

Fragmentary Subjectivity and the Evolution of the Museum:  
Examining Walter Benjamin's 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'

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Abstract:

This essay examines Walter Benjamin's text, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1935) to explore how technological advancement transformed the socio-political function of art and severed its ties to religious tradition. Benjamin identifies the degradation of art's 'aura' as a casualty of these changes. I review how Benjamin defines aura, as a sensation connected to art's cult value, before considering the political implications of its decay. I demonstrate how mechanical reproduction fundamentally altered art's function to enable a fragmentary construction of subjectivity. I then draw on Rosalind Krauss' essay, 'The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalist Museum' (1990), to demonstrate the cultural changes predicted by Benjamin decades earlier. Specifically, how the degradation of 'aura' led to a radical restructuring of the museum as a site which produces identity; moving from a temporal to spatial organising principle to accommodate a radically contingent, embodied subject.

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In 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1935), Walter Benjamin examines how technological advancement impacted the creation and perception of art. The reproduction of images, first through photography and subsequently film, transformed the socio-political function of art and severed its ties to religious tradition. Benjamin identifies the degradation of art's 'aura' as a casualty of these changes. I will review how Benjamin defines aura, as a sensation connected to art's cult value, before considering the implications of its decay. In doing so, I will demonstrate how mechanical reproduction fundamentally altered art's function to enable a fragmentary form of subjectivity. This led to the radical restructuring of the museum itself, moving from a temporal to spatial foundational organising principle to accommodate a radically contingent subject.

To foreground this analysis, it is essential to outline art's history in ritual. Statues, totems, and cave paintings across centuries demonstrate the role of art objects as sacred tools. Over time, art's social role expanded, but this grounding in ritualistic practice continued to inform its creation and public reception. Benjamin labels the persistent influence and social heralding of religious tradition on art, 'cult value', resulting in enduring reverence for the unique art object. He notes that earlier, incomplete attempts to separate art from its cult value occurred during the Renaissance, in the elevation of beauty to a level of 'secular worship'.<sup>1</sup>

Entering 20<sup>th</sup> century modernity, artistic practice shifted to become a reflection of subjectivity. Methods of display adapted to encompass this shift, prioritizing exhibition and public audience, as opposed to the closed ceremony of ritual. This created a context of organized viewership, where the museum functioned as; "...an institution of liberal government in which essential values of modern subjectivity could be practiced and enacted vis-à-vis the material object."<sup>2</sup> Tony Bennett describes art objects housed in the museum as "props for a performance in which a progressive, civilizing relationship to the self might be formed and worked upon".<sup>3</sup> Importantly, each object contained a temporal element, brought into focus through its curation and spatial organization. The museum used art objects to construct a vision of historical progress, becoming "the location of a collective, historical-

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." In *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, (London: Fontana, 1968). 6.

<sup>2</sup> Dorothea von Hantelmann, "The Experiential Turn." *On Performativity*, ed. Elizabeth Carpenter. Vol. 1 of *Living Collections Catalogue*. (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2014). 5.

<sup>3</sup> Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*. (Taylor & Francis Group, 1995). 186.

cultural memory... intended to enable visitors to experience the formation of the bourgeois individual as a process rooted in history”.<sup>4</sup> Above all, this cemented a narrative of temporal unity. Bennett describes how, “like all the king's horses and all the king's men, the museum is engaged in a constant historical band-aid exercise in seeking to put back together the badly shattered human subject”.<sup>5</sup> This institutional reinforcement of art historical teleology was dependent on the social value of unique objects. Benjamin describes how an object’s authenticity constituted its cultural authority, writing:

the authenticity of a thing is *the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning*, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced. ... And what is really jeopardized when the historical testimony is affected is *the authority of the object* (my emphasis) <sup>6</sup>

Historical specificity constitutes the authority of the object, an authority exercised and enabled through a collective respect for tradition. Viewed in person, the art object has a sense of ‘presence’—both from the space it physically occupies, and symbolically, since its authenticity forms the basis of its cult value. In other words, observing a unique object encourages a contemplative experience within the viewer, similar to a spiritual reverence.

Mechanical reproduction radically disrupted this structure of meaning-making. Benjamin observed how reproduced images evoked entirely different sensations within the viewer. Photography provides mediated access to art across wider audiences, spanning geographical distance. In this separation from the original art object, Benjamin explains that “...the quality of its presence is always depreciated. This holds not only for the art work but also, for instance, for a landscape which passes in review before the spectator in a movie.”<sup>7</sup> I interpret this depreciating ‘quality of presence’ as a weakening of impact, a less intense affective response from the viewer. Reproduced images lack the cultural authority gained through historical grounding, in turn diminishing their cult value.

Through this comparison, Benjamin defines ‘aura’ in negative terms—the element eliminated in an artwork through its mechanical production. He writes; “[one] might subsume the eliminated element in the term ‘aura’ and go on to say: that which withers in the age of

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<sup>4</sup> Dorothea von Hantelmann, “The Experiential Turn.” in *On Performativity*, ed. Elizabeth Carpenter. (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Bennett. *The Birth of the Museum*. 39.

<sup>6</sup> Benjamin, ‘Work of Art’, Section II, 4.

<sup>7</sup> Benjamin, ‘Work of Art’, Section II, 4.

mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art”.<sup>8</sup> Aura is thus defined by its absence, as much as its presence; aura is the sensation which accompanies our perception of a unique art object and weakens through reproduction. Benjamin describes aura in language that suggests an enlivened force, recounting the ‘withering’ and ‘shriveling’ of the aura,<sup>9</sup> as though it contains a life-force similar to nature, indicating its relationship to sensation. Benjamin also locates the presence of aura in the natural world. Perceiving aura in nature is described as experiencing “the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be.”<sup>10</sup> The distance referred to is the symbolic distance activated by cult value—the ungraspable element that exists within the spiritual, separating the observer from the object, thereby elevating it to a sacred category.

Benjamin embraces the radical restructuring of art’s social role as a result of the loss of aura. This process is inextricably tied to its destructive potential to displace the value of traditional cultural heritage. When authenticity is no longer a requirement, “... the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice—politics”.<sup>11</sup> From the loss of historical tradition, the potential of art as a vehicle for political ideology is gained. Critically reflecting on Benjamin’s analysis, I observed a similar conceptual thread within the text—the political potential of fragmentation.

This potential reveals itself in Benjamin’s analysis of film, and how its basis in mechanical reproduction creates a fundamental shift in perception, in turn developing a new form of subjectivity. Films are comprised of shots and frames, a project of mass collage. Its fragmentary nature extends to include the actor’s role where numerous, distinct performances are produced non-linearly, signaling art’s departure from “the realm of ... beautiful semblance” and unity.<sup>12</sup> This departure from the stage creates a new relationship between actor, audience and performance. While the stage actor identifies with their role, the film actor is disconnected from the audience and instead performs for the camera itself. In short, film’s mechanical fragmentation denies the actor the experience of a unified self.

Benjamin favoured the chaotic methodology of the Surrealists, who embraced fragmentation as a means of disruptive liberation for the senses. As McCole describes, “his search for something hopeful in the destruction of tradition stemmed from the Surrealist conviction that novel juxtapositions—sewing machines, umbrellas, and dissecting tables ...

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<sup>8</sup> Benjamin, ‘Work of Art’, Section II, 4.

<sup>9</sup> Benjamin, ‘Work of Art’, Section IX, 11.

<sup>10</sup> Benjamin, ‘Work of Art’, Section III, 5.

<sup>11</sup> Benjamin, ‘Work of Art’, Section IV, 6.

<sup>12</sup> Benjamin, ‘Work of Art’, Section IX, 11.

would prove liberating.<sup>13</sup> The visual juxtapositions of the Surrealists were themselves reflections of a disrupted post-industrial existence. The unease and disturbance created by the disjointed, shifting image reflected an increasingly demystified relationship between past and present. Certainly, Benjamin understood fragmentation enabled a fundamentally new way of perceiving the world, and therefore understanding oneself. He describes this in relation to film:

With the close-up, space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended. The enlargement of a snapshot does not simply render more precise what in any case was visible, though unclear: it reveals entirely new structural formations of the subject.<sup>14</sup>

Recall that the museum's role in modernity was to enable the formation of a subject anchored by a singular vision of history. Its spatial organisation centred around constructing temporal unity, resisting acknowledgement of fragmented human experience. As mechanical reproduction and loss of aura enabled new, discontinuous formations of the subject, this inevitably reshaped the organising principles of the museum itself.

Rosalind Krauss' article, 'The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalist Museum' (1990) provides an account of how the changes foreshadowed by Benjamin were cemented in institutions in the decades following. The text also examines the ongoing impact of deprioritizing authenticity on artistic practice. Krauss credits mechanical reproduction as the conceptual context which Minimalism emerged from in the 1960s, as artists embraced the mass industrial fabrication of sculpture, as well as producing work comprised of series of multiple originals. Simultaneously, Krauss notes a fundamental shift in the governing principles that organised the museum space, which she attributes to the exhibition of Minimalist work. More specifically, a switch "... from diachrony to synchrony. The encyclopaedic museum is intent on telling a story, by arraying before its visitor a particular version of the history of art. The synchronic museum ... would forego history in the name of a kind of experience, an aesthetic charge that is not so much temporal (historical) as it is now radically spacial".<sup>15</sup>

The subject who engages with Minimalist sculpture is forced to negotiate a set of spatial boundaries, acknowledging that their perception shifts in a dynamic process of viewership. Through the work's engagement with the surrounding space, history is no longer the museum's

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<sup>13</sup> John McCole, "Walter Benjamin, Susan Sontag, and the Radical Critique of Photography", In *Afterimage*, (1979) 12–14. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1525/aft.1979.7.1-2.12>

<sup>14</sup> Benjamin, 'Work of Art', Section XII, 16.

<sup>15</sup> Krauss, 'Cultural Logic', 7.

governing principle. The viewer becomes “a subject who coheres, but only provisionally and moment-by-moment, in the act of perception.”<sup>16</sup> Krauss understands this mode of artistic viewership as a lived, bodily perspective, informed by the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s framework in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945).<sup>17</sup> The museum as a site for constructing identity was now organised around “a concept of situated knowledge, an understanding of meaning as something that is always and inseparably linked to a situated and embodied subject.”<sup>18</sup> This context demonstrates how Minimalism emerged as a movement which fulfilled Benjamin’s prediction of the political potential of fragmented subjectivity. To prioritise embodiment is to revise art historical teleological narratives in favour of accommodating a modern subjectivity which is radically decentralised and plural. These emerging art forms led to the entire destabilising and eventual restructuring of institutional spaces, challenging narratives of a unified, linear history.

By examining art’s production and organisation within the museum over the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we observe the reverberating impact of the loss of aura. Mechanical reproduction removed the criterion of authenticity from artistic practice, encouraging the formation of fragmented work, detached from historical context. Benjamin’s belief in the political potential of fragmentation was well founded—in severing art’s longstanding relationship to religious tradition, new art forms emerged with democratising effects, including a new embodied subjectivity. This challenged the entire temporal organisation of the museum as a site of historical unity as it moved towards a spacial governing principle, reflective of a radically contingent subject.

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<sup>16</sup> Krauss, ‘Cultural Logic’, 9.

<sup>17</sup> Krauss, ‘Cultural Logic’, 9.

<sup>18</sup> von Hantelmann, ‘The Experiential Turn’, 5.

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