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Benjamin's Neglect: Reconciling the Auratic Function of Music and New Media

"One of the things I love about movies is their ability to make reality lyrical."

-Evan Puschak (Nerdwriter1), *Why Sergio Leone Played Music On Set*
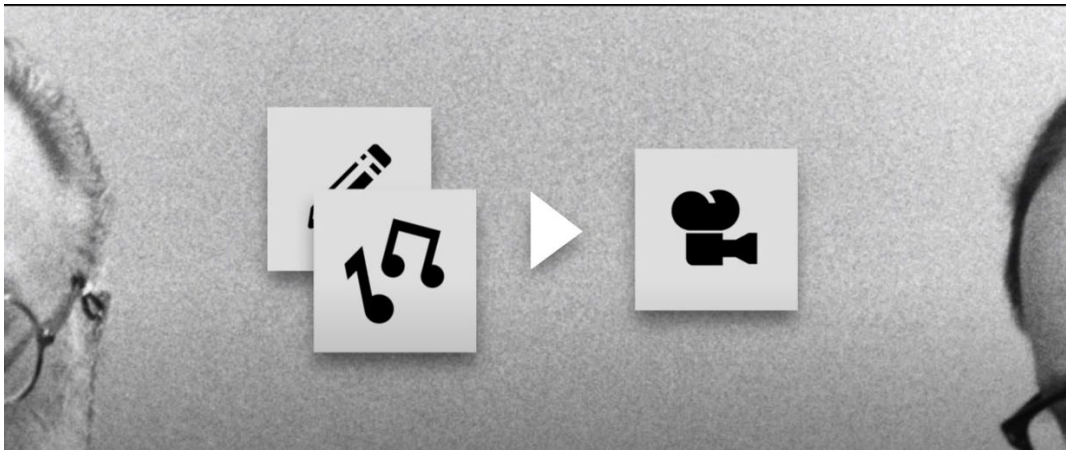

Figure 1

This video has lit a fire in my mind. Evan Puschak, also known as The Nerdwriter, offers an account of the profundity of spaghetti western director Sergio Leone's decision to play the music of his composer, Ennio Morricone, on the set of the film *Once Upon A Time In The West* (Puschak, 2019). Often music, by Morricone's own admittance, is something of an afterthought, not asked of by a composer until near the end of the production (Morricone et al., 2014). What made this partnership so unique is that Morricone would compose the entirety of the score *before* filming had begun (Fig. 1), thus allowing Leone to use Morricone's music on set to influence the cinematography, acting and blocking of scenes (Puschak, 2019). Further still, it creates a unique feeling that is intrinsically tied to integration of these two modalities of art, the visual and aural. It's not solely the aural or visual that invokes in the viewer a sense of presence, a feeling of being

in the time and place where this scene is occurring, but the combination of the two. And it even goes so far as to interpellate the audience, bringing it into a seemingly unique experience.

One could argue that this experience is not unlike that of Walter Benjamin's concept of aura. However, Benjamin was exclusively concerned with the perceived cult value of the visual, not the aural. As Owen Chapman points out in his work, *The Elusive Allure of "Aura": Sample-based Music and Benjamin's Practice of Quotation*,

> "Benjamin is quite blunt about this in an endnote to '*The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*,' wherein he approvingly quotes Leonardo da Vinci, who claims, 'Painting is superior to music because, unlike unfortunate music, it does not have to die as soon as it is born…Music which is consumed in the very act of its birth is inferior to painting which the use of varnish has rendered eternal'" (Chapman, 2011).

Furthermore, Benjamin's explanation of aura also claims that it is lost through "mechanical reproduction," and "new" visual media, like film and photography (Benjamin, 1968). That all said, many scholars, artists and critical theorists have since openly debated, deconstructed and renegotiated Benjamin's claims on both counts, submitting their own counterpoints and explanations as to why aura exists in the traditional and persists (or struggles to persist) in the mechanically reproduced art of music. Benjamin's neglect of music and his lack of foresight concerning new media has allowed for his work to be picked apart and negated, yet it still is often returned to as a framework or basis for art critique. This, to me, begs two questions: how exactly has Benjamin's neglect of musical and mechanically reproduced forms weakened his original analysis of aura and how might that neglect be reconciled for future auratic analysis?

This paper is divided into four sections. The first will examine Benjamin's original terms for aura and how it neglects the aural modality that was concurrently present in the ritual value of traditional auratic art. The second will expand on this notion by examining arguments by current scholars who examine the perpetuation of aura within modern aural media, namely through exclusive release, sampling and live performance. The third will propose an avenue of reconciling Benjamin's original neglect through the process of synchresis, looking at film and video games. And the fourth section will consider an alternative route to reconciliation by discussing whether Benjamin's aura has given way to a new form of cult value in the spectacle. My goal over the course of this paper is to provide context to the current conversations which assert why music has auratic presence in traditional and mechanically reproduced art, despite its neglect in Benjamin's original work, as well as to discuss where possible conversations about the reconciliation of this original neglect could possibly lead. It is my argument that however Benjamin's aura is used for critique in the future, that critique must be accompanied by a reconciliation for the auratic function of music and new media that was neglected in Benjamin's original analysis.

Benjamin's Aura and The Original Aura

Before I move into my formal analysis, it's important to establish the critical tools, that is Benjamin's concept of aura, with which I will be working. In *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Benjamin explains aura to be composed of various qualities. As implied in the introduction to this paper, aura is "that which withers" when art is mechanically reproduced. It is the quality of art that places it within "time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be." Aura is a part of an art-object and contributes to its "authenticity."

It is also the phenomenon of viewing art (or nature) and perceiving "a distance, however close it may be." And it is inextricably tied to its "ritual function," or cult value. (Benjamin, 1968) I write these qualities in this long-winded and fragmented fashion to emphasize how Benjamin's writings on aura were long-winded and fragmented too, as he was at once weighing the loss of aura while considering the new value of shared experience, which "emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual," in mechanically reproduced visual media. (Benjamin, 1968)

And yet, in his discussion of the authenticity and cult value of art, he privileges the traditional and visual and neglects and dismisses the aural and reproduced. What is striking about this neglection is his insistence on aura's origins spawning from a ritual, religious function, which he describes using examples of Greco-Roman statues and medieval catholic sculptures. This is because musical and aural traditions were commonly paired, together, with the ritual objects Benjamin claims to possess such aura.

Figure 2

This is exemplified in Bissera Pentcheva's work, *Optical and Acoustic Aura in the Medieval Image: The Golden Retable of the Pentecost at Stavelot*. Pentcheva shows this discrepancy

through a historical and theoretical account of a piece of religious art, an 11th century golden

retable depicting the scene of the Pentecost originally used at a Belgian church (Fig. 2).

Pentcheva begins her analysis by offering the original Latin meanings of aura which "draw

attention to the olfactory, gustatory and tactile effect of moving air on the body. The optical

impact is rarely included in the semantics of the word." (Pentcheva, 2020) Indeed, Pentcheva

acknowledges Benjamin's influence on the interpretation of the word in the modern sense, but

notes that by focusing on solely the visual, Benjamin's interpretation "lacks all the other sensory

stimuli that the prototype embedded in its context can exercise on the beholder." She elaborates

on this point by examining the multi-modal "radiance" of the retable, whose "major spiritual

principles such as mirroring and *choros* were simultaneously visually and aurally encoded," in

other words, whose ritual function applied to both visual and aural uses. She concludes with an

anecdote that demonstrates how Benjamin's "optical aura" of an object can be further augmented

when considered simultaneously with its aural function:

> "The scintillating gold during the night office paired with the singing of the
>
> responsory *Factus est repente* created the sensorial nearness of Spirit as an invisible sonic
>
> energy ascending to the vaults and visible coruscation enflaming the golden retable."
>
> (Pentcheva, 2020)

Along with revealing a form of proto-synchresis, a process I will return to in the third section

of this essay, Pentcheva demonstrates that the aural and sonic qualities of a piece of art were

intrinsic to its perceived "distance, no matter how near" and authenticity in its original ritual use,

just as much as its visual qualities. Though this is but one example, it nevertheless serves as a

strong indictment of Benjamin's aural neglect, in that music and other aural art can possess an

auratic function and indeed could be originally part of a traditional art object's auratic interpretation.

Auratic Music in The "Age of Mechanical Reproduction"

Beyond highlighting music's auratic function in traditional art, the question of its function in contemporary, mechanically reproduced art has produced myriad scholarship in response. One might wonder why scholars continue to return to Benjamin's aura, even though his account seemingly foretells the end of aura in mechanical reproduction. The reason is that Benjamin's dismissal of such possibilities is largely considered short-sighted and outdated and has thus opened aura to renegotiation to fit modern viewpoints. As artist and professor Douglas Davis writes in his work *The Work of Art in the Age of Digital Reproduction (An Evolving Thesis: 1991-1995)*,

"The fictions of the 'master' and 'copy' are now so entwined with each other that it is impossible to say where one begins and the other ends. In one sense, Walter Benjamin's proclamation of doom for the aura of originality, authored early in this century, is finally confirmed by these events. In another sense, the aura, supple and elastic, has stretched far beyond the boundaries of Benjamin's prophecy into the rich realm of reproduction itself. Here in this realm, often mislabeled 'virtual,' both originality and traditional truth are being enhanced." (Davis, 1995)

Figure 3

This adaptation of aura onto "individuated copies" is thus now the focus of much modern

scholarship which argue that Benjamin's aura be "reconsidered in the modern age." (Ahlers,

2016) For example, scholar Ben Green examines recent attempts by musical artists to harken

back to the traditional, ritualized aura, with special regard to the Wu-Tang Clan's album *Once*

Upon A Time in Shaolin (Fig. 3). Coincidentally, RZA, a member of the Wu-Tang Clan and co-

producer on the album, has often spoken of being influenced by the directorial and musical

stylings of Leone and Morricone, whose work I'll return to later in the paper. Green recounts the

origins of the album, and its subsequent failings. In trying to establish the album as an art-object

with ritual aura, it rather became a coveted and divisive collector's item whose reception, while

unique, was unique for the wrong reasons: the object provided a unique experience for its

beholder, but its cult value was ironically limited by its private ownership. To this misguided

attempt at achieving a "withering" cult value, Green offers a counterpoint, saying

> "music's aura does not necessarily wither. It becomes more multiple and multivalent,
>
> contingent and contested, but arguably this only extends its cult value, the power to enthrall

and affect, both in the collectives it helps to define and in highly personal ways." (Green, 2017)

However, others aren't as convinced of the usefulness of aura in mechanical reproduction, especially when it comes to sampling and "quotation." Returning to Chapman, he argues that "the feeling of being moved by a work of art enough to want to interact with it through processes of quotation and remixing" is far more valuable than fretting over whether art has "an inherent quality based on its substantive duration." (Chapman, 2011) Aura as Benjamin defines it, Chapman states, is thus up to the individual to bear any "specific meaning" but doesn't possess the usefulness for art critique as much as Benjamin's "practice of quotation." Sampling, in Chapman's view, is the ultimate representation of this, as it serves as "a profound example of the power and potential of quotation to transcend, interrupt, and make possible the production of new works of art." (Chapman, 2011)

Figure 4

Another take on the function of aura in mechanically reproduced sound hinges on the quality of "liveness." Rob Ahlers writes in his piece, *Benjamin's KISS: A Perspective on Music,*

Spectacle and Aura, that "aura lives on in reproductions and performances." (Ahlers, 2016)
Examining the band KISS' rise to stardom and later highly successful reunion tour (Fig. 4),
Ahlers argues that the adapted aura serves a new purpose in the live performance. Calling back
to Benjamin's own descriptions of aura, Ahlers points to the

> "live show's substantive qualities, among which the interplay of proximity and distance are
> of special importance. Though spatially within reach – sometimes literally – the icons on
> stage are seen as inviolable, which is enhanced by spectacle and the aforementioned show
> elements." (Ahlers, 2016)

He also proposes that the "auratic promise" of these live performances can further be used as a
marketing tool, dispersed through "distribution channels," which indoctrinates, one could say
interpellates, the listener with the desire to obtain this unique experience it in person, indeed
receiving the art in the place of its production. (Benjamin, 1968)

Underpinning these conversations on the auratic function of music in modern reproduced
forms is a crisis. Jay David Bolter et al. attempt to address this crisis in their work *New Media
and the Permanent Crisis of Aura*. They write that while "aura has not definitively decayed in
the age of mechanical and now electronic reproduction," the new media forms that have
appeared in the decades since Benjamin's initial analysis "seem to be predicated on the
possibility (the opportunity and the danger) of the decay of aura." (Bolter et al., 2006) Pointing to
the representative qualities of "transparency" and "hypermediacy," which evokes and calls into
question aura respectively, they propose that, in fact, there isn't a need to worry, as
"contemporary popular media see no contradiction in pursuing the auratic and the non-auratic
almost simultaneously." (Bolter et al., 2006)

While this may seem to assuage worries about the significance of aura in modern reproduced forms, renegotiation, deconstruction and adaptation of Benjamin's aura still occurs because of his original neglect. Thus, this crisis is inevitably bound to continue rearing its head as scholars bend over backwards to demonstrate how new and further disparate interpretations of art, increasingly removed from Benjamin's original interpretations, can still claim to have aura. What can be done to possibly reconcile this crisis for good?

Once Upon A Time in Temporality: The Aura of Synchresis

Having established context for the current conversations around the auratic function of music in traditional and mechanically reproduced modes, I'd now like to offer a potential avenue of reconciliation that values Benjamin's original analyses while incorporating the auratic function of music which Benjamin had neglected. I've noted prototypical instances of this mode in previous work here. Pentcheva's "radiant" retable and Ahlers' "live performance" are examples of a combination of the aural and visual modes in the physical, in-person experience. But what about the "virtual" space of new media, such as in movies and video games?
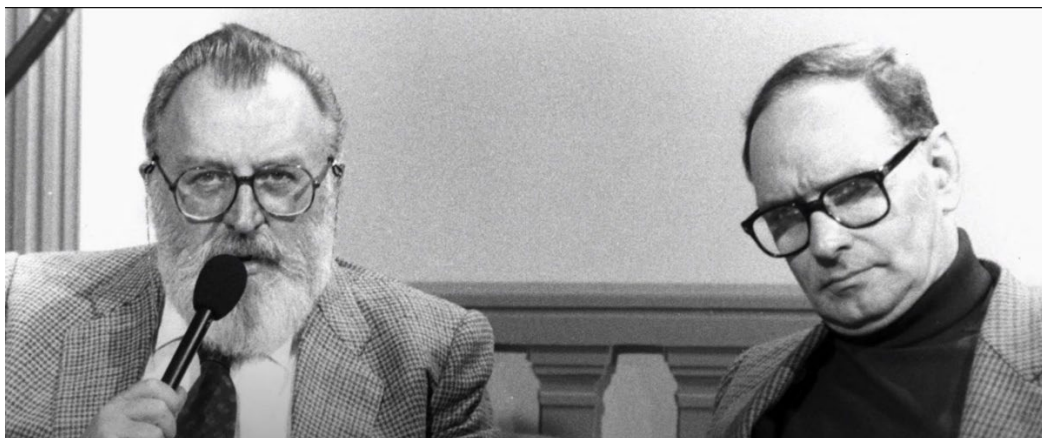

Figure 5 (From left to right: Sergio Leone, Ennio Morricone)

To answer this question, I return to the subject of film scoring and the partnership between Sergio Leone and Ennio Morricone (Fig. 5). During a series of film music seminars, whose transcripts were compiled and subsequently translated into English (Morricone et al., 2014), Morricone and his musicologist peer Sergio Miceli discussed various theories and techniques that are employed when composing scores for cinema, as well as the process of working in the film industry as a composer in general. One such technique described is the application of "explicit" and "implicit" sync points. Sync points are musical movements that are written specifically to line up with certain visual aspects in a film. An explicit sync point is an obvious "meeting place between music and image," pairing recognizable musical movements like, as Miceli describes, a crescendo, a series of chords or a sudden stop in a rhythmic flow with a salient visual action. A sync point is implicit when it compliments something subtle within a scene. Miceli uses the example of when an actor "simply raises his eyes," which the composer then capitalizes on with an implicit sync point. In short, it "underlines sentiments more than events." (Morricone et al., 2014)

Typically, the process of adding sync points is done once the visual element, the filming, is complete. However, Morricone had a special relationship with Sergio Leone in which Leone would insist on the score being completed first. Describing in his own words the scene from *Once Upon A Time in the West*, which is featured in the Nerdwriter video, Morricone writes,

> "When Leone told me about the film, he said absolutely nothing about the fact that there would be a close-up of a clock on the station building. For that scene I composed a piece that used vibraphone and celeste. By his placement of the visuals with the music, Leone made that casual choice become like the sound of a clock. This was very far from my original intentions…I only wrote the music, but the revision of this episode verified how much more

effective the music could become with this type of treatment by the director. There are very few directors who react this way, but when one succeeds in establishing this kind of collaboration, the results are excellent, and usually one says that both the music and the film work." (Morricone et al., 2014)

The main quality of this reciprocal treatment of music and film, which creates a "staying power" and "can justify and permit a happy coexistence between the two languages," is what Morricone calls *temporality*. (Morricone et al., 2014) But more than just sharing a temporality that makes their pairing "work," the pairing itself brings something new, something authentic that makes the viewer feel their pairing's presence. Morricone's vibraphone and celeste paired with the image of the clock evokes the presence of time and place. The "musical bridge, with a crescendo" paired with the wide dolly shot of the town evokes a feeling of distance (Fig. 6), despite the proximity of the viewer to the screen. I am, not so subtly I hope, describing Benjamin's qualities of aura in this pairing.

Figure 6

The process of this pairing being able to "work" and presenting a new experience has a name: "synchresis." I first encountered this term, coined by Michel Chion, when reading Giles Hooper's chapter on music in video game cutscenes in *Emotion in Videogame Soundtracking*. A

cutscene, using David O'Grady's definition in the chapter, is "'a spatiotemporal unit often

freighted with narrative, dramatic, or spectacular significance.'" A simpler way to put it is that

cutscenes are "'cinematics' or in-game 'movies.'" (Hooper, 2018) Hooper presents synchresis

after describing a cutscene depicting a major character's death in the video game *Final Fantasy*

VII, in which the dying character's musical theme is used for great emotional effect (Fig. 7). The

theme continues to play once the cutscene finishes and the player is back in control, which

Hooper describes as music performing "a 'suturing' or 'integrative' function" (i.e., synchresis).

Here too exists the temporality, the staying power, which affects players enough to "move some

to tears." (Hooper, 2018)

Figure 7: The death of Aerith is accompanied by her musical theme, heightening the staying power of the scene in the minds of the players

Given these "virtual" examples as well as the history of prototypical instances in physical

art, I believe synchresis merits consideration as a possible avenue down which to lead future

conversations about the shifting form and significance of Benjamin's aura in modern reproduced

art and media. In doing so, one can continue to engage with Benjamin's original analysis while also resolving the original work's neglect of the aura of the aural.

"More Real Than Reality Itself": Moving Away From Aura Toward The Spectacle?

Despite the opportunity for synchresis to reconcile Benjamin's neglect of the auratic function of music, it's worth considering whether pursuing another form of reconciliation that doesn't address musical neglect, but rather Benjamin's dismissal of cult value in mechanically reproduced art, would be worthwhile instead. In doing so, one might argue that engaging strictly with Benjamin's original analysis of aura is no longer useful and thus an alternative critical theory in the modern examination of art is needed. One such theory which concerns itself with cult value and ritual experiences is that of the spectacle, though it mainly concerns the interpersonal relations between others more than one's relationship with art. Guy Debord's seminal conjecture on the subject in *The Society of the Spectacle* can give us some insight into this possible avenue. As a basis for modern critique, Debord calls spectacle the "the outcome and the goal of the dominant mode of production." He further writes in thesis 18,

> "For one to whom the real world becomes real images, mere images are transformed into real beings — tangible figments which are the efficient motor of trancelike behavior. Since the spectacle's job is to cause a world that is no longer directly perceptible to be *seen* via different specialized mediations, it is inevitable that it should elevate the human sense of sight to the special place once occupied by touch…This is not to say, however, that the spectacle itself is perceptible to the naked eye — even if that eye is assisted by the ear. The spectacle is by definition immune from human activity, inaccessible to any

projected review or correction. It is the opposite of dialogue. Wherever representation

takes on an independent existence, the spectacle reestablishes its rule." (Debord, 1994)

To draw parallels between Debord's and Benjamin's works, both put significant stock in

the cult value of the visual. Both write in fragmented passages. And both make references to

something that has diminished in life. Aura withers for Benjamin whereas spectacle reveals "a

world that is no longer directly perceptible" for Debord. However, Debord, though his work was

originally published a year before Benjamin's, seems to suggest that spectacle has taken over for

aura, and that the spectacle makes uniform the shared experience which had been "liberated from

the ritual" (i.e., establishes its rule over independent existences of representation) that Benjamin

had attributed to mechanical reproduction. And whereas Benjamin described aura as instilling

the quality of authenticity in the image of an object, Debord describes an investment in the

unreal. One might argue that these differences could represent an evolution in public thought,

away from the authentic and individual toward the unreal and collective.

This possible avenue could be further strengthened by referring back to some of the modern

conversations about the auratic function of music in which references to aura and spectacle

cohabitate the same space. Ahlers, for example, by giving aura, music and spectacle the same

weight in the title of his article, exhibits this cohabitated space. He argues that live performance

spectacle "creates a sense of auratic presence" in that it "creates a present-moment experience

and sense of being in the here and now with an authentic and original work of art." (Ahlers,

2016) One could say that this sense is related to the "tangible figments" which Debord refers to

but could also say the spectacular quality of the live show is more strongly a depiction of

"unreality" than authenticity. Ahlers also takes a quote from Robert Walser which calls stage

shows "'larger-than-life images tied to fantasies of social power, just as in the most prestigious

musical spectacles of opera,'" the specialization of power being, as Debord notes, at the root of spectacle. (Debord, 1994)

Figure 8

While on the subject of opera, João Pedro Cachopo in his work, *The Aura of Opera Reproduced: Fantasies and Traps in the Age of the Cinecast*, refutes the "valorization of liveness" in musical-theatrical work while also avoiding the "trap" of juxtaposing liveness with mediatization. That said, Cachopo points to the spectacularizing of operas in the digital, which have increasingly become staged to better facilitate broadcast and recording. (Cachopo, 2018) Moreover, the copies resultant from digital recordings, as well as the artistic direction taken with them, such as moving a scene with a set dramatizing Rome to be reshot in the actual, physical location (Fig. 8), transform the work into something "more real — more authentic, more unique, more drastic — than reality itself." (Cachopo, 2018) This "'real more real than reality,'" which is produced in art, is reminiscent of Debord's spectacle, which is produced in society, and which as he says is "the very heart of society's real unreality." (Debord, 1994)

In terms of modern art and spectacular critique, a spectacularized aura could be "the omnipresent celebration of a choice already made in the sphere of production, and the consummate result of that choice" in art. (Debord, 1994) And yet the desire for aura, for the real and authentic, persists. Though spectacle could offer an alternative avenue of discussing the goal of mechanically reproduced art, as indeed the scholars cited here have begun to do, the desire for an authentic, individual experience still appears to trump the unreal and collective experience the spectacle offers. If spectacle is to become a potential theory for use in art critique in the age of mechanical and digital reproduction, it must still contend with this inherent auratic desire.

Conclusion

There are myriad other avenues down which the discussion for reconciling Benjamin's aura in modern artistic forms could go. But I want to bring this paper to its close by coming back to the quote from the Nerdwriter: "one of the things I love about movies is their ability to make reality lyrical." I said it lit a fire in my mind because it's what originally got me thinking about the auratic function of music, and further of "mechanically reproduced" media. While Benjamin mostly focuses on the loss of aura, there's implicit meaning in the way he describes nature and visual media as being auratic that signifies a resultant sense of awe and wonder which is evoked from the experience. Therefore, his neglect of music in his original analysis causes others to attempt to renegotiate or deconstruct it, because they have come to feel aura, this awe and wonder inspired by the presence of an authentic experience, in these neglected modes as well. As I have noted over the course of this paper, music has always had and continues to have a stake in the art and media we interact with and admire in our lives. Therefore, as people continue to desire authentic, original experiences with art and new media, if we are to continue returning to

Benjamin's aura in our contemplation of the value of these experiences by the way we interact with them, we must reconcile Benjamin's neglect of the auratic function of music and reproduced media by acknowledging them as valid auratic modes.

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