

# Aura and the Dialectics of Printmaking

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## Introduction

Walter Benjamin's concept of aura has emerged as a pivotal notion in reproductive, visual arts practices. Significant critical attention has been given to his idea that the aura of an 'original' artwork lies in its uniqueness and authenticity, and that this power is damaged when the artwork is reproduced or multiplied. Since publication of 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' it has become common to position the aura in opposition with techniques of reproduction, and to suggest that the notion of authenticity lacks usefulness in artworks that are multiple by nature. There has also been much theoretical debate surrounding whether technical reproduction has led to the progressive outcomes that Benjamin predicted. However, little attention has been paid to his complex and nuanced characterisation of the aura, or to his ambiguous application of the term 'reproduction'. In this paper I will examine the notions of *aura* and *reproduction* in relation to analogue printmaking,<sup>1</sup> and will argue that Benjamin's conception of the aura – rather than being in opposition to methods of mechanical reproduction – is in fact entangled within the central discourse of the discipline.

The concept of the aura is one of Benjamin's most influential contributions. It involves a slippery constellation of ideas that are best understood in terms of ambiguities, and oscillations between binary pairs. This is encapsulated in Benjamin's observation that 'We define the aura ... as the unique phenomenon of distance, however close it may be' (Benjamin, 2007b, p.222). My claim that printmaking is bound up with the notion of aura is undoubtedly a loaded one, since it can be condemned as nostalgic, or read as an attempt to rescue the discipline from marginalisation as an in-authentic practice. However, these interpretations fail to account for the defining characteristic of aura that I will emphasise; that is, the holding of opposed notions in tension. I will use Georges Didi-Huberman's term 'dialectic' to characterise the aura as a series of paired tensions that are inseparable from the printmaking medium. These tensions include: multiple/original, authenticity/in-authenticity, now/then and here/not here.

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<sup>1</sup> My focus will be on analogue printmaking, since digital methods bring alternate ways of thinking about aura that are beyond the scope of this paper.

## Multiple/Original

The relationship between the notions of copy and original, multiple and the singular lies at the heart of Benjamin's theory of the authenticity and the aura. He proposed that the dynamic between multiple and original was one of succession – the multiple made the original redundant, or at least less powerful, and heralded a positive shift in the relationship between the viewer and art. This position led him to the famous pronouncement 'That which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art' (Benjamin, 2007b, p.221), however, it was built on narrow designations of the terms multiple, original and reproduction, designations which do not hold in the case of printmaking today. I will examine Benjamin's perspective on these terms, and consider how printmaking repositions and reconstructs them.

In most of his writing Benjamin used the term 'reproduction' to refer to still photography.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, his ideas have also been readily applied to the printmaking discipline (e.g. Princenthal, 1996; Rochfort, 1999; Verhoogt, 2007). In many respects, the relocation of his ideas to printmaking is appropriate, since prints were the first mechanically produced images created for reproduction.<sup>3</sup> However, it remains pertinent that Benjamin's interest lay in *photography* as a means of 'copying' original artworks, since it highlights his concern was not with examining the *multiple* in its broader sense.<sup>4</sup> This has led to difficulties in the application of his theory to printmaking, which has not been helped by Benjamin's ambiguous use of the term *reproduction* to cover both copies of original artworks and works which are multiple by nature such as casts, prints<sup>5</sup> and coins.

There are two key problems that emerge in applying Benjamin's concept to print practice. The first concerns how the relationship between multiple and original is constructed, and the second, how the question of authenticity is resolved as a result. One of Benjamin's most well known declarations is that the original work of art is

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<sup>2</sup> Benjamin tended to use the term 'technical reproduction' to refer to photography, and 'mechanical reproduction' to designate methods including printmaking, founding and stamping.

<sup>3</sup> Benjamin (2007b) highlighted the shared history of photography and print when he charted a brief chronology of reproductive technologies. He argued that in each phase the reproductive potential of these mediums accelerated in intensity and capacity for multiplication/distribution, such that the newest process "surpassed" the previous, until photography, for the first time "freed the hand of the most important artistic functions" (p. 219)

<sup>4</sup> It is unsurprising that Benjamin's was on the reproduction of existing artworks, since, up until the late 19th century and early twentieth century, reproduction accounted for the overwhelming percentage of print production (see for example Verhoogt, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> I use the term 'print' throughout to refer to works produced through analogue printmaking methods.

authentic, and the multiple, in contrast, is neither unique nor genuine. He emphasised the singularity and uniqueness of the 'original' artwork is the key to its authenticity, and argued that mechanical multiplication undermined this essential constituent of aura. He stated: 'The presence of the original is the pre-requisite to the concept of authenticity ... the whole sphere of authenticity is outside ... reproducibility' (Benjamin, 2007b, p.220).

Benjamin's assertions on this topic were made in specific reference to *reproductions of original works*, and not to works which are multiple by nature. This explains why he saw the relationship between multiple and original as one of *substitution*, a view he articulated when he said that 'by making many reproductions [the technique of reproduction] substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence' (Benjamin, 2007b, p.221). As a stand-in or surrogate for the original, the reproduction is impoverished, it lacks the history of ownership, material changes and singular presence of the 'real thing'; it lacks the aura of the original object. Furthermore, since the copy replaces the original, it also detaches the original from its domain of tradition.

It is misleading, however, to suggest that a reproduced 'copy' substitutes an extant art object. In any reproduction, no matter how accurate, there is always loss, variation and interpretation. This is why Verhoogt (2007) was able to convincingly argue that reproductions can have an 'aura' of their own, and why David Socher (1999) maintained that photographs (and I would add prints) do not reproduce their subjects but *mechanically produce* them. To quote Socher directly, it is 'an age of mechanical picturing, not of mechanical reproduction' (Socher, 1999, p.4).

The distinction that Socher draws between *reproducing* and *picturing* things is important and underlines the fact that relationship between copy and original is not one of substitution as Benjamin proposed, but one of interaction and dialogue. This is particularly evident in fine art printmaking where a work is both multiple and original, and is typically comprised of numerous copies. The print materialises the dialectical tension between 'multiple' and 'original' that has been observed by others, such as Rosalind Krauss (1981) who called the singular and the multiple a 'paired-opposition' that perform in mutual interdependence. She stated that originality and repetition are 'bound together in a kind of aesthetic economy, interdependent and mutually sustaining, although the one – originality – is the valorised term and the other – repetition or replication – is discredited' (Krauss, 1981, p.56).

If the singular and multiple are a binary pair, what then of authenticity? Questions about the authenticity of the multiple can be traced back, well before Benjamin, to the Renaissance, when the capacity to produce bronze castings, engravings and etchings brought questions about uniqueness and genuineness. The response to this problem in critical literature typically proposes that authenticity is a meaningless concept when applied to the multiple. It makes no sense, the argument goes, to identify the 'authentic' print from an edition of many, and it is meaningless to attempt to distinguish between original and copy (Benjamin, 2007b; Goodman, 1976; Mattick, 1993; Pelzer-Montada, 2001).

I would disagree that the attempt to distinguish is between multiple, copy and original is meaningless, not because I believe any definitive distinctions can be made in printmaking, but because it is the *act of attempting to discriminate* that gives rise to questions of authenticity. It is, in fact, the very possibility of a contrast between original and copy, multiple and singular, that gives the notion of aura a place in the reproductive arts. We see this phenomenon also in the realm of religious relics, where, as Anthropologist Sean Kingston (1999) observed, the possibility of authenticity is never raised without the possibility of its shadow, in-authenticity. Benjamin noted there was no need for the idea of authenticity in art until mechanical reproduction was introduced; he stated 'at the time of its origin a medieval picture of the Madonna could not yet be said to be 'authentic'. It became 'authentic' only during the succeeding centuries and perhaps most strikingly so during the last one' (Benjamin, 2007b, p.243). The concepts of authenticity and in-authenticity require one another in order to exist at all, since each notion is underwritten by the other.<sup>6</sup>

The multiple creates a tension in which notions of authenticity and aura are activated. Questions about the authenticity of the printmaking medium lead to an inevitable oscillation between notions of singularity and repetition. The genuineness of a particular print can only be established based on the historical fact that the original plate produced it. Authenticity in printmaking, as Goodman noted, 'always depends upon the object's having a requisite, sometimes rather complicated, history of production' (1976, p.119). We see that the search for authenticity in print sends us

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<sup>6</sup> A similar dialectic is seen more generally in modernism where originality in art was increasingly emphasised, as technologies of reproduction were accelerating the scope and variety of repetition in all aspects of life.

back to the hidden origin of the plate, back to an origin of materiality, not to an idea of the original as something new and without precedent.

### **Now/Then, Here/There**

Not only do prints show us that uniqueness is not necessary for works to have authenticity or aura, it is in generating a tension between multiple and original that the print produces the conditions for aura to arise. In 'The Supposition of the Aura', Georges Didi-Huberman proposed the aura emerges as a result of dialectical tensions, in particular the dualities of here/not here and now/then. The first of these oppositions surfaces in Benjamin's observations about the auratic distance of the shadow; he says:

What is aura? A peculiar web of space and time: the unique manifestation of a distance, however near it may be. To follow, while reclining on a summer's noon, the outline of a mountain range on the horizon or a branch, which casts its shadow on the observer until the moment or the hour partakes of their presence – this is to breathe in the aura of these mountains, of this branch (Benjamin, 2007b, pp.222-23).

The shadow is produced through a connection with its referent. Like a trace or imprint it brings its referent close, whilst also pointing to its absence. Georges Didi-Huberman said of the imprint:

I think that the imprint is the "dialectical image", ... something that as well as indicating touch (the foot which impresses itself into the sand) also indicates the loss (the absence of the foot in its imprint); something which shows us both the touch of the loss as well as the loss of the touch (Didi-Huberman, 1999, cited in and translated by Pelzer, Montada, 2001, p. 3).

Didi-Huberman's understanding of the imprint is relevant to analogue printmaking methods, where the surface of the finished print shows us that contact has been made with a matrix that is now absent. By nature prints toy with the opposition of 'gone' and 'not gone', 'here' and 'there'. The printmaking process mediates between the hand of the artist and the artwork, allowing traces to be recorded, yet standing between direct contact. There is a distance between what is present and what is absent. Artist Kiki Smith has spoken of this distance:

What I like ... probably the most [about printmaking] is the distance of it ... that it is removed. That it gets away from the earnestness of things.  
I'm starting to use myself. Maybe because prints are this other world – they're a secret entrance into using myself as subject ... I've been much more self-revealing in doing prints (Kiki Smith, quoted in Weitman, 2003, p.11 & 85).

Kiki Smith views the inherent distance in printmaking in emotional terms, and meets it with heightened, self-revelatory content in her work. The tension between close and far

is played out along a psychological continuum. Benjamin viewed the relationship between reproductive practice and distance differently, claiming that reproduction decreases the viewer's distance from artworks by transposing the originals from their special settings, such as churches, palaces, and museums. Benjamin was more focused on the social ubiquity that the multiple allowed, rather than being engaged with the inherent materiality of the process as Kiki Smith's observations suggest.

Despite the fact that Benjamin made poetic reference to the aura of shadows, he did not fully explore why the simultaneity of distance and proximity was significant to his concept. He did, however, share some richly suggestive thoughts when he addressed the 'magical value' (Benjamin, 2005, p.510) of early portrait photography.

Immerse yourself in such a picture long enough and you will realise to what extent opposites touch, here too: the most precise technology can give its products a magical value, such as a painted picture can never again have for us. No matter how artful the photographer, no matter how carefully posed his subject, the beholder feels an irresistible compulsion to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency, of the here and now, with which reality has (so to speak) seared the subject (Benjamin, 2005, p. 510).

Benjamin's position evokes the idea that it is the very tension between absence and presence, between what is seen and what is not, that generates auratic experience. It is vital that there is something unattainable, or irretrievable suggested in that which is present.

Susan Stewart provided a powerful exploration of the tension between 'here' and 'not here,' 'now' and 'then', in her influential work 'On Longing' (1993). She observed that when objects are removed from their site and time of origin, they are by definition always incomplete, and this incompleteness generates desire. She claimed that the object must remain impoverished and partial in order to generate its power in the here and now, and that 'The place of origin must remain unavailable in order for desire to be generated' (Stewart, 1993, p.136). If an object were able to recoup the past, to negate the distance between then and now, its auratic power would be lost. Stewart's concept may help to explain why the imitation of artworks has actually intensified the cultic status of art,<sup>7</sup> since the partiality of any copy can trigger longing for the 'real thing'.

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<sup>7</sup> The role of reproduction in promoting authorship and the renown of artworks has been argued by Hughes and Ranfft (1997), Mattick (1993) and Verhoogt (2007).

The aura of the print is fostered through the mediation of the seen and unseen, the visible and invisible, the then and the now. The hidden realm of the matrix is materialised through the print so that the visible paper surface affords a glimpse of something beyond itself. Its material condition carries a kind of uncanny trace of the unseen, with a sense of a distanced connection to the hand of the artist. The print is therefore a concept that partakes in a field of relationships between people and materials, and between materials and time. The paper surface carries the implication that some kind of contact has occurred, although it is clear to the viewer that the generating platform is now missing. Furthermore, the paper support is removed from its point of origin as image, the plate, and by Stewart's measure this renders the print partial and therefore a generator of desire.

### **Conclusion**

Benjamin's significant contribution to printmaking was to highlight that mechanical reproduction raises questions around the notion of authenticity, and reconstructs the experience of aura. However, Benjamin saw reproduction as chiefly a technical process with political ramifications, and this caused him to overlook to the distinctive characteristics of various reproductive processes (Verhoogt, 2007). The practice of printmaking is dialectical, oscillating between authenticity and in-authenticity, multiple and original, here and not here. These doublets form the fundamental components of the discourse that maps out the discipline. Since these binary pairs are inextricably bound up within the print, notions of the original and authentic will be continually contested through the practice. To say that print practice is auratic is not to lay claim to nostalgia, but merely to highlight that print encompasses a field of ambiguous tensions that Benjamin saw operating within the aura. The structure of the print process, and its material product in the print, is dialectical. In the words of printmaker and writer Ondrej Michalek: 'printmaking is perhaps best characterised by the word "between"' (1997, p.188). The significance of reproduction extends beyond its capacity to change our relationship to other forms of art, and is also found in the way that it reconstructs our understanding of authenticity and our experience of aura.

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