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Aura: An Elusive Concept in Art Theory and Museum Practice

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ABSTRACT

According to Tate's online glossary Art Terms, aura is a quality integral to an artwork that cannot be communicated through mechanical reproduction techniques. So what happens to the aura in the age of digital reproduction? The paper describes the origin of this concept, which was introduced by the author and art critic Walter Benjamin in 1936 and became popular in the 1980s. Today, aura is used in many different contexts, often as a matter of course and without any explanation. It is not possible to speak of a uniform use of the term; it often appears more as an essayistic auxiliary construct than as a scientifically elaborated, theoretically and empirically sound concept. Nevertheless, aura is one of the essential concepts in the context of the historical authenticity of the object, as it guarantees its authenticity and uniqueness. This paper spans from object and auratisation to the relationship of original and (digital) reproduction to the migration of aura to the (perfect) copy. The quality of the reproduction plays a central role in the career of a work of art, whose appreciation is shown by its reproductions and their mass distribution, both through photography and digitally on the internet. The thesis of the migration of aura suggests that it can be created or transmitted by presentation and narration, both in the real world and the digital realm.

Keywords: Artwork; Atmosphere; Authenticity; Aura; Auratisation; Original; Reproduction; Walter Benjamin

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1. Introduction

“The closer you look at a word, the farther it looks back (at you).”

Karl Kraus (1874–1936)

(“Je näher man ein Wort ansieht, desto ferner sieht es zurück.” Benjamin quotes this aphorism by Karl Kraus several times.).

According to Tate’s online glossary *Art Terms*, “Aura is a quality integral to an artwork that cannot be communicated through mechanical reproduction techniques”^[1]. This statement refers to the well-known essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technical Reproduction” by the Marxist philosopher and cultural critic Walter Benjamin (1892–1940), who has dealt with the topic “aura” in various of his writings^[2,3]. Nowadays, the term “aura”—in the sense of a distinctive atmosphere surrounding an object or person—seems to be a commonplace word used in various contexts, from German youth language (German Youth Word of the Year 2024), through the feuilleton in European newspapers to various scientific disciplines. The origins of the term (Greek ‘breeze’) date back to antiquity^[4] (p. 44). So it has a long tradition, which partly goes back to mystical-esoteric conceptions of thing-significance (in German “Dingbedeutung”) and thing-ensoulment (in German “Dingbeseelung”), which were popular in occultist, spiritist and parapsychological circles at the end of the 19th century. In addition, it is noteworthy that the word is often used in different contexts as a matter of course and without any explanation, especially in the cultural sector. Therefore, “it should be noted that it is not possible to speak of a uniform use of the aura term. Aura often appears more as an essayistic auxiliary construct than as a scientifically elaborated, theoretically and empirically sound model”^[4] (p. 23). According to critics, aura is ‘the holiest cow in the museum, and it is milked wherever possible’^[5] (p. 164). Some critics even complain that the museum is ossified in the auratic^[6]. Nevertheless, the concept of aura is so popular that the term made it into the International Council of Museums’ *Dictionary of Museology*: “Emanation from a substance, body or object. Atmosphere that seems to surround a person or object. [...], this term, according to philosopher Walter Benjamin, refers to the unique character of an artwork’s hic et nunc presence (presence in the here and

now)”^[7].

In the museum field, the term became popular in the 1980s^[8], due to the influential works of the cultural scientist Gottfried Korff (1942–2020), who developed the concept of an authentic object aura. In this concept, Korff combined aura with authenticity and propagated the genuine, original objects as the key to the presentation of history in the museum^[9]. For Korff^[9], the materiality of the object was of particular importance because it ensured its permanence and visual quality (in the sense of being illustrative or pictorial). Critics pointed out that being visible is not the same as being illustrative and that the visible aspects of an object contribute only in part to the value of the exhibition and the worth of consideration in the museum, because both the interest of the public and the “aura” of the objects are often associated with stories about the object and its monetary value which are not visible and therefore usually cannot be read directly from the object itself. This can be illustrated by a thought experiment by Diethard Herles^[10] with the iconic bust of Nefertiti, queen of Ancient Egypt and wife of Pharaoh Echnaton: In the exhibition space of the Egyptian Museum of Berlin, the bust has an aura and is accordingly appreciated by the audience. However, if it were placed in the museum’s souvenir shop between replicas, it would become clear from the behaviour of the beholders that it does not have an aura in the sense of an effect emanating from the object itself. It follows that aura cannot be understood as a property of the object itself, but is a subjective perception on the part of the contemplators. Nevertheless, according to historian Katja Stopka^[11], aura is one of the essential concepts and most important phenomena in the context of historical authenticity because it is to be recognised as a phenomenon belonging to the object, which guarantees not only authenticity in terms of uniqueness, truthfulness, credibility, but also dignity. Therefore, it is necessary to take a closer look at this concept, especially in the context of the tension between materiality and digitality, because digital media enable high-quality, ubiquitous reproductions of unique physical objects. This raises the question of what happens to the aura of the object when the thing becomes digital, especially as in recent years the topic of digital materiality has received increasing attention^[12].

2. A Short Overview of Walter Benjamin's Aura Concept

As the art critic and philosopher Boris Groys^[13] states, talking about Walter Benjamin is tempting and difficult at the same time as Benjamin leaves much room for interpretation of his writings which seduces the reader into a free play of imagination. This may help, Groys continues, to understand why the term aura has made such a significant philosophical career. As a matter of fact, in his writings, Benjamin does not clearly answer the question of what aura actually is. Consequently, the research on Benjamin has hardly succeeded in limiting the scope for interpretation of his conceptual explanations^[2] (pp. 95–98). Therefore, philosophers of science claim that Benjamin's concepts are obscure and highly in need of explanation. In contrast, Benjamin's defenders argue that a positivist theory of science cannot deal with his peculiar conceptual thinking because it translates the analytical cognitive dualism of object and method, of subject and object, into a triad of thing (experience), representation (procedure) and medium (language)^[2] (p. 101). Art historian Mika Elo^[14] (pp. 117–135), points out that Benjamin knowingly and willingly applied the art of literary montage in his text, even at the risk of blurring his own theoretical position. In consequence, Elo^[14] (p. 121) assumes that "the aura in Benjamin's text is not to be understood as a philosophical concept, but rather as the movable name of a dialectical figure of thought, which, despite its 'non-philosophical' character, has an inner stringency. Thus, the alleged contradiction or ambivalence of the aura 'concept' and the aspects detached from its horizon of meaning appears in a somewhat different light." Taking all this into account, Benjamin's artwork essay can be considered one of the author's most controversial works, as critics state^[15] (pp. 11–33). Overall, it seems obvious that aura is a travelling concept in the sense of the cultural theorist Mieke Bal^[16], i.e., a concept which "travels" through time, space, disciplines and cultural contexts. Such a concept is an abstract representation of an object and serves as a tool for intersubjectivity in order to facilitate discussion on the basis of a common language, and can be helpful to analyse an object or a theory. In addition, the aura concept is also suitable as a perfect philosophical cover for a technoskeptic or

technophobic attitude towards any kind of reproduction, although Benjamin^[17] (pp. 217–251) himself mentions several aspects in his essay where the reproduction is superior to the original, which aura apologists seem to deliberately ignore.

In Benjamin's writings, the concept of aura manifests itself in several, sometimes difficult-to-compare views of a specific, hardly objectifiable phenomenon of perception^[2] (p. 104). To make things even more complicated, Benjamin uses a natural phenomenon in his description of this experience, although he is actually concerned about the aura of artworks and historical objects.

"The concept of aura, which was proposed above with reference to historical objects, may usefully be illustrated with reference to the aura of natural ones. We define the aura of the latter as the unique phenomenon of distance, however close it may be. 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 the aura of the mountain or of that branch"^[17] (pp. 222–223).

The prevalent opinion in research on Benjamin interprets this experience of distance as a quality or state of being aloof and thus as a kind of unapproachability, which also exists at close proximity to the object^[2] (pp. 113–114). Even so, a sensory perception blurs the boundaries between subject and object, whereby this effect emanates from the object and appears to the subject and therefore, according to Miriam Hansen, cannot be reproduced^[3] (pp. 351–352). On the one hand, this concept is connected to the neo-romantic experiences of the sublime in nature, and on the other hand, to the secular cult of beauty, which has been a tradition in Western culture since the Renaissance^[2] (p. 113). At the same time, Benjamin combines his aura concept with a unique appearance of a work of art focused on the object's "presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be", which lacks even the perfect copy, because the "presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity"^[17] (p. 220). According to Benjamin, mechanical reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition and puts an end to this unique existence by substituting it by a plurality of copies, which leads to the withering of the aura of the artwork. Interestingly, Benjamin embraced the

severing of the quasi-mystical aura from the original as a potentially liberating phenomenon, as it separated the artwork from cult values and ritual ^[18].

It is precisely this plurality of copies that makes Benjamin's aura concept interesting for the digital age. While mechanical reproduction is intricate, cumbersome and costly, digital reproduction can be done easily and without loss of quality. This raises some questions about the aspect of digital reproduction and the potential reproduction of aura. What happens to the aura of an object when it can be digitally reproduced and distributed infinitely? Before we get closer to this topic, we need to take a look at two equally iridescent terms that, at first glance, seem to compete with the aura concept, but could also complement it.

3. Aura, Authenticity and Atmosphere—Competing or Complementary Concepts?

In the reception of Benjamin's work, aura is closely associated with the notion of authenticity. But what does "authenticity" mean? For Benjamin, it means the material manifestation of the object and its fate in history when he describes it as "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". Korff takes up the aspect of authenticity as the most important factor for characterizing the museum as the institution of objects ("Dingwelt") and goes so far as to equate aura and authenticity ^[8] (p. 122). But this falls short because they are two different concepts. Therefore, it is necessary to take a closer look at authenticity.

According to Armin Saupe ^[19], the word can be traced back to antiquity and signifies in the first instance "genuineness" in the sense of something that has been validated by someone "as original". In this way, an authentic object can take on different epistemic functions in a museum collection: It can serve as a historical "witness" (e.g., in a history museum), as a "work" (e.g., in an art museum) or as "specimen" (e.g., in a natural history museum) and illustrate what has been passed down to us in different contexts of meaning. In a world which is increasingly based on mediated experiences, Saupe continues, the museum is one of the few places where it is possible

to directly encounter the fascination of the authentic. The specific materiality of the object makes it a historical sign or identity marker which refers to a specific moment in the past, to a historical process, or to the use of a thing which enables an emotional connection to the past. At the same time, the object is marked as "authentic" by telling stories of its origin. This gives the object an additional quality that includes authority both in a concrete and in an abstract sense. By being part of a collection, the object is authoritatively attributed a cultural value by the museum as a social institution ^[11] (p. 38). As Andreas Wesener ^[20] points out, authenticity has both a material and a social dimension. On the one hand, it is linked to the genuineness of an object in terms of physical-material substance, origin, authorship, history of ownership, or style, which serve as qualifying factors; while on the other hand, authenticity is based on scientific evaluation carried out by experts. This process follows established procedures of contextualisation, presentation and narration which are part of a strategy of authentication with in an exhibition. The scientific data on which this process is based are usually recorded as a part of the museum documentation and can be made available along with the object, although it is not an integral part of the object itself, nor can it be visually read from the object itself. For if the latter were the case, there would be virtually no fakes or forgeries. Instead, art forgers nowadays make an effort to forge not only the artwork itself, but also its provenance by fabricating seemingly old and original documents, labels or photos in order to make the deception perfect. An illustrative example of this approach is the German visual artist and former art forger Wolfgang Beltracchi, who has admittedly forged hundreds of paintings, including their provenance in order to establish their authenticity ^[21]. Overall, the construction of authenticity is based on a mutable and time-bound value system that can be analysed from different perspectives. This makes the difference to aura, which can be considered as a non-verifiable, subjective perception or, as João Carmo puts it: "We are apparently looking at a perception phenomenon—an experiential dialogue between the observer and the object" ^[22]. This opinion can be challenged, Peter Spangenberg, for example, claims that Benjamin uses a twofold derivation, defining aura as both a subjective experience and a quality inherent to the object ^[23]. According to Spangenberg, Ben-

Benjamin first attempts to plausibilise aura as a basal, holistic pattern of experience, while later on he describes it as an inherent quality of works of art which becomes effective in dealing with them. The latter argument corresponds to the image act theory by authors, such as Horst Bredekamp, who attribute images a specific efficacy across time and culture (in German “Bildaktivität”), so that, according to his theory, images are less objects than subjects ^[24]. In a certain sense, they themselves are actors who call for an intensive engagement on the side of the viewers.

Now, let us get back to authenticity: according to Wesener ^[20], it is also a difficult term, partly because authenticity has become a buzzword driven by the desire for “the real”, “the genuine”, “the unique” in many areas of private and public life which has led to an inflationary use of the word “authentic”. This makes it difficult to agree on any particular definition of “authenticity” and “authentic” as the “term mingles empirical, interpretative, and normative elements ... as much as it combines aesthetic, moral, and cognitive moments” ^[20]. This suggests that authenticity is not as solid a concept as it may seem at first glance.

The third concept in this intricate trio is atmosphere, a concept not derived from Benjamin but from the philosopher Gernot Böhme. According to Böhme, atmosphere is “the felt presence of something or someone in space” ^[25]. In this way, it blurs the lines between the tangible and the intangible, therefore being located somewhere in between the subjective and the objective, the subject, and the object ^[26]. This suggests that aura may be much closer to the concept of atmosphere than to that of authenticity. Paschou and Spangenberg even go as far as to claim that atmosphere can be considered a secular synonym of aura ^[26] (p. 2). What makes the topic of atmosphere so interesting for museums in particular is the fact that it has recently been recognized as contributing to a quality experience in service spaces ^[26] (p. 2). In addition, recent publications and studies have been dealing with the digital atmosphere of museums, which can be defined as “the emotions that occur due to the incorporation of digital apps in addition to content, design, colors selection, sound and audio, and scents and aromas of the physical space” of the museum ^[26] (p. 10). The so called museum digital atmosphere coexists with the physical exhibition space but unfolds a parallel dimension by offering another kind of experience which

is enriched with intense immersion and interactivity ^[26] (p. 11). Despite its recent popularity, the concept of atmosphere is also endowed with a certain vagueness which is partly due to the reason that atmospheres are phenomena which are ‘felt’ rather than ‘understood’ in a cognitive way however, regardless of its vague definition, the term ‘atmosphere’ is frequently used in everyday language and both in aesthetic discourse. Benjamin’s notion of aura describes a particular atmosphere related to an artwork in a peculiar environment that allows for contemplative art appreciation, demanding at the same time concentration on the side of the viewer. According to Wesener, Benjamin describes a particular atmosphere regarding the feeling of distance conveyed by the original work of art that cannot be grasped solely by its material characteristics; rather, the experience of aura requires a particular openness or mood on the side of the perceiving subject. This mood is supported by the atmosphere of the surrounding setting, in our case, the museum or exhibition. However, as it is an individual, highly personal feeling, it cannot emanate from the object itself, but rather arises on the side of the person. This obvious fact clearly contradicts the above-mentioned definition in Tate’s Art Terms glossary, which claims that the aura is an integral quality of the object. For this reason, the notion of atmosphere helps to clarify the “roles and responsibilities” of beholder and artwork in making it clear that an auratic experience is a highly subjective emotion when appreciating artworks or museum objects. Without any question, the setting where this act of appreciation takes place, contributes to the atmospheric mood. As Stopka ^[11] points out, both the museum space and the modes of presentation in the exhibition are of particular importance as they contribute to the exhibition value of the object, which is, according to Benjamin, the counterpart of the traditional cult value of the object. In museums, objects are often presented in special ways, for example, they are displayed in showcases in which they can be viewed from all sides and may appear close to the touch, while at the same time being locked away and untouchable, this is the reason why museums are often considered as “don’t-touch places” or “noli me tangere” spheres in which objects are close at hand for inspection but unapproachable at the same time. This play with proximity and distance increases the exhibition value of the object in a similar

way as lighting, labelling and contextualisation can do. All these authentication strategies of presence and distance, Stopka continues, are intended to promote the emotional mood of museum visitors to perceive the exhibits as auratic. But this also means, Stopka concludes, that experts, by applying such authentication strategies, are able to inscribe an authenticity on objects regardless of their material substance or history, which can influence laypersons in a way that they experience these objects as authentic and auratic. This claim is supported by the results of a visitor study by Constanze Hampp and Stephan Schwan conducted at the Deutsches Museum, a museum of history of science and technology: The findings show “that authenticity indeed is not inherent in the object, but emerges instead through specific interactions between the visitor and the object” while “visitors with a sense for authenticity appreciate originals and well-done replicas in an equal manner”—at least in the specific exhibition context of this study ^[27].

Ultimately, when dealing with aura, authenticity and atmosphere, we are facing three complex and intricate phenomena which describe individual perceptual sensations and feelings that are socio-culturally accepted because they depict an elusive fascination, a certain mood, on the side of the viewer of an object. Although such concepts may not seem appropriate for an evidence-based scientific discussion, they are enjoying growing popularity in the humanities and cultural studies discourse over the last few decades. This might be due to the fact that all three phenomena can be attributed to objects in socially accepted processes. In the following section, however, our focus will be on aura and auratisation, that is, the process of creating aura.

4. Auratisation as a Socially Accepted Process of Value Attribution

Auratisation is a socially accepted process of value attribution that has a long tradition in Western Culture and a close connection to Western museology, as Karl-Heinz Kohl shows ^[28]. One of the best-known processes, which can also be found in other religions and cults ^[29], is the ascription of physical remains or personal effects to a saint or a martyr by the Roman Catholic Church ^[30]. Even

though museums claim to be secular institutions, they echo earlier collecting processes from a religious context, which are blurring the boundaries between magic and rationality. In the context of aura, the reference to relics is particularly interesting because of the question of whether the aura is a property of the object itself or whether it is constituted only in the eye of the believer or beholder, respectively ^[31]. If we follow the religious or magic tradition, the only possible answer is: aura arises from the object. If we take the rational perspective, the only reasonable answer is: aura is a sentiment or emotion on the side of the beholder. From a pragmatic point of view, however, both object and beholder seem to be involved in the process of auratisation, as art historian Horst Bredekamp points out: Aura producers and aura recipients are equally involved in this process, which has quasi-religious traits, not to say fetishistic traces ^[32]. This is due to the fact that museum objects can be regarded as close to medieval Christian relics whose healing power was considered to be transferable: “When you put a cloth on a relic, it absorbed part of the sacred power. The same applies to the work of art: by reproducing its form, the spiritual power gathered in it could be transferred”, and in a “mixture of materiality and material holiness, the form of the artwork first acquires the character of a relic, and this sanctification of the form urges reproduction in analogy to the relic.” This means that, according to Bredekamp, the aura is transferable and that this transfer can be done in a certain, processual way. Therefore, we have to ask how this process works and what it does to the object. After all, the process of auratisation is a way to endow an object with aura, appreciation and value, while the opposite process of de-auratisation is a way to strip the object of its aura, appreciation and value. It is important to think of both ways together because they are closely related, as will be shown by an example from the museum world.

The designer and marketing specialist Mario Pricken tries to give an answer to this question ^[33] (pp. 12–13): He claims that an object has only the value we attribute to it. The notion of being valuable is therefore an externally projected idea of value, but is perceived as a property attached to the object that really exists. This value subsists exclusively in the minds of the members of a particular community. In this community, valuable objects are mediums of exchange or means to create status or serve an

ideal conception. To support his thesis, Pricken^[33] (pp. 14–15) gives the following example: In 1897, the Gemäldegalerie, an art museum in Berlin, acquired the painting “The Man with the Golden Helmet”, which was supposed to be an original work by the famous Dutch painter Rembrandt von Rijn. The portrait became the highlight of the collection and year after year, thousands of visitors came to admire it. But in 1984, something amazing happened: In the course of a restoration, experts found evidence that the work could not have been created by Rembrandt himself but rather by artists in his workshop or circle. Therefore, it was removed from its former, prominent place in the gallery and hung in an adjacent room. In addition, it was marked as the work of an anonymous artist from the circle of Rembrandt. Since then, the picture has received little attention from the visitors, although its physical characteristics have not changed in any way. Only the artistic attribution, bestowed—and ultimately taken away—by the authority of the museum, is now a different one. In consequence, Pricken^[33] rightly asks: What has been lost, and especially where and why? What happened to the former aura, attraction and value of this artwork? Pricken’s^[33] (p. 16) conclusion is: “Art and religion are the two areas that have been able for thousands of years to charge practically every object with meaning: religion elevates objects to the rank of a symbol of the saint (relics) and art elevates them to the rank of a work that is attributed socially relevant value.” It would not seem far-fetched to add marketing to Pricken’s list of disciplines, as his book makes obvious.

This example casts a strong light on the processes of auratisation and de-auratisation and leads us to the question of what constitutes the aura of the original. In order to find an answer to this question, different approaches, influencing factors and their interdependencies will be investigated.

5. Original, Authenticity and Aura

Museums have always been closely associated with collections of physical objects: Objects, the “real things,” are the decisive criterion for distinguishing museums from other memory institutions such as archives and libraries. Therefore, the materiality of objects has always played an important role in museological theory. The material as-

pect is also central to Benjamin’s artwork essay because it establishes the link with the object’s uniqueness and authenticity. As media scientist Felix Liedel states, Benjamin therefore emphasises the material dimension of the object^[34] (pp. 243–267). However, according to Liedel, we have to consider that a physical object in an exhibition has not only a material dimension but three different ones: “First, cultural objects are often material artefacts that are usually unique. Secondly, they have a symbolic dimension that represents a socially preconfigured range of interpretations (that are offered to the audience). Thirdly, they need actively acting recipients in order to make this offer for interpretation subjectively significant^[34] (p. 245). Overall, Liedel continues that material artefacts are losing their importance: instead, their information is placed at the centre of discourse. This information dimension of an object corresponds to an encoded sign, i.e., a sign with meaning, and includes, in particular, questions about the cultural assessment of an object. This aspect is of importance because the physical reproduction of an artefact will always remain an “imitation”, while this is not the case with the symbolic dimension—as signs exist beyond spatial or temporal boundaries (the “here and now” of the object according to Benjamin). The multiplication of a sign indicates its broad social acceptance; therefore, it does not lead to a loss of authenticity, originality and aura, as Benjamin suspected, but potentially to a greater range of the information dimension and its symbolic meaning. This is because, Liedel^[34] (p. 247) argues further, in contrast to the material dimension of an artefact, its symbolic dimension can be reproduced without any loss. This characteristic is of particular significance for the digitisation of cultural objects: In this process, the materiality of the object is inevitably lost and, due to technical limitations, at least a certain amount of information about the object, as even state-of-the-art digitisation methods are not able to record and reproduce potentially infinitely existing pixels. This means that, according to Liedel^[34], the quality of digitisation is of the essence, because of poor digitisation quality, much information can be lost and, as a consequence, the reception on the side of the audience suffers significantly from this loss. This supports the deficit hypothesis concerning the relationship between original objects and their media representations, which is widespread among cultural critics and theorists

[35]. This hypothesis is also a central motive for Benjamin, who, according to sociologists Antoine Hennion and Bruno Latour, accepts argumentative mistakes in his essay in order “to reach his desired conclusion: any copy is a weak counterfeit of the original” [36]. Due to the fact that media representations in exhibitions are traditionally used as substitutes for originals, they are widely associated with “loss”. This attribution of “loss” is essentially due to the lack of presence of the object, its being “here and now”, and follows Benjamin’s argument that the aura is bound to the object’s “presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be” [17] (pp. 220, 222–223). This line of reasoning is not new; rather, it was the same argument against traditional photography in its early years, and supposedly it will be reused by opponents with the advent of each and every new technology of reproduction. This leads us back to Benjamin’s argument: “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”.

In fact, Benjamin’s argument consists of two statements: One refers to the “perfect copy”, the other to the significance of “place”. Before we turn to the former, we deal with the latter, which Groys [13] is particularly concerned with. Groys [13] (pp. 35–36) addresses this aspect by attempting to tie Benjamin’s notion of aura to the aspect of the object’s physical location by postulating that the aura is the relation of the work of art to the place where it is located, i.e. depends on its external context. Groys continues that Benjamin makes the distinction between original and copy solely depending on the context of their appearance. For Groys, this distinction is therefore purely topological and, as such, independent of the material aspects of the object. On the one hand, the original is bound to the place, the copy, on the other hand, is virtual, i.e. placeless and unhistorical. Thus, the “here and now” of the original defines its authenticity: “The copy is therefore unauthentic not because it differs as such from the original, but because it cannot be located or placed—and therefore has no tradition, no history.” According to Groys, it is not possible to distinguish between an original and a copy on the basis of materiality, instead only the topology of the context determines the status of the object. For Groys, the central argument is that for Benjamin, the distinction between original and copy is sole-

ly dependent on the context of their appearance. As an argument against Groys’ topological approach, Marleen Stoessel and Manfred Eggert note that in this case everything, if put in the right place, in the appropriate context and framework, can be declared “art” and thus receive an aura in the sense of “hic et nunc”, including reproductions [37]. The philosopher Michael Hauskeller also casts some doubt on the argument of appearance when he finds that concentrating on the “here and now” misleads the character of a unique appearance [38]. For what being should be revealed to us in this way? He continues, for we cannot say that the essence of the appearance is just the appearance and nothing more, because in this case all appearances must be auratic. However, according to Benjamin, aura is not every appearance, but only the unique phenomenon of distance, however close it may be. This indicates that the place or location of the object does not bring us closer to the salient point of the aura. Therefore, we turn to Groys’ interpretation of Benjamin’s notion of the “perfect copy”.

Groys states that Benjamin, when talking about the “perfect copy”, proceeds on the assumption that the most perfect reproduction would leave the existence of the artwork untouched and that there would be no longer any material difference between the original and the copy. However, the obliteration of the substantive distinction between the original and the copy would not mean an annihilation of that distinction as such. This is because the disappearance of any material difference between the original and the copy does not erase another, invisible, but no less real distinction between them: The original has an aura that the copy does not have. Thus, according to Groys, the aura is the only criterion for differentiation if the technique of reproduction renders all material criteria of differentiation useless. However, Groys qualifies his statement, such a perfect copy is only conceivable in modern times, and therefore, aura is a phenomenon of modernity. This leads us to the notion of the “perfect copy”, a kind of reproduction which can be produced by digital means.

6. Original, (Digital) Reproduction and Aura—A Complex Relationship

The complex relation between the original and its

(digital) reproduction can be ideally illustrated by two examples: the digital facsimile of Paolo Veronese's monumental painting *The Wedding at Cana* (1563) and *The Next Rembrandt* (2016), a printed portrait with physical texture in the style of Rembrandt von Rijn, created by an algorithm. Both cases rely on the accuracy of digital methods that ensure an impeccable quality, the so-called "perfect copy". In both instances, the topic of high-quality reproduction is the focus of interest, because the "perfect copy" has a decisive influence on the reception by the audience^[39].

A "perfect copy" can be understood as a reproduction that is completely faithful to the original in such a way that it can no longer be distinguished from the original by mere observation, although it was not made by an artist. Due to the advancing capabilities of digital technology, the creator no longer has to be an artist, but can also be a digital tool. In consequence, a detailed digital analysis of the original or its style may lead to a digitally created "perfect copy" that can be printed in high quality that meets all the needs of aesthetic perception. When the aesthetic properties of a "perfect copy" correspond exactly to those of the original artwork or style, the following question arises: how can the traditionally higher regard for the original be justified if the copy is perfect?. In the case of a digitally produced and printed facsimile, which can in fact be a "perfect copy," this question is difficult to answer, especially if the already mentioned aspect of the "perfect place", the original location, comes into play, as will be shown in the following example.

Paolo Veronese's *The Wedding at Cana* (Nozze di Cana) (1563) and its digital facsimile is an ideal example for a "perfect copy". The original was created for the refectory of the San Giorgio Maggiore cloister in Venice, designed by the famous architect Andrea Palladio. It was commissioned to decorate the front side of the walls of the refectory, which explains its expansive size of 67.29 m² (6.77 m × 9.94 m; 267 in × 391 in). In 1797, the painting came into the possession of the Louvre as part of the French Revolutionary Army's loot of Italian art. In 2006, the Fondazione Giorgio Cini entrusted the art conservation company Factum Arte with the fabrication of a

full-sized computer-generated facsimile of the original, which was to be installed in the refectory. Factum Arte used a non-contact distortion-free colour scanning system with integrated LED lights to capture the surface of the painting at high resolution, printed the digitally created facsimile on a purpose-built printer using pigment inks and finally, retouching the surface with golden varnish^[40]. The digital facsimile was mounted in the refectory in 2007. Here, installed at the place for which the original had been initially made, illuminated by two large side windows and interacting with Palladio's architecture, the digital facsimile has a decisive advantage over the original in the confined space of the Louvre's exhibition rooms in terms of its effect on visitors: the original place, its generous spatial effect and light. Or to put it in Lowe's words: "An accurate facsimile installed in its original setting makes sense of the composition of the painting and the architectural references that condition its design." This impression on the visitors is enhanced by the fact that it cannot be visually distinguished from the original, but is in fact located at the place of the absent original, making it possible to understand the intense relationship between the painting, the room and the light: at about 5 p.m. on a summer afternoon the light in the room exactly coincides with the light in the painting so that Palladio's architecture merges with Veronese's painted architecture (**Figure 1**)^[41].

At this point, we have to reconsider Groys' above-mentioned claim that the copy is unauthentic because it cannot be located or placed: So, what does it mean for the digital facsimile of *The Wedding at Cana* when it is now in the place for which the original was initially created? What happens to the "perfect copy" in the location of the original? Although it is difficult to answer this question, it becomes obvious that the place cannot be a criterion for distinguishing between original and copy or their authenticity, atmosphere and aura. Later on, we will deal with the question if the aura can migrate from the original to the copy. But beforehand, we will take a look at another example that deals with the stylistic reproduction of masterpieces.



Figure 1. Adam Lowe is studying the finished facsimile in Palladio's refectory on the Island of San Giorgio Maggiore in Venice.

Note: The exact copy of Veronese's masterpiece has been put back into its original position on the end wall of the refectory, making it possible to understand the relationship between the painting, the building and the light.

Source: © Factum Arte.

In addition to the “perfect copy,” there are also new possibilities of reproduction, such as copying the style of an artist in the production of a totally new work, created exactly in the manner of this artist. An example of the perfect imitation of an artist's style is our second example: *The Next Rembrandt*. In 2016, a new Rembrandt portrait was presented to the public in Amsterdam. Although it exactly resembled Rembrandt's style in the 1630s, it was not created by Rembrandt himself but in a digital project. The objective of this endeavour was not to create a “perfect copy,” but to recreate an ideal-typical portrait in the style of Rembrandt^[39]. To achieve this goal, 346 Rembrandt paintings were digitised and analysed by facial recognition software. The analysis resulted in 168,263 fragments,

which were typical of the style of Rembrandt. From these fragments, a deep learning algorithm concluded how Rembrandt usually painted eyes, nose, mouth, collar and hat, how he handled proportions and the layering of colours. Based on this information, the algorithm was instructed to create a new, ideal-typical portrait in the style of Rembrandt. The resulting image was printed on a special 3D printer applying ink in 13 layers on a plastic backing. The finished product showed a bearded man, 30–40 years old, wearing a dark hat and dark clothes with a white collar. Although the new portrait echoed very closely Rembrandt's style, its reception in the art history community was quite mixed, with comments ranging from “a fascinating exercise in connoisseurship” to “Total BS”. In any case, the

implementation was so close to Rembrandt's style that if the portrait had been presented in the context of an exhibition, hardly anyone would have noticed it as a style copy.

These two examples indicate that both the quality of digitisation and the resulting quality of the "perfect copy" play an essential role in the reception, as Liedel^[34] (p. 247) suggested. But what happens to an artwork that loses its visual quality, for example due to decay? Does it also lose its impact on the public and its status in art history? Would it be possible for copies to help maintain the aura of the corrupted or even lost original? To find answers to these questions, we turn to another example, Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper*.

Leonardo da Vinci created his famous wall painting between 1495 and 1498 in the refectory of the cloister Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan. Soon, the mural deteriorated, not only because of the untested oil painting technique Leonardo had used instead of the traditional fresco technique, but also because of the moisture in the wall. As early as 1517, the baleful process of decomposition had begun—but before that, the first copies had already been made, crafted directly in front of the original^[42]. At the same time, Leonardo's *Last Supper* became one of the few artworks whose effect was largely conveyed by verbal (written) description, as Richard Hüttel remarks^[43]. This literature contributed early on to the transfiguration of the painting. Overall, according to Hüttel, Leonardo's *Last Supper* can be regarded as a special case of an unprecedented auratisation of an artwork, because the countless descriptions and comments on it were difficult to reconcile with the ruined appearance of the original: "The sad state of preservation gave rise to a kind of ruin poetry, whose subtle-melancholic tone was already varied from the middle of the 19th century by a stronger, ecclesiastical-religious voice." On the whole, as Hüttel rightly points out, Leonardo's highly praised *Last Supper* exemplifies how art history can become cult history. Already in the late 18th century, reproduction graphics had become increasingly important in art criticism, which had led to insistent demands for the authentic reproduction of the compositions of masterpieces and, at the same time, to increasing criticism of poor, superficially copying or interpreting reproduction graphics: The engravings now had to satisfy scientific demands in terms of quality and reproduce the

original as faithfully as possible, the previously common interpretive imitation was replaced by the most accurate reproduction possible. At the same time, demand increased considerably because these engravings served as a basis for discussion and a substitute for the original object in art conversation, which was widespread in noble and bourgeois circles. In the course of time, various efforts to reconstruct the ruined mural took place, some of which were rather temporary exterminations of the original, for example, in 1726, the Milanese painter Michelangelo Bellotti painted over the picture in such a way that it appeared as new, while subsequent restorations were content with filling gaps and repairing damage. In 1794, a subscription for a faithful reproduction of *The Last Supper* started, which the engraver Raphael Morghen implemented in three years of work, drawing on various earlier reproductions. Due to its technical finesse and attention to detail, the celebrated result was not only considered a kind of representation of the spoiled original, but also a highlight of printmaking. Due to the success and the rising trade price of Morghen's engravings, numerous imitations were soon created as "copies of the copy," and over time, a veritable copying industry arose so that by the middle of the 19th century more than 40 artists had copied Morghen's work. At the same time, there was an anthropomorphisation of the painting and an aestheticisation of the inevitable decay in a transfiguring, romanticizing literature in which, paradoxically, decay became the condition of fame: The more the painting was ruined, the more euphoric its remains were celebrated as Hüttel stated. To illustrate this, Hüttel offers an ostensive description of the reaction on the side of the contemporary audience which found itself apparently in a kind of hierarchy of appreciation and contemplation: While some visitors managed to retrieve the faded splendour of the mural with the help of "imagination" and experienced it therefore as a great work, the "visually less gifted" were able to enjoy the art assisted by so called master descriptions in textual form, while those who only had "untrained eyes" (such as the sceptic visitor Mark Twain in Hüttel's depiction) were able to help their ability to appreciate the original with large engraving reproductions. In this context, it seems obvious to associate the effect on the more adept visitors with a well-known psychological phenomenon, the mere-exposure effect. The psychologist Stephan

Schwan explains this effect as follows: The frequency with which certain objects are depicted can signal their significance and thus enhance their value from the viewers' point of view. However, the viewers do not necessarily have to be aware that they have already come into contact with an object several times, whether in conversations, through images in traditional mass media or nowadays on the internet. The plain fact of having been confronted with an object more or less accidentally can already lead to a higher appreciation of this object. The same seems to hold true for the confrontation with reproduction, as the case of Leonardo's *Last Supper* and its abundant number of copies indicates. These copies became substitutes for the ruined original and, at the same time, ensured the widespread dissemination of the acquaintance with the original and the general familiarity with it. This clearly contradicts Benjamin's thesis of the decay of the aura through reproduction: "While Walter Benjamin assumed that media reproduction leads to a loss of the aura and thus to a reduced appreciation of the original, the ... empirical findings of psychological research point in the opposite direction" ^[44]. Rather, the widespread circulation of reproductions contributes to increasing the aura of the original, as the example of Leonardo's *Last Supper* indicates.

While *The Last Supper* stands for a long tradition of

reproduction in the analogue world, there is a very recent example from the museum field of how a digital reproduction can charge a hitherto little-known and acclaimed original with aura: Taylor Swift's 2025 music video clip *The Fate of Ophelia*. The clip borrows its opening sequence from the motif of the painting *Ophelia* (around 1900) by Friedrich Wilhelm Theodor Heyser, which is in the possession of Museum Wiesbaden. In this sequence, Swift slips into the role of the tragic character "Ophelia" from William Shakespeare's play "Hamlet" by reenacting Heyser's painting as a living picture in the tradition of the *tableau vivant*. With her video clip, Swift made Heyser's work an overnight star ^[45]. Since October 2025, when the connection between the video and Heyser's piece was established, the fan community has been pilgrimaging to the Museum Wiesbaden to see the painting and feel close to their idol (**Figure 2**) ^[46]. The so-called "Swifties" flock into the museum, which has organised a selfie corner, Swiftie tours and events as well as merchandise in the museum shop. As the media report, the popularity of the song has a positive impact on the museum in a stricter sense and on the appreciation of art at large. Generally speaking, it is fascinating how a short sequence in a video clip can make a painting, which until recently received little attention, so famous: pop culture meets museum.



Figure 2. Swifties in front of *Ophelia* by Heyser in Museum Wiesbaden.

Source: Christoph Boeckheler.

With these examples in mind, the following question seems quite justified: Would it be conceivable that the aura of the original can be transferred to the copy one way or another and that in the end both of them are equipped with it? This idea is pursued by the thesis of the migration of aura, to which we want to turn in the following section.

7. Migration of Aura from the Original to the Reproduction

The question of a potential migration of aura from the original to the reproduction is an essential one, as the concept of aura is part of a fixed canon of discourses on the potential and effectualness of artefacts in the museum. Some in the museum community go even further and refer to the museum's object-centred approach with its fixation on authenticity and aura as central to the Western concept of the museum. This is why the discussion about the potential migration of aura hits a nerve. An open question in this discussion is also if the aura of the physical and the digital object is necessarily the same and whether they are bestowed by engaging with it.

The migration thesis became popular in the context of the discussion about the digital facsimile of Veronese's *The Wedding at Cana* and the associated assessment of the effectiveness of the original and the reproduction on the reception by visitors, as described above. The proponents of this thesis are the philosopher and sociologist Bruno Latour and artist and curator Adam Lowe, co-founder of the art conservation company Factum Arte. To illustrate the problem, they compare the arrangement of the original in the Louvre with that of the facsimile in the refectory in Venice: In Paris, at the time their article refers to, Veronese's painting was placed opposite the *Mona Lisa* in the "Salle de la Joconde", between two doors, framed by a huge gilt frame, hanging low in a cramped and often crowded room^[47]. In contrast, in Venice, the facsimile was mounted directly above the dark, more than man-high wall panelling, without a frame, filling the width of the entire wall, illuminated by two large windows in the east and west of the hall. In consequence, and thanks to the light and the atmosphere of the spacious dining room, the comparison by Latour and Lowe culminates in the following question: "Is it possible that the Venice version, undeniably

a facsimile, is actually more original than the Paris original, ...?" This question, according to Latour and Lowe, leads to a "terrible cognitive dissonance" because visitors are well aware of the fact that the original is in the Louvre and not in Venice, as the facsimile is explicitly marked as such. But the atmosphere in front of the facsimile in the refectory is very different from the one in which the original is situated in the museum room: While in Paris, the meaning of the painting seems entirely lost and contemplation is difficult due to the crowd in the room who came mainly to see the *Mona Lisa*, in Venice, the spatial situation appears to be perfectly suitable for contemplating the work. Therefore, their conclusion is: "Without question, ... the aura of the original had *migrated* from Paris to Venice".

As Latour and Lowe further explain, a closer examination of the assessment of the terms "original" and "reproduction" in the various art forms is as necessary as it is informative. As a starting point, they claim that the word "copy" should not be interpreted in the sense of lacking originality, the reason why it is often regarded as derogatory. Rather, the opposite is true, they continue, because the etymological root of the word is the same as in "copious," indicating a source of abundance, the origin of which is the original. To illustrate this, they draw on the ancient symbol of the cornucopia, a hollow, curved goat's horn that is overflowing with fruit and vegetables. Just as this horn has a single starting point and flows into a wide funnel, so do the original and the copies that emanate from it: "No copies, no original. To stamp a piece with the mark of originality requires the huge pressure that only a great number of reproductions can provide".

To analyse this connection further, Latour and Lowe compare the relationship between "original" and "copy" in the fine arts with other genres such as the performing arts: In a theatre, they argue, no one will complain about seeing a performance of *King Lear*, the whole idea of "playing" *King Lear* is to replay it. In this way, the career of the play that started with the very first performance will be continued with every new interpretation. As a result, a trajectory—a sequence of a time-ordered set of states in a dynamic system—is created and everyone is ready to take into account the work's trajectory, from the beginning through the latest form of "revival". However, what holds true for a performance seems difficult to accept for an artwork or mu-

seum object. However, this idea is not new, as the historian and curator Ulfert Tschirner^[48] points out with reference to André Malraux's "musée imaginaire" with an intermedial comparison: According to Malraux^[49], the relation between a museum object and its reproduction now corresponds to what a theatre performance means when compared to reading this play, what listening to a concert means when compared to a record of this concert. Tschirner adds, that the perception of the original now becomes an event, because it is no longer the only typical way to encounter a work of art, which also—and maybe more often—is encountered through its reproductions and the perception of the original can in turn be influenced by reproductions. Tschirner's argument can be interpreted as follows: Eventually, every exhibition, every presentation of an object, whether in a museum or online, is a recontextualization or interpretation, comparable to the performance of a theatre or music piece. If we follow this line of reasoning, it would be possible to interpret the installation of the digital facsimile in Venice as a new interpretation of Veronese's painting. According to Latour and Lowe, the claim that *The Wedding at Cana* has been performed in San Giorgio seems somewhat far-fetched: In Venice is just a facsimile, in Paris, the original. As a reason for this unequal treatment, they identify something they call "the differential of resistance between all segments of the trajectory of a visual artwork". While in the performing arts each version is just as laborious and costly to produce as an earlier version, this does not hold true for the visual arts, if we follow Benjamin's view of the mechanical copy and, of course, even much less for a digital copy. According to Latour and Lowe, hidden behind the common sense distinction between original and copy lies a misinterpretation of the process of copying that has to do with the technical equipment necessary and the amount of care taken to reach the quality of the original^[47] (pp. 282–283). In consequence, they continue, a facsimile is already discredited because of a perceived gap associated with the techniques of reproduction which goes back to the fact that Benjamin confused the notion of "mechanical reproduction" with the inequality in the techniques employed along a trajectory: "No matter how mechanical a reproduction is, once there is no huge gap in the process of production between version n (the original) and version $n + 1$ (the reproduction), the clear cut distinction between the original

and its reproduction becomes less crucial". With digital technology, the aforementioned "differential of resistance" has been modified significantly due to the quality that can be achieved in digital reproductions. In consequence, "the really interesting question is not so much to differentiate the original from the facsimiles as how to tell the good reproductions from the bad". Therefore, "digital facsimiles are introducing many new twists into the century old trajectory of works of art". These twists are even amplified by the increasing dissemination of digital tools and enhancements in digital technology. For Lowe, digitality and aura have much in common as they are far from being discrete, stable and clearly defined: "Digitality was once associated with the virtual but is becoming increasingly physical. [...] For Benjamin, the aura is intrinsic to, and emanating from, the object; in reality, the aura is projected onto the object by the viewer and is the product of our own perception of value, our beliefs and prejudices. When these change, the aura can relocate."

Over time, the migration thesis found more and more supporters, for example, the archaeologist Stuart Jeffrey or contemporary historian Katja Stopka. Jeffrey acknowledges that a digital replica is clearly different from the physical object, however, he continues, both are produced with expertise, intentionality and the expenditure of resources and these factors "may act on the digital in the same way as they act on the physical", and argues "that aura can migrate from an original to its reproductions. [...] These representations can add to or change the aura or authenticity of the original, becoming part of the ongoing biography of the original"^[50]. Complementary to Jeffrey's reasoning about quality aspects, Stopka's argument about quantity can be used, namely the multiplicity of copies. According to Stopka, the aura of the original arises from its reproduction, because only the "potential multiplicity" of an object reinforces its status as an original and attests to its uniqueness. As a result, it can be concluded that the aura of the original can actually be transferred to any replica and that the staging of the objects using authentication methods has a greater effect than their authenticity in the sense of scientifically verifiable authentication. Authenticity and aura, respectively authentication and auratisation, are not identical, but they depend on each other. Consequently, it seems justified to speak of a migration, transition or relo-

cation of the aura from the original to the reproduction. In addition, the growing number of digital reproductions and their ubiquity might also have another effect, as described by art historian Hubertus Kohle: “Whether in the long run there will still be an awareness in future generations ... that there is still an original behind the reproduction, one could discuss. Would it not be conceivable that the original in the museum receives a status that corresponds to that of the international prototype of the metre in Paris, which is only used in disputes and which no longer plays a role in public awareness?”^[51]. Nevertheless, Kohle^[51] continues that with regard to Benjamin, “one can critically assume that the massive reproduction activity in the digital age does not destroy the aura of the original, but rather promotes it.”. This statement would include that the experience of aura is possible both by analogue and by digital means, as will be discussed in the following section.

8. The Experience of Aura—Analogue and Digital

The consideration of the experience of aura in the analogue and the digital way is an instructive prerequisite for the comparison of the two experiences on the part of the beholder. According to Burmeister, we have to imagine aura as an experience, a sensory perception and an associated emotion. Consequently, the auratic experience is a subjective sensation, a sentiment of the onlooker which is decisively shaped by the situation of the perception. This means that both the emotional disposition of the viewer and the external conditions of perception play significant roles when approaching the object, which will be experienced as auratic. This experience is, as Burmeister continues, neither empirically observable nor theoretically defensible. Rather, the auratic experience is subject to a process of attributing meaning, for which the object is at most the trigger, that is, the object is charged with meaning by the beholder. In this respect, the starting point of the aura is not the object, but the viewer, who has an auratic experience in a peculiar situation.

Such an auratic experience can take place in various situations supported by favourable conditions, for example, in the museum while enjoying an exhibition, in the theatre while seeing a performance, in the concert hall while

listening to the music, and in the cinema while watching the movie. While in the first three situations, this happens in the presence of objects and people and corresponding equipment or staging, in the latter, neither objects nor people (except for the audience) are involved but solely projection technology is applied to evoke auratic experiences. And auratic experiences do really happen in a cinema show, in consequence leading to the auratic power of film stars, something that Benjamin reluctantly had to admit although he dismissed it as a characteristic of the Western capitalist film industry. This means that the auratic experience depends more on the mood of the beholder and on the specific situation than on the presence of objects or persons or places. Thus, if an auratic experience is possible even in the analogue world without the presence of a physical object, the conclusion is that it must also be possible in the digital realm, where the material object does not exist and a digital object takes over the role of the physical object.

But what are the prerequisites for the experience of aura? According to cultural scientist Magnus Wieland, it is a contemplative approach to the object which is required to make its aura experienceable. In addition, Michael Hauskeller notes that we can only experience aura if a specific perceptual condition for the beholder is granted, namely the presence of a contemplative tranquillity, which consequently makes auratic experiences inevitably rare, as this condition is at times difficult to fulfil even in a museum. This certainly holds true for busy exhibition spaces, where there is hardly the necessary tranquillity for a contemplative perception, even if everything is done on the side of the museum to establish this ideal state. Therefore, Hauskeller concludes that experiences of aura are very rare, while we always experience atmospheres, no matter where we are or what we are currently doing. Even if in the museum, as Hauskeller convincingly points out, auratic experiences should actually be very rare, it is possible to have other experiences. As psychological studies show, visitors to the museum can have cognitive experiences such as growth of knowledge and understanding, which are also perceived as valuable.

9. Conclusions

The intention of my argumentation was to shed light

on the elusive concept of the aura from different angles to make it more transparent. It has been argued clearly that aura is not a quality integral to an object or artwork, as suggested by the Tate's Art Terms glossary or an emanation from a substance, body or object as suggested in the *ICOM Dictionary of Museology*. Therefore, it can actually be communicated through reproduction techniques and media, as the "Swift effect" on Heyser's previously little-known *Ophelia* painting evidently illustrates, which has now received a large influx through media attention followed by in-person visits by a large fan community. It may seem a bit exaggerated, but it could be speculated whether this will have a similar effect on *Ophelia* as the media echo had on the fame of *Mona Lisa* after its theft from the Louvre in 1911.

Moreover, the migration of aura from the physical object to its digital facsimile and/or reproduction, based on the examples discussed, suggests that this is also a serious assumption, which, however, would have to be investigated even more closely with scientific methods and studies. This aspect is closely related to another interesting question for future research: How can physical objects and digital media influence or even increase each other's aura or the auratic experience of beholders online and offline? And how can this effect be measured? A stimulating starting point for a scientific investigation could be Taylor Swift's music video *The Fate of Ophelia*. Perhaps a new cultural phenomenon would be identified in the process of such investigations: "the virtual aura", as predicted by Suzan Hazan. Hazan raises the question if Benjamin's lost aura can be compensated for or reconstituted in any way in a virtual environment in a networked society.

Another aspect was to clarify the ambiguity of Benjamin's aura concept and the resulting diversity of reception and interpretation in all its contradictions in the field of cultural heritage. Interestingly enough, the art and museum community, as well as the feuilleton, is loudly lamenting the loss of aura, citing Benjamin. In fact, Benjamin welcomed the decline of the aura because he saw in it a revolutionary potential for the liberation of art. Despite this fact, the aura concept remains attractive, precisely because it lends itself to ambiguous interpretations and remains an elusive concept, which has established itself in an intricate trio with the equally broadly interpretable con-

cepts of authenticity and atmosphere. Perhaps it is actually correct what Ulrich Beil et al. note about Benjamin's aura concept: "Thus, the diversity of the concept of aura and its enormous cultural productivity can only be obtained by the corresponding diversity of (inter)disciplinary—phenomenological, philological, historical, historical-theoretical and media-philosophical—perspectives"^[15].

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