

THE AURA OF THE ORIGINAL AND THE AUTONOMY OF VIRTUAL PLACES. DISTINGUISHING AN IMAGE'S PHYSICALITY FROM ITS VISUAL CONTENT

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ABSTRACT

*This article reconsiders the notion of the 'aura' of pictorial works of art in light of the developments of digital technology and what they revealed about the nature of images. It proposes that while the means of experiencing an image have vastly multiplied, an alternative unique value that has emerged is the autonomy of the space that is seen through it. This idea is explored through a case study of Paolo Veronese's painting *Nozze di Cana*, the recent production of an accurate facsimile of it, and its placement in the physical setting in Venice for which it was originally painted.*

Keywords: aura, image, art, original, virtual place, art theory, media theory

L'AURA DELL'ORIGINALE E L'AUTONOMIA DEI LUOGHI VIRTUALI. LA DISTINZIONE TRA LA FISICITÀ DI UN'IMMAGINE E IL SUO CONTENUTO VISUALE

SINTESI

*Questo articolo riconsidera la nozione di "aura" delle opere d'arte pittoriche alla luce dello sviluppo di tecnologie digitali e di ciò che esse possono rivelare sulla natura delle immagini. Esso suggerisce che mentre i mezzi per vivere un'immagine si sono largamente moltiplicati, sta emergendo un peculiare valore alternativo, cioè l'autonomia dello spazio che è possibile vedere attraverso di essa. Questa idea è indagata attraverso lo studio de *Le Nozze di Cana* di Paolo Veronese, la recente produzione di un suo accurato facsimile e il suo posizionamento nello spazio fisico veneziano per il quale era stato originariamente dipinto.*

Parole chiave: aura, immagine, arte, originale, luogo virtuale, teoria dell'arte, teoria dei media

INTRODUCTION

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, an emerging challenge with respect to understanding images was to come to terms with their unprecedented spread due to the invention of mechanical means of reproducing them into multiple copies. Accordingly, in 1936, Walter Benjamin famously wrote that means of mechanical reproduction brought about a loss of the 'aura' of works of art, and thus introduced a theoretical framework for addressing such issues (Benjamin, 1999). But by the early 21st Century, not only did these issues expand further due to even more powerful and widespread means of mechanical reproduction, they were also given an added dimension by digital technology and its reduction of the materiality of images – from objects that are physically constant (such as a painted canvas or a printed paper) to objects whose physicality is adjustable (such as computer screens and monitors). This does not necessarily negate Benjamin's observation, yet it does call for some further refinement or expansion of it.

Benjamin's notion of the aura successfully put into words the difference that is intuitively perceived between a work of art's original and one of its myriad copies. There is something unique about the original – with its material physicality, the labor of its maker, its history of changing owners and locations, and the cultural value it receives as a consequence of all of these. In that sense, the reason that copies make a reference to an original, and that they even exist at all, is precisely because it is what it is – an 'original'. Though its copies may appear almost identical to it in many ways, they nevertheless lack that core value, which cannot be replicated. They don't have the aura of the original object.

Digital technology presents a different phenomenon that goes beyond just an intensification of the process of mechanical reproduction. Digital technology not only allowed the means of mechanical reproduction to be even more widespread and accessible, but it also constituted a major, other, *qualitative* difference: digital technology altered the degree of the *physicality* of images. That is, the very ability to even see an image became increasingly separated from the existence of a physical object which might clearly be identified as being 'an image'. Previously, as long as the difference was between, say, an original painting and its multiple printed copies, the issue was that of comparing the origins of two physical objects: one which was manually labored on by its artist and another which was mechanically reproduced by a machine. But, at least, both objects had a material existence. Yet when the discussion expands to involve digital files that are downloaded to a computer and projected onto a screen, the very nature of the image's physicality is altered. In other words, not only does the image lack an aura, but it hardly even has a physicality to which such an aura could be attached to even if the image had it.

With the expansion of digital technology, the physicality of what might be called 'an image' has become reduced to one of myriad devices that can interchangeably show multiple different images – and even different mediums. At the same time, the physical presence of the devices through which the image is viewed is becoming increasingly secondary. Nevertheless, what hasn't changed is the nature of the space that is seen through them: whether we look at the original or at one of its multiple copies – mechanically reproduced or digitally viewed – the intensity of our experience might be affected, but the visual content is the same. In other words, digital technology shifted the attention from the physicality of the object which carries the visual content, to the visual content that this object presents. This may have abolished the aura of the physical object, but it is far less clear what this means to the space that is seen through it.

This article, therefore, seeks to understand the visual space of images from the point of view of the aura of works of art. It starts by revisiting the idea of the 'aura' of a work of art, analyzing what an aura and its underlying aspects are, and addressing the aura with respect to pictorial images in particular. It then explores the possibility of the aura's presence in various cases: in an original painting, in a perfectly executed copy of it, and in the visual space of a painting as distinct from the painting as a physical object. The discussion is assisted by a case study of Paolo Veronese's painting *Nozze di Cana*, the story of which coincides with and illuminates the various aspects of these topics. Ultimately, this article proposes the interpretation that the visual space of a painting has an autonomous existence, and additionally, that it might even have an aura of its own.

THE AURA OF A WORK OF ART

The idea of the aura of a work of art, as introduced by Benjamin, refers to the discernable value of the uniquely crafted singular object as opposed to the mechanical reproduction of multiple copies of it. In that sense, for example, Leonardo da Vinci's painting of the Mona Lisa in the Louvre is the 'original', and thus has such an aura, whereas any other copy of it does not. Although this idea makes sense intuitively, it is much less obvious what exactly an aura is, or what might imbue a work of art with such an aura. As a first step towards the discussion of the aura, I will propose some finer distinctions about the possible uses of the term.

The first distinction is between the aura as an *explicit* phenomenon, and the aura as an *implicit* phenomenon. As an explicit phenomenon, the term 'aura' refers to the literal presence of a discernable glow of colored light, or an energy field, which may surround a person or an object. Traditionally, such an aura was attributed to saints, and it was often depicted in paintings of them as



Figure 1: Paolo Veronese – *Nozze di Cana*, 1563, oil on canvas, 6.77m x 9.94m (Source: Wikimedia Commons).

a visible halo around their heads. It is sometimes also attributed to works of art, be it a painting, a sculpture, or even a sheet music manuscript. As an implicit phenomenon, on the other hand, the term ‘aura’ refers to the atmosphere of specialness around people or objects that seem to radiate a quality that transcends their physicality. This article does not preclude the possibility that explicit auras might exist (or that implicit auras might reflect the presence of explicit ones), but the focus of its entire discussion, similar to Benjamin’s, is on auras in the implicit sense of the term.

The second distinction is between the aura as a *potential* phenomenon, and the aura as a *manifested* phenomenon. Regardless of whether the aura might take the explicit form of a glow of light, or the implicit form of an atmosphere of specialness, an aura can at times be more hidden, and at other times more fully present. For example, in a masterpiece of painting, the painted canvas has an aura that is fully manifested, whereas a printed copy or screen image of it can be considered to be devoid of such an aura. This article explores the idea that while a paper or screen may not have a manifested aura, they

could nevertheless have a potential aura which would manifest itself under certain conditions. In that sense, part of what gives the original canvas its aura is that it enables the potential aura to manifest itself. The manifestation of a potential aura, therefore, is an interplay between the intensity of its potential and the conditions available for it to shine forth. To be clear, however, the term ‘manifested’ is not used here to mean that an aura has been perceived by an individual, but rather that an aura has achieved a realized existence in the external world.¹

Equipped with these two sets of distinctions about the aura – explicit or implicit, and potential or manifested – the next step is to explore what an aura might consist of. The following considers some of the underlying aspects which may generate, influence, or contribute to the aura of an original work of art – some of them more obvious, others more elusive.

The first and most straightforward aspect of the aura of an original work of art is that it involves a superior quality of experience. This, of course, is predicated on the original being in a well-kept state, which is not al-

¹ The question of what allows an aura to be perceived by an individual is a separate and important matter, which is not included in the discussion of this article. The aim of this article is to study the nature of what might actually be there to be perceived at all, even if the attention of the observing individual might have a part in bringing about its existence.

ways necessarily the case. However, often enough, the original work of art is capable of providing an experience whose quality is incomparable with that of its numerous copies. For example, paintings by Caravaggio are often considered to be ones that must be seen in the original in order to appreciate them in full, even in the purely visual sense. In such a case, their aura might simply be a matter of a certain visual quality that a reproduction cannot fully replicate. Yet the notion of the aura, in essence, also extends beyond such technical concerns.

A second aspect of the aura is that of the labor of the artist who created it. For example, the reason that the Mona Lisa draws countless visitors to it is not just because they wish to see what that painting looks like, and not even because they seek a better visual experience of it. After all, since there are so many available copies of the Mona Lisa, seeing it in the original, together with the crowds that fill its room in the museum, hardly adds much more visual information than visitors might already have. The reason they come has more to do with the assertion that this physical piece of canvas is the exact same one which Leonardo had labored on for several years. That process, along with the legends that grew around his labor and its fruit, gives this painted canvas a particular value which cannot be replicated in any way.

A third aspect of the aura is that of veneration. Historically, before works of art were subjected to mechanical reproduction, and even before they were treated as 'art objects' worthy of collection and exhibition, they were often made as objects of magic or ritual. Thus, the sculpture of a Greek god, or the altar painting in a church, were not necessarily accessible to all people at all times but rather only to particular people, or at particular times, or both (Benjamin, 1999). They were made to serve a specific role within the culture in which they were created. This gives such objects two distinct underlying values. One such value is in its former inaccessibility: the rarity of experience that is tied to the ritual it was made to play a part in. This value is lost when it becomes an object of public display in a gallery, at a later time and culture – or at least replaced by another kind of inaccessibility: that of the pedestal in a museum room in a culture that venerates beauty. The other underlying value is the meaning that an object of ritual had for the people who took part in it, and the emotional role it had for them, be it religious or cultural. Such veneration gives objects a unique value, which can be recognized even by people and cultures that do not share the rituals for which they were created.

A fourth aspect of the aura is that of provenance, or the story of what happened to a physical object from the time it was created until the present: where it has been, who owned it, and what changes it might have been subjected to (Benjamin, 1999). In addition to being prone to wear and tear like all physical objects, works

of art can also be subjected to physical adaptation to fit the changing culture of the times and their newfound meaning in it. Their social roles may vary, and if their cultural esteem rises, so might their financial value, turning them into commodities that can be bought, sold, given, stolen, rediscovered, and returned (or not). All of this gives art objects unique histories that – at least to art historians and collectors – give them a particular value which is added on top of the inherent value they might have already had otherwise.

A fifth aspect of the aura is that of the location in which a work of art is experienced. This aspect does not necessarily pertain to the work itself, but rather to the conditions that allow its aura to fully manifest or be more easily perceived. In that sense, the sculpture of a Greek god, when placed in its original placement in the cella of a temple, would emanate an aura of greater intensity than it might in a museum room. Similarly, the performance of a Shakespeare play in the reconstructed Globe Theatre – all other things being equal – might contribute to manifesting the aura of the original play more successfully than the exact same performance by the same theater company when performed on the stage of, say, a contemporary Jazz club.

Although it is convenient to discuss all these aspects of the aura separately, they are often seamlessly combined. For example, in Michelangelo's ceiling painting in the Sistine Chapel, many of the aspects of its aura are indistinguishable from one another. Visiting the Sistine Chapel provides the opportunity to see this multifaceted work in a way that is visually impossible otherwise, to witness the physicality of the actual ceiling which Michelangelo labored on for several years in an uncomfortable position on a scaffold, to appreciate it as an object of veneration for generations of churchgoers and for generations of art lovers, and to experience it in the original context for which it was made. The aura of this work is infused by the combination of all these aspects of it.

In order to recognize and discuss the presence of the aura of a work of art, it makes no difference whether you might hold materialist views in mind or rather spiritualist ones. In one way or another, the above issues – the presence of supreme quality, the attention of labor or veneration, the lure of inaccessibility or meaning, the invisible traces of provenance, or the resonance of location – are an inseparable part of the work of art. Perhaps you believe that emotional and spiritual factors can have a transformative effect on an object's physicality, and in a way that is humanly discernable. Or perhaps you don't believe in the ability of physical matter to absorb any such non-material value. Either way, you can probably sense that the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel has something about it that is not limited only to mere pigments on a plastered ceiling. Whatever this may be is difficult to say with absolute certainty, but that is what the elusive term 'aura' attempts to capture.

THE DUAL NATURE OF MAKING A PAINTING

The idea of the aura refers to works of art in general, but its nature differs depending on the particular medium of the work. To understand the aura in the art of painting (and its consequence for images in general) we need to better understand its difference from other mediums.

For example, if we are talking about a sculpture – such as Michelangelo's original *David* – then that sculpture is clearly the original reference to all of its copies made in various sizes and materials by different people at different times. That carefully tended-to physical object of chiseled Carrara marble would thus be the bearer of this work of art's aura.

However, if we are talking about a theater piece – such as a play by Shakespeare – then a distinction must be made between the potential aura of the play and the physicality of the stage, sets, props, actors, and costumes which are involved in its performance. The aura of the play cannot become manifested without them, and they might have potential auras of their own to contribute to it. If they all resonate well together, the resulting performance will be memorable and jointly manifest the potential auras of all involved. But the aura of the original, in the case of theater, is a potential that can only be attributed to a certain spirit or essence of the play, which particular performances of it may embody in varying degrees of success (Latour and Lowe, 2011).

The case of painting is usually considered along the lines of the first example, and though it is justifiable in many respects, it is also incomplete. To some extent, a painting is indeed a physical object comparable to a sculpture, which needs to be just as carefully crafted to completion before it can be further copied by various means. This is also the level at which discussions of the aura in painting typically occur. But unlike a sculpture, a painting also provides a visual experience that is distinct from its physicality. Unless it is an abstract painting – which is a whole other discussion² – the very nature of the medium of painting is that it provides a pictorial view into a separate space that seems to exist as if it were *behind* the surface of the painting (Gombrich, 2002).

However, the visible world revealed by a painting cannot be directly compared to the enactment of a theater play either. After all, a play does not create a non-physical space, but rather transforms the physical space of the stage into the experience of another physical place for the limited duration of the play's performance. Additionally, the visible world of a painting cannot be compared to a Platonian ideal, since that ideal, in itself, has no visible existence at all. Therefore, like in sculpture, what is seen in a painting is inseparable from the painting as a physical object and is visibly part of it at all times. Yet, like in theater, the



Figure 2: *The Church of San Giorgio Maggiore, Venice, built between 1566 and 1610, by Andrea Palladio (Source: Wikimedia Commons).*

whole point of painting is that what is visually revealed through it is distinct from its physicality.

The obvious, yet often overlooked, essence of painting is that it has a dual nature. When the painter applies paint onto a canvas, the result is simultaneously the creation of a unique physical object, and also the creation of a visible space that can be experienced through it. This distinction might initially seem to be a peculiar idea since we are so accustomed to considering a painting and its visual content to be one and the same. And yet, the very essence of pictorial art lies in this duality: the making of a physical object such that it transcends its physicality to the point of providing a view into a non-physical space. The inspiration, talent, and labor of the painter are infused into both of them. Accordingly, any attempt to locate the aura of a painting must come to terms with its inherent duality: a painting is simultaneously a physical object and a non-physical (yet publically accessible) visual space.

CASE STUDY: PAOLO VERONESE'S "NOZZE DI CANA"

A valuable insight into the questions of original, copy, aura, and space can be gained by exploring the case of Paolo Veronese's painting *Nozze di Cana* and its unique history (fig. 1). For over two centuries, the pictorial space of the *Nozze* was accessible through the original canvas hanging in the original setting for which it was painted. Commissioned by the monastery of the island of San Giorgio Maggiore in Venice in 1563, it was painted by Veronese for the new refectory building (fig. 2) designed by Palladio for the mona-

² The main distinction between pictorial images and abstract images is whether they generate a *visual space* that can be seen *through* the image, or only a visual pattern that exists *on the surface* of the image. Both can have an aura, but this article focuses particularly on images that generate a visual space. For an in-depth comparison, see Ettliger, 2018.



Figure 3: Paolo Veronese's *Nozze di Cana* on display in the Louvre museum (Source: Wikimedia Commons).

stery. It was made-to-measure to cover the nearly 7 by 10 meter wall of the dining room where all the monks convened together daily. Suitably, it was made to represent a Biblical meal that was a recurring theme for paintings: the wedding feast at Cana, where Jesus turned water into wine. That painting's event, architecture, people, the interactions between them, and the light in which they are all presented, were made to fit for that particular physical setting with its own function, architecture, and lighting conditions. The space of the painting was made to be experienced from the space of that monastery's dining room.

In the year 1797, when Napoleon's army conquered Venice, its soldiers entered the monastery and took the painting as war booty. Its huge canvas was taken off the wall, cut horizontally, rolled like a carpet, and sent to Paris. There it was stitched back together and eventually placed in the Louvre museum. In the classical terminology of art theory, when the original painting was removed from Venice and relocated to the Louvre in Paris, its 'illusion space', or 'pictorial space' moved along with it. The wedding scene no longer appeared to be occurring behind the wall of the monastery's di-

ning room in which the painting was formerly placed, but behind the wall of a gallery in the Louvre (fig. 3).

A century or two later, the development of mechanical means of producing copies made it possible to have multiple different objects that look like the original painting. Nowadays there are multiple postcards, posters, and reproductions of the *Nozze*, but this brings up a new question: if each of these objects have their own 'illusion space', yet they look so similar, what does it say about that space?

A useful and widespread metaphor for understanding paintings was introduced by Leon Battista Alberti already in the Renaissance: to consider them as a 'window' to whatever is seen in them (Alberti, 1966). Following Alberti's window metaphor, then, the above question can be rephrased as follows: if multiple copies are made of a painting, does the window of each copy provide a view to a different place, or do they all provide views to one single place? The terms 'pictorial space' or 'illusion space' express the first interpretation, referring to the spaces behind each copy as if they are separate. But if we wish to explore the second interpretation, then how could it be expressed? How



Figure 4: The specially-built scanner and rig used for scanning Paolo Veronese's *Nozze di Cana* (Source: © Factum Arte).

should we refer to a visible place that has no physical existence yet can be experienced through multiple physical objects as if it were the same single place?

I will hereby refer to such a place using the term *virtual*, not in the sense that it is digital or even non-real, but rather in the sense that it is *non-physical* yet provides an 'as-if-physical' visual experience (Ettliger, 2008). This choice of term is not accidental, and it does imply a connection to phenomena that became prevalent in the digital era, but which are actually rooted in the very nature of pictorial images. In that sense, the *virtual place* in which the *Nozze* occurs was created by Veronese through the creation process of the original painting. The original painting still functions as a primary window for seeing it, yet this virtual place can also be experienced – in different viewing qualities – through a whole range of various copies that have since been made of this painting using various means.

In order to be visually experienced, a virtual place is dependent on the availability of at least some kind of physical device. Traditionally, this was the original painting, and later on, it could have been one of its myriad mechanically-reproduced copies. More recently, digital technology made the virtual place visually available also through display monitors or projections on screens – provided that their computers

are equipped with the digital file that can temporarily transform their array of pixels into a window to that virtual place. In order to address all these different types of physical objects using a single encompassing term, I will refer to them as *devices of illusion*: that is, despite their many differences, they are nevertheless all physical devices, and they all provide a pictorial illusion (Ettliger, 2008). As such, therefore, Veronese's original painting in the Louvre is the original device of illusion for viewing the virtual place of the *Nozze*.

THE AURA OF A PERFECT COPY

The latest chapter in the long history of Paolo Veronese's *Nozze di Cana* is an unexpected twist. The original painting still remains in the Louvre, but after two centuries of tension and debate, in 2007, a facsimile of the *Nozze* was produced and placed in the original setting of that painting in the Palladian refectory of the Monastery of San Giorgio Maggiore in Venice. But this was no mere copy. Produced by the innovative art conservation company Factum Arte, the process began by digitally documenting the original painting: scanning it up-close at a high resolution (fig. 4), producing two different



Figure 5: A facsimile of Paolo Veronese's *Nozze di Cana* hanging in the original setting of the original painting in the Monastery of San Giorgio Maggiore in Venice (Source: © Factum Arte).

sets of high-level photographs of it, and 3D scanning the exact structure and texture of its surface (Factum Arte, 2007). Then, in the company's studio in Madrid, a series of canvases were produced using the same materials and techniques that were used in Veronese's time. The canvases were also coated with the same kind of 'gesso' – the material layer on which paint was applied – as was traditionally used. Then, a large digital printer directly placed the right kind of pigment in the exact right location onto the layer of gesso. The studio's skilled team manually stitched all the canvas panels together and fixed any possible inaccuracies. Even the exact features of the surface were recreated as they are in the original. This was followed by the task of transporting the finished facsimile from Madrid to Venice and placing it in its intended location (fig. 5).

When the facsimile was unveiled – a perfect copy, placed in the original setting – this raised many questions that relate to the notion of the aura. One of the reactions to it was to even speculate whether the aura, previously attached to the original *Nozze* hanging in the Louvre, might have left the original and migrated to the newly-produced high-quality facsimile of it that was now hanging in Venice (Latour and Lowe, 2011). While this reaction might be a bit of an over-statement, it does emphasize that something momentous did happen here. But what exactly? How does it relate to the aura? And how does it relate to the visual space

of the painting? To get a better understanding of the issue, we can analyze and compare the original and the facsimile of the *Nozze* in light of the various aspects of the aura discussed above.

First, in terms of their visual quality, the whole point of making the facsimile was precisely that today's technology makes it possible to produce it at a quality so high that it matches that of the original. Furthermore, the very ability to achieve such a feat gives the facsimile its own uniqueness as a physical object that "must be seen to be believed" – seen, in person, as one might do with an original work of art.

Second, in terms of the effects of human labor and its attention on the aura of a physical object, the facsimile, although made by a strikingly different process than that of the original, cannot be said to lack a labor of love. Despite its heavy reliance on digital technology, the particular way it was applied in this project involved much human care and attention: from the dedicated drive behind it, through the complex operation of the equipment, and down to the intensive manual labor of the team of restoration artists and experts that was required to ensure the integrity of the finalized canvas.

Third, the aspect of veneration of an object is a little harder to determine. In this particular case, the absence of the *Nozze* from Venice has had a cultural importance for Venetians for several generations, which, inadvertently, intensified the particular aspect of the aura that derives from the inaccessibility or hiddenness of an object of ritual. In that sense, the renewed presence of a high-quality facsimile, combined with the continuing absence of the original, perhaps maintains some degree of such an aura. Thus, combined with the cultural meaning of having this painting back in its location, even if as a perfect copy, gives it an aura that may not be equal to that of the original, but which is not negligible either. Whether or not it will intensify or wane will also depend on the degree to which the Venetian public will accept and adopt the facsimile as their own as time goes by.

Fourth, the provenance of the *Nozze* – with its rich historical context, long-lasting political intrigues, and their discernible imprints on the damaged canvas – is quite remarkable. This obviously gives the original a unique aura, but strangely enough, to some degree, also to its facsimile. After all, the very existence of this facsimile is an inseparable part of the historical odyssey of this painting, as well as a physical evidence of it. It therefore carries at least some aspect of the aura which brought it into being.

A fifth aspect of the aura that needs to be considered is its location – in which the facsimile has a clear advantage. There is no question that the Louvre is a grand museum, and that the very act of displaying

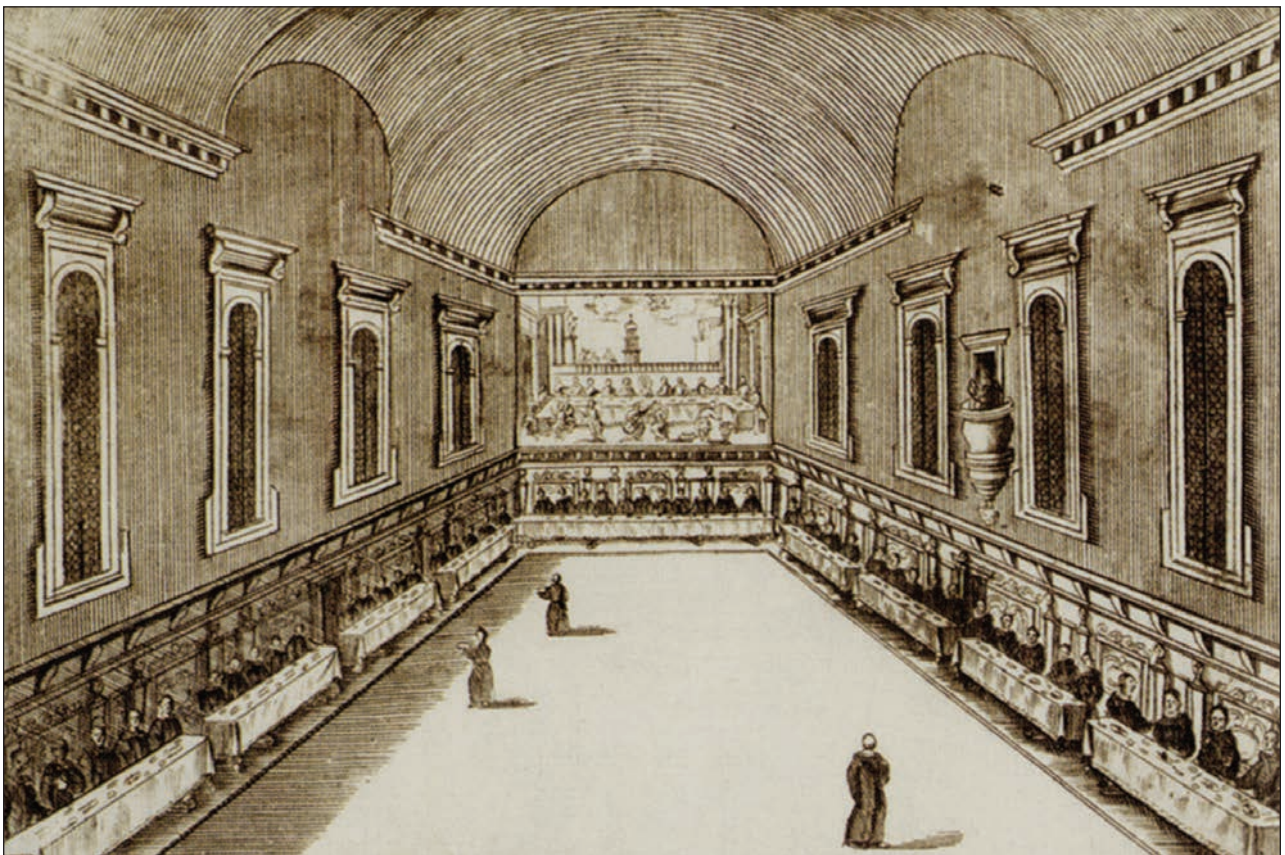


Figure 6: Vincenzo Maria Coronelli – Refectory, San Giorgio Maggiore, engraving, 1709. Paolo Veronese's *Nozze di Cana* is noticeable on its far wall (Source: Refectory, San Giorgio Maggiore).

a work of art in it imbues that work with a certain aura.³ Moreover, the placement of the *Nozze* in the Louvre is far from marginal: it is hanging in the same respectable room as Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*, covering the entirety of the large wall that faces it. However, on a practical level, this also means that in order to see the *Nozze*, one has to deal with the crowds of people who come to see the *Mona Lisa* as they continuously enter and leave the room from the two openings on either side of the *Nozze*. Additionally, the painting is hanging low, providing a vantage point into its visual space that is quite different from the vantage point for which it was made. The virtual place generated and presented by this painting was designed to serve as a visual extension of a wall, starting from 2.5 meters above the floor of a Venice monastery's dining room (fig. 6): its entire scene, with all its important painted figures, was designed to perch above the head-table where the monastery's abbot sat during dinner; its light was designed to fit the Venetian light at dinnertime; its architecture was designed to fit Venetian architecture, with Classical

and Renaissance influences, as well as an arcaded tower designed by Palladio, the same architect of the physical setting the painting was made for (Collins, 2018). Therefore, the facsimile, combining its high visual and material quality together with the originally intended location, provides a prime experience of the virtual place of the *Nozze* as it was intended to be, much more than the original in the Louvre can ever achieve.

The above analysis surely leaves room for additional considerations, yet the essence of its direction is clear: there are arguments to be made for an aura of the original as well as for an aura of the facsimile. Therefore, in conclusion to the comparison of the *Nozze*'s two canvases, the value of the facsimile cannot be denied, while the original still maintains its value just as well. More interestingly, however, this fascinating case allows us to shift the discussion from the physicality of either the original or its facsimile, and take it in another direction: the non-physical existence of the virtual place they both provide visual access to.

³ This has been the argument of conceptual art, that what makes a work of art is only its admission into the status of a gallery object. As seen in this study, it is a partially-true argument, except for the 'only'.

THE AUTONOMOUS EXISTENCE OF A VIRTUAL PLACE

The case study of Paolo Veronese's *Nozze di Cana* doesn't end here; it extends further. At the inauguration event of the *Nozze's* facsimile in Venice in 2007, a specially-made video work was presented by artist and filmmaker Peter Greenaway and projected onto the entire facsimile. By merging the facsimile and the video projection into a unified device of illusion, this work demonstrated how the virtual place of the painting can achieve a new life. Presented when the physical setting of the monastery refectory was otherwise dark, the video was continuously changing over time: alternately lighting up some parts of the painting while darkening others, changing its overall lighting and weather conditions, adding various visual effects, delineating contours of characters and architecture, and even gradually shifting the viewing angle so as to give the impression of seeing that same virtual place from above. Thus, this video projection departed from a strict adherence to the painting so as to provide a revealing insight of its virtual place. As a result, it perhaps enhanced this virtual place's aura even beyond what its original device of illusion had originally made available.

The intensity of experience which Greenaway's video work provides, also brings attention to a non-obvious realization that is universal to all pictorial images. Part of the value of this work, obviously, was that its video projection was onto a high-quality device of illusion whose aura rivals that of the original, and that its location was the very same wall as the original's physical setting. What this did, however, was to enhance the presence of the virtual place of the *Nozze* and assert its autonomous existence as distinct from *both* the original *and* its facsimile. While neither the facsimile nor the video caused this autonomy, they nevertheless provided a particularly vivid demonstration of it. The existence of the two painted canvases of the *Nozze* already indicated that (1) they do not show two virtual places, but only one, and (2) this virtual place is distinct from either of them. What Greenaway's video projection emphasized, on top of that, is that this virtual place is not tied to the physicality of either of them – it has an autonomous existence of its own.

The autonomy of virtual places is nothing new; it has been the case ever since painters in Ancient Greece began to create visual depth in their paintings (Gombrich, 2002). Yet as long as pictorial images were tangible physical objects – be it original or copies – there was no need to think of them in this way. However, technological developments in the last century or two increased the suspicion that images might extend beyond their mere physicality. First, mechanical reproduction made it possible to produce numerous copies of images, and more recently, digital abstraction made it possible to distribute limitless copies, ever fa-

ster, and with a reduced physicality. But it also made it possible to create places that can be seen through screens alone (such as in 3D imaging and video games), without even needing any permanent physical images to exist at all. Accordingly, the term 'virtual' became popularized as a loose reference to something that is present yet intangible. But the virtual nature of places that are seen through images is not the result of their loss of anchoring in a constant physical object such as a painted canvas or a printed paper – the virtuality of places in images is inherent to the very nature of pictorial images, no matter what kind of device of illusion they are seen through. Be it pixels on a screen or a painted canvas, be it a fleeting projection of light on a wall or a fresco painted into a wall's plaster – the increasing recognition that there is a virtual aspect to images is precisely the realization that the places seen in them have, and always have had, an autonomous existence.

Consequently, the realization that a virtual place has an autonomous existence makes it possible to bring up a further question: might also the virtual place itself have an aura?

THE POSSIBLE AURA OF A VIRTUAL PLACE

From the conventional understanding of images – traditional as well as contemporary – the suggestion that a virtual place might have an aura sounds quite implausible. From the traditional point of view, the idea of a virtual place is foreign, since the pictorial space of an image is considered to be an inherent part of its physicality. From the contemporary point of view, part of the fascination with new media is – for better or worse – the seeming lack of aura that stems from its disembodiment.

Nevertheless, is there any indication to the possibility that a virtual place might have an aura, at least to some degree? To determine whether or not the idea of the aura is appropriate also for the understanding of images in terms of virtual places, the analysis of the various aspects of the aura from the beginning of this article will again be of assistance.

First, as far as the quality of experience is concerned, if a virtual place has an aura, it is rather a potential aura whose presence would be more easily discernible the more the quality of its manifestation as a device of illusion improves. Thus, a truly powerful aura of a virtual place would manifest itself even through a reproduction of an original painting on a modest postcard. On the other hand, a high-quality facsimile would allow even a weaker aura to shine through as well.

Second, what about the labor of the artist? Visually speaking, of course, the labor of the artist created the surface of the painting and its space simultaneously – the two cannot be separated, and in that sense, neither can their aura. But what about the possible claim

that the artist's labor might also infuse some kind of a non-physical glow into the physicality of an artwork? In that sense, such a glow would by definition be absent from the virtual place. However, if there is such a thing as a non-physical glow, then if it can inhabit physical matter, would it necessarily be impossible for it to also dwell in a non-physical space, such as the visual space of a pictorial image? More specifically, consider the digital creation tools of today, such as 3D modeling programs. Such programs can produce visually-rich images of virtual places without involving any device of illusion except for the computer screen which the artist uses as a viewing tool while working on them. Therefore, if the labor of the artist who makes these virtual places generates any such non-physical glow, this glow isn't likely to go into the physicality of the computer's screen or processing units. What such creative labor could infuse with an aura, rather, is the virtual place. As such, it would be more of a potential aura that would become manifested whenever and however that virtual place is viewed again.

Third, what about the aspect of veneration? In the case of the *Nozze*, what exactly is it that has been venerated for centuries, from either the religious, artistic, or cultural perspective? Whether through its presence in the Louvre or through its absence in Venice, was the veneration directed at Veronese's painting as a pattern of paint on a physical canvas, or at the visual content of its virtual place? Here as well, the two cannot be clearly separated. Yet Greenaway's video projection does emphasize that the virtual place, even as distinct from the surface through which it is seen, shares at least part of the veneration. But what about virtual places that have no fixed devices of illusion, such as virtual places that are seen in films or video games? Might they too have an aspect of veneration to them? Interestingly enough, the answer is yes: some films do reach the cultural status of 'cult films' (or are otherwise highly respected or popular) and thus, indirectly, so do some places in them. For example, the cult status of *Star Wars* gives a certain aura to the virtual place of the 'Mos Eisley canteen', and that of *The Wizard of Oz* gives a certain aura to the virtual place of 'the Emerald City'. But in addition, the non-physical existence of these places makes them forever inaccessible, which reinforces the veneration aspect of their aura even more.⁴

Fourth, as far as provenance goes, the aura seems to rest clearly with the physical device of illusion and not with the virtual place. This is surely the case in paintings, where, to the extent that their virtual places could have a provenance value at all, it derives directly from the existence of their original painting as a physical object with a unique history of where it's been and what happened to it. To a lesser extent, however, even

in the production of virtual places in film, a similar consideration to provenance can be attributed to the back story of how such virtual places were produced. A film made in Paris, for example, even if many of its scenes were actually shot in a studio, would still carry into it some of the aura of the city of Paris, even if the place seen on the screen is not literally Paris.

Fifth, the location from which the virtual place is viewed surely has an effect on bringing out the potential aura that might be inside of it. In painting, an original canvas hanging in a museum would allow its virtual place to shine through more intensely than if it were looked at in a storage room or reproduced in a book. And as the case of the *Nozze* has shown, even a facsimile, placed in the location for which its original painting was made, can allow its virtual place to manifest itself in full. Similarly, films are more fully manifested when viewed in a cinema theater than if they are viewed at home or on an airplane. Such differences affect the extent to which the aura of a virtual place would be able to become fully manifested.

In summary of all these aspects, it would seem that there is a strong case for considering the virtual place as having an aura of its own, as distinct from the aura of the device of illusion through which it could be seen. The aura of a virtual place would be a potential aura, existing separately from any of its devices of illusion and the manifested auras they each might or might not have. At the same time, the aura of the virtual place is entirely dependent on the quality of its device of illusion in order to become manifested. In that sense, the aura of the original painting as discussed by Benjamin is a combined expression of both of them: the aura of the painted canvas fused with the aura of the virtual place.

If the above analysis is correct, this opens a reconsideration of contemporary culture's understanding of images and their value: perhaps all the museum visitors who stop at the museum shop to buy a postcard or poster of their favorite paintings on their way out are not clutching at empty, soulless objects after all; perhaps the labor of the artist does leave its mark on his work even when it has no physicality to receive that mark; and perhaps the meaning that pictorial works of art have for people does infuse these works with a discernable value, independently of the physicality of the object through which they are seen. If so, then the lamentation of Walter Benjamin – and many of his later interpreters (Berger, 1990) – about the loss of the aura of works of art in the age of mechanical reproduction was justified only in part. Thus, the age of digital abstraction revealed another aura that has always been there but was never fully noticed for what it was.

⁴ In that sense, this is one of the drivers behind the merchandise business around movies: what it sells are objects that attempt to capture an aura that is by definition unattainable, because that which actually bears the aura is not even physical but located in virtual space.

CODA: LEONARDO'S "LAST SUPPER"

The distinction between the aura of a device of illusion and the aura of a virtual place is well demonstrated in another project which Peter Greenaway made with *Factum Arte* – the re-creation of Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper*. The intention of that project was to produce a video that would be projected on the original wall painting in its setting in the refectory of the Convent of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan. However, the sensitive state of Leonardo's original allowed for a projection on it to occur only once. Therefore, in order to be able to have repeated presentations of the video work, a facsimile of the original painting was produced, and a 1:1-scale replica of its physical setting was built for the facsimile to be placed in.

Greenaway's video was projected onto the facsimile and showed audiences *The Last Supper* like they've never seen it before. More particularly, specific sections of this video simulated the changes of penetrating sunlight throughout the day, yet two such sunlight simulations were clearly distinct from each other. One simulated the effect of the sun entering the physical setting of the monastery through the windows which had originally been there, following its sun rays as they travel through the room and shine onto the surface of the painting from various angles. The other simulation, however, depicted the sun that shines *inside* the virtual place, entering through the openings in the ceiling above the Christ and apostles as they eat the last supper, following the sun's changing angles as it travels *through the virtual place*. Whereas the first simulation

of sunlight emphasized the aura of the device of illusion, the second one rather emphasized and brought out the aura of the virtual place: the non-physical room and events of the last supper, as envisioned, created, and made visibly accessible by Leonardo.

CONCLUSION

The development of mechanical means of image production made it possible to reproduce an original painting into multiple copies, but brought into question the possible loss of the aura of the original. More recently, digital technology made it possible to use a single versatile device through which to experience the visual content of nearly any image, and of various mediums. And yet, this also revealed that the visible space of a pictorial image has an autonomous existence which is distinct from the physicality of the image through which it is seen. This distinct existence is the underlying essence of the often elusive term 'virtual place' – a place that is visually accessible, but not physical.

Consequently, the aura of an original painting, traditionally attributed to its physicality as an object, might therefore consist of two distinct auras. One aura is of the original as an object, and the other aura is of the virtual place that is seen through it, and which can also be seen through its myriad copies, with their varying levels of physicality. Accordingly, also virtual places that never had a physical original – such as in photographs, films, or digitally produced images – may still emanate some form of aura.

AVRA IZVIRNIKA IN AVTONOMIJA VIRTUALNIH KRAJEV. DISTINKCIJA FIZIČNOSTI PODOBE IN NJENE VIZUALNE VSEBINE

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POVZETEK

Razvoj mehanskih sredstev za ustvarjanje podob je omogočil reproduciranje številnih kopij izvirne slike, hkrati pa je sprožil vprašanje morebitne izgube avre izvirnika. Bolj nedavno je digitalna tehnologija omogočila, da z uporabo ene same vsestranske naprave izkusimo vizualno vsebino tako rekoč katere koli podobe in tudi različnih medijev. Vendar pa je to tudi razkrilo, da ima vizualni prostor slikovne podobe avtonomno eksistenco, distinktivno od fizičnosti podobe, skozi katero ga vidimo. Ta distinktivna eksistenca je temeljna esenca pogosto izmuzljivega izraza "virtualni kraj" – kraj, ki je vizualno dostopen, ne pa tudi fizičen.

Posledično je torej možno, da avra izvirne slike, ki se tradicionalno pripisuje fizičnosti slike kot objekta, sestoji iz dveh ločenih avr. Ena je avra izvirnika kot objekta, druga je skozi objekt vidna avra virtualnega kraja, ki ga vidimo tudi v nešteti kopijah različnih ravni fizičnosti. Posledično lahko tudi virtualni kraji, ki niso nikoli imeli fizičnega izvirnika – na primer v fotografijah, filmih ali digitalno ustvarjenih podobah – še vedno izžarevajo neke vrste avro.

Ključne besede: avra, podoba, umetnost, izvirnik, virtualni kraj, teorija umetnosti, teorija medijev

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