

Philosophical Précis

## The Current Decline in Aesthetic Sensibility and the Recovery of Auratic Space (Lessons from Benjamin and Adorno)

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**Abstract:** I intend, in this précis, to revisit the notion of “auratic space” in the works of Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno. I will specifically draw on insights from Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” where he defines “aura” as the unique specificity of a work of art in time and space, an ambivalent feeling of distance and proximity. In the same work, Benjamin laments the decline of the aura due to the mechanical and mass production of art. Meanwhile, I draw on Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory* where he highlights the “indefiniteness” of a work of art, that is, its “nonidentical” character that transcends its immediate “givenness.” I will use this Benjaminian-Adornoian description of “auratic space” to critique the current decline in aesthetic sensibility against the backdrop of the rise of generative artificial intelligence (AI).

**Keywords:** Adorno, Benjamin, auratic space, artificial intelligence

Art is dead, dude!”<sup>1</sup> These are the words of Jason Allen, the graphic artist who won first place in the 2022 Colorado State Art Fair’s competition with his entry “Théâtre D’opéra Spatial.” To be fair, Allen competed under the “emerging digital artists” category, but something about the winning entry did not sit well with his fellow artists. “Théâtre D’opéra Spatial” is a computer-generated image created using a “generative artificial intelligence program” called Midjourney. Similar to ChatGPT or Gemini AI, Midjourney operates through natural language descriptions or “prompts.” In other words, Midjourney has replaced brush strokes with

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<sup>1</sup> “An A.I.-Generated Picture Won an Art Prize. Artists Aren’t Happy,” in *The New York Times* (September 2022), <<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/02/technology/ai-artificial-intelligence-artists.html>>.

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linguistic prompts and the painter's canvas with the computer screen. While his fellow artists were bothered and many were insulted, Allen could not be more correct with his acerbic retort: "It's over. A.I. won. Humans lost."<sup>2</sup> This controversy involving Allen and his AI generated image is, however, just a symptom of an underlying problem that is more complex and ubiquitous. The problem haunts not only the world of art; as educators we are now experiencing the impact of AI.

The tribulations brought about by the emergence of artificial intelligence forces us to question our basic normative assumptions about the world and our perception of it. The artwork—which is the most human, all too human form of expression—has been undermined by generative AI. This forces us to reevaluate the role of the artwork—both as a mode of expression or creation, and a source of meaning in our lives. Such reevaluation is necessary because the undermining of the artwork in the age of AI means the undermining of human creativity, more specifically the replacement of the potentialities of the human body with machine technology. This results in the decline of aesthetic sensibility on our part as creators and receivers of the artwork.

In the following précis, I intend to revisit the notion of "auratic space" in the works of Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno. I hope that through an exposition of the idea of auratic space I would be able to further describe what the decline in aesthetic sensibility entails. There is something fundamentally human that gets lost when we become overly reliant on AI. The decline in aesthetic sensibility involves losing our ability to "create art" (art as a mode of articulating human experiences) and "receive art" (to be enthralled by art). Creation and reception are, to my mind, the twofold dimension of auratic space—a story of human joy and pain, as well as an opening to a hopeful utopia. It must be said that, for both Benjamin and Adorno, aesthetic sensibility is profoundly related to our perception and engagement with our socio-political environment. When we lose such sensibility, we become disconnected from reality—from our ability to be affected by the material environment or to be enraged by the wrong state of things. The definition of "aura" comes from Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," where aura is described as the unique specificity of a work of art in time and space, an ambivalent feeling of distance and proximity. The mechanical and mass production of the artwork, Benjamin laments, spells the decline of the aura. It is in his last book, *Aesthetic Theory*, where Adorno highlights the "indefiniteness" of a work of art, that is, the artwork's "nonidentical" character that transcends its immediate "givenness." Through a Benjaminian-Adornoian notion of auratic space, I

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

present a critique of the current decline in our aesthetic sensibility against the backdrop of the rise of artificial intelligence.

In 1935, the German philosopher and cultural critic, Walter Benjamin, published “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” an essay where he presented a political critique of the state of artwork production during that period. The essay became a seminal text for the early members of the Frankfurt School, especially Theodor Adorno, as Benjamin offered a critical analysis of the aesthetic implications of the “mechanical reproduction” of artworks—that is, how the intervention of technology impacts not only the creation of artworks but also how they are appreciated. More specifically, Benjamin chronicled how the technologically oriented artforms of film and photography profoundly changed the way people experience artistic content. Central to Benjamin’s critical position is the notion of the “aura,” about which he says, “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.”<sup>3</sup> Moreover, aura is “the unique phenomenon of distance” of an object, “however close it may be.”<sup>4</sup> In the context of a piece of artwork, its aura is its unique specificity in time and space. One experiences it ambivalently—inasmuch as the artwork is experienced from a distance within close proximity. It is some sort of illusive materiality, a historicity that commands the artwork’s authority.

However, the rise of mechanical reproduction effectively led to the depreciation of auratic space. Benjamin appropriates Karl Marx’s emphasis on the rise of bourgeois culture and industrial capitalism as having paved the way for the emergence of mechanical reproducibility of consumer goods, including “copies” of cultural artifacts. This resulted, Benjamin laments, in the withering of the aura, where “the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition,” and by “making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence.”<sup>5</sup> It must be noted that Benjamin observes two contrasting consequences of mechanical reproduction. On the one hand, since it causes the decline of the aura, mechanical reproduction results in “a tremendous shattering of tradition”; on the other hand, it leads—ironically—to a “renewal of mankind.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, while the mechanical reproducibility of an artwork marks the decline, perhaps death, of the material authority of an original artwork, the technological reproduction “democratizes” the artwork inasmuch as it becomes more accessible to more people. As such, Benjamin is

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<sup>3</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, trans. by Harry Zohn (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1968), 223.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 224.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

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not in total disagreement with the democratization—or more specifically, secularization—of the artwork, since, by evolving from its traditional religious or “ritualistic” function, it is now able to assume a more practical function. Perhaps, the artwork is now able to function as a critique of society. But here's the rub: Benjamin cautions,

Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be. This unique existence of the work of art determined the history to which it was subject throughout the time of its existence.<sup>7</sup>

I wish to add that the historicity of an artwork involves the role of the human who, for G.W.F. Hegel, is the agent of a historical and cultural period in the sensuous expression of a significant experience—more specifically, to the sensuous expression of freedom. Hegel writes:

“... man brings himself before himself by *practical* activity ... to produce himself and therein equally to recognize himself. ... Man does this in order ... to enjoy in the shape of things only an external realization of himself.”<sup>8</sup>

The practice of art reproduction is not entirely new. As a matter of fact, Benjamin notes that, “Manmade artifacts could always be imitated by men.”<sup>9</sup> Imitation has been the longstanding pedagogical tool of great artists in teaching their students their craft. Take for instance, the reproductions of Rembrandt’s paintings by his students. However, there is something radically different in mechanical reproduction as opposed to human reproductions. With the use of machines in the process of reproduction, the human element in artworks started to diminish. Eventually, the manual imitation of students of a master’s work was replaced by copperplate printing which allowed a much faster process of producing copies which were sold in large quantities. In the middle of the 1800s, photography began to replace mechanical printing. Fast forward to today, the invention of digital photography along with the rise of computer-generated images has made physical media obsolete. With all these changes, the quality of our experience

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 222.

<sup>8</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, Volume I, trans. by T.M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 31.

<sup>9</sup> Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” 220.

of these objects of art also radically changed. Our experience is more of the consumption of billions of digital images circulated every bit second through the internet. Not only do these images lack the physical attributes of the original objects, they also do not have the command of the auratic element of the original. The current state of art is symptomatic of our contemporary *Zeitgeist*. Today, people are consumers of digital products which are purchased because of their entertainment value, not because of their aesthetic value. Today, there is a decline in aesthetic sensibility because consumers simply consume and they are unwilling to actively engage in the auratic space of objects, which may have religious, social, or political implications. We do not participate in art in order to fulfill our humanity, we download in order to fulfill the demands of the market. Simply put, the decline in aesthetic sensibility is our diminished ability to respond to the auratic experiential quality of works of art.

It was Theodor Adorno who responded and paid critical attention to Benjamin's notion of aura. However, Adorno interpreted Benjamin's description of the age of mechanical reproduction to be too fatalistic and somewhat pessimistic about the aura. Adorno writes: "Benjamin's definition of aura touched on this inner-aesthetic element, though it relegated it to a past stage and declared it invalid for the contemporary age of technical reproducibility."<sup>10</sup> Moreover,

The failure of Benjamin's grandly conceived theory of reproduction remains that its bipolar categories make it impossible to distinguish between a conception of art that is free of ideology to its core and the misuse of aesthetic rationality for mass exploitation and mass domination, a possibility he hardly touches upon.<sup>11</sup>

While Adorno sees promise in Benjamin's discussion of the aura and agrees with him on most points, he appears to diverge on the notion that the aura is lost in modern times; rather, he suggests it is somewhat hidden. Despite Adorno's disagreement with Benjamin, he did draw from the latter the notion of auratic distance. Adorno agrees with Benjamin that the experience of the aura presupposes space or distance, as when one gazes at an artwork. Moreover, the artwork itself, like a landscape painting, demonstrates the "appearance" or "semblance" of distance. What is called aura, according to Adorno, "is known to artistic experience as the atmosphere of the artwork ... whereby the nexus of the artwork's elements points beyond

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<sup>10</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. by Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum, 1997), 310-311.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

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this nexus and allows each individual element to point beyond itself.”<sup>12</sup> Adorno further adds that aesthetic aura “goes beyond its factual givenness, its content”<sup>13</sup> and “the purportedly immediate experience itself depends on what goes beyond pure immediacy ... in which what is mediated becomes immediate.”<sup>14</sup> There is something more than meets the eye when one gazes at an artwork; something more “indeterminate” that cannot right away be placed a finger on. Hence, beyond the factual givenness of an artwork is its indeterminate character—it points beyond its determinate materiality or objectivity. Adorno uses the example of a “fleeting musical passage” that “depends on the intellectual comprehension of its function in a whole that is not present.”<sup>15</sup> In this context, a musical piece demands from the listener both an “active” and “passive” relation. Active listening entails some level of intellectual or cognitive engagement, while passive listening happens when the listener receives the music or allows herself to be moved by the music. There is in an artwork an enigmatic indeterminacy that requires one’s active and passive attention. Adorno maintains: “Every artwork is a picture puzzle, a puzzle to be solved, but this puzzle is constituted in such a fashion that it remains a vexation.”<sup>16</sup> In other words, there is something in the artwork that is profoundly nonidentical.

The auratic distance that we, as observers, have from traditional manmade art allows space for possible contemplation. That contemplation is neither common nor banal because an artwork has its own singularity and irregularity (or peculiarity). Today, the auratic space of human art is forced to compete with the ubiquity of AI. With AI applications being readily available in desktops and mobile phones, the presumption that AI generated images are works of art banalizes the creative process. Such regularity frustrates the contemplative and critical potential of art. All elements that make works of art great are undermined because of the ability of AI to create something devoid of historical and cultural situatedness. Therefore, the artwork ceases to be a sensuous expression of human freedom, to put it in Hegel’s parlance. Art will be devoid of spirit.

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 274.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 338.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

## References

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