
“ART WITHOUT ORIGIN? REPRODUCTION, SIMULATION, AND THE CRISIS OF AESTHETIC AUTHENTICITY”

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Abstract :

*Seminal essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* remains foundational in aesthetic theory, media studies, and political philosophy. His formulation of “aura,” the decay of authenticity under mechanical reproduction, and the politicization of art continues to resonate in the twenty-first century. However, the digital epoch—characterized by algorithmic mediation, platform capitalism, artificial intelligence, and infinite reproducibility—demands a theoretical expansion of Benjamin’s framework. This article revisits Benjamin’s core concepts and situates them within the broader trajectories of Frankfurt School critical theory and postmodern media philosophy. Through comparative analysis with Adorno and Horkheimer’s culture industry thesis and Baudrillard’s theory of simulacra, this study proposes two original theoretical models: (1) *The Continuum of Aesthetic Value Transformation*, and (2) *The Algorithmic Aura Framework*. The article argues that while mechanical reproduction eroded ritual aura, digital reproduction produces a reconfigured form of “algorithmic aura” grounded in visibility metrics, platform authentication, and data permanence. Rather than signalling the death of art, technological mediation reveals art’s ontological mutability across historical conditions.*

Keywords : digital reproduction, algorithmic culture, simulacra, media theory, aesthetics, platform capitalism

Introduction :

Art at the Threshold of Technological Modernity :

The twentieth century inaugurated an unprecedented transformation in the ontology of art. Industrialization, urbanization, photography, cinema, and mass print culture altered not only artistic production but also perception itself. Within this historical rupture, Walter Benjamin’s (1936/1968) essay articulated a radical thesis: technological reproducibility fundamentally transforms the function, authority, and meaning of art.

Benjamin’s intervention was not merely aesthetic—it was historical and political. Writing in the shadow of fascism and mass propaganda, he recognized that technological



reproduction dismantled the ritualistic foundation of art while simultaneously enabling new forms of political mobilization. Art, once embedded in sacred distance, entered the sphere of mass accessibility.

Yet the twenty-first century confronts us with a further shift: digital reproduction. Images now circulate instantaneously across platforms; artificial intelligence generates artworks without human intentionality; and algorithmic systems determine visibility and value. The central question this article poses is:

Does Benjamin’s concept of aura collapse entirely under digital conditions, or does it mutate into new forms of mediated authenticity?

To address this question, this study undertakes five objectives:

- Reconstruct Benjamin’s theory of aura and reproducibility.
- Situate his ideas within Frankfurt School debates.
- Extend the analysis through Baudrillard’s postmodern simulation theory.
- Theorize digital reproduction through platform capitalism.
- Propose new conceptual models for contemporary aesthetic theory.

Literature Review :

Aura and the Ontology of Presence :

Walter Benjamin defines aura as: “The unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be.”

Aura emerges from singular presence—its embeddedness in time, place, and tradition. It depends upon:

| | |
|-------------------|------------|
| Authenticity | Historical |
| continuity | |
| Ritual value | Physical |
| irreproducibility | |

A medieval icon in a cathedral possesses aura not merely because it is old, but because it participates in sacred temporality.

Table 1

Characteristics of Aura in Pre-Mechanical Art

| Dimension | Description | Example |
|---------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------|
| Spatial uniqueness | Exists in a specific location | Fresco in a chapel |
| Temporal continuity | Linked to tradition | Religious relic |



| Dimension | Description | Example |
|-----------------|-------------------------|---------------------|
| Ritual function | Used in ceremony | Liturgical art |
| Authority | Authenticated by origin | Original manuscript |

Mechanical reproduction detaches art from ritual space. A photograph of the Mona Lisa allows mass circulation, dissolving sacred distance

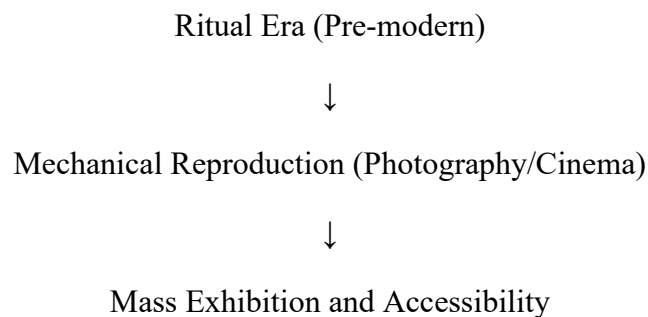
Mechanical Reproduction and the Shift from Cult to Exhibition Value :

Benjamin identifies a fundamental shift :

- Cult Value → Exhibition Value

In ritual societies, art serves religious or ceremonial functions. Under mechanical reproduction, art serves display and circulation.

Chart 1: Transformation of Artistic Value



Film becomes the paradigmatic modern art form because it is inherently reproducible. There is no singular original print in cinema. Reproduction is not secondary—it is constitutive.

Perception, Shock, and Modernity :

It can be argued that film reshapes perception itself. Montage fragments time; close-ups magnify detail; editing constructs meaning.

Modern perception becomes :

Fragmented Accelerated Mediated

Art no longer demands contemplation but produces shock.

This aligns with urban modernity, where experience becomes discontinuous and overstimulated.

The Culture Industry Debate :

- Adorno and Horkheimer complicate Benjamin’s cautious optimism.
- Where Benjamin sees democratization, Adorno sees commodification.



Table 2

Benjamin vs. Adorno: A Comparative Framework

| Aspect | Benjamin | Adorno & Horkheimer |
|------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|
| Mass art | Potentially emancipatory | Ideologically manipulative |
| Film | Politicizing medium | Standardized entertainment |
| Audience | Critical participant | Passive consumer |
| Technology | Dialectical tool | Instrument of domination |

Benjamin foregrounds revolutionary potential; Adorno foregrounds capitalist subsumption.

Analysis :

From Reproduction to Simulation: Baudrillard’s Intervention

Jean Baudrillard (1981/1994) radicalizes Benjamin’s thesis.

For Baudrillard:

- 1. Reproduction no longer copies the real.
- 2. Simulation precedes and replaces reality.
- 3. The distinction between original and copy collapses.

Benjamin : Aura declines.

Baudrillard : The real disappears or fades.

Chart 2: Ontological Escalation

Original → Reproduction → Simulation → Hyperreality

In hyperreality, there is no authentic referent.

Digital Reproduction and Platform Capitalism :

Digital media introduces :

- Infinite replication without degradation
- Algorithmic ranking
- Data permanence
- Platform ownership

Art’s visibility depends on metrics :

- Likes



- Shares
- Engagement rate
- Algorithmic recommendation

We therefore observe a transition:

Ritual Value → Exhibition Value → Commodity Value → Simulation Value → Algorithmic Value

Continuum of Aesthetic Value Transformation :

Table 3

Continuum Model

| Stage | Dominant Value | Medium | Theorist |
|------------|----------------|------------------|---------------|
| Ritual | Cult value | Sacred art | Pre-modern |
| Mechanical | Exhibition | Photography/Film | Benjamin |
| Industrial | Commodity | Mass media | Adorno |
| Postmodern | Simulation | Television/Media | Baudrillard |
| Digital | Algorithmic | Platforms/AI | Present Study |

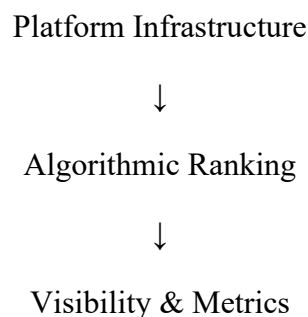
Algorithmic value depends on : Platform authentication, Data traceability, Visibility metrics and Network circulation

Algorithmic Aura Framework :

Algorithmic aura emerges when:

- Digital scarcity is constructed (e.g., NFTs).
- Platform verification authenticates identity.
- Visibility confers symbolic capital.
- Data permanence creates archival authority.

Chart 3: Structure of Algorithmic Aura





Perceived Digital Authenticity

Aura no longer resides in material uniqueness but in data-validated presence.

Political Implications of Algorithmic Culture :

Benjamin warned against the aesthetication of politics.

Today we confront :

- Meme warfare
- Deepfakes
- Viral propaganda
- Algorithmically amplified extremism

The politicization of art has become inseparable from platform governance.

Discussion: Is Aura Dead ?

Aura has not disappeared. It has mutated.

Original aura = presence. Algorithmic aura = visibility.

Original aura = ritual distance. Algorithmic aura = network circulation.

Conclusion :

From Aura to Algorithmic Ontology :

This article has argued that Benjamin's core insight—namely, that the ontology of art mutates under technological conditions—retains urgent relevance in the digital epoch. However, the shift from mechanical reproduction to digital reproduction introduces a qualitative transformation that requires theoretical expansion. Mechanical reproduction displaced ritual value in favor of exhibition value; digital reproduction further displaces exhibition into algorithmic valuation. If the mechanical age desacralized art by multiplying its copies, the digital age abstracts art into data flows governed by platforms, metrics, and computational visibility.

The trajectory traced in this study—from ritual aura to exhibition value, commodity standardization, simulation, and finally algorithmic visibility—demonstrates that art's authority has progressively migrated from sacred context to technological infrastructure. Under mechanical reproduction, the original artwork lost its cultic authority but gained political accessibility. Under digital reproduction, however, art becomes inseparable from the infrastructures that host and circulate it. Platform capitalism introduces a new regime of aesthetic power: algorithmic governance. Visibility is no longer a neutral outcome of exhibition but the result of opaque computational sorting. Thus, the contemporary form of aura is neither sacred nor purely material—it is infrastructural.



The concept of “algorithmic aura” proposed in this article does not suggest a restoration of uniqueness in the classical sense. Rather, it identifies a new modality of authenticity grounded in verification systems, digital scarcity mechanisms, archival permanence, and networked recognition. In the digital ecosystem, value emerges not from physical singularity but from traceability and platform legitimacy. The verified profile, the blockchain-authenticated NFT, the viral post—these phenomena illustrate how authenticity is now constructed through technical protocols. Aura persists, but its ontology has shifted from material presence to coded validation.

This transformation also intensifies the political stakes that Benjamin foregrounded. If fascism aestheticized politics through spectacle in the mechanical age, the digital age operationalizes politics through algorithmic amplification. Memetic warfare, deepfake technology, viral misinformation, and attention economies demonstrate that reproducibility now operates at the level of computational acceleration. The politicization of art and the aestheticization of politics converge within digital infrastructures that monetize engagement and reward polarization. Thus, the contemporary crisis is not the loss of aura but the commodification of attention.

Yet it would be reductive to interpret these transformations solely through the lens of decline. Benjamin’s dialectical optimism invites us to recognize that technological mediation also opens emancipatory possibilities. Digital reproduction democratizes production tools, enabling global participation in creative practices. Marginalized voices gain platforms previously inaccessible within elite art institutions. Archival digitization preserves endangered cultural heritage. Virtual and augmented realities expand experiential dimensions of aesthetic engagement. The challenge, therefore, lies not in resisting technological mediation but in critically interrogating its governing structures.

The theoretical models developed in this article—the Continuum of Aesthetic Value Transformation and the Algorithmic Aura Framework—seek to synthesize Benjamin with subsequent critical theorists such as Adorno, Horkheimer, and Baudrillard. While Adorno’s culture industry thesis underscores commodification and ideological control, and Baudrillard’s simulation theory diagnoses the collapse of referential reality, Benjamin’s framework remains uniquely adaptable because it conceptualizes aesthetic transformation as historically contingent. Aura was never eternal; it was always socially produced. Its mutation under digital conditions is therefore consistent with Benjamin’s methodological approach.

What emerges from this study is a call for a post-Benjaminian aesthetic theory attentive to three interlocking dimensions:

1. **Technological Mediation** : Art must be understood as inseparable from its technological conditions of production and circulation.
2. **Political Economy** : Platform capitalism and data extraction shape aesthetic visibility and value.
3. **Algorithmic Governance** : Computational infrastructures now mediate perception, distribution, and reception.



In this context, aesthetic theory must expand beyond object-centered analysis toward infrastructural critique. The “work of art” can no longer be isolated from the platforms, algorithms, and data systems that sustain its existence. The digital artwork is not merely an object but a node within a networked system of circulation.

Importantly, the persistence of aura in algorithmic form suggests that human perception continues to seek distinction and authenticity even within conditions of infinite reproducibility. The desire for originality has not vanished; it has migrated into new symbolic economies. Scarcity is artificially constructed; authenticity is cryptographically secured; visibility is computationally ranked. These developments underscore Benjamin’s enduring relevance: art’s meaning is always shaped by historical modes of reproduction.

Benjamin’s essay did not mourn the past but interrogated the present. Following his example, contemporary theory must resist nostalgia and instead analyze how art functions within current technological regimes. The age of mechanical reproduction has evolved into the age of digital proliferation, but the fundamental issue remains unchanged: how does technology transform the conditions under which art is produced, perceived, and politicized?

In conclusion, the work of art in the age of digital reproduction is neither diminished nor transcendent—it is infrastructurally reconstituted. Aura has not disappeared; it has been re-coded. Authenticity has not vanished; it has been algorithmically recalibrated. The task of aesthetic theory is therefore not to lament the loss of sacred presence but to decode the infrastructures that now generate symbolic authority.

Benjamin’s insight—that art’s ontology is historically contingent—remains the guiding principle for understanding our current moment. In recognizing the mutability of aura, we recognize the mutability of art itself. And in recognizing this mutability, we acknowledge that the future of aesthetic experience will be shaped not only by artists but by the technological architectures within which art circulates. The work of art persists—not as relic, but as interface.

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