

BENJAMIN'S CRISIS OF AURA AND DIGITAL MEDIA¹

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Aura is one of the most commonly invoked terms in media theory. Walter Benjamin's argument that film and other "reproductive" media diminished or destroyed the aura that had belonged to earlier art is regarded as one of the foundations of media theory. Benjamin was writing, however, in the 1930s, when film was the popular "new medium" that posed a challenge to the traditional plastic arts. What does the coming of digital media do to Benjamin's argument? Is his analysis of aura still valuable in a media economy in which film and photography compete for cultural status with computer games, various Web genres, and enhanced television? My colleagues and I (in a working group at the Georgia Institute of Technology) suggest that the question of the loss of aura is relevant for new media and particularly relevant for a particular group of digital media technologies called "mixed reality," which combine the physical and the virtual and therefore exist at the boundary between reproductive technologies and older forms, to which Benjamin ascribed aura.

Aura

It is worthwhile at the outset to review briefly the three essays, all written in the 1930s, in which Benjamin deals with aura expressly and at length.

The Short History of Photography (Kleine Geschichte der Photographie, 1931) is the earliest of the three.² Here Benjamin is concerned with the early development of photography: in particular how daguerreotype portrait photography developed from portrait painting and how this early phase in photography later gave way to a new aesthetic. Early photographs possessed an aura that surrounded each image and was expressed technically in the continuous tonal values of the early technologies. Aura was a sentimental or romantic attitude, or perhaps even a mystical breath that encircled the photograph. After the 1880s, photographers such as Atget, whom Benjamin sees as a forerunner of the surrealists, "sucked the aura out of reality."³

The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction (Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit) offers Benjamin's most influential statement on aura.⁴ In the *Kleine Geschichte*, aura was characterized as an attitude of reverence towards art. In the *Kunstwerk* essay Benjamin develops his argument based on changing technologies of representation. Aura belongs to works of art that are unique, as art in general was before technologies of mechanical reproduction. Aura is the sense of the "here and now" that each such work possesses because of its history of production and transmission. This uniqueness lends to each painting or sculpture a special quality,

which can in turn evoke an attitude of reverence on the part of the viewer. In a difficult passage, Benjamin compares the viewer's experience of a work of art with the experience of nature.

We define the aura [of natural objects] as the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be [einmalige Erscheinung einer Ferne, so nah sie sein mag]. If, while resting on a summer afternoon, you follow with your eyes a mountain range on the horizon or a branch which casts its shadow over you, you experience [breathe, atmen] the aura of those mountains, of that branch.⁵

This quality of distance-no-matter-how-near is a key to Benjamin's thinking. He offers his example of aura in nature specifically in order to illustrate aura in art: the analogy suggests that the closer we come to a work of art, the better we appreciate the distance between ourselves and that work. The physical presence and uniqueness of a painting or sculpture generate (ironically) a sense of distance and therefore aura. Although we might be close enough to touch or even deface the painting, we cannot touch or affect its unique history.

Unlike painting, photography and film do not inspire such feelings of reverence and remoteness, because they are technologies that reproduce their objects of representation "automatically". Photographs and films are artifacts that can themselves be reproduced automatically in an arbitrary number of (nearly) identical copies, and each copy can have the same status as every other. A visitor to the Louvre comes to see the original Venus di Milo, with its complex history of transmission from the island of Melos in the 2nd century B.C. to the Louvre in the present. For the viewer of a Chaplin film, on the other hand, the experience is the same no matter which of the thousands of copies he happens to be viewing. In the age of film and other reproductive technologies, aura undergoes a decline, which Benjamin believes makes possible a new political cinema.

Benjamin distinguishes stage acting from film acting on the basis of aura. In a dramatic performance, the physical presence of the stage actor preserves aura. In film, however, artistic expression is no longer centered in the actor, but rather in the camera, which treats the actor as it does all other elements of the filmic world. Benjamin regards film as a reflexive medium, because the mobile point of view of the camera and the techniques of editing lead the viewer to explore and reflect on the world seen through the lens.⁶ In fact, mechanical technologies of reproduction do not simply affect the viewer's response to art. Benjamin makes the larger claim that these technologies have changed our collective sense of perception. Auratic perception is one way of seeing the world; photography and especially film offer another. The film camera, which penetrates the space of the scene and even, metaphorically, the film actor him- or herself, conditions us to view the world as evacuated of aura.

Benjamin's last extended discussion of aura appears in the essay *On Some Motifs in Baudelaire*.⁷ The main concern here is lyric poetry, verbal expression (and memory), rather than photography or other visual technologies *per se*. Benjamin defines aura in this context as the "associations, which, at home in the *memoire involuntaire*, tend to cluster around an object of perception...".⁸ Photographic and film cameras, we learn here, extend the range of voluntary memory (*memoire volontaire*), because they provide a permanent, visible record of the sound and the sight of an event. Benjamin takes

note of Baudelaire's claim that photography is suitable to record ephemeral events and objects, but is not compatible with the realm of imagination. And what Baudelaire regards as the realm of imagination is for Benjamin the realm of aura. Although Benjamin does not make the point explicit, we could say that from a modernist perspective the connection between involuntary memory and aura is that both are nostalgic. An involuntary memory concerns an event that is now recoverable only through association: it carries with it a sense of remoteness, of distance-no-matter-how-near. It was the element of nostalgia in aura, to which Benjamin himself was attracted in his earlier writings and which he apparently later hoped to banish from artistic representation.

In the 1930s, then, Benjamin offered a series of characterizations of aura and applied the term to a range of human experience. Aura can belong to works of art, natural phenomena, and even human faces or figures. Benjamin thought he was demystifying the concept of aura, which he derived from the theosophical and Jewish mystical traditions of the 19th century.⁹ He saw film technology in particular as rescuing art from its sentimental (auratic) condition and making a more advanced political expression possible. Yet Benjamin's own characterization of aura is ambiguous and perhaps ambivalent. Aura can usually be understood as a psychological state, an attitude or feeling that the viewer experiences when contemplating a work of art or a mountain or other manifestation of nature. But Benjamin sometimes writes as if aura were a quality (almost an emanation) of an object, such as a painting. The ambiguity of Benjamin's concept of aura is apparent in the key phrase: aura is the "unique phenomenon of a distance, no matter how near." This tension between far and near – between the unapproachable and the approachable both at the psychological level and at the cultural and economic level – seems to be a defining feature of Benjamin's aura.¹⁰

Did Cinema Lose Aura?

One question that arises is whether Benjamin is in fact right that film precludes aura as an aesthetic response. We could argue that there have been auratic and non-auratic styles or genres throughout the history of film. The popular style of filmic narrative that was defined in the 1910s and continues to characterize the Hollywood film seeks to maintain aura in two ways. First, the representational practice of the Hollywood style aims to evoke in the viewer a sense of immediacy, not the reflective attitude that Benjamin ascribes to film. Once a viewer becomes accustomed to continuity editing, the edits disappear from his/her conscious perception of a film. As the name ("continuity editing") suggests, the visual presentation, which is in fact discrete, comes to be felt as continuous, and the viewer experiences the shifting point of view as "natural." The mobile camera could be said to bring the depicted world near to the viewer, which Benjamin claims diminishes aura. But the ambiguity of the far-near distinction also admits the opposite interpretation: that the transparent style creates a sense of distance where distance does not really exist. The viewer is actually watching images play across a flat screen, but is fooled into seeing a world beyond the screen. The Hollywood style encourages the viewer not to think of the process of representation or the screen (however near it may be), but to look through the screen to an imaginary world.¹¹

In addition, we can point to the cultural practices that grew up around film – the

Hollywood star system, which even today makes the stars themselves into auratic objects, who are remote no matter how near. The popular audience participates eagerly in the process, not only by attending the films, but also by buying magazines (and now visiting Web sites) to learn more about its favorite celebrities. The aura of the stars consists in conflating their presentation on the screen with their lives off screen. They appear on the screen in giant close-ups, while their celebrity makes them distant, almost ritual figures, larger than life and different from the rest of us. From the 1910s to the present, the public has expected that the stars will live out stories in the physical world that reflect the characters they portray. The transparent mode of representation applies to the stars themselves, as is illustrated by the fact that fans often stubbornly confuse actors with the characters they play. The Academy Awards (where actors parade before attentive fans in person and on television) and the whole publicity machine of celebrity affirm the auratic power of film stars.

Benjamin took note of the process of celebrity in the *Work of Art* essay, but dismissed it as a characteristic of Western capitalist film industry:

The film responds to the shriveling of the aura with an artificial build-up of the "personality" outside the studio. The cult of the movie star, fostered by the money of the film industry, preserves not the unique aura of the person but the "spell of personality", the phony spell of a commodity. So long as the movie-makers' capital sets the fashion, as a rule no other revolutionary merit can be accredited to today's film than the promotion of a revolutionary criticism of traditional concepts of art.¹²

Benjamin's ambivalence emerges here: he is implying that the aura of earlier art forms was authentic, but that in the world of film, only a contrived sense of aura remains.

A politically revolutionary film style was no more popular in Benjamin's day than it is in ours, and we have to doubt whether popular film ever constituted the aesthetic revolution that Benjamin claimed for it. The Hollywood style and its European counterparts have dominated film from his day to the present. The reflective film style, in which Benjamin placed his aesthetic and political hopes, did characterize avant-garde film of the 1920s. Benjamin regarded film as the popular expression of the reflective practices that the elite art world knew as dada and surrealism. But in fact, the reflective films of his period were also "high art"—the work of dadaists and surrealists such as Léger, Man Ray, and Buñuel, none of whom could be considered popular filmmakers.

Digital Media and Aura

Like film, digital media forms are understood as reproductive technologies. Because the computer is capable of perfect reproduction of information, the same media experience can be offered repeatedly to a series of users. However, the relationship between the viewer/user and the experience can vary depending on the technology chosen. Like Hollywood cinema, virtual reality (VR) and some genres of computer games present the users with a world in which they can immerse themselves. The goal of a VR application is to immerse the user in a world of computer-generated images and (often) computer-controlled sound. As the images (Fig. 1, Fig. 2) indicate, the user experiences this world



Fig. 1 - The user wearing a VR headset sees a "virtual world" of texture-mapped polygons (Larry Hodges, Georgia Institute of Technology)

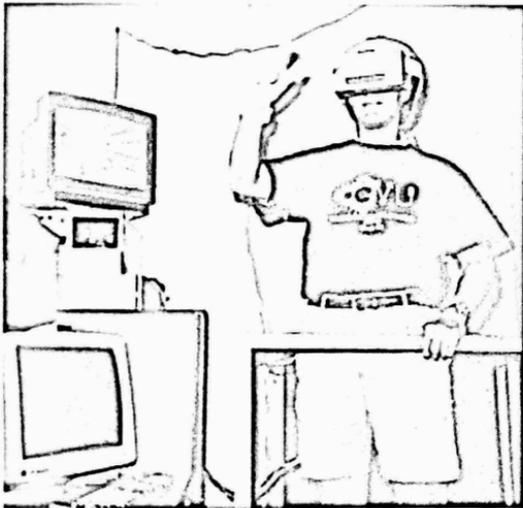


Fig. 2 - While experiencing the virtual world, the user is actually located in the very different physical world of the computer science laboratory (Larry Hodges, Georgia Institute of Technology)

through more-or-less realistic computer graphics, while the user herself is standing in a laboratory facility surrounded by tracking equipment and computers. As the second image (Fig. 2) reminds us, virtual reality is performative, in the sense that the user must "put on" the virtual world (by donning the headset) and act in it (turning his/her head,

walking around, using the data glove). Screen-based computer games often follow the VR paradigm, as they seek to draw the player into a 3D, computer graphic world beyond the screen. Like VR, such games strive to be purely virtual; they strive for seamless representation (Fig. 1, Fig. 2).

The goal of a VR application is to immerse the user in a world of computer-generated images and (often) computer-controlled sound. Although practical applications for VR are relatively limited, this technology still represents the next logical step in the quest for pure virtuality. Computer games (at least action-adventure games) often follow the VR paradigm: locating the user in a computer graphic world. Although screen-based games cannot offer full visual immersion, nevertheless, the goal is to make the world seamless.

In mixed-reality (MR) applications, the computer provides digital information that is integrated into the user's view of the physical environment. This integration can be accomplished with a variety of configurations of hardware and software, and the different strategies have been given a variety of names, including "ubiquitous computing," "augmented reality" (AR), "wearable computing" and "tangible computing." All of these approaches combine physical and virtual elements into a single experience for the user. Because they are not purely virtual, however, MR and AR experiences are not perfect reproductive technologies. Instead, they draw on the physical and cultural uniqueness, the "here and now," of particular places. In that sense they can be said to exploit the aura of the place. In an augmented reality experience called "The Voices of Oakland," we were seeking to exploit the unique character, the aura, of an historic cemetery in Atlanta. The visitors to the cemetery wore a computer that delivered audio, the voices of those buried in the cemetery, but the visitors' view of the cemetery was not obscured (Fig. 3).

Different digital forms seem to differ in their capacity to evoke aura. In an MR application, the experience is a hybrid, in which the physical and the virtual are necessarily intertwined. Hybridity works against aura; nevertheless, the physical place, which is unique, lends uniqueness to the experience and may revive the possibility of evoking aura. In a VR application, the physical location of the user is irrelevant. Ideally, the user neither sees nor hears the laboratory where her body is situated, but experiences instead a wholly virtual world. As in computer games, the goal is immersion. The VR community has even adopted the term "presence" to describe the psychological state that they seek to induce in the user. There is a journal called *Presence* to publish research in describing and measuring user reactions within VR environments.¹³

At first Benjamin's aura might be regarded as contrary to the VR concept of presence. To take what is remote and unapproachable (and therefore auratic) and to bring it near to the subject – this is precisely Benjamin's recipe for destroying aura. Popular film would seem to be like VR in this sense. Like VR today, film for Benjamin seems to be a purely virtual technology, one that severs the subject's connection to the physical world, as film theorists of the 1970s emphasized. The viewer enters the enclosed and darkened space of the theatre, and it is the task of the film to construct an alternative virtual world on the screen. If aura depends on the subject's physical connection to a place or object that has aura, then film – like VR or any other self-contained technology of representation – destroys aura by breaking that connection.

The ambiguity of Benjamin's definition, however, suggests another interpretation, in which aura and VR presence are compatible. We can see their compatibility if we return



Fig. 3 - Visitors to the Oakland cemetery listen to the "Voices of Oakland" using a portable computer and headphones.

to the Benjamin's nature analogy, in which the subject experiences (breathes in) the aura of a mountain or branch on a summer afternoon. Here Benjamin appeals to nature as an immediate presence, yet this very presence reveals the distance between the subject and nature, in the sense that the felt immediacy and transparency of nature compel the human subject to appreciate its remoteness. If transparency in nature can evoke aura, then transparency in art should do the same. Since certain styles in film and photography (and computer games and VR) have all aimed for this feeling of transparency, we are left to wonder why Benjamin does not acknowledge that mechanical technologies can evoke legitimate aura.

What about the hybrid forms of MR, in which the computer-generated virtual images and sounds are situated in a physical environment? Here the experience is both immediate and mediated. In the Oakland Cemetery, for example, a physical, human-guided tour of the cemetery should be high in aura, and a tour supported by augmented reality perhaps equally high. Because both the human-guided tour and the augmented tour maintain the user's physical connection to the site, the experience will be felt as unique and historically significant. Physical presence should enhance the aura by heightening the ironic sense of distance however near. In this respect, MR experiences should be more effective at conveying aura than other media forms. As with presence itself, how-

ever, any media technology could enhance aura by building a sense of distance through proximity. In the case of historical or cultural sites, this enhancement can be achieved by providing information about the place or object that establishes connections with the viewer's previous knowledge. For example, if the user knows nothing about the significance of the Oakland cemetery for American history, then she can only understand her visit as a visit to the generic place, "cemetery" (even a generic cemetery will have some associations). As the visitor learns more about the people buried at Oakland and the art and architecture of the monuments, her associations become more varied, and she comes to appreciate the uniqueness of this cemetery. Any media technology – a web site, a film, or even a prose description – could build such associations. (Benjamin even suggests that lyric poetry prior to Baudelaire had aura.)

Aura and Remediation

It is worth noting that Benjamin's three main discussions of aura each concentrate on different media or media forms: on photography, on film, and on lyric poetry respectively. Each discussion treats a moment of transition from one set of representational practices to another, and each involves the tension between older and newer technologies. The *Kleine Geschichte* examines the transition from portrait painting to the daguerreotype and then to non-auratic photography. The *Kunstwerk* essay contrasts stage drama and film. And the last essay focuses on the changing nature of lyric poetry after Baudelaire, who was reacting against claims for the new technology of photography and industrialization in general.

In previous work in media theory, we have introduced the concept of "remediation" to describe the interaction between older and newer media forms in a given cultural moment.¹⁴ In their efforts to reach audiences with a new media form, designers or creators refashion the representational practices already understood and appreciated by those audiences. Designers in any media form, old or new, are making a claim that their particular representational practices can provide an experience that is authentic or "real." New media designers "remediate" earlier media in the sense that they borrow both representational practices from earlier media and claim to be improving on them. For example (to take the case that Benjamin examines in the *Kleine Geschichte*), analogic photography remediated portrait painting in the sense that it borrowed the economic and social functions as well as some compositional techniques. But photography also claimed to surpass portrait painting in the fidelity with which it could represent the subject – at least according to a definition of visual fidelity that photographers themselves promoted. (Those who continued to favor painting over photography argued just the opposite: that, unlike the camera, the artist could bring out the inner character of the subject.)¹⁵ Similarly, to take the case that Benjamin concentrated on in the *Kunstwerk* essay, film remediated stage drama, borrowing from the practices of the stage in order to present a story through action and dialog. Film's claim to surpass drama was rooted in the techniques of editing, as Benjamin noted in his essay. In constructing a sequence of edited shots, the filmmaker frees the viewer's point of view from the fixed position that it occupies in the theatre.

We become aware of aura in art through a rivalry or interplay of new and traditional media forms. What Benjamin characterizes as the decay of aura in photography and

film is an expression of this interplay in the late 19th and first half of the 20th centuries. For Benjamin, film's task was to denigrate the aura of drama by providing the reproducible experience and mobile point of view that drama could not, just as photography's task had been to denigrate the aura of painting. Marleen Stoessel points out that Benjamin first defined the idea of aura at the moment of its supposed decay.¹⁶ This is not surprising. Benjamin's descriptions of aura suggest an unacknowledged nostalgia, a desire for something lost and now unrecoverable. In a culture characterized by reproductive media technologies, the authentic, the unmediated, becomes unrecoverable.

We have also argued that there are two opposing strategies of representation that designers and artists employ in the remediation of media forms: transparency and hypermediacy.¹⁷ Either of these strategies can be used in any media form, although artists and designers in certain media and at certain times may favor one or the other. The strategy of transparency asks the viewer to forget the process of mediation and concentrate on the mediated content. Hypermediacy, on the other hand, emphasizes the mediated character of the experience. For example, a painting by the 18th century Italian Canaletto strives to be transparent, while most contemporary music videos are hypermediated. As we noted above, since its development in the 1910s, the Hollywood film has generally pursued the goal of transparency. The intended audience is not expected to be conscious of the moving camera and the edits; it is supposed to experience this way of viewing the action as "natural" and to focus instead on the drama itself. On the other hand, the surrealist films of the 1920s were hypermediated and required the viewer to reflect on the process of their own making.

The interplay of these two strategies helps us understand the decay – as well as the constant revival – of aura within 20th century media forms. The strategy of transparency aims to evoke aura in the viewer, while hypermediacy denies aura. This dichotomy holds even in film. The transparent style from Griffith's day to Benjamin's (and to ours) is auratic. The assumption behind the transparent style is that film can deliver an authentic experience to the viewer by capturing the aura (the reality, the "here and now") of the characters, places, and situations. In his nature analogy, when Benjamin describes the aura of a natural location, he posits an unmediated relationship with nature. The transparent style in film or other media seeks to emulate that supposed immediacy – to bring viewers closer to the real by effacing the medium that interposes itself between them and the object of representation. Benjamin's nature analogy is heavy with nostalgia. Benjamin, an urban scholar of the 20th century, chooses to describe aura as a moment of communing with nature in the absence of any media technologies. When Benjamin calls aura a feeling of distance however near, he is not only describing a desire for immediacy; he is also acknowledging that that desire cannot be fulfilled in an age of mechanical reproduction. Furthermore because Benjamin's notion of aura already implies its own degeneration, it is classic nostalgia. Even when in the 1930s Benjamin had decided that film could be a new politically progressive art form, he could not dispense entirely with a romantic yearning for an immediacy that was supposed to exist prior to reproductive technologies. That same yearning is still expressed (in what Benjamin regarded as a debased form) in the transparent style of Hollywood film. By contrast, hypermediated representation in avant-garde film or other media, which have no pretense of immediacy, is not nostalgic; it shows no regret in making the viewer conscious of the process of representation and therefore the decay of aura.¹⁸

Two representational strategies existed in film in Benjamin's day and continue today. Various forms and styles of film, like other media forms, can be auratic or non auratic. Although Benjamin argues that film is by nature reflective, we have already noted that he made an exception for the capitalist film industry – a very large exception, because in Benjamin's day the film industry (in Hollywood or Europe) accounted for most popular film, as it still does. Avant-garde film of the 1920s offered a critique of aura, and what it critiqued was the strategy of transparency of popular film forms.

There are degrees and kinds of critique that filmmakers can offer. There is the often playful critique of representational practice in Chaplin films: Benjamin argues that Chaplin's fragmented body motions interpret "allegorically" the fragmentation that the camera itself makes possible.¹⁹ Benjamin claims that dada is the high art (anti art) movement that anticipated the popular film of Chaplin, but dada's critique of the aura of high art is far more radical than Chaplin's critique of the transparency of film. Although Chaplin's style may have hypermediated elements, at the core of his films there remains an auratic sentimentality. Throughout its history film has offered a critique of the decay of aura in other media while asserting its own ability to capture the authentic. For example, the common practice of making film versions of "great literature" was an expression of both homage and critique. While acknowledging that these literary texts provided great stories, filmmakers were also suggesting that their films could retell these narratives in ways that made them more authentic, more accessible to a vast popular audience. For that audience, they were in effect reasserting, not destroying, the aura of these works.

The classic Hollywood film style was (and largely remains) a representational system that diligently pursued the auratic, even if for Benjamin the result was a sham aura in comparison with the aura of oil painting or sculpture of earlier centuries. Perhaps the first major challenge to the aura of film came with television in the 1950s. This new medium implied that film could not achieve immediacy, because it lacked the key quality that television (of course) could provide: liveness. Although the two industries battled for their share of audiences and cultural status in the 1950s, their relationship stabilized relatively quickly, with each content to claim its own definition of immediacy (and aura).

In recent decades, however, both popular film and especially television have been increasingly willing to pursue strategies of hypermediacy as well as transparency. MTV music videos are hypermediated. Romantic comedies and blockbuster fantasies (such as *Lord of the Rings*) are largely transparent, but popular films can also incorporate the styles of music videos or games (*Lara Croft*, *Tomb Raider*, *Mortal Kombat*, *Resident Evil*, and so on) or can be intentionally self-referential (*The Matrix* series). The recent genre of computer graphic animated films (such as the *Toy Story* and *Shrek* films) combines generally realistic, three dimensional graphics and continuity editing with quotations and parodies of various live action films (and earlier animated films in their own series). This combination playfully calls into question the aura of live-action filmmaking. So called "reality TV" also manages to be transparent and hypermediated, self referential and sentimental at the same time. In so doing it remediates and diminishes the aura of both the television soap opera and the film documentary. Contemporary popular media see no contradiction in pursuing the auratic and the non auratic almost simultaneously; this eclectic attitude is perhaps a key characteristic of popular art and representation since Benjamin.

Thus, aura has not definitively decayed in the age of mechanical and now electronic

acy and therefore for auratic art remains strong. However, we can say that media forms throughout the 20th century seem to be predicated on the possibility (the opportunity and the danger) of the decay of aura. Media forms oscillate between offering a non-auratic, reflective experience and reasserting the importance of immediacy and aura. The moment of decay never ends because each media form is constantly comparing itself with other older and newer forms. Media forms are constantly calling into question each other's ability to represent the authentic, and these remediations raise the possibility of the decay of aura, the loss of authenticity of experience.

Aura has been in a permanent crisis since the introduction of mechanical technologies. When Benjamin drew attention to this crisis, he seems to have assumed that it would be resolved in favor of a non-auratic, politically aware cinema of the future. Instead, the desire for immediacy and for auratic experience has paradoxically survived in the face of increasing levels of mediation that digital technology make possible. But this desire is now combined with a fascination with the processes of mediation that call immediacy into question. The permanence of the crisis has helped to determine the ways in which media experiences are now received and interpreted by viewers. In digital media, and now in more traditional forms as well, aura has become a design parameter. Designers can decide whether to cast a certain experience as auratic or not. In film and television the choice of genre usually determines whether to aim for aura. In digital media, because the genres are not as firmly established, each design requires a separate decision. The presence or decay of aura is not, as Benjamin suggested, predetermined by the choice of media technology or by the dominant technologies of the time.

- 1 A version of this essay been published as "New Media and the Permanent Crisis of Aura," *Convergence*, I, no. 12 (2000), pp. 21-39. This current version was also delivered at the conference entitled "Medien-Begegnungen, Media Encounters, Rencontres des Médias", Bayreuth Universität, Department of Media Studies, Faculty of Languages and Literature (April 7-9, 2005) and will be published in the proceedings of that conference.
- 2 The essay was originally published in 1931 as "Kleine Geschichte der Photographie." For the German, see W. Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, edited by R. Tiedemann, II. Schweppenhäuser, Vol. II, 1 (Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp, 1972-), pp. 368-385. For a summary and important analysis of this and the other key aura passages, see M. Stoessel, *Aura. Das vergessene Menschliche: Zur Sprache und Erfahrung bei Walter Benjamin* (München Wien: Carl Hanser, 1983).
- 3 W. Benjamin, "Kleine Geschichte der Photographie," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, *op. cit.*, p. 378.
- 4 *The Work of Art* was first published in a French edition in 1935, then posthumously in two versions in German. For the German versions, see *Gesammelte Schriften*, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, 2, pp. 431-508. The English translation referred to here is W. Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1968), pp. 217-251.
- 5 *Ivi*, pp. 222-223.
- 6 *Ivi*, pp. 232-237.
- 7 W. Benjamin, "On Some Motives in Baudelaire," in *Illuminations*, *op. cit.*, pp. 155-200. The essay was originally published in 1939 as "Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire". See *Gesammelte Schriften*, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, 2, pp. 605-653.
- 8 *Ivi*, p. 186.
- 9 For the relationship to Jewish thought, see M. Hansen, "Benjamin, Cinema, and Experience:

- The Blue Flower in the Land of Technology," *New German Critique*, no. 40 (Winter, 1987), p. 90. See also M. Stoessel, *op. cit.*
- 10 The phrase (in both the *Kleine Geschichte* and the *Kunstwerk* essay) is: "Einmalige Erscheinung einer Ferne, so nah sie sein mag." The German word *Erscheinung*, like the English "appearance," could refer to a psychological state (how something appears to a subject) or to an objective condition (how something "naturally" appears). That ambiguity seems to reflect Benjamin's ambivalence toward the status of aura (in the mind or in the world).
- 11 For substantially different interpretations of Benjamin's concept of aura, see R. Kaufman, "Aura Still," *October*, no. 99 (Winter 2002), pp. 45-80 and M. Hansen, *op. cit.* Both seem to interpret aura as a kind of critical distance and would likely disagree with the close relationship that we draw between aura and the desire for immediacy and authenticity in art and popular entertainment. Both think that aura could survive in twentieth century film and poetry, but for reasons very different from those that we suggest. Kaufman argues for a kind of "critical aura," which Adorno and perhaps even Benjamin believed to be possible in modern art. Neither Kaufman nor Hansen discusses the aura of digital media.
- 12 "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *op. cit.*, p. 231.
- 13 See for example: T.B. Sheridan, "Musings on Telepresence and Virtual Presence," *Presence*, I, no. 1 (1992), pp. 120-126; M. Lombard, T. Ditton, "At the Heart of It All: The Concept of Presence," *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication*, II, no. 3 (September 1997); B. Witmer, M. Singer, "Measuring Presence in Virtual Environments: A Presence Questionnaire," *Presence*, III, no. 7 (1998), pp. 225-240. A comparative media approach to presence is provided by T. Marsh, "Presence as Experience: Film Informing Ways of Staying There," *Presence*, V, no. 12 (October 2003), pp. 538-549.
- 14 J.D. Bolter, R. Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999). See also J.D. Bolter, "Remediation and the Desire for Immediacy," *Convergence*, I, no. 6 (Spring 2000).
- 15 For essays that exemplify these debates, see A. Trachtenberg (ed.), *Classic Essays in Photography* (New Haven: Leete's Islands Books, 1980).
- 16 M. Stoessel, *op. cit.*, pp. 15 and 36. A similar point was made by B. Groys, "Die Geburt der Aura. Variationen über ein Thema Walter Benjamins," *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (November 11-12, 2000).
- 17 J.D. Bolter, R. Grusin, *op. cit.*, pp. 21-44.
- 18 Hansen takes a different view in explaining this passage and Benjamin's notion of how aura relates to experience on the one hand and film technology on the other. For her, a key aspect of aura is how it invests objects with their capacity to return our gaze. See M. Hansen, *op. cit.*, pp. 187-188 (and throughout the rest of her essay).
- 19 *Ivi*, p. 203.