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## Mechanical Reproduction in an Age of High Art

Chris Barker

### Abstract

This paper reopens the question of the place of high art in the period identified by Walter Benjamin as the age of mechanical reproduction. Walter Benjamin, Bruno Latour, and Adam Lowe are wrong to think that mechanical reproduction has transformed the concept of art, destroying the aura of art or transmitting that aura from original to copy. The concept of art cannot be redefined by the modern change in the capacity to reproduce art unless art was initially defined primarily by its uniqueness/nonreproducibility. Photographic reproduction has caused major changes in the visual arts and in the way we consume art, but reproductive techniques have a long, continuous history that includes the production and reproduction of exact, artistic copies.

### Key Words

aura, Walter Benjamin, engraving, high art, Bruno Latour, reproduction

### 1. Introduction

This paper reopens the question of the position of high art in the period identified by Walter Benjamin as the age of mechanical reproduction.<sup>[1]</sup> Rather than deal with the ubiquitous and unanswerable question, "But is it Art?", or the even narrower question, "Is it High Art?", this paper challenges Benjamin's assertion, developed and modified in a recent article by Bruno Latour and Adam Lowe, that we are in a period of mechanical reproduction in which art has lost its aura. Benjamin's argument is that all art loses its aura when it can be copied. A work of art that is copied is cut off from its original position and place, its unique embodiment, and the tradition that its unique history transmits. Benjamin's epigraph, from Paul Valery's *Aesthetics, The Conquest of Ubiquity*, makes the stakes quite clear: "we must expect great innovations to transform the entire technique of the arts, thereby affecting artistic innovation itself and perhaps even bringing about an amazing change in our very notion of art."<sup>[2]</sup> The first two predictions about technique and innovation are elaborated and persuasively defended in Benjamin's essay. But the third, at least as I argue here, overreaches. While it is sensible to say, with Benjamin, that humanity's modes of existence and production (e.g., cooperative, capitalist) change the way that we understand art, one can still demur from the claim that our concept of art has not endured throughout these changes. Can we demonstrate this without losing sight of Benjamin's important historical insights about changes in production, changes in art, and changes in art theory? That is the question posed in this paper.

Benjamin's 1936 essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," makes a sweeping argument about art and mechanical reproduction. Benjamin's 1931 essay, "Little History of Photography," deals more narrowly with

photography. By reading the 1931 essay, we see that Benjamin is actually addressing a fairly narrow question even in the 1936 essay: Does the photographing of art change our relation to the concept of the work of art? He writes that photographic reproduction diminishes the distance between the work of art and the consumer, which allows the place and value of the original to fluctuate. His thesis can be tested in two ways. First, one could focus on photographic reproduction and show that the photographic reproductions themselves meet the standard of a work of art, aura and all, and exist as new works of art in parallel to the original, auratic art. This is the argument that Latour and Lowe try to make.

After presenting their argument, I show that they do not achieve what they seek to accomplish, and in fact address a question quite different from Benjamin's. When Latour and Lowe meet Benjamin on his own terms, they actually agree with both his conception of an aura and his conception of reproduction, despite the fact that their paper reads as a challenge to his authority. Second, one could focus on other, non-photographic modes of reproduction that preceded photography and that developed in parallel with it, especially the reproductive engraving of oil paintings on copperplates that was introduced sometime in the fifteenth century, and the steel engravings that replaced copperplate engraving in the 1830s. Earlier types of reproduction raise the same questions as photographic reproduction and show that we ought not to expect a revolution in the way that we perceive art, but rather a Whiggish evolution at most. Toward what end our art-sense is evolving remains an open question. Even to think about photographic reproduction as accelerating and intensifying changes that have a 600-year history overstates the conclusion that we can draw. A historical view usefully unsettles Benjamin's thesis in order to show that the individual can find artistic value in a unique original, a non-unique engraving, a non-unique reproductive engraving, and even a non-unique photograph that is specifically made to be reproducible.

In Part One, I summarize Benjamin's description of the aura of a work of art, and explore his thesis that photographic reproduction destroys the aura. In Part Two, I examine the attempt made by Latour and Lowe to convict Benjamin of a category error by posing a counter-example that aims to disprove Benjamin's thesis about the end of auras. In Part Three, I offer my own counter-example to show that photographic reproduction is not the only or primary sense that can be given to mechanical reproduction, and that Latour and Lowe have not addressed Benjamin's concern about photography because of their selective use of examples. In my conclusion, I address the sociopolitical implications of the Benjamin thesis. To anticipate the conclusion, a thicker description of the last 600 years of the mechanical reproduction of works of art shows that Benjamin, Latour and Lowe, and prominent critics of reproductive engravings such as William Ivins, Jr. fall afoul of reducing aesthetic questions about the worth of art to narrower concerns with works of art as scientific artifacts, "visual statements," or politicized statements to be judged by their exhibition value.

## **2. The explanation of the thesis**

What is the aura for Benjamin? In his "Little History of Photography," Benjamin uses the concept of aura to describe early photographs that capture the "fullness and security" of the sitters' gazes.[3] The aura of the early photograph grows from the congruence of subject and technique. In "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Benjamin explains that these photographs memorializing dead loved ones are the "last refuge" for the cult value of the picture. Benjamin argued in "The Little History" that in the 1880s Parisian photographer Eugène Atget began to kill the aura by dismembering photographed scenes to focus on details. This was a way of seeing that led to surrealism and also to "arty" abstractions of parts that did not make compositional wholes. In doing so, Atget "initiates the emancipation of object from aura, which is the most signal achievement of the latest school of photography." [4]

Benjamin's formal "definition" of aura ("A strange weave of space and time") is confusing, so much so that his description is worth quoting at length:

Now, to bring things *closer* to us, or rather to the masses, is just as passionate an inclination in our day as the overcoming of whatever is unique in every situation by means of its reproduction. Every day the need to possess the object in close-up in the form of a picture, or rather a copy, becomes more imperative. And the difference between the copy, which illustrated papers and newsreels keep in readiness, and the original picture is unmistakable. Uniqueness and duration are as intimately intertwined in the latter as are transience and reproducibility in the former. [5]

Original works of art endure as a unique testament of artistic vision. Relative to such enduring statements, a photograph is disposable, "transient," and judged only by its use-value. Benjamin finds a political meaning in the function of the reproduction, which brings the masses closer to the work of art, which they may now cheaply acquire for their homes, use carelessly as a cheap reproduction, and strip of place and time and manner to gaze at the reproduced work of art in whatever manner they desire. The reproduction divests even admittedly singular and unique things of their uniqueness, undermining memory and knowledge. [6] Psychologically, the motivation that Benjamin uncovers is confusing, because he writes about the "passionate inclination" to overcome distances and the need to "possess," which seem to be at the root of art. Is it at the root of modernity or at the root of all art or just Western art? Is the surrealist "estrangement between man and his surroundings" salutary? The alienation of the authentic individual from herself is often, and sensibly, a pejorative way of talking about an art "under whose gaze all intimacies are sacrificed to the illumination of detail." [7]

For Benjamin, it appears to be a salutary and enlightening process to move from auratic art to photography. However, there are dangers at the threshold and in immersing oneself in this new world. Photography-as-art is dangerous because of the potential for commercialization through advertisement.

Benjamin not very kindly anticipated Warhol thirty-one years before his soup cans were first exhibited by writing that “photography...can endow any soup can with cosmic significance but cannot grasp a single one of the human connections in which it exists.”<sup>[8]</sup> In his 1931 essay, Benjamin wrote that “the impact of the photographic reproduction of artworks is of very much greater importance for the function of art than the greater or lesser artistry of a photography that regards all experience as fair game for the camera.”<sup>[9]</sup> He explained:

the understanding of great works was transformed at about the same time the techniques of reproduction were being developed. Such works can no longer be regarded as the products of individuals; they have become a collective creation, a corpus so vast it can be assimilated only through miniaturization. In the final analysis, mechanical reproduction is a technique of diminution that helps people to achieve control over works of art—a control without whose aid they could no longer be used.<sup>[10]</sup>

Benjamin developed this ambitious and interesting explanation of our loss of control over our cultural conditions further in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” He used a Marxist lens to prognosticate about the effects of the material conditions of art production on the superstructure of culture, including the fine arts and fine art theory. For him, fine art theory is shot through with mystifying concepts (“creativity and genius, eternal value and mystery”) that lend themselves to appropriation by fascists. He expected that the material conditions of art-reproduction will transform such concepts because even the perfect reproduction abstracts from certain material conditions of the original art’s unique “presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be.” A reproduction cannot reproduce down to the atomic level the structure of the original. A reproduction only reproduces a current time-slice of the original, and thus deeply violates the history of the original—all that is transmissible from its beginning. Benjamin therefore believed that the authority of the object is undermined because its authority rests upon historical testimony of the work of art concerning its own authentic, unique existence and tradition.

Some reproductions, perhaps all reproductions prior to photographic reproduction, do not unsettle time, place, and history in the way that photographic reproduction does. Benjamin called these “manual reproductions” and offered a history of the previous 2500 years of reproduction, which unfolded in four stages: founding and stamping; the woodcut; engraving and etching; and lithography. As in the “Little History of Photography,” Benjamin was primarily interested in the influence that each mode of reproduction has on the traditional art forms. He found a kind-difference between the latest evolution in the modes of reproduction and their earlier precursors. As Benjamin said, photography (which he subsumed under the process of technical reproduction) takes away the work of the hand and substitutes for it the work of

the eye.<sup>[11]</sup> The eye of a photographer enhanced by a camera sees more and differently from the eye of the craftsman who translates the original work of art into another medium using his handicraft. Most importantly, such photography enables relocation of the work of art into the home of the connoisseur or some other locale where it can be consumed at his convenience. The reproduction thus renounces uniqueness and place, and at the same time loses its hold on tradition.

In "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Benjamin argued that an art-work's aura originates in the cultic value of art. This cultic value has been secularized as a cult of beauty and ultimately challenged by the revolutionary means of production—photography—and the political rise of socialism. He briskly dismissed "theological" counter-revolutions, such as *l'art pour l'art*, to conclude that the work of art designed for reproducibility has transformed the art-world, liberating us from art's parasitic dependence upon ritual.<sup>[12]</sup> In this new world, there is no such thing as an authentic print, an authentic film or, one presumes, an apolitical work of art. This is the era of art produced by and for the people, and no longer the era of art produced by the mystical genius for a suprahuman end.

There are two key issues at stake in Benjamin's essay on the age of mechanical reproduction. The first concerns photography as an art form and the second concerns the photographic reproduction of works of art. There are legitimate concerns that we should have with photography as an art form or as an element of a work of art, but Benjamin tends to exaggerate the potential authoritarian dangers of the photographic work of art. I will consider four examples.

First, writing about plays, Benjamin seems to equivocate in Section IX, where he ties the aura both to the physical presence of the stage actor (and so the film audience does not perceive an aura around the actor, which seems wrong as a matter of fact) and to the presence of an audience (although the audience is not present for the painter or sculptor any more than for the screen actor). Benjamin interprets the film actor's art as an instance of alienation of the worker from the product of his labor ("During the shooting he has as little contact with it as any article made in a factory") and interprets the actor's work as a "series of mountable episodes."<sup>[13]</sup> Nonetheless, cinema does not in itself tyrannize over the gaze any more than a stage actor's emotive performance or a lurid part of a painting, attracting the viewer's eye, could be said to tyrannize over the eye of the viewer. Moreover, the fact that an actor can be startled by a loud sound and his reaction edited into or out of a movie is, for Benjamin, the strongest evidence that film abandons the realm of "beautiful semblance." If this is true, it is because the actor's audience-persuading craft can be trumped by the director's and editor's crafts. Finally, Benjamin thinks it is only now, in the case of illustrated magazines, that "[f]or the first time, captions have become obligatory." Indeed, captions had been often required to make sense of a specific theme or scriptural passage represented in religious art and allegory or to direct the viewer's gaze.

There are similar problems with thinking that photographic reproduction of art necessarily transforms the values of art. In all cases, we cannot fully escape either the handicraft element or the intellectual work done by framing a photographic scene. We, the masses, can bring art closer to us and force it to speak to us on our own terms. We can see its reality in a new way that is different from the way the artist saw it and from the way that an interpreter engraving it would have seen it. Reproduction often creates a powerful and artistic copy and may even add luster to the original. Bruno Latour and Adam Lowe argue this in a recent re-evaluation of Benjamin's thesis.

### **3. The development of the thesis by Latour/Lowe**

As consumers of art, we seem unable to free ourselves from the type of cognitive architecture that makes colorful advertising, a multitude of copies of the Mona Lisa, kitschy paraphernalia sold at St. Peter's in Rome, and the highest of high art attractive to the consumer.<sup>[14]</sup> The sociologist Bruno Latour and Adam Lowe, an artist and founder of a Madrid-based team of digital mediators who use the most advanced technology to help produce and reproduce fine art, have recently reframed Benjamin's question by asking whether a reproduction can have an aura, the type of presence that comes from unique embodiment that Benjamin beautifully evoked, and even the history that he attributed to original works of art.<sup>[15]</sup>

Latour and Lowe adopt the first element in Benjamin's essay, the concept of the aura, but challenge the second element, the diachronic account of the aura's destruction by an age of mechanical reproduction. They develop their point using a particular photographic representation of Veronese's *Marriage at Cana* that has been crafted with great technical ingenuity and exactness by the company Lowe founded. They ask whether the reproduction is as valuable as the original painting now hanging in the Louvre. If it is not, why not? Latour and Lowe believe that the question of original or copy has been made moot by the decisive question, "Is it [a work of art] well or badly reproduced?" Here, considering the duration of the work of art that Benjamin found important, they believe that copies enhance a work of art's duration and actually enhance its originality. By copying, they imply, you pay homage to an original and thus re-inscribe it with an aura. They use the analogy of tracing the Nile back to its source as an amusing game parallel to the game of asking "Is this an original?" But a consideration of the whole of the life of the river from the vantage of the delta's size (parallel to the view of Veronese's painting from the perspective of its continuing importance today) is more consequential. They imply that they are interested in the entire trajectory of the production of the work of art, one that includes not only the original work of art but also stunning copies and works inspired by the original painting.<sup>[16]</sup>

Latour and Lowe's theory demonstrates that they are concerned primarily with important works of art, although they do not explain why these works of art are deemed to be important. They give a largely economic explanation of why a copy might be less valuable than the original. There may be an asymmetry in the mobilization of resources—the time,



money, and labor spent by the copyist might be less than that of the original artist. In a related argument, Latour and Lowe recognize that there could be a gap in the techniques of production between original and copy. They argue that historically such a gap was created by the invention of the printing press and provide two examples to support their general position concerning what make a work of art valuable. Each performance of a play is equally valuable, or at least is able to be judged according to its artistic merits, because each performance is unique. Each is equally difficult to produce, and an earlier performance of *Macbeth*, for instance, does not make Akira Kurosawa's job directing *Throne of Blood* any easier. Second, a copyist in a monastery doesn't point out an original manuscript among the many manuscripts that are illuminated: "...no copyist would have said *this one* is the original while *this one* is a copy."[\[17\]](#)

If, they argue, a reproduction reduces the gap in the resources used in the process of reproducing the original—that is, if reproduction is costly—then the reproduction can be just as much a work of art and achieve the elements of originality that they think a work of art activates. These elements are the uniqueness of place (with Benjamin), accessibility or availability to be seen by the viewer (which combines Benjamin's concern with aura and with exhibition value), and a deep respect for the surface features of the work of art. They conclude that Benjamin made a category error when he devalued copies: "In effect, Benjamin confused the notion of 'mechanical reproduction' with the inequality of the techniques employed along a [work of art's] trajectory." Latour and Lowe believe they have solved this problem by refusing to prioritize the original time-slice and its techniques, thus allowing them to see that the aura of a work of art can migrate from a degraded original to a reproduction in which an equivalent amount of time, labor, and thought are invested.

What is unfortunate, given the elegance of Latour and Lowe's essay and Factum Arte's mission, is that their example provides evidence for much less than they claim. First, the analogy they draw between the performance of a play and the reproduction of a painting is a false one. It is Benjamin's image, but it is used clumsily and not, as Benjamin used it, to show a problem with the craft of the screen actor. A script needs staging for the playwright's vision to be embodied; thus, all performances have a certain non-original equality when contrasted with the script. A painting may have source material (religious scripture, a view of the country from the window), but it is unduly Platonizing to say that we are *reproducing* something when we paint a painting. In contrast to the painter, whose work is complete when she has finished painting, the playwright's craft is only fully realized when it is staged. Second, Latour and Lowe seem to confuse the art of illuminating a manuscript with the art of transmitting knowledge through written texts. Third and most obviously, the exciting description of Factum Arte's Veronese reproduction shows that it is clearly *not* just a photographic reproduction, and that its craft does not solely or even primarily rely on the features of photography singled out as promising and dangerous by Benjamin. For Latour and Lowe and for Benjamin, the *photographic* reproduction of Veronese's *Marriage at Cana* that you can purchase at the Louvre is not a



work of art.

For Latour and Lowe, the facsimile created by Factum Arte and placed in an original context in San Giorgio, Venice counts as a *painting*. The laborious process of scanning Veronese's painting and printing it on gessoed canvas significantly complicates and refines the process of producing the *Marriage at Cana*. This process is both mechanical, insofar as it makes use of digital techniques and photographic reproduction, and handcrafted. Factum Arte's photographic reproduction involves all the basic materials and characteristics of the Veronese painting. Moreover, it possesses a handicraft, a technique, so the whole can be said to be a product of an intellectual process. It can thus be considered an exact copy. A true test of Benjamin's thesis would have been of a purely photographic reproductive process—a process that allows for exact, instant replication of all the surface features of a work of art without any alien artistic syntax mediating the process of reproduction. It is this possibility of a wholly new, unmediated relation to art that we shall explore below.

#### 4. A better counterexample

How can we test Benjamin's thesis about the transformative effects of art-less reproduction? One approach would be to show through close analysis of Benjamin's writings that, for him, there is no "nature" of a work of art. There is instead its original use value as an element of ritual; the subsequent history of works of art is parasitic on that cultic value. This cultic value is secularized but retained, until the photograph strips the object of its history and it becomes solely a tool to be used by the dominant social power in the present day, namely the masses. Through conceptual analysis, we could then show that other values are involved beyond the use of the work of art as a tool of religion and politics. Thus a naturalist might show that images, as images, have a value anterior to or different from a cultic value and that this appeal (to our aesthetic sense, to sexual attraction, or to other aspects of human culture) lingers and imbues a work of art with an aura in our age as in any other age.

Alternatively, unpacking Benjamin's encapsulated history of reproduction allows us to clarify the ambiguity in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," namely the equivocation between mechanical and photographic reproduction. If mechanical reproduction does not destroy the aura of an art object, then the historical thesis founders because Benjamin has specified the auratic elements of art (uniqueness, place, and tradition) that reproduction threatens or transforms. Benjamin's definition of the aura is misstated, and because his thesis depends on it, the thesis about the transformation of the modern world is also incorrect. Those not working within the Frankfurt School may have guessed that this would be the case. The question, as always in the history of ideas, is "Why?"

When considered as an explanation of high art's appeal, or its aura, and an account of the changing political use of art, Benjamin's argument makes a great deal of sense. However, a powerful counterexample to Benjamin's thesis is the fact that auras exist throughout the long age of mechanical reproduction. The auras of works of art did not wither

because of the reproducibility of art and, in fact, some reproductions had or grew over time to have their own distinct artistic aura. This demonstrates that there is a significant problem with the argument that the work of art's aura has been transformed by the reproduction of art. More trenchantly, it challenges Benjamin's description of the aura. If reproducibility and reproduction do not cause the loss of aura, then something is wrong with the aura thesis.

What is wrong with the aura thesis is the assumption that cultic use value endows a work of art with an aura *ab origine*. Although it is beyond the scope of the argument here to show why Benjamin proposes the thesis that he does, the argument that uniqueness endows art with an aura and that the aura fades when uniqueness fades is too strong. For more than 500 years, we have been reproducing art mechanically, and in important instances, such as founding and stamping, the reproductive processes go back thousands of years. In Benjamin's concern to defend his thesis, he was not sensitive to the difference between autographic and allographic prints.<sup>[18]</sup> His concern was only with reproduction of works of art by allographic engravers, and only with the effects of such reproductions on the aura. He was not even concerned with a potent counterexample to his basic thesis, the autographic engraving or fine art etching, which yields non-unique images that are not located in any particular place and are not restricted to the use that can be made of them. This in itself poses a basic problem for the thesis of "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." But, granting that Benjamin's concern is with the effects of reproduction on existing works of art and not about prints as works of art, how does the thesis fare in light of older, pre-photographic modes of reproduction?

On the subject of reproductive engravings, which were the dominant mode of making an "exact repetition of pictorial statements" before the rise of photography, William Ivins, Jr., a former curator of prints at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, corrects what he thinks was a careless and mistaken indulgence of reproductive engravings by writing the following against reproductive engravers' lack of respect for the true surface of the painting:

As one thinks about this, it becomes obvious that *all record of the very things which constitutes [sic] the work of art* and which are visible to everyone who looks at it with care and an educated eye, was omitted from the old engravings after works of art. It was absolutely impossible, by studying the old engravings, to distinguish between the original [painting] and a close contemporary copy or a fake of it, even of the most blatant kind.<sup>[19]</sup>

Ivins's point is that reproductive engravings were such an inferior way of transmitting information about works of art that they would transmit the same information about an original or a copy. For Ivins the engravers' contempt for the "gesture of the original maker's hand" constitutes an indelible mark against reproductive engravings.

In the old processes, the [visual] report started

by a syntactical analysis of the thing seen, which was followed by its symbolic statement in the language of drawn lines. This translation was then translated into the very different analysis and syntax of the process. The lines and dots in the old reports were not only insistent in claiming visual attention, but they, their character, and their symbolism of statement, had been determined more by the two super-imposed analyses and syntaxes than by the particularities of the thing seen.[\[20\]](#)

Although the non-critic may be less insulted by the tyranny of the mediators than the professional appears to be, Ivins's judgment is enticing. Through photography, art has changed—more fundamentally even than it did during the Renaissance or the baroque period. In truth, our entire way of seeing has changed. The hold of the engraver as middleman over the transmission of the visual statement of the original artist was a “tyranny,” “the rule of a blinding and methodically blinding visual common sense.”[\[21\]](#) It killed both artistry and the scientific knowledge that visual reports transmit so much more simply than words.[\[22\]](#) Happily, according to Ivins, the half-tone photographic process locates the intrusive lines and dots found in engravings below the level of our unaided vision, so that reproductions of art are made without alien syntax or generalizing abstractions. The work of art itself is now made available to us for the first time through a process of art-less reproduction. If this is true, and we have found an art-less mode of reproduction, then we can finally test Benjamin's thesis about the transformation in the concept of art brought about by the change in the material conditions of reproduction.

In their defense, reproductive engravers can respond that theirs is an art of translation just as worthy as any that moves between media; that theirs is a different and legitimate language, a different embodiment, and one that requires skills and intelligence. The greatest reproductive engravers produced non-unique, transferable, placeless works of art. In some cases (Swanenburg after Bloemaert, and Audran after Le Brun), these engravers were more skilled and more artistically successful than the painters whose work they copied.[\[23\]](#) Even Ivins admits that the art basic to both painting and printing is draughtsmanship, and that the engraver can be more skilled at that art than the original painter. Engravers, although they were eventually admitted to England's Royal Academy of the Arts as full members in 1928, possess an independent skill that was used to disseminate paintings broadly from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries.

The integration of photographic techniques in the 1890s, a change that allowed as many as 700 impressions to be reproduced per hour, resulted in the gradual “erosion of... independent craftsmanship” at a time when the nineteenth-century workshop, with its “fragmentation of production” into many different specialist tasks, already “drove a wedge” between the manufacture of prints and intellectual input.[\[24\]](#)

For Ivins, the wedge actually occurred much earlier, in the early seventeenth century, when there developed an

intellectual division of labor among the original painter, the draughtsman who drew in imitation of these paintings, and the engraver who rendered what was drawn in the “house” style.[25] But the engraver might respond that the wedge was not driven in that deeply, and that Ivins singles out a problem or set of problems only with the economy of reproductive engravings and not one that involves the concept of mechanically reproduced works of art.

The commercial studios churning out reproductive engravings may have been engaged more in manual reproduction and less in art, but Ivins’s deep concern and even indignation stems, it seems, from his belief that there is a process of visual communication without syntax, one superior to that of slavish imitators chained to a specialized task such as engraving fur and the like. He derides as retrograde the opinion that engravings are the only dignified way to reproduce works of art, and that half-tones and their shiny paper are vulgarities. On the other hand, it is possible to disagree with his taste and, if his argument is that progress in the realm of art connoisseurship requires adherence to his sort of taste, to reject his argument. To put the same point differently, the fact that an engraver translates the visual syntax of Manet or Bouguereau into his own style and syntax may mean that...the engraver has his own worthwhile, unique visual syntax![26] Thus much holds for pictorial expression,[27] which has had the same problems for at least 600 years. However, by focusing on photographic reproduction, we are steered away from seeing the antiquity of these questions, and the improbability that a revolutionary new way of seeing art will emerge from what seems to have been a long, gradual process of change in art production and reproduction.

## 5. Summary and synthesis

Art, as art, represents a way of seeing the world, with an independent, interpretable technique embodied in a concrete medium.[28] Whether this definition of art is wholly adequate does not concern us. On commonsense grounds one can defend the claim, made in the preceding section, that there is an intellectual contribution made by the reproducer of a work of art and that the reproducer’s technique and insight might create a work of art in its own right. If so, how does this change our relation to art? For Walter Benjamin, there was a time when all art had a sacred, expressive quality, but that period was brought to a close by the capacity to mechanically reproduce works of art in a multitude of identical copies. Ivins, who knows prints as well as anyone, defines prints as exact, reproducible visual statements that are more important for their capacity to transmit knowledge than for their artistry. In Ivins’s view, photographic reproduction ended the tyranny of the middleman craftsman over the transmission of knowledge, so that visual reports are now free of mediation and are solely “provided by the thing seen.”[29] Ivins thinks that the photographic copy actually brings us back into conversation with the original work of art. Precise photographic reproductions put us back in contact with the “indicia of personality” represented by an art work—its surface and brush strokes, its particularities. Latour and Lowe dwell on one particularly laborious and faithful copy of a work of art. For them, this copy involved so much time, effort and ingenuity to

produce that it puts us very much in touch with the indicia of personality of the original painting.

There are two things wrong with the conclusion that photographic reproduction changes how we see art. First, framing effects and other matters of composition remain relevant even in an age of precise photographic reproduction. Just as Michelangelo provided no guidance when he said that his sculptures were in the marble block, so too is Ivins wrong when he thinks that the photographic print is *in* the thing pictured. A second problem is that the definition of the aura and the thesis about its decline do not answer our question about the worth of the copy. What is required, as Ivins notes, is not an account of changes in the material conditions of art-reproduction alone, but an interpretation of the meaning of the art produced in those particular conditions.

Benjamin, Latour and Lowe, and Ivins all offer such interpretations: All think, in one way or another, that photography frees us from arbitrary, harmful, or tyrannous conventions concerning the meaning and use of art. For Benjamin, photography is the last nail in the coffin of sacred art and a first step towards socialist art. For Ivins, photographic reproduction frees us from the tyranny and mediocrity of the middleman, whether a draughtsman, an engraver, a museum-employed restorer, a rich snob, or a counterfeiter. For Latour and Lowe, photographic reproduction sustains rather than dissolves the majesty and aura of old masters. Each of these scholars has offered a partial answer to the question, What is the worth of a copy? For Benjamin, the worth of the copy for "we, the people" is ambivalent: it can be used for valid socialistic purposes or authoritarian propaganda. For Ivins, the worth of a precise copy to the art historian is extremely high. For Latour and Lowe, the worth of a copy is very high because it enables a new audience to be in real contact with high art.

## 6. Conclusion

In this paper I have divided Benjamin's account of art into a discussion of the concept of the aura and the history of its decline. The auratic part of Benjamin's account of an art work withstands scrutiny. Unique things have auras about them. They are rare and have a powerful political economy. As unique aesthetic expressions, they can provoke awe and wonder. The association of art with the sacred and the cult experience, as Benjamin argues, is a phenomenon that persists today in the notion of a cult film and in the Marian cult. But the power of auratic art and its hold on language is only part of "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." What of Benjamin's diachronic account of the loss of aura through the mechanical reproduction of art, especially in a time when we have perfected the process of photographic reproduction? Has the concept of art changed because of such changes in the material conditions of the reproduction of art?[\[30\]](#)

For Benjamin, the replacement of manual reproduction by mechanical reproduction allows us to consume, store, and dispose of high art, apparently changing the way we view high art, depreciating its presence, and even changing the concept of art itself. Latour and Lowe attempt to save most of

Benjamin's thesis by demonstrating that today's most refined mechanical reproductions are as artistically rendered as an original art work. Their effort reinforces Benjamin's account of auratic art, and they argue that such copies reinforce the concept of originality, resulting in the originals becoming even more powerful. Despite the efforts of Benjamin and Latour and Lowe, however, the original thesis cannot be saved. The aura was never with the original to the extent or in the way that Benjamin elaborated, and therefore it is not present in the original to migrate to the copy. Latour and Lowe's example suggests a general rule about handicraft and art, one which Benjamin also saw, albeit incompletely. Even the eye has a handicraft that requires a technique for mediating between the sight of the eye and the thing pictured.

Latour and Lowe do not challenge the death-of-the-aura thesis because they based their argument on a cherry-picked example in which photographic reproduction closely approximates handicraft. To test Benjamin's thesis about process reproduction, we would need to show that a fully photographic process that creates a multitude of reproducible photographs, can also result in works of art. To a great degree, factors such as sensitivity to framing, the importance of composition, the inclusion of strange or overlooked subjects, and other aspects of artistic production have already answered this question, at least from an empirical point of view. Photography is art, and we have not found the way of presenting art without mediators who contribute their own intellects, insight, and handicraft.

As an addendum, a plea should be made for art pluralism. Instead of emancipating the eye from auras or charlatans or conservators, we should accept that it is important to *train* the eye. Most importantly, studying how the very greatest artists saw their world is vital for liberal education, because talking about, reading about, and comparing engravings, photographs, and paintings teaches us about how to see our world.

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### Endnotes

[1] The author would like to thank Arnold Berleant and the editorial staff of *Contemporary Aesthetics* for their kind aid and advice in steering this paper through to publication, and the journal's anonymous reviewer for many helpful comments that improved the final draft.

[2] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations: Essays and*

*Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1969), p. 217.

[3] Walter Benjamin, "Little History of Photography," *Selected Writings, Volume II: 1927-1934*, transl. Rodney Livingstone et al (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press, 1999), pp. 507-530. The original reference to "Little History of Photography" is from Osborne, Peter and Charles, Matthew, "Walter Benjamin," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), (Winter 2013 Edition), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2013/entries/benjamin/>.

[4] Benjamin, "Little History of Photography," p. 518.

[5] *Op. cit.*, p. 519.

[6] *Op. cit.*, p. 518.

[7] *Op. cit.*, p. 519.

[8] *Op. cit.*, p. 526.

[9] *Op. cit.*, p. 520.

[10] *Op. cit.*, p. 523.

[11] Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," p. 219.

[12] *Op. cit.*, p. 224.

[13] *Op. cit.*, p. 231, 230.

[14] Rejecting the end-of-art thesis: "Hegel made a terrible mistake in arguing that this equivalent but incommensurable mode of intelligibility of the basic problem of the Absolute no longer needed a sensible intuitive mode of intelligibility because we had understood it so well at the conceptual and rational practical level." Omair Hussain, "After Hegel: An Interview with Robert Pippin," *Platypus Review*, 36 (2011): 1-10, <http://platypus1917.org/2011/06/01/after-hegel-an-interview-with-robert-pippin/>.

[15] See Bruno Latour and Adam Lowe, "The Migration of the Aura or How to Explore the Original Through its Fac Similes," in *Switching Codes: Thinking Through Digital Technology in the Humanities and the Arts*, ed. Thomas Bartscherer (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2011), pp. 275-297, <http://www.bruno-latour.fr/sites/default/files/108-ADAM-FACSIMILES-GB.pdf>

[16] It is not clear whether the trajectory begins with the biblical story of the marriage, or with the earliest version of the story depicted by a painter, or with Veronese's version.

[17] Latour and Lowe, "The Migration of the Aura," p. 9.

[18] Julie F. Codell, "The Aura of Mechanical Reproduction: Victorian Art and the Press," *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 24, 1 (1991), 4-10. I am indebted to Codell's references and discussion of the works of Gordon Fyfe and William Ivins, Jr.

[19] William Ivins, Jr., "A Note on Engraved Reproductions of Works of Art," *Studies in Art and Literature for Belle Da Costa Greene*, ed. Dorothy Miner (Princeton, NJ: Princeton



University Press, 1954), p. 194. Emphasis added.

[20] William Ivins, Jr., *Prints and Visual Communication* (Cambridge, Mass., and London, England: The M.I.T. Press: 1953), p. 128.

[21] *Op. cit.*, p. 70.

[22] *Op. cit.*, pp. 116, 127.

[23] Carolyn Kellogg, "The Rise and Fall of Charles Le Brun: Q&A with Louis Marchesano," *The Getty Iris*, July 26, 2010, <http://blogs.getty.edu/iris/the-rise-and-fall-of-charles-le-brun-qa-with-louis-marchesano/>.

[24] This and the preceding point are found in Gordon Fyfe, *Art, Power, and Modernity: English Art Institutions, 1750-1950* (London, New York: Leicester University Press, 2000), p. 113. Fyfe smartly notes that the Latin words *invenit*, *pinxit* locate authority elsewhere than the engraver's work, which he signs *fecit*, *sculpsit*, etc.

[25] Ivins, *Prints and Visual Communication*, p. 68.

[26] *Op. cit.*, p. 144.

[27] A more difficult question (and one closer to Ivins's heart) is whether anyone can defend the thesis that pictorial communication can be done better by any of the pre-photographic arts (p. 136). If you were a sculptor or a painter and wanted to make your work more widely known, say, through museums' virtual galleries or commercially through auction houses' mailers or websites, would you ever want anything but a photograph of your work? The answer is likely to be "No."

[28] See, for instance, Arthur Danto, *After the End of Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998). See also Arthur C. Danto, "The End of Art: A Philosophical Defense," *History and Theory* (1998), p. 130. Danto wants to make "philosophy out of art" at the expense of aesthetics (p. 133), so his great question is how an exact replica of non-art can be art.

[29] Ivins, *Prints and Visual Communication*, p. 128.

[30] Other controversial examples are helpful to consider but lie outside the scope of this paper. For example, Achille Collas's *réduction mécanique* and Elkington's electrotypes can be considered works of art in their own right in spite of the mechanical techniques of reproduction employed in making their non-unique products, or they may be held to violate a standard (*e.g.*, uniqueness, nonreproducibility) to which fine art should be held.

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