

WHAT IS AURA?

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Abstract

The article discusses some of the key notions of Walter Benjamin's famous essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936). The author emphasizes that the importance of Benjamin's work with regard to the question of "aura" in the contemporary, post-modern constellations of the cultural logic of late capitalism lies in the idea of reading, writing, talking, thinking, and watching films. This can perhaps serve as a model for "saving our souls" in the age of nihilism, epitomized

by the mass media of communications, i.e., the informational-communicational paradigm.

Keywords: Walter Benjamin, art, film, technology, image, the political.

Kaj je avra?

Povzetek

Članek obravnava nekatere temeljne razsežnosti znamenitega eseja Walterja Benjamina z naslovom *Umetnina v času, ko jo je mogoče tehnično reproducirati* (1936). Avtor poudarja, da z vidika vprašanja »avre« v sodobnih post-modernih konstelacijah kulturne logike poznega kapitalizma poglobitni pomen Benjaminovega dela leži v ideji branja, pisanja, razgovaranja, razmišljanja in gledanja filmov. To morda lahko služi kot nekakšen model za »rešitev naših duš« v obdobju nihilizma, kakršnega zaznamujejo množični mediji komunikacije, se pravi, informacijsko-komunikacijska paradigma.

222 *Ključne besede:* Walter Benjamin, umetnost, film, tehnika, podoba, politično.

Introduction

What is *aura*? After more than eight decades, this question still haunts us, just as it did at the time of the first publication of Walter Benjamin's famous essay. Although someone may say that this question has long since been resolved, I deem it to be more "open," more disturbing and more provocative than one might imagine. Why? Simply, because we should keep the remembrance of *it* in the current age of *the catastrophe of certainty: world* as the work of artistry of the *technosphere*.¹ Is this not a catastrophe?

The aim of this article is to propose the thesis that we should retain the notion of "aura," even if that contradicts the letter of Benjamin's essay. Especially visual arts, as well as their theory and practice, must "keep it in *mind*." Why is that so? In order to answer this question, we have to develop a certain kind of conception, wherein the idea of *reading, thinking, understanding, then writing, talking/speaking ... watching movies* also, should be exposed. This would also lead us to a specific political philosophy connected with the visual possibilities of contemporary art. What is the reason for this kind of approach?

223

I think we should keep in mind the last sentences of *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. The whole of Benjamin's effort is concentrated in a finely lapidary prose. "Mankind [...] as an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods" (Benjamin 2019d, 20) is something we find incarnate in contemporary features of fascism all around us. Where? In the "psycho-technique of controlling our desires, in the real ontology of conquering these desires by an apparatus of control" (Paić 2018, 397), i.e., in the "brain washing," to which we voluntarily submit. That is—right at the place where "the society of control" (Deleuze) has replaced "the disciplinary society" (Foucault).

I really do find Benjamin's words prophetic. "Mankind [...] as an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods"—is certainly present in the technosphere! That is also something which is linked to fascism "creeping"

1 "Technosphere" is a concept developed by the Croatian philosopher Žarko Paić. Among many descriptions and definitions of *it*, I have chosen this one—from an interview—as being the most appropriate: "I call 'technosphere' that new constellation of relationships between machine, animal, and human in the age of network dominance as a social entropy of global capitalism." (Paić 2014)

in our streets. “This is the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic. Communism responds by politicizing art.” (Benjamin 2019d, 20) Thus, the notion of *aura* should be transferred from the area of aesthetics to “the cultural logic of late capitalism” (Jameson). Because we may, in doing this, find some new tools—or, better still, weapons—to fight the “certainty of the future” that Benjamin already disclosed near the end of his life. Namely, in his *Thesen über den Begriff der Geschichte* (*Theses on the Philosophy of History*) he declared that (*homogenous, empty*) history as perpetual progress leads to—*catastrophe*. This is the well-known image of Paul Klee’s *Angelus Novus*:

224

His face is turned towards the past. Where *we* see the appearance of a chain of events, *he* sees one single catastrophe, which unceasingly piles rubble on top of rubble and hurls it before his feet [...] a storm is blowing from Paradise, it has caught itself up in his wings and is so strong that the Angel can no longer close them. The storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the rubble-heap before him grows sky-high. That which we call progress, is *this* storm. (Benjamin 2019c, 6)

This passage from thesis IX, also written in fine lapidary prose, discloses everything. We are caught on the way to *catastro...*, beg your pardon, the *future*. So, what is the purpose in keeping the concept of *aura* alive nowadays? Primarily, its role should be in “taking our time.” This “taking time” is simply connected with what we have already mentioned, i.e., *the idea of reading, writing, talking, and thinking*—accompanied by *watching movies*—as a model for “saving our souls.”

This article traces the idea that the concept of “aura” still has something to say in a world wherein *the ideology of the end of all ideologies* is dominant. Also, it points to some moments in Benjamin’s thought that can supply us with some weapons against so-called “cultural politics,” by utilizing some ideas already present in his work in the 1930s. *Aura* is still present all around us. The point is that—*we should turn it against the grain*. Contrary to understanding it a kind of a sign for the loss of its contemplative power in the field of the arts, I will try to use this concept for certain political

purposes. Concerning my understanding of *the political*, I will also link it to my understanding of “*philosophy* in the age of the *Denkverbot*” (cf. Žižek 1998, 11–19). Benjamin should be taken as a contemporary philosopher of politics. He should also be understood as some kind of a visual artist through his “dialectical images of thought.” Would it be too much of an effort? Probably ... but you cannot know *until you actually try it* (Joe Strummer)!²

Aura and technology

What if there is no reality outside of the scientific-technological (media) construction? There really is nothing new in saying that we live in the informational-communicational, or media, or transparent *society* (if such a thing as society exists, following the neo-conservative de-evolution from the end of the 1970s!?). Benjamin’s text *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936) introduces a certain theory, it’s probably better to say a “philosophy of art,” under the circumstances of the technological developments of modern society in general. Although “a work of art has always been reproducible” (Benjamin 2019d, 2), it was not until after the invention of photography that the character of art itself changed drastically. Benjamin states:

225

During long periods of history, the mode of human sense perception changes with humanity’s entire mode of existence. The manner in which human sense perception is organized, the medium in which it is accomplished, is determined not only by nature but by historical circumstances as well. (Benjamin 2019d, 5)³

That is the key for understanding Benjamin’s concept of “aura.”

Once again, what is *aura*? Benjamin’s first definition of this fundamental

² The notion is taken from the song by Joe Strummer and The Clash “Know Your Rights” from the album *Combat Rock* (1982). The song actually declares: “Oh, know these rights [...] Number three: You have the right to free speech / As long as You’re not dumb enough to *actually try it*.”

³ This is also the main argument in Yves Michaud’s analysis (cf. 2004).

concept in his ontology is to be found in an earlier work, *A Short History of Photography*. When he speaks about the artistry of the Parisian photographer David Atget, Benjamin accentuates the loss of traditional representative art, i.e., painting. Painting was always a kind of a sacred ritual in attempting to capture the spirit of reality, its aim being to depict it. “Catharsis through mimesis”—this is how it is possible to define its purpose from the standpoint of the Aristotelian origins of aesthetics. This is also present in Benjamin’s definition:

What is aura? A peculiar web of space and time: the unique manifestation of a distance, however near it may be. To follow, while reclining on a summer’s noon, the outline of a mountain range on the horizon or a branch, which casts its shadow on the observer until the moment or the hour partakes of their presence – this is to breathe in the aura of these mountains, of this branch. (Benjamin 2019a, 16)

226 The work of art, at its beginnings, was somehow connected to its sacred purpose. Its origin lies in ritual. But this should not be excluded from the natural human urge to reach a spirituality which transcends the immanence of pure life. This act of transcendence is included in the human desire to create. Creation belongs, consequently, to the sphere of reflection and self-consciousness. Thus, art is necessarily connected to philosophy. *To think is to create*. From the beginning of humankind onwards, the work of art was meant to be some kind of language as an emanation of the human spirit’s desire to reach divinity. So, the work of art has an *aura*. It connects that which is near with that which is distant. In doing so, the magic of “transcended life” happens. Benjamin tries to supply the work of art with this “auratic character.” Namely, “the work of art” has in its “here and now,” in its unrepeatability, an *aura*, such that this is its fundamental ontological concept.

But what happens to the “aura” in the age of mechanical reproducibility? To say it most simply—*it* is lost. This loss of “aura,” however, for Benjamin means that we inaugurated the era of post-aesthetic art. That is the main thesis in Danko Grlić’s analysis of the adventure of Benjamin’s thinking (cf. 1984). The possibility of mechanical reproduction necessarily leads to the theory

and praxis of post-aesthetic art. This conclusion also includes a problematic solution to this state of things, i.e., that the hope of emancipation lies in the class consciousness of the proletariat (here, Benjamin follows György Lukács's main thesis from his work *Geschichte und Klassenbewußtsein*, 1923). This was due to Benjamin's acquaintance with historical materialism of the early 1920s. That, along with his inheritance in Jewish Mysticism, makes up the twofold methodological key to his thought in general. The masses have become—in this new ontological constellation—the new recipient and historical subject of *post-aesthetic art*. Such a constellation, therefore, presupposes that the aura has become unsuitable for the age of the mechanical reproduction of “artefacts.” Once again, what happened to αὔρα? This ancient Greek term means breeze, wind, expiration of air, glow... In the Latin tradition, it means *aura honoris*—a tiny ray of light; in medieval medicine “aura” means an uncomfortable state before an epileptic attack. In the Kabbalah, *aura* was like a space of Ether that surrounds humans. But after all, it became something that represents a poetical, spiritual approach to things. In the traditional work of art, aesthetic objects look back to their creator, they return the gaze to the author.

227

For Benjamin's analysis, it is important to note that “aura” represents “a human trace.” That is something which is forgotten and comes from humanity as such. In the whole of Benjamin's thought, “aura” brings back human “remembrance.” This remembrance is, of course, something different from the category of memory. Because the latter is necessarily connected with computational thinking and mind; it is known by the abbreviation RAM in computer technology.

Works of art are received and valued on different planes. Two polar types stand out; with one, the accent is on the cult value; with the other, on the exhibition value of the work. (Benjamin 2019d, 7)

Where does this “exhibition value of the work” come from? Undoubtedly, from the first art that exhibits characteristics of mechanical reproducibility, i.e., *photography*. Photography replaced painting with many more options for representing the reality to which it is directed, concerning the ontological intentions of art matters. Painting was still meditatively oriented in the

uniqueness and unrepeatability of artistic creation. Such a kind of eternal authenticity of an aesthetic object needs to be put into ideal circumstances for its receptivity and appreciation, and is determined by a well-educated, refined audience. It also needs solitude as a precondition for the truthful experience of an artwork. To summarize Benjamin's position on the "auratic" work of art, we can say that it is "oriented towards the past." Consequently, it should be negated as such. Because its goals and aims are incompatible with the technological era of the mass consumption of all goods, including cultural artefacts at every level. Two artistic areas have become decisive in this diagnosis for a progressive political and artistic stance. These were photography and the most influential 20th-century art form—*film*. Cinematography defines all the contours of mechanical reproduction. Technological reproduction opens up the possibility of collective receptivity, which is not contemplatively focused, but relaxed and easy, and does not need to be seriously reflected in any theoretical frame or scientific exactness. The remnants of "auratic" artworks were written-off by Benjamin's progressive, i.e., communist stance, and called-off as some kind of *l'art-pour-l'art* "theology of art" (Benjamin 2019d, 6).

But does Benjamin really write-off all of the so-called "auratic artefacts"? Along this analysis, we intend to show that things are not so simple. Furthermore, we can recognize many examples and appearances of *aura* in today's digitally developed movies.⁴

Is there an aura in film as artform?

Before we direct our analysis towards cinematography as a post-auratic medium, let us again pay attention to photography. The Apparatus—as it would be called by Foucault and Agamben respectively—included in it "gives a last, mortal punch to the relation between the present and the eternal," as Grlić said (1984, 36). It is in photography that the value of visibility, as well as the possibility of its reproduction, begins to hold back cult values. The praxis of photography is closely connected with tectonic changes in capitalist industry and the ideology that accompanies it. But what are the most important

4 This is one of the main theses in Boris Groys's analysis (cf. 2008).

consequences of this connection? In an ontological sense, we are witnessing the fact that *the image* replaces *the word*. Visuality, and almost only *visuality*, becomes the instrument of cognition. Pictures, on the other hand, need a supplement in words.

The camera becomes smaller and smaller, ever readier to capture transitory and secret pictures which are able to shock the associative mechanism of the observer to a standstill. At this point the caption must step in, thereby creating a photography which literarises the relationships of life and without which photographic construction would remain stuck in the approximate. (Benjamin 2019a, 19)

Benjamin's diagnosis says that the medium of photography inherently has this compatibility with written words. (Much later, we can see how the words are intertwined with moving pictures in Jean-Luc Godard's masterpiece *Histoire(s) du cinéma*; 1988–1998. Literally, literature literarizes pictures!) In a political framework, this means that the working class became the subject of writing, i.e., the author—first in newspapers, then at higher levels of artistic expression. Photography is a medium that thinks. Pictures think. The thought is not existent just in the raw material of a moving picture, but is already present in photography. For that purpose, we can add to the discussion Eduardo Cadava's explorations on photography, which could be a proper supplement for Deleuze's film theory (cf. 2002).

229

But no one can deny that Benjamin gives film the role of the great destructor of the auratic and aesthetic arts. Its main goal is to give the final and ultimate blow to the sacredness of an artistic *aura*. Films are the paradigm of post-aesthetic art, and they are completely intertwined with the receptivity of viewers, as the latter interiorize all the characteristics of socially useful value. At first sight and fundamentally, in films the “aura” of the actor disappears. There is no physical connection between the actor and the viewer. The actor acts for an apparatus.

In 1932 Rudolf Arnheim saw “the latest trend... in treating the actor as a stage prop chosen for its characteristics and ... inserted at

the proper place.” With this idea something else is closely connected. The stage actor identifies himself with the character of his role. The film actor very often is denied this opportunity. His creation is by no means all of a piece; it is composed of many separate performances. (Benjamin 2019d, 9–10)

In any case, the “aura” of the actor is evaporating. The whole Aristotelian tradition of catharsis has been put into question. Of course, Benjamin follows the path that was traced by his friend Bertolt Brecht and his *dialectical theater*. Owing to the montage technique in film narrativity, the scenes are fragmented and separated from each other. In contrast with *aura*, which is dedicated to the “here and now,” the whole process of filmmaking is cut into temporal pieces and fragmented because of the *montage* techniques. Film, with its technical/technological instruments, breaks up the *fundamentum* of auratic artistry.

230

Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go traveling. With the close-up, space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended. (Benjamin 2019d, 15–16)

By the camera’s technical/technological possibilities, by its driving, by cuts and static pictures, by its slowing and accelerating of pictures, by its zooming and its diminishing of vision, the film explores the optical unconscious as psychoanalytic theories were revealing the instinctively sub/unconscious.

The camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses. (Benjamin 2019d, 16)

In other words, film removes every kind of separation, unknowingness. It deprives us of any kind of aesthetic self-indulgence and artistic self-satisfactory

impulses that cannot be found in the everyday. That is to say in our profane (cf. Agamben 2007), *wirkliches Leben* (there is no adequate English word for “wirklich!”). Benjamin uses the visually seductive comparison for this kind of “de-aurisation,” namely, the one between painter and cameraman. He compares them with magician and surgeon. This excerpt reads:

In short, in contrast to the magician—who is still hidden in the medical practitioner—the surgeon at the decisive moment abstains from facing the patient man to man; rather, it is through the operation that he penetrates into him. [...] Magician and surgeon compare to painter and cameraman. The painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, the cameraman penetrates deeply into its web. (Benjamin 2019d, 13)

Thus, the painter/magician marks those practices of auratic-aesthetic art, while surgeon/cameraman here stands for the post-aesthetical demarcation and “constitution of the world” (to use a Heideggerian-like idiom). In the longer run, the masses bring with themselves new forms of reception. But the most questionable in Benjamin’s thesis is his insistence that this fact—i.e., the mass-participation in evaluating the works of art—changes the social circumstances in art and in politics for the better. He presupposes that the masses react progressively and critically to the content of films. (That means, contrary to the meditative and speculative stance towards masterworks of painting.) But, unfortunately, *this is not true*. The case is quite the opposite! We are witnessing nowadays scenes where the masses are truly dedicated to the most conservative and retrograde views in the media and in the arts. We can say that the masses are even inclined to some fascist tendencies in our multicorporate capitalism. Darko Suvin would say concerning these matters:

As movement, fascism is a reactionary mobilisation of petty-bourgeois and peasant masses put into service of capitalist repression. State power was conceded to it by the top capitalist conglomerates as a more efficient agent of mass agitation, repression, and economic restructuring. (Suvin 2017, 273)

The reaction of the so-called the “everyday consumer” to movies is, according to Benjamin, anti-elitist.

The film makes the cult value recede into the background not only by putting the public in the position of the critic, but also by the fact that at the movies this position requires no attention. The public is an examiner, but an absent-minded one. (Benjamin 2019d, 19)

Film creates the *organon* for the poetry of everydayness. Contrary to academic aesthetics, movies supply us with a reality that is not separated from our usual experiences. In film, the work of art takes the function of social activism. But... does this neglect the fact that the contemporary viewer most often does not have any kind of progressive attitude towards social and political movements? That s/he is seduced by the power of pictures impregnated with banality and stupidity? I find an example of this in the Croatian movie *Broj 55* (No. 55; 2014).⁵ It is a kind of a proof that could serve to show how auratic art still dominates in the digital era and is submitted to the conservative purposes contained in it.

232

The “aura” as a determining factor of the metaphysical history of philosophy

Walter Benjamin’s role in the history of philosophy is mainly—ambivalent. No one can deny that he, somehow, belongs to the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory of Society, along with Bloch, Marcuse, Horkheimer, Fromm, and especially his personal friend, Theodor W. Adorno. But, on the other side, he was firmly embedded in the Jewish religious tradition; Gershom Scholem is the most important witness to Benjamin’s debt to the Kabbalah and Messianic theology. Furthermore, we can say that his genius could, in the long run, be placed within the prophecy of postmodernity. Many of his lucid predictions have been realized in the theory of the so-called “postmodern condition” (Lyotard, Harvey).

5 Cf. my review of the film in: Krivak 2015, 303–306.

Benjamin was, also, always opposed to the tradition of Western metaphysics. As his counterpart in this line of thinking, Martin Heidegger, he stands in the deepest critical position towards its heritage. But what Heidegger had in mind concerning metaphysics was its demise. Although the fate of metaphysics is the fate of Western thought (“the fate of life,” after all), for the great philosopher of ontology, its demission should be followed by a preparation of that which “has to come.” That is to say, of *der andere Anfang* (the Other Beginning). Heidegger’s philosophy, in the last period of his thinking, is directed towards the future, that is to say “openness” (*Erschlossenheit*). He somehow “takes part in a spiritualist séance” of calling the spirits of undefined “things to come,” and takes that as *the task of thinking*.

Benjamin’s stance towards metaphysics is ambivalent. His use of words is much more associated with Kant and Nietzsche’s approaches. In his study on *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1928), metaphysics is related to a complete experience which brings to the fore the opposition between the figures of *symbol* and *allegory*. Thus, Benjamin finds “the place of emptiness between Being and Time” (Paić 2017, 121). Allegory, for him, represents a new discourse language of the historical rubble-heap, i.e., of the ruins, caused by the ideology of progress. In his time, Benjamin tried to counterpose—to this “single catastrophe” of progress—a specific and particular theory of salvation. That salvation is directed towards—the Past. As his famous ninth thesis of *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (1939–1940) tells us a story about Paul Klee’s “Angel of History,” the proper item which we should consult in search of salvation for the soul is—*the past!* What the future brings with itself is nothing but—*catastrophe*. Once again, let us remember Benjamin’s famous “*image of thinking*”:

233

There is a painting by Klee called *Angelus Novus*. An angel is depicted there who looks as though he were about to distance himself from something which he is staring at. [...] His face is turned towards the past. Where *we* see the appearance of a chain of events, *he* sees one single catastrophe, which unceasingly piles rubble on top of rubble and hurls it before his feet. [...] But a storm is blowing from Paradise, it has caught itself up in his wings and is so strong that the Angel can no

longer close them. The storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the rubble-heap before him grows sky-high. That which we call progress, is *this* storm. (Benjamin 2019c, 5–6)⁶

Using this kind of argumentation, Benjamin becomes the *tenant-lieu* (placeholder)⁷ of a particular “metaphysics.” We can say that—along with the fundamental concept of *aura*—another Concept (*Begriff*) takes its place in the *universum* of his theoretical strategy. That is—“the dialectical image.” This concept means that metaphysics should be hibernated/“frozen” in its historical moving backwards. Benjamin is a historical governor of *the new discourse of the image*, in the technological age of the end, or even death, of metaphysics. His enterprise is a peculiar “new enchantment” (counterposed to Weber’s theory of disenchantment, *Entzauberung*). In the profane regime of contemporaneity, metaphysics has not evaporated or gone away. Benjamin’s language is a decisive breakthrough to the essence of things, an intuitive recognition of that which is at “the core of Being” and its presence (παρουσία). What is the meaning of the concept of “the dialectical picture” (*das dialektische Bild*)? The picture is crystalized at a standstill, where the moment of its truth has been captured. The essence of metaphysics is the essence of those specific *dialectical images*.

Excursus on fragmentation

Benjamin can be regarded as a witness to “the short history” of the demission of the Whole (cf. Čekić 2018, 130). The abovementioned depiction of the

6 There is also Laurie Anderson’s version of this thesis on the album *Strange Angels* (1989), in a song entitled “The Dream Before”: “Hansel and Gretel are alive and well / And they’re living in Berlin / She is a cocktail waitress / He had a part in a Fassbinder film / And they sit around at night now / Drinking schnapps and gin / And she says, ‘Hansel, you’re really bringing me down.’ / And he says, ‘Gretel, you can really be a bitch.’ / He says, ‘I’ve wasted my life on our stupid legend / When my one and only love was the wicked witch’ // She said, ‘What is history?’ And he said, ‘History is an angel / Being blown backwards into the future’ / He said: ‘History is a pile of debris / And the angel wants to go back and fix things / To repair the things that have been broken / But there is a storm blowing from Paradise / And the storm keeps blowing the angel / Backwards into the future / And this storm, this storm is called / Progress.’”

7 As could have probably been said by Jacques-Alain Miller, in Miller 2019.

Angelus Novus is his main testament to this fact. Palpably influenced by Franz Rosenzweig's book *Der Stern der Erlösung* (*The Star of Redemption*; 1921), Jewish thinkers of the era (Adorno, Benjamin, Scholem) began to speak differently than the old school of thought inaugurated by the German Classical Idealism. The starting point consisting of the Absolute was no longer convincing in the epoch wherein new technologies came to the fore. It has become necessary to develop "new modes of thinking." The picture of modernity as a whole was broken into pieces. Against the Hegelian scientific-philosophical system, there appeared a multiplicity of artistic and philosophical perspectives which have put this scientific certainty into question. Rosenzweig insisted that reality is fragmented, comprised of many individualities that stand against each other. The monumental *Ge-Stell* of the German (Hegelian) Idealism has become doubtful. Kant and Hegel were the last thinkers who wrote *Aesthetics* without being artists or *connoisseurs* of art in its embodiments. Th. W. Adorno, in his *Negative Dialectics* (and *Minima Moralia*), has declared that "The Whole is un-truth/ful" (i.e., *false*).

That which Walter Benjamin—in his crucial essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*—calls the ruins, as a matter of fact, are fragments of "the old world" which began to fall apart in an unstoppable process. That becomes evident with the appearance of film and the loss of *aura*. He uses the technique of *constellations* as a model for this kind of new thinking, in order to reach the meaning of events that were beginning to happen in the wake of a complete defragmentation of the old world. These *constellations* are part of "montage-like constructivism." The latter technique—appearing after the historic avantgardes and the birth of technological reproducibility: objects, buildings, texts, and pictures (fragmented, broken, dispersed, and expelled from their usual contexts)—should be re-composed into *new constellations*. For Benjamin, these "constellations" are strictly critical towards the old conceptual patterns and systems. These figures form contingent and changeable patterns of thought. Every construction of these constellations should be used as one permutation among innumerable other possible configurations, connections, and correspondences (cf. Čekić 2018, 135). Benjamin's constructivist principle of thinking presupposes "the stoppage of thought" (the standstill picture), which brings about some kind of a *shock* that crystalizes it like a *monad* (fundamental term of Leibniz's philosophy). That is the meaning of the concept

of “a dialectical picture.” Benjamin frequently used the example of the Dadaist art as a paradigm for the effect which films brought to the fore. The common denominator for both of the phenomena is “cognitive Shock.” The artistic manifestations of Dada became the focal point of a scandal, in a manner that attacks the perception of viewers, just like it was the case with movies shortly thereafter. For Benjamin, the birth of cinematography is decisive because it has the possibility to provoke every kind of human response, where the so-called “optical unconscious” becomes a constitutive element. Jovan Čekić says that “[w]hen, with Hitchcock, avantgarde shock was replaced by *suspense* and mental images—as Deleuze concludes—then we leave the representation for some kind of things” (Čekić 2018 136), and embark upon the textures as a *network* of relations between the phenomena. The *montage*, as a major film technique, predicts a *network* with multiplicity and unrecognizability of knots.

The effects of photography and movies are not only asserted in the fact that the masses become decisively important. Much more fundamentally, *the loss of aura* and the “de-territorialization” (Deleuze) of the original was the sign
236 Benjamin already recognized in his famous essay:

In photography, exhibition value begins to displace cult value all along the line. (Benjamin 2019d, 7)

Mechanical reproduction of art changes the reaction of the masses toward art. The reactionary attitude toward a Picasso painting changes into the progressive reaction toward a Chaplin movie. (ibid., 14)

Nevertheless, we can stress here the other conclusion: “But cult value does not give way without resistance.” (ibid., 7) Before explaining this, let us recall with a bit more depth Benjamin’s fundamental deduction of *aura*. For with the “loss of aura,” for the first time in history, the work has been redeemed from its parasitic existence in ritual, replacing itself, and displacing itself into *the political*. It is not just that the “aura” has been demised, but—with this destruction of the auratic function—the arts become equal with the liberation of material facts from its “shell.” This shell was not only immanent to the field of the sacred and artistic. It was necessarily connected with material conditions

in the production of commodities and social relationships. The whole reality should be “re-territorialized” and saved from the prison-world, depicted specifically in Foucault and Bentham’s *panopticon*.

This “flâneurism” through fragments was very enjoyable for Benjamin (cf. Grøtta 2015). The demise of the *Whole* was his diagnosis for the advent of *photography and film* (which especially came to the fore in “the age of its mechanic reproduction”). Modernity has come to an end. We should not regret this end, we should feel “no remorse” (Motörhead compilation from the year 1984!). Chaos, brought about in theory by art and essayistic philosophy, will serve us, as Benjamin predicted, as some kind of weapon against capitalism and... fascism.

But what about the aura? Do we have to keep it nowadays, and for what purpose? If I can jump to some conclusion much before the end of the analysis employed here, the answer for keeping the aura lies precisely in the aforementioned. The *aura of reading, understanding, writing, talking, and thinking* as a model for saving our souls should find its way in the *re-politicization* of the arts in the age of “the cultural logic of late capitalism.” There is no other way to *keep* this important term—*alive*.

237

The work of Benjamin in the age of *visual studies*

What role does Walter Benjamin have in the contemporary social and artistic framework? Where does his theory touch upon the essence of times in which we live? We can answer these questions by drawing, or at least sketching, the picture of contemporary art. Namely, its paradox is that it lives in an age where the visual culture of media is the dominant mode of artistic production. Contemporary art belongs to the interdisciplinary area of studying cultural phenomena. Particularly, its place is inside the visual arts as different regimes of visual representation and creation of new identities. And culture? “Culture has become an event of the total performance of life itself.” (Paić 2014) *Visual studies* and *Bildwissenschaft* (science of pictures) are part of the so-called “pictorial turn” (W. J. T. Mitchell and Gottfried Böhm). What does that mean for our approach to the matter of the essence of art nowadays? The picture in the age of technical/technological reproduction is replicated, multiplied...

it is informational-communicational. As a matter of fact, contemporary art became the “integrated spectacle of pure image” (Debord) beyond human/inhuman relationships. W. J. T. Mitchell’s concept of “the pictorial turn” has been fulfilled by the latest bio-scientific developments. Basically, on such a platform, we can say that life and technology are inseparably connected in a new experience of *visuality*.

The communicational regime of signs in contemporary media points to the fact that *visuality* and *visualization* are new forms of telematic presence. (Flusser and Weibel, as cited in: Paić 2008, 20)

In *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Benjamin has described the idea of artwork in its technological reproducibility with “the loss of aura.” But new art as media-art has much more to do with *aura* than simply refer to it. The very notion of art has already become some concept of life itself. All these facts are strictly connected with the technological character of arts. But should we ascertain that technology today is *the condition sine qua non* of art?

238

Benjamin’s efforts must be analyzed inside the totality of technology as a kind of a metaphysical framework for the understanding of contemporary art. Although he is aware of the revolutionary potentialities of art becoming a part of mass-reception, we should be careful regarding the real possibilities and consequences of these changes. Danko Grlić says that “the anticipatory power for all authentic art” lies in its potentiality to keep “what is resistant, revolting, and critical towards actuality” (Grlić 1984, 42). Does technology, after all, gives us freedom? Undoubtedly, it does make things function much “easier.” But it also posits some boundaries to the true self-realization of man. How can this be explained?

When freedom is reduced to liberties, we are in the position of blindly following the rules of “Capitalism as Religion” (the title of a famous fragment by Benjamin).⁸ When we take “voluntary servitude” (E. de La Boétie) as

⁸ The following lines are a statement on this made by Stiff Little Fingers in the song “Suspect Device” from the album *Inflammable Matter* (1979): “They take away our

something normal, we agree that technology and the culture of images are all we need. We take *pictures of everything*, take *selfies*, and use others “*surf-techniques*” upon digital textures as some kind of wishful “thinking” and behavior. That happens when the “liberties,” i.e., the un-freedom, are taken for granted... when such “a state of things” has become “normal, practical, efficient...”

But what, for Benjamin, should be the real role of art as a liberating weapon? Against the functional usefulness, the false non-conflict, and the manipulative pseudo-harmony...? The art of photography, and especially film, should serve us as the “liberating weapon.” Because, as Heinz Paetzold had said, film has introduced a kind of “an unreflected pseudo-aura” (cited in: Grlić 1984, 52). That was not just in the case of the media-creating star-system, but, for better reasons, also in the artistic creativity of real moviemakers that made film the “form that thinks” (Bergman, Fellini, Godard, and Deleuze are the best examples of these efforts). Technique/technology should have the function of articulating the “meaning” which could be transferred by films/artworks. Because art—in its finest moments—transcends “the sphere of necessity” (which Hegel defines as “civil society,” *Bürgergesellschaft*). Artistic experience transcends the boundaries of its temporal facticity and social reality. Benjamin is aware of these facts, as was his friend/theoretic rival Adorno, who introduced the category of “culture industry,” in order to explain what happens when artistry is included in cultural regimes of organizing all activities for the goals of capitalism. Benjamin recognized this in the *Theses on the Philosophy of History*:

239

For what he [i.e., the historical materialist; M. K.] surveys as the cultural heritage is part and parcel of a lineage [Abkunft: descent] which he cannot contemplate without horror. It owes its existence not only to the toil of the great geniuses, who created it, but also to the nameless drudgery of its contemporaries. There has never been a document of

freedom / In the name of liberty / Why can't they all just clear off / Why can't they let us be / They make us feel indebted / For saving us from hell / And then they put us through it;/ It's time the bastards fell.”

culture, which is not simultaneously one of barbarism. And just as it is itself not free from barbarism, neither is it free from the process of transmission, in which it falls from one set of hands into another. (Benjamin 2019c, 5)

Adorno, in his *Negative Dialectics*, says that “the experience of the art recipient really needs, primarily, ‘coming out,’ and, if you wish, alienation, that is happening as subjection of a subject to a discipline of artwork itself” (as cited in: Grlić 1984, 73). The artwork, also for Benjamin, cannot be reduced to concrete, empirical, socio-political tasks, it should keep a kind of an *aura*, at least in its political sense. But the artist should fight against the taking of the free time from the workers, which is the entrepreneurship of the culture industry. Free time has, therefore, become the extension of alienating the working time.

240 But what we should fundamentally find unsupportable in Benjamin’s theory is the division between the aesthetic, *auratic* art and the post-aesthetic art of mass reception. The aesthetical as such cannot successfully be negated by something that is ideological-political and technological. As Danko Grlić would say, the artistic itself is the place where the inherent *revolutionary power* lies. Although Benjamin—in his own individually suggestive manner—rejected parasitic aesthetical, academic, self-indulgent indoctrination, he has not precisely formulated the essential alternative. That is understandable owing to his fragmented way of thinking. We can say, with Danko Grlić, that “there is no fight between aesthetics and ideology, but between *both of these parasites* and *art* itself” (Grlić 1984, 79).

Finally, what is Benjamin’s statement on visuality as such? Can an image be the ultimate horizon for knowledge regarding art in the age of mechanical reproduction? This was depicted in his famous fragment on Baudelaire entitled “Zentralpark”:

The course of history, seen in terms of the concept of catastrophe, can actually claim no more attention from thinkers than a child’s kaleidoscope, which with every turn of the hand dissolves the established order into a new array. There is profound truth in this *image*. The

concepts of the ruling class have always been the mirrors than enable the *image* of “order” to prevail. The kaleidoscope must be smashed. (!)
(as cited in: Grøtta 2015, 164)

Instead of a conclusion: The preserved concept of *aura* in the age of the digital

What is “the breaking of the silence” (of thinking) in Benjamin’s discourse? *The power of image over language*. For a German thinker of Jewish origin, the magical word is *aura*. Benjamin thinks in *images of thought* rather than in concepts! In them, there appears space-time for an understanding of Being different than the overwhelming nihilism of world history. The category of “aura” is the modern supplement for what was “sacred” and is basically connected with the growth of a new society, determined by the self-development of technologies. Instead of the “auratic” characteristics of traditional art, film and photography are directed towards a fragmented subject of collective reception. But despite Benjamin’s conclusion that we are witnessing “the loss of aura,” namely:

241

[...] that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art. This is a symptomatic process whose significance points beyond the realm of art (Benjamin 2019d, 4),

his stance towards this fundamental concept of his thinking on art is ambivalent. Besides, on the one hand, being the concept that was abandoned in the new age of mechanical reproduction, on the other hand, he still needs it as a kind of a salvation for the failure of humanity as such.

With the appearance of photography and film—both visual arts confirm the verdict of the predominance of image over language—, we are confronted with the overcoming (*Aufhebung*) of the difference between the artwork and life itself. For Benjamin, aesthetic liberation from the constraints of traditional art—consisting in the power of the masses and their participation in modern technology—needs to be fulfilled by complete, i.e., *political liberation*. Thus, some kind of conclusion to this paper will be inherently linked to his explicit

devotion to the political revolution. Of course, this is in accordance with the *epilogue* to the famous essay. The concept of “aura” should somehow be resurrected from its burial in the visual arts of technological reproduction!

Boris Groys’s “profane illumination” of Benjamin’s “politicization of art”

Walter Benjamin directed all his efforts—not only in his theoretical writings, but also in his tragic fate—against a deadly enemy, *fascism*. *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, which are regarded as his testamentary work, are completely dedicated to the building of his own specific philosophy of history, based on “historic materialism.” That should be decisive in his fight against the seemingly invincible praxis of the fascist movement. In the thesis VIII, we read:

242

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the “emergency situation” in which we live is the rule. We must arrive at a concept of history which corresponds to this. Then it will become clear that the task before us is the introduction of a real state of emergency; and our position in the struggle against Fascism will thereby improve. (Benjamin 2019c, 5)

So, how is it possible to create “a real state of emergency”? By following the order to politicize art as such. That was also the goal of the historical avantgarde in the first three decades of the 20th century. German philosopher of art, Boris Groys, developed this thesis in his book *Topology of Art (Topologie der Kunst)*; 2003; cf. also Groys 2008, 53–65). For him, Benjamin’s concept of *aura* is in reality the product of the modern technology of reproduction. In other words, and paradoxically at first sight, “aura” comes to life at the moment of its disappearance. How could this be possible? And how is this connected with Benjamin’s explicit words about its loss in the age of mechanical reproduction? Although the original has its place and time in the “here” and the “now,” while its copy is “outside of here and now,” it is, strictly speaking, without space and without history. Reproduction as *de-territorialization* and *re-territorialization* (Deleuze’s terms) decides the status of aura in contemporary art.

Boris Groys arrives at the conclusion that technological reproduction as such does not include aura or its disappearance, or its loss, but its disappearance or loss, even its decay, happens when the new aesthetic taste of the masses is established, which consciously replace the origin with its copy (Groys 2008, 63).⁹ There are two appearances of this inclusion of the masses in this process. The “aestheticization of politics” in Nazism, for Groys, is merely a *simulacrum*, or a copy of the mass as an object excluded from real scientific-technological development. For Benjamin, as was stressed by Groys, communism has solved the riddle of history. The reason for this conclusion lies in the fact that this political-social movement has placed the masses in their right position. That is, the proletarian masses have become the subject of history after “the end of history.”

Communism is the legitimate successor of the avantgarde artistic movements, because avantgarde art, in its radical destruction of tradition, has made possible “the return of aura” as a figure of “profane illumination” by its consent to the scientific-technological faith of the self-development of new media. Communism opens up the possibility of regaining “the open work” (a term used by U. Eco) in which, with the loss and disappearance of aura— the new certainty of *aura* has achieved resurrection. On the other hand, as an art copy of an inauthentic myth and the secularized religious-cult staging of “the beautiful” and “the sublime” in modern times, Nazism/fascism is the real regime of the death of aura in the arts of mass-spectacle (this was later developed by Guy Debord in *The Society of Spectacle*).

243

Groys is, thus, (at least) the supporter of “a coming back” of *aura* in the arts of installation and the performative-conceptual turn epitomized by *visual arts* in *the age of images*. He follows Benjamin’s idea of “the politicization of arts,” which concludes the author’s essay. Let us recall these words again:

“*Fiat ars—pereat mundus,*” says Fascism, and, as Marinetti admits, expects war to supply the artistic gratification of a sense perception that

9 “If reproduction makes copies out of originals, installation makes originals out of copies. Our modern way of approaching art can by no means be reduced to a ‘decay of aura.’ Rather, the modern enacts a complex play of removing from sites and placing in (new) sites, of deterritorialization and reterritorialization, of removing aura and restoring aura.” (Groys 2008, 63)

has been changed by technology. This is evidently the consummation of “*l'art pour l'art*.” Mankind, which in Homer’s time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order. This is the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic. Communism responds by politicizing art. (Benjamin 2019d, 20)

Final words

244

We all know “*the power of images*.” We have seen it at work in Leni Riefenstahl’s famous film *Triumph of the Will* (*Triumph des Willens*; 1935). In this aesthetically perfectly designed movie, she uses all of the inherent possibilities of the moving camera, as well as the montage techniques (the “optical unconscious,” as Benjamin would have probably said), creating thus a monumental, artistically inventive work of art (a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, Wagner would say). The film, with its formal brilliance, epitomizes *the image’s will to power*, and is magically imposed upon us with its many technological strategies, which lately became usual (useful) as codes for a re-reading and re-thinking of the new language of film. Hitler, on the one side, and the masses of 700,000, on the other, make up two protagonists in the perfectly manipulative propagandistic machinery (*Machenschaft*, as Heidegger would have probably said in the 1930s!). This was a real masterpiece by a very talented author. From the first scenes of the plane’s arrival—with NSDAP leaders and Hitler landing at Nürnberg for a meeting of *the party*—to the diabolically nocturnal torchlight-parade at the meeting’s ending, all is posited in servitude to the divine ideal, incorporated in the motto: “Ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Führer.”

What is the other pole of this *power of images*? In the book *Modern Times. Essays on Temporality in Art and Politics* (2017), Jacques Rancière gives a description that perfectly fits Benjamin’s argument at the end of *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*:

I wish to make this point about his conflict of modernities by looking at a short sequence of a film, namely Dziga Vertov’s *Man with*

a Movie Camera (*Chelovek s kino-apparatom*, 1929). This film [which was obviously familiar with Benjamin's revolutionary film theory; M. K.] is a part of a project that was widely shared at the time by Soviet avant-garde artists, in spite of their divergences; the project of breaking the separation between art and life, of using the means of art no more to produce art works destined to the enjoyment of art *connoisseurs* or *Bourgeois aesthetes* but to create new forms of collective life. It is a revolutionary film [...] (Rancière 2017, 70)

But, as Rancière lucidly continues, it is revolutionary not because it is a movie *about* revolution. Furthermore, it is not a “simple work of art” belonging to an art-field called “cinema” and dedicated to the representation of “a social event” (like something that is marketed nowadays through the so-called “social networks”), which is known in history as the October Revolution. What is *Man with a Movie Camera* in reality? Rancière argues that this movie is an activity which, among other activities, is constituting communism. Not communism as a political system, but as a “new fabric of common sensible experience” (Rancière 2017, 70–71). Wasn't this also the idea of visibility and images in Benjamin's philosophy of art? Vertov—as if he would be an unconscious follower of Benjamin's theory—does not represent communism as a result of planned organization and a hierarchy of tasks. On the contrary: Vertov has created—with the array of all the then-known technologies of mechanical reproduction!—the common rhythm/beat of all human activities. But, also technological...

245

* * *

Finally, what is the place of Walter Benjamin and his ultimate essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* within the philosophical *theory of images*? Furthermore, what is *aura* in today's constellations of the “cultural logic of late capitalism”?

For the most part, its significance lies in our *idea of reading, writing, talking, and thinking*. We can add also... *watching movies*. This is a kind of a model for “saving our souls” in the age of nihilism, epitomized by the mass media of communications, i.e., the informational-communicational paradigm. The

phenomenon of *visuality* as such is not something bad, or good, in its own right. If we take seriously the predicaments detected in Deleuze and Guattari's last book, *What is Philosophy?* (1991),¹⁰ we should also take very seriously the perils of "the creeping fascization" all around us, notably in the last few years.

They have proposed the philosophical task of gaining a certain type of "a non-fascist existence." The connection between capitalism and schizophrenia should be broken by a new way of defining the activity of philosophy. Was that not also Benjamin's intention in the final words of his essay on... *aura*? It could be said that this essay is not about "aura," but is dedicated to the necessary task with which we are confronted today. That is... *fascism*. To recognize *it* everywhere around (and between) us is a matter of urgency. This must not be postponed.

Walter Benjamin, "the sad melancholic, but uncompromising fighter for justice" (Grlić 1984, 86), stands with us in this task. The writing of Benjamin is a human's cry over "the traumatic consciousness of the existential disaster of the individual and his/her community" (Paić). He gives us enormous encouragement not to surrender to it.

246

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¹⁰ The book represents a kind of a conclusion to their project/diptych *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* consisting of two books entitled *Anti-Oedipus* and *Thousand Plateaus*.

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