Study on Aura in Replica Arts

Yichen Wang

Basis International School Guangzhou, Guangzhou, 510663, China

Abstract: This paper explores the concept of aura in mass-reproduced art forms such as film and photography. Drawing on Walter Benjamin's 1935 essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," it examines how Benjamin defines aura as the unique quality of an artwork that derives from its historical, cultural, and ritual context. According to Benjamin, mass reproduction diminishes aura by detaching art from its cult value, leading to its democratization. However, media scholar Johnathan Rozenkrantz challenges the idea that aura is lost, suggesting that individual interpretations recontextualize and restore aura through personal experience. This paper argues that while the original aura may shift, it persists in subjective responses to mass-produced art. Through analysis of Tarkovsky's Mirror and various photographs, the paper demonstrates how aura is generated in film and photography, reshaping art's purpose from cult value to exhibition value, and ultimately democratizing artistic experience.

Keywords: Film Study, Aura, Mechanical Reproduction, Andrei Tarkovsky

1. Introduction

What is film's relation to reality? Is it a replica of our reality or is it part of our reality? Are we not the prisoners in Plato's cave when we sit before a movie screen? I always feel bewildered when the film ends. I was too devoted to what is projected on to the screen to the extent that I doubt when I walk back to reality. The analogy between Plato's cave and reproduced arts, namely film and photography, correspond to Benjamin's speculation on the social implication of mechanically reproduced art. In his influential 1935 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Walter Benjamin defines aura as an aspect of artwork's quality that encompasses the historical, cultural and ritual contexts of its creation. Benjamin explains that aura is "the unique phenomenon of distance, however close it may be." Benjamin claims that mechanical reproductions, specifically film and photography, "[liquidate]...the traditional value of the cultural heritage"[1] and corrodes aura. As aura decays, reproduced art becomes "based on politics."[1] In this sense, art becomes the perfect tool to educate the masses. However, media scholar Johnathan Rozenkrantz points out that Benjamin overlooked "the plurality of experience," which means that "no two experiences are ever alike."[2] The unique personal experience that individuals acquired from reproduced art gives rise to interpretation rooted in individual response that may not conform to the canonical interpretation. Canonical interpretation is itself a product of elitism, cultural hierarchies, and institutional authorities. In this sense, aura is still produced in reproduced artworks. In some films and photographs, the authenticity and uniqueness of artwork in time and space exist in a way that is different from traditional artworks. Through the lens of Tarkovsky's renowned film *Mirror* and various photographs, this paper attempts to coin down how aura was created in photography and film. The paper will be divided into five parts: 1) Introduction, 2) The Definition of Aura in Film and Photography, 3) Aura in Photography, 4) Aura in Film, 5) Conclusion and Social implications.

2. The Definition For Aura in Film and Photography

Despite Benjamin's definition, the meaning of aura is still disputed. Other than "the unique phenomenon of distance," the word aura can refer to different things across disciplines and cultures, such as the halo in religious iconography, or spiritually guided life force energy known as Reiki in Japanese culture. The word aura originates from the Greek noun αὔρα, which literally means "breeze," referencing a minor wind goddess in Greek mythology. It is also cognate with ἀήρ, the morning air or morning mist. Breeze, air, and mist are all intangible and are all representative in creating the atmosphere of a scene.

In Latin, aura acquired the visual implication of a halo. This paranormal feature is often depicted in religious art. In religious iconography, a circle of light is typically depicted behind the figure of Christ or saints. The halo is usually painted in gold to reflect light and to make an icon particularly vivid and

lively. When an icon representing saintly figures emanates the light, that light helps to create the aura of the divine presence. In both religious art and architecture, light is an important medium that emphasizes objects and figures. This is also known as chiaroscuro, the contrast of light. Light can be represented with pigments in drawings or artificially manipulated light sources in film studios. Some might argue that if light is essential in creating aura, then how come we're not experiencing aura all the time? That is because chiaroscuro is not only about the light source but also about the difference of light intensity within a dim environment. In the drawing, the rays of light behind the icon contrast the plain use of color of the other part of the drawing; in the church, the softly-lit environment with candles flickering. Such similar immersive settings are created in the cinema, the viewfinder, and photography exhibitions–even in the content created on the screen or film celluloid.

We can also utilize the two concepts proposed by Roland Barthes in "Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography" to understand the aura specific to film and photography. Proposed by Barthes, the terms *studium* and *punctum* resemble some of the defining characteristics of aura. *Studium* refers to the viewers' recognition of the general, cultural contexts and aesthetics of the artwork, while *punctum* is the "accident which pricks [the viewers]" and which "disturb the *studium*." *Studium* is the general, cultural contexts and aesthetic interpretation of the artwork, which corresponds to the ritual function of artwork referred to in Benjamin's essay. *Punctum* describes the specific emotional and personal impacts of photographs on an individual, which matches to media scholar Johnathan Rozenkrantz's argument that aura resides in personal experience. We must note that Barthes frames *punctum* as an element that breaks the *studium*, and elevates the artwork to a personally and emotionally engaging state for the viewers.

From the above discussions, we can define aura in film and photography as the effect of an artwork transcending itself from an aesthetic representation of reality into a piece that reminds the audience of their personal memories and engages with the audience's emotion via the medium of light. Among the three characteristics of aura discussed above, *punctum* is pivotal to the understanding of the mechanism of forming aura in film and photography. *Punctum* was originally used by Barthes to exclusively describe photography's ability to create a quasi-aura experience for the viewer, yet we will borrow the concept to understand how the aura in film and photography might be produced from different elements, such as visual styles, narratives, and sound. However, we must note that aura cannot be measured empirically, but the paper will utilize formal analysis and theoretical interpretation to approach the subject matter.

3. Aura in Photography

A photograph, as the frame of film, differs from a moving image. While film is a time-based medium, photographs are each segmented from one another yet reserve the potential of certain combinations under specific occasions, such as a photography exhibition. For the discussion of this section, we will examine a single photograph's ability to create aura with Barthes' *studium* and *punctum* theoretical approach.

Figure 1: Kertész, Blind Gypsy Violinst, 1921

For Barthes, *studium* is the "docile cultural subject" in an artwork and *punctum* is the "detail that

arouses great sympathy in [her]."[3] For instance, when writing about Kertész's 1921 photograph of a blind gypsy violinist being led by a boy, he claims that *punctum*, the power of expansion, gives her the certainty of being in Central Europe.

Here, the photograph really transcends itself: is this not the sole proof of its art? To annihilate itself as medium, to be no longer a sign but the thing itself?

The power of the image transcending the representation of reality to the direct substitute of reality is the essence of creating aura in reproduced art. Specifically, Barthes' argument is that: instead of seeing a photograph, he saw a blind violinist led by a boy somewhere in central Europe. So instead of seeing the photograph with an impartial, third-party viewer consciousness, he was intuitively and naturally attracted to the photograph and contextualized the photograph as somewhere in Central Europe. (see Figure 1) This experience is the new form of aura appearing in photography.

Similar experiences can be felt in others' photography, such as Vivian Maier's color photograph. In her VM1978K04566-11-MC, a photograph that depicts a boy sleeping on the passenger's seat while his sister glanced into the camera with the car window rolled down.

Figure 2: Vivian Maier, VM1978K04566-11-MC, 1978

This photograph from Maier created what Barthes described as "photograph…transcend[ing] itself [as a medium]." When looking at the photograph at first sight, I was immediately drawn to the girl's slightly contemptuous stare (see figure 2). At this instant, am I conscious of the fact that I'm looking at a photograph? Most viewers weren't aware of the fact that we are looking, through Vivian's eyes, at the girl and her sleeping brother (see figure 2). The eye contact between me and the subject is essentially an interaction or experience instead of I consciously thinking to myself: how should I analyze this photograph? What are some aesthetic features of this photograph? Some more likely questions that would be asked are: where are their parents? How old are they? Why are they being left in the car? If we compare the two sets of questions, this photograph successfully "annihilate[s] itself as medium." If the same attraction occurred to the viewers, we can say that the viewers automatically adjusted themselves to the *punctum* of the photograph. Instead of holistically viewing the photograph's composition and aesthetic details, they were instantly drawn to the punctum of the photograph–the girl's stare. This resembles Barthes' argument which claims that *punctum* will break down *studium* and elevate the audience to a personal and emotional engaging level. At this level, individual viewers' interactions with the subject matters of the photograph are plural, interpreting the occasion of the photograph based on their own backgrounds, understandings, and even upbringing. Thus, the canonical interpretation, in this situation, ceases to exist.

4. Aura in Film

The mechanism of *punctum*, like that of aura, still involves uniqueness and authenticity–the uniqueness and authenticity that reside in personal experience and interpretation of film. The aura in film

can be attributed to its ability to feel time, evoke emotions, and create a particular atmosphere, but to understand precisely how film creates shared experience for all while being unique to each individual in the theater, we will examine how a specific film represents and even creates time and space. This space can be created by various means in cinematic visual language.

Tarkovsky's *Mirror* unfolds fragmented pieces of memories of childhood, personal moments, the war, and the mother and eventually reveals the owner of the memories–a dying man. The story is representative in creating the personal interpretation space that stretches out of the frame with its non-chronological and stream conscious-like first-person narrative. Although the audience is precisely learning the experience of a dying man in his forties in fragmented pieces of memories, the focus of the film is not attached to the man. Instead, the film focuses on affiliated objects, events, and pieces of loosely-held memories of the man, which positions the audience in a first-person perspective in the film, granting them more flexibility to organize pieces of information organically and personally.

Mirror employs a non-chronological series of discrete yet similar shots of women's hair.

Figure 3: Series of screenshot from Mirror, 1975

This series of shots have one thing in common, which is that each shot does not show the face of the woman. The "faceless" figure qualifies the audience's position as an observer of the scene, and to a very large extent, merges with that of the dying man (see figure 3).

This notion of merging the audience's perspective with the perspective of the main character–the dying man is further exemplified with two specific scenes. Firstly, in the scene where Maria, the mother, talked to the doctor and walked back into the wooden house, Arseny Tarkovsky's poem *First Dates* was read as the camera moves in the old house, displaying the children eating, Maria standing in the corner, and an open window. The characters and their movements in this scene remain completely unaffected by the recitation of the poem. The children's attention is fully devoted to their breakfast, same as Maria's attention on her children and ours' attention on Maria. The recitation of the poem and the audience's eyes construct the father's quasi-presence in this scene, yet when Maria cries by the window, this quasi-presence is liquidated. While Maria cried, the poem read "Behind us still our fate was grimley holding, A razor-handed madman, seeking fee," which indicates the man is already gone to the war. Yet the fact that "we" are still reading the poem and watching Maria create the "unique phenomenon of distance, however close it may be." The shots of the scene are also in a cascade that approaches Maria. From full length shot to chest shot then to a close-up. Yet there is still a distance between "we" and Maria in the scene.

This special audiovisual feature of representing a man via voice and not appearance is used again in the scene where the man quarrels with his mother. From the first point of view, the camera moves within an empty house from one end to another as the man talks to his mother on the telephone. If mute the conversation, the scene would fall into mediocrity since it is a simple shot without much action nor a

specific subject. The conversation in this scene is almost like mind instructions. It instructs the audience to reflect on specific things in their life such as quarrel with mother, and it evokes the audience's emotion rather than projecting emotion of the characters on the audience via acting and staging, which allows the audience to bring in themselves to the situation and relate to their own experience.

Another crucial feature of Tarkovsky's films that help with creating aura is its ability to let time be felt in film. Tarkovsky writes that:

How does time make itself felt in a shot? It becomes tangible when you sense something significant, truthful, going on beyond the events on the screen; when you realise, quite consciously, that what you see in the frame is not limited to its visual depiction, but is a pointer to something stretching out beyond the frame and to infinity.[4]

Tarkovsky's depictions of reality in his frames are organic. There are elements in his frame that are truthful in terms of representing reality yet unconventional in terms of the plot's progression. When the viewers watch two characters have a conversation on the screen, they are conscious of the fact that this is a story and the conversation is leading them to a dramatic event. There is the consciousness of artificiality of the scene for the viewers. Such consciousness stems from people's conventional perception that artwork is composed of representations, also known as archetypes in films. For instance, there is the use of light and darkness to hint on the position of the protagonist and the villain in many movies. In this case, elements in film are subordinate to the plot's progression. On the other hand, people often overlook film's special ability to document rather than represent.

In *Mirror*'s opening scene where Maria ended her conversation with the doctor, Tarkovsky introduces the intangible element of the wind, which sweeps by the crops as the doctor turns his head around.

Figure 4: Screenshot from Mirro975r, 1

This element intrigues the viewers to wonder what is the significance behind such an element. Viewers tend to have the mindset of rationalizing elements they don't understand as a symbolism that might be consistently presented throughout a film, but the wind rationalizes the doctor's movement of looking back in an organic way. Therefore, wind, as the natural force that documents reality, is the "accident that pricks the viewers." Using Barthes' method, the *studium* of the scene is the two characters having a conversation. Their conversation hints on Maria's unease and missing role of the father. The *punctum* is the wind that waves through the crops (see figure 4), which has "more or less a power of expansion" for it expands the viewers' perception from the most basic audiovisual experience to a personal-mnemonic-spiritual experience. The wind is almost a pause that stops the characters in the frame as well as the viewers. It could remind the viewers their particular memory that is related to the wind or crop field or evening. In essence, the wind leads the viewers from the audiovisual domain into a new domain of experience–the mnemonic and oneiric domain of experience.

However, the mnemonic and oneiric experience is not subjected to one medium. Other than film, haiku can create a similar experience–the ability to "reach totality," to expand, or to transcend itself in comparison to film. Eisenstein, Tarkovsky, and Barthes all wrote about the analogy between haiku and reproduced artworks. The paragraphs below, we will use haiku to analyze the aura in film.

Eisenstein argues that "it is the readers who make the haiku's imperfection a perfection of art."[1] In his essay "The Cinematographic Principle And The Ideogram," he explains haiku's ability to evoke a wide array of emotions with minimalistic descriptions. He claims that haiku is almost like a montage in literature.[1] Yet Tarkovsky disagrees with Eisenstein's take. Tarkovsky does not "accept the notion that editing is the main formative element of a film;" he rejects "montage cinema."[1]

Tarkovsky used the analogy between film and haiku to describe film images' capacity, as an "incarnate, visible, and four-dimensional"[1] medium, to achieve the "totality" of human experience with a few shots. The main difference between photography and film is that film is a time-based medium. The aura in photography is created by the visual content that re-contextualizes the viewers, such as how Barthes felt himself re-contextualized in Central Europe when seeing the *Blind Gypsy Violinist* photograph (figure 1). Aura in film is about changing the viewers' consciousness and perception of time, from the time of the reality to the time manufactured in the film, or what Tarkovsky calls "the operative pressure or thrust." Despite the argument between Eisenstein and Tarkovsky, both point out haiku's ability to imply a more grandeur picture than it actually described. In Tarkovsky's language, this ability is presented as minimal interpositions on the "time thrust." This is why we see more long takes in Tarkovsky's films. For Eisenstein, the ability is presented as minimal frames, meaning that the more grandeur picture is created with montage–the consecutive yet discrete shots of pictures.

5. Conclusion

From the paragraph above, we conclude that aura still exists in replica artworks but in a way that is different from the traditional concept and form of aura. While the traditional form of aura emphasizes the unique and authentic presence of an artwork in time and space subordinating to an elitist and canonical interpretation, aura in replica art shifts its emphasis in uniqueness and authenticity to individual viewers' experience. The paper specifically discussed the forming of aura in two mediums, namely film and photography.

For Benjamin, art bears political significance. The aura in traditional artworks is tied to the canonical narratives designed by the ruling class and traditions. Aura, an artworks' uniqueness and authenticity in time and space, is a justification to the ruling class' and traditional narrative. For instance, the portraits of monarchs not only display such narratives to the public but also legitimize such narrative. In the age of reproduction when artworks can be mass reproduced, Benjamin argues that artworks will be democratized from aura while Rozenkrantz argues that aura remains and evolved in replica artworks. In both arguments, artworks are now widely available to the masses, but what could be the social implications of this phenomenon? Although we have concluded that canonical interpretation in photography may cease to exist nowadays since photography can be mass-produced and mass-reproduced with mobile phones and cameras, the effects of the democratization of art is still unclear. It might lead to Baudrillard's nightmare, in which reality is duplicated to such an extent that it corrodes reality itself.[5] From the writer's point of view, the democratization of art could lead to populism in art. By definition, populism–the idea of representing the people–is oftentimes juxtaposed against the elite group. The democratization of art is essentially about weakening the canonical interpretations and ritual functions–the interpretations and functions that serve the elites. The existence of aura in replica artworks could facilitate the rise of individualism in modern life. What can be inferred from the conclusion that aura in replica art could facilitate populism and individualism is still subjected to future discussions and studies.

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