in every situation by means of its reproduction. Every day the need to possess the object, from the closest proximity, in a picture - or rather a copy - becomes more imperative. And the difference between the copy, which illustrated papers and newsreels keep in readiness, and the original picture is unmistakable”²¹.

In the essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility*, aura is a name given by Benjamin to designate the unique experience of a particular object. Thus, the aura is considered the only moment of experience in which the subject encounters the object that cannot be reproduced. Also here, the philosopher will approach the aesthetic dimension of the concept of aura, considering that an aura can only be of the original work of art. The aura distinguished the viewer of the opera and creates the detachment for a true aesthetic experience.

Reflecting on the multiple dimensions that Benjamin proposes when discussing the concept of aura, Mădălina Diaconu proposes a model of the aura that is relevant to the ontology of the aesthetic object and due to its ambiguity. For the aura “refers both to the idea of luminosity, to the brilliance of the phenomenal character (related to the phainesthai), and to darkness, since the splendor of the appearance is only a way in which the work defends its mystery: the blind beauty for the work of art to hide even better behind it”²². In addition, the aura in close connection with the work of art always involves an ontological approach. In this respect, the author notes: “the aura is not only of the work of art, but also is the work of art itself. To make of the aura the space surrounding the work of art or just a layer («the shell») of it, would mean to return to the ontology of the thing itself and to the separation action of the substance. But the artwork is both and simultaneously one and the other. It does not radiate (as the name of the work's action) as if a message passed from the deeper layers of the work to the surface, through the aura, to reach the receiver. Its movement is pulsating or,

¹⁸ *Apud*. Miriam Bratu Hansen, *op. cit.*, p. 371.

¹⁹ *Apud*. Miriam Bratu Hansen, *op. cit.*, p. 342.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 342 - 343.

²¹ Walter Benjamin. 2008. „Little History of Photography”. In *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and other Writings on Media*, ed. by Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty and Thomas Y. Levin, 274 - 298. Cambridge, Massachusetts London: Harvard University Press, pp. 285 - 286.

²² Mădălina Diaconu, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

rather, of *simultaneous* opening and closing”²³. In an ontological approach, the author questions the ideal space and the real space of the work of art, the understanding of the work of art as an aura imposing a dynamic interpretation of the principle of identity, as there is a relationship “as subtle irradiation and gentle «conquest» by diffusion”²⁴ between the microcosmic closure and the opening to the real world of the work of art.

3. Aura as uniqueness and authenticity

In *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility* Benjamin addresses the ways in which mechanical reproduction spoils the uniqueness and authenticity of the work of art. He called this uniqueness and authenticity *the aura*. On this point, Gilloch noted, “the aura is the particular power that an image or object has by virtue of its uniqueness, authenticity, and incorporation into the interweaving of tradition”²⁵. Benjamin will believe that the aura of art has changed due to mechanical reproduction and interprets the increasing reproducibility of art directly related to the power of his aura. In this sense, the philosopher explores the differences and consequences of the politicization of art and of the aestheticization of politics.

Describing works of art and some natural objects as having an aura, Benjamin sees in the aura the features of authenticity and uniqueness that constituted the works of art or an object in itself and also as something that requires contemplation and immersion from the viewer. Thus, a natural object, such as a mountain, we could say that it has an aura, because it has a personality and a life independent of us, it is distant, it is the only one of its kind and it is related to its surroundings and location. Similarly, a work of art is considered unique in that no person can reproduce it with complete accuracy. “In even the most perfect reproduction, one thing is lacking: the here and now of the work of art - its unique existence in a particular place. It is this unique existence - and nothing else - that bears the mark of the history to which the work has been subject”²⁶.

In connection with works of art, the concept of aura is introduced to describe the way of being of the traditional works of art, - which “wanders into the age of their technological [reproducibility]”, which is based on their singular existence and authenticity, on the testimony their history and authority²⁷. Also, the aura highlights a particular type of relationship between the work of art and the environment in which it is placed, because, by resonating with the environment, it is a kind of identity of the work of art²⁸. Thus, reception can be understood “as an entrance into the aura and therefore understanding the work of art, communicating with it and developing an appropriate interpretation require you to enter into the aura of the work of art”²⁹. There is an ambiguity that the work of art preserves in this sense, the ambiguity of *being aura* and of *having aura*, which M. Diaconu calls in the most proper way to be *within his aura*³⁰. The fact that the work of art *is within its aura* implies a kind of fascination that comes from the fact that it attracts and at the same time evades and remains at a distance: “it attracts, pulls you within the aura spell, but at the same time withdraws (evades), it stays at a distance”³¹.

²³ *Ibidem*.

²⁴ Mădălina Diaconu, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

²⁵ Graeme Gilloch. 2002. *Walter Benjamin: Critical Constellations*. Cambridge: Polity Press, p. 182.

²⁶ Walter Benjamin. 2008. „*The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility*”. In *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and other Writings on Media*, ed. by Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty and Thomas Y. Levin, 19 - 55. Cambridge, Massachusetts London: Harvard University Press, p. 21.

²⁷ Miriam Bratu Hansen, *op. cit.*, p. 350.

²⁸ Mădălina Diaconu, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 105.

³⁰ *Ibidem*.

³¹ *Ibidem*.

The idea of aura can also explain the phenomenon of the work resonating with the environment. In this respect, Sedlmayr proposes the concept of «sphere» of the work of art, “which surrounds the work shaped in visible form as a kind of finer, invisible veil”³², distinguishing between the external, physical limit of a work of art (which can be for example its frame) and its essential limit, which involves those elements related to the essence of the work of art. Sedlmayr uses the term «enlighten» when referring to the act of reception, which leads to the possibility of interpreting the veil as an aura: “the veil itself allows to be seen and masks, reveals, but also protects against the indiscretion of the gaze”³³.

In the relationships it establishes both with the receiver and with the environment where it is placed, the work of art creates an ambiguity, as it resonates with the environment *in which it is installed*, transfiguring it, or to a certain extent, *it creates own environment*. The work of art exists in that environment, to which it opens and transforms, in the process of an irradiation and illumination exerted on the outside. In this respect, M. Diaconu noted: “in the world of spectrum of within, things change into scents: *to be within something* means nothing but *to be fragrance*, as an expression of the concomitance of *being* and *becoming*. Likewise, the work of art somehow has the identity of a fragrance or an aroma: static and dynamic, it exists in itself and advances towards others, it is given without being divided, like a wave, and it is as ineffable as this”³⁴. Thus, aura appears as an irradiation of the work of art on its physical environment. In this sense, Mikel Dufrenne talks about the sprawling character of the work of art, which illuminates and aestheticizes its neighborhoods³⁵.

Having as a starting point the relationship between closure and opening, between configuration and action, the work of art can be interpreted as a wave or as a fragrance, which in Latin refers to the name of *aura*. The term meant not only the smell or the perfume, whether pleasant or unpleasant, but everything related to the air, from a breeze, to the breath, to the breeze or to the wind, to the heights of the sky or to the air. The original connection with the semantic of air refers to the idea of distance, of free space in which something can move or breathe. Therefore, on the one hand, art requires openness and distance, on the other hand, it represents a *spiral* and a way of knowledge³⁶.

Aura also refers to the investment of an object with human qualities and emotions, so that the act of reception does not imply looking at an inanimate thing, but presupposes that thing can look back at us. Thus, we are talking about a bond in a mutual relationship. Aura is the work of art, but also the meeting space between the work of art and the receiver, the latter having the availability to become a receiver. We speak in this way of a kind of “openness in projection of aura”³⁷, an opening that contemporary art has capitalized on by discovering the possibility of transforming it into projection of aura, by taking it out of context and creating distance, which has led to the establishment of natural objects or objects of consumption as works of art, Duchamp being one of the pioneers in this regard. Grounded on politics, and replacing the cult value (*Kultwert*) with the exposure value (*Ausstellungswert*) of the work of art, the contemporary art “produces forms that are technically reproducible, such as photography and film, and prefers to deepen the individual's the attitude of superficial and distracted reception of audience (*Zerstreuung*)”³⁸. In this context, however, there is the problem of distinguishing between aura and pseudo-aura, the latter being an expression of a high creativity³⁹.

³² Apud. Mădălina Diaconu, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

³³ Apud. Mădălina Diaconu, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

³⁴ Mădălina Diaconu, *op. cit.*, p. 101.

³⁵ Mikel Dufrenne. 1976. *Fenomenologia experienței estetice*, vol. 1. București: Editura Meridiane, p. 227.

³⁶ Mădălina Diaconu, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

³⁷ Apud. Mădălina Diaconu, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

³⁸ Mădălina Diaconu, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 105 - 106.

Distance, detachment is what allows, according to Benjamin, the authenticity of the work of art. The work of art, according to Benjamin, bears the terms and times of creation that make up its originality and authenticity. We are talking about creative contexts that are born from the original work of art and that maintain the distance between it and the viewer and maintain the necessary disposition for a true appreciation of art. As for replica, the philosopher considers that they do not have the authentic aura of the original: "In even the most perfect reproduction, one thing is lacking: the here and now of the work of art - its unique existence in a particular place. It is this unique existence - and nothing else - that bears the mark of the history to which the work has been subject. This history includes changes to the physical structure of the work over time, together with any changes in ownership"⁴⁰.

Benjamin believes that the use of technology, such as lithography in the field of fine arts, has changed the way in which art is produced and consumed: "Lithography marked a fundamentally new stage in the technology of reproduction"⁴¹. Lithography allowed the printing of several copies and the expansion of the public potential that had access to art. Then, the introduction of the illustrated newspaper and later photography increased the production rate and the size of the consumer audience. The use of photography was a turning point in the history of the artistic aura. "But only a few decades after the invention of lithography, graphic art was surpassed by photography"⁴². After that, the introduction of the film was an additional step towards mass communication. These technologies allowed the masses to enjoy of various forms of art, it was no longer reserved only for the rich and was no longer inaccessible to the general public. In addition, the film brought with it even greater changes, as the recordings allowed for repeated reception. Therefore, mechanical reproduction has brought great changes in the consumption and availability of art; both film and photography have contributed to a complete change of the idea of what art is. Likewise, Jeannelle Jean-Louis and Larrat Jean-Claude, in a study published in 2012, point out that the extraordinary diffusion of images in the contemporary world has created a new relationship with art⁴³.

According to Benjamin, the aura is the central category of traditional art, which is inadequate for technical reproduction and mass reception. The aura was the presupposition and the result of the poetic life of things and is described by him as "the unique appearance of a distance, no matter how close"⁴⁴. The auratic is associated with the cultic function of art, which implies a relationship of synonymy with the uniqueness of the work of art, which excludes any copy. The invasion of the aristocracy of the art of mass culture led to the shattering of the aura, according to the philosopher. Therefore, the artistic status of cinema and photography is contested by Benjamin, even if a certain aesthetic of some reproductive techniques is recognized, such as etchings and lithographs.

4. Aura and technology development

In his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility*, W. Benjamin identifies the perceptual change of changes produced by the rise of technology, especially those that emphasize speed and reproducibility. This phenomenon was accompanied by a

⁴⁰ Walter Benjamin. 2008. „*The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility*“. In *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and other Writings on Media*, ed. by Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty and Thomas Y. Levin, 19 - 55. Cambridge, Massachusetts London: Harvard University Press, p. 21.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p. 20.

⁴² *Ibidem*.

⁴³ Jean-Louis Jeannelle and Jean-Claude Larrat. 2012. „*Filmer l'art avec André Malraux*“. In *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France*. No 1. Vol 112.

⁴⁴ Walter Benjamin. 1963. *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit. Drei Studien zur Kunstsoziologie*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, p. 18.

significant decrease of aura, which also implies a new way of relating to art, because art without aura has not been experienced in any other previous culture. Thus, the philosopher considered that photography and film have no precedent in human history, because unlike environments such as painting or sculpture that create unique objects, film and photography allow the almost infinite reproduction of identical images. This difference between the single object and the mechanically reproduced object is described as an aura difference. However, the image of the film is not unique and therefore it lacks this quality of aura, and the growing presence of the film in society has led to the blurring of the aura when it comes to artistic creation.

When questioning how mechanical reproduction affects society itself, Benjamin talks about changing the social status gap with the development of technology. Thus, if before mechanical reproduction, a work of art was a singular object, unique in its individuality, and the most important works of art were kept in private homes by someone with high social status or in other places, such as cathedrals, private castles or museums, being inaccessible to those of the lower classes, who were not considered worthy of viewing, due to mechanical reproduction, the value of art has changed dramatically. A piece of art that was appreciated for its uniqueness and aura became an image rather appreciated for its aesthetic, cultural and social value. Moreover, once mechanical reproduction became widespread, the rarest images began to spread to all social classes, contributing to increasing public education and blurring the social status gap.

In Benjamin's conception, time and space converge to evoke the aura. The aura is the sign of authenticity contained in a work of art, it is a quality that cannot be reproduced and thus there is a kind of privilege of the original work of art. However, in the essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility* the philosopher outlines the notion of authenticity within mechanically reproduced art and he does not leave aside the idea that the original is necessary in order to obtain authenticity. We can thus speak of a kind of hyperreality, in the sense that Jean Baudrillard or Umberto Eco articulated this term. If for Baudrillard, hyperreality is a consequence of existence, Eco defines hyperreality as “authentic fake” and considers that there is a deliberate choice to approach the copy as real, a choice that could be a very simple decision. Wanting authenticity, the “authentic fake” is exactly what Benjamin finds so disconcerting about the state of the art.

The effort to determine the time and space of a work of art means locating the presence. To do this, Benjamin focuses on sensory experience, and the perception of time in the role of memory is essential in this regard. Thus, time and memory converge in a photograph, and this convergence produces presence or aura. Benjamin discusses about the idea of an aura of authenticity that promotes “the adjustment of reality to the masses and the mass to reality”, in the sense that Bergson speaks of the felt time and the time shown by the clock. He believes that it is possible to see the desire illuminated in a photograph or on the screen, in the sense that Roland Barthes considered this.

Referring to the texts of the stage director Mihai Măniuțiu, M. Diaconu proposes a point of view from which we could talk about the aura in connection with the art from the era of mechanical reproduction. In this sense, she notes: “the existence of an energetic climate in theatrical performances, the double character of the mimetic process, first as an incarnation of the character in the actor and then as a takeover and repetition of the actor's experience by the audience; finally, his descriptions suggest something similar to the concept of aura, seen even in its materiality”⁴⁵. For Măniuțiu, “the sensations compose around the actor a kind of his second epidermis, moving (like an hive), fluid and in constant transformation: the higher its density, the more pronounced will be its penetrability”⁴⁶.

⁴⁵ Mădălina Diaconu, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

⁴⁶ *Apud.* Mădălina Diaconu, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

The concepts of “density” and “penetrability” are interpreted by M. Diaconu as referring to the ideas of closing - hiding, respectively opening - revealing the work of art, such as identifying inspiration (the actor's *inspiration* representing the way he interprets the text) with an “«enlightenment» (s.n) of the whole being of the actor” can be associated with the understanding of the interpretation as an penetration into the aura. For, from Măniuțiu's point of view, “the actor's state of play is in fact the field of irradiation of his playful acts, it is the effective halo of the playful act and therefore his «state» is «the most intimate and at the same time the most extended energy of the act». It is not only a halo of the actor who is content to passively dress him in his contemplation by the public, but it is active, radiating, spreading in public and transfigures him”⁴⁷. Therefore, the concept of aura functions here more as an intuitive model than as the basis of an explanation with a claim to absolute truth about art: “Its magnetic field, its halo of suggestion carries this invisible body of the actor to others, helping to conquer the living space of each member of the audience and to transform the body and the feeling of the spectators into a polymorphic element, annexable to the flow generated by it”⁴⁸.

When the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applied to artistic production, the whole social function of art becomes a revolutionary one for Benjamin. The ritual function is replaced by a different practice - politics: “But as soon as the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applied to artistic production, the whole social function of art is revolutionized. Instead of being founded on ritual, it is based on a different practice: politics”⁴⁹. He is preoccupied with the aura lost in a culture obsessed with the art of war, which abolishes the aura as it removes architecture as a result of the atrocities of war. Using the concept of aura, Benjamin will provide an argument for the political effectiveness of cinema.

The mechanical reproduction of the film changed the conception of art. One of the most radical ideas that the appearance and development of the film brought is related to the promotion of a revolutionary critique of the traditional concept of art. Film production is, for Benjamin, the final expression of the aesthetics of politics, because it has revolutionized and changed the way people have interpreted and seen the outside world. The film had the power to draw the public's attention to model its beliefs on the dominant political ideology without questioning it. Thus, it became a tool used for political purposes and very suitable for propaganda. For example, during fascism the film was used to celebrate the cult of the leader with whom the masses could identify⁵⁰.

According to Benjamin the major changes in art production are what have damaged the authenticity and uniqueness of the work of art, namely its aura: “for the first time in world history, technological reproducibility emancipates the work of art from its parasitic subservience to ritual”⁵¹. He also believes that a work of art has now become something that is designed to be reproduced: “from a photographic plate, for example, one can make any number of prints; to ask for the «authentic» print makes no sense”⁵².

However perfect a reproduction may be, it will always lack the unique existence in time and space. Thus, mechanical reproduction allows a lack of history, which Benjamin fined, considering that without a testimony about history, aura of an object is destroyed, the unique existence being replaced by a plurality of copies. The destruction of aura is closely related to

⁴⁷ *Apud*. Mădălina Diaconu, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 108.

⁴⁹ Walter Benjamin. 2008. „*The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility*”. In *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and other Writings on Media*, ed. by Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty and Thomas Y. Levin, 19 - 55. Cambridge, Massachusetts London: Harvard University Press, p. 25.

⁵⁰ Antoon Van den Braembussche. 2009. *Thinking Art. An Introduction to Philosophy of Art*. Amsterdam: Springer Science + Business Media B.V., p.189.

⁵¹ Walter Benjamin. 2008. „*The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility*”. In *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and other Writings on Media*, ed. by Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty and Thomas Y. Levin, 19 - 55. Cambridge, Massachusetts London: Harvard University Press, p. 24.

⁵² *Ibidem*, pp. 24 - 25.

what Benjamin calls the destruction of tradition, both of which are related to mass movements and to increasing of accessibility to culture and its democratization. In this sense, the philosopher brings into question the “cult value”, which he associates with the predominantly religious art, made before the era of modernity. In this regard, C. J. Cala noted: “For Benjamin, works of art in our society often have with them a specific «cult value», or value that is not subscribed to the artworks themselves, but, rather, to the context in which the artworks were either constructed or situated”⁵³. This form of value is no longer relevant when it comes to art produced using modern production methods, as it no longer has an authentic element, from a photographic negative can be made any number of prints.

In the modern era, the emphasis is on the “exhibition value” of art. For, art is no longer produced for the sake of art, but for political reasons. Film and photography could be said to be prime examples of this. “Reproducibility leads to the disappearance of the cult value of the work of art. It is no longer hidden in those consecrated spaces of bourgeois culture, frequented by the few who are privileged”⁵⁴.

The social, economic and technological innovations of modernity have led to the decline of *aura*, in the sense that Benjamin initially defined the aura as an aspect of distance, a notion continued in his essay on mechanical reproduction, which follows *aura* of the image to its cultic origins. The loss of *aura* and the shock effect of modernity are accompanied in Benjamin by an ambivalence regarding modernity itself and an ambiguity of the concept of *aura*⁵⁵. *Aura* is related to a mimetic experience, with the ways in which the mimetic persists as a kind of residue or trace in modern experience. Thus, through the concept of aura, the notion of memory-trace is developed⁵⁶. As it is originally described by the author, the aura is seen in close connection with the cultic value of the work of art. The substantiation of the aura in the ritual of the cult refers to the pre-modern experience, to which both the writings of W. Benjamin and those of A. Warburg refer. And for Aby Warburg the world of the primitive is not a neutral object of selfless analysis, but an arena of correspondences, personalized affinities, and symbolic meanings⁵⁷. However, the views of the two authors differ in that while “Warburg conceives of the cultic image as functioning through the *lack* of critical distance, in other words through the predominance of the empathic-mimetic urge.

For Benjamin, conversely, the cultic image gains its aura precisely *because* of the distance between the object and the spectator”⁵⁸. Moreover, W. Benjamin concludes that the cultic value of the work of art becomes replaced by its exhibition value. In this regard, M. Rampley noted: “while the experience of the shock of cinema dispels the auratic residue of the work of art aura is preserved in the cult of the movie star; the loss of cultic aura is compensated for by the aura of aesthetic authenticity in the museum. This construction of a ‘false’ aura is the symptom of a much larger process, namely the growth of commodity fetishism, where the mass-produced good, which Benjamin had seen as antithetical to auratic experience, reinstates aura in the magic of the reified commodity”⁵⁹. Although commercialization is seen by Benjamin as one of the causes of the decline of aura, he believes that the commodity fetishism contributes to the re-establishment of the aura. In this sense, we

⁵³ C. J. Cala. 2013, *The Collected Works*, p. 592. Retrieved April 10, 2020, from https://books.google.ro/books?id=fsRpmNW8b2AC&pg=PA2&lpg=PA2&dq=C.+J.+Cala.+2013.+The+Collected+Works.&source=bl&ots=b7_h4E6YJz&sig=ACfU3U2sOvFb3SI_8XXAmINWYyoH4N2CKA&hl=ro&sa=X&ved=2ahUKewit07KFyoPpAhURx4UKHWQLDqoQ6AEwA3oECAoQAQ#v=onepage&q=C.%20J.%20Cala.%202013.%20The%20Collected%20Works.&f=false

⁵⁴ Graeme Gilloch, *op. cit.*, p. 185.

⁵⁵ Matthew Rampley. 2000. „Aura and Memory”, in *The Remembrance of Things Past. On Aby M. Warburg and Walter Benjamin*: 73 - 103. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz Verlag, p. 76.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 76 - 77.

⁵⁷ *Apud*. Matthew Rampley, *op. cit.*, p. 75 - 76.

⁵⁸ Matthew Rampley, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 78.

are talking about a relationship between aura, mimeticism and trade, a relationship that is foreshadowed by Aby Warburg, who in his study *Flemish Art and Early Florentine Renaissance* links the loss of medieval art piety with the rise of trade, and sees it manifested in the rise of the painting as a commodity⁶⁰.

5. Aura and its characteristics

In the work *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility* there are three fundamental ideas expressed in connection with aura: first, it is closely related to authenticity and originality, then in some contexts we can say that aura decreases and third, the loss of aura becomes more pronounced proportionally to technological advancement.

Benjamin distinguishes between an *authentic aura*, which is irrevocably in decline with the increasing development of technology, and a *simulated aura* that comes from the interaction art - technology - masses. The simulation was associated with «pseudo-aura» as “an already distorting reaction formation toward the historical ‘decay of aura’”⁶¹ is “the object of the artwork essay’s call for demolition”⁶². In relation to traditional art and culture, we can talk about a destructive, cathartic function that art developed through the evolution of technology, such as film, can have on the former. The destruction of the authentic aura, observes Miriam Bratu Hansen, can also be thought of as an aspect related to a kind of rhetorical discourse⁶³. Beyond this, Benjamin questions the extent to which the «authentic» aura was compromised by the industrial simulation of automatic effects and how at the same time it contained structural elements that were indispensable for reimagining the experience in a collective, secularized form. and technologically mediated. In this sense, a strategy to preserve the aura, at least in its potentiality, was to introduce the concept, to highlight its irreversible degradation: “Benjamin had to kill the term, mortify and blast it to pieces, before he could use it at all”⁶⁴. On the other hand, another strategy of the philosopher was “to abandon the term altogether and use the demolished fragments of auratic perception in other concepts, in particular the mimetic faculty and the optical unconscious”⁶⁵. For, even though Benjamin identifies aura as a historical phenomenon and in an irreversible degradation, he imports fragments of the concept - secularized and modernized - in his efforts to reimagine the experience of aura in the conditions of technologically mediated culture.

Referring to the nature of aura, Benjamin, detaching himself from the visions of the theosophists (and especially from the conception of R. Steiner), brings to attention three aspects related to the authentic aura. First of all, the authentic aura appears in all things, not just in certain types of things, for example in connection with works of art, as most would be tempted to believe. First of all, the authentic aura appears in all things, not just in certain types of things, for example in connection with works of art, as most would be tempted to believe. Second, aura deviates with each movement of the object whose characteristic it is. Thirdly, the authentic aura must not be thought of as a sign of magic, of a magical halo, as we sometimes find it described in the works of mystics. The distinctive feature of the authentic aura seems to be the ornament, “an ornamental halo [*Umzirkung*], in which the object or being is enclosed as in a case [*Futteral*]”⁶⁶, as it is masterfully illustrated in Van Gogh's late

⁶⁰ *Apud*. Matthew Rampley, *op. cit.*, p. 79 - 80.

⁶¹ Miriam Bratu Hansen, *op. cit.*, p. 356.

⁶² *Ibidem*.

⁶³ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 357.

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁶ *Apud*. Miriam Bratu Hansen, *op. cit.*, p. 358.

paintings, “in which one could say that the aura appears to have been painted along with the various objects”⁶⁷.

The interpretation of the aura as *ornament* or *ornamental halo* calls more an important epistemological trope to contextualize the phenomenon of the aura in the framework determined by the evolution of technology⁶⁸. This illustration can be associated with the writings of Siegfried Kracauer, who used ornament and arabesque to address aspects of contemporary commercial culture and introduced the concept of «mass ornament». Referring to the idea of ornament, Benjamin questions about “the «most hidden, generally most inaccessible world of surfaces» which reveals itself to the subject only under the influence, in a mode reminiscent of childhood games and feverish dreams”⁶⁹. In this context, the ornamental dimension of the aura leaves room for an interpretation of its mimetic dimension, which means that it has the gift of seeing and producing similarities that enter unconsciously or imperceptibly into our lives⁷⁰.

Benjamin insists on the idea that «the true aura appears in all things» and suggests that it leaves room for understanding aura and in a context of the reality of modern everyday. In this sense, since 1925, in the *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* he noted: “To show things in the *aura of their actuality* is worth more, is far more fruitful, albeit indirectly, than to trump them with ultimately petit bourgeois ideas of popular education [*Volksbildung*]”⁷¹.

Benjamin emphasizes the stable and relational character of the aura, its dependence on certain particular elements, such as the act of reading, looking or interpreting, but refuses an ontological foundation of the concept of aura. This attracted a number of criticisms, especially from film aestheticians and theorists, including Georg Lukacs, Guido Aristarco, Heinz Paetzold and Theodor Adorno. Theodor Adorno assumed Theodor Adorno took the concept of aura, interpreted it and considered that the aura of aesthetic objects would represent the human trace of the human forgotten from thing, and the discovery of the auratic in things would be equivalent to “recalling the previous relationship between things and people, as if things would be given to the people”⁷². Other critics acknowledge the presence of the auratic element in all artistic objects, not only in traditional art. For example, H. Paetzold considered that even modern art that explicitly revolts against the aesthetic aura cannot be completely freed from it, since it is the aura that distinguishes aesthetic objects from physical ones and is the condition for works of art to it can transcend their purely empirical character⁷³. Therefore, the «auratic experience» is considered to be constitutive of art in general, and the destruction of the aura would in fact be equivalent to removing art from the mystery that surrounds it.

Beyond the critical interpretive dimensions of the concept of aura as proposed by Benjamin, we note that the aura involves keeping a distance, that in technically reproducible arts we witness to the disintegration of the aura or its reinterpretation, and film and cinematography have favored the creation of a pseudo-auras.

6. Conclusions

In the context of aesthetic-philosophical reflection, in connection with the discourse on the problematic features of modern and contemporary art, determined by the evolution of the technological world, W. Benjamin develops the concept of aura and the problem of auratic

⁶⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 359.

⁶⁹ *Apud*. Miriam Bratu Hansen, *op. cit.*, p. 359.

⁷⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁷¹ *Ibidem*, p. 358.

⁷² *Apud*. Heinz Paetzold. 1974. *Neomarxistische Ästhetik. Teil 1: Bloch, Benjamin*. Düsseldorf Pädagogischer Verlag Schwann, p. 150.

⁷³ Heinz Paetzold, *op. cit.*, p. 163.

perception. He proposes an integrative discourse on the concept of aura, justified by the fact that it appears in all things, from the world of nature, to historical phenomena, from sensitive experiences, to the aesthetic world and the work of art. Distance and proximity are two fundamental elements that Benjamin uses to describe auratic perception. The philosopher argues and brings to the fore the blurring of the distinction between the subject and the object of perception, which is the quintessence of auratic perception.

According to Benjamin, the aura is the sign of authenticity contained in an object or in a work of art, it is a quality that cannot be reproduced and thus there is a kind of privilege of the original. The philosopher believes that the use of technology, such as lithography in the field of fine arts, the emergence and development of photography, film and cinematography, have changed the way in which art is produced and consumed. These technologies allowed the masses to enjoy various forms of art, art began to be accessible to the general public, which led to the democratization of the artistic phenomenon and contributed to the complete change of the idea of what art is. The reproduction of works of art in modern times can cause, according to Benjamin, the loss of aura and the loss of authenticity in the aesthetic experience. By characterizing the aura as *ornament* or *ornamental halo*, the philosopher contextualizes the phenomenon of the aura within the framework determined by the evolution of technology. Referring to the contemporary metamorphosis of the aura, in relation to artistic practice and the interference generated by the development of technology, which shapes social life, the philosopher draws attention to the danger of creating pseudo-aura, which is favored by photography, film and cinematography.

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