

Walter Benjamin

The Loss of Aura in Art



Introduction to Multimedia

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Walter Benjamin

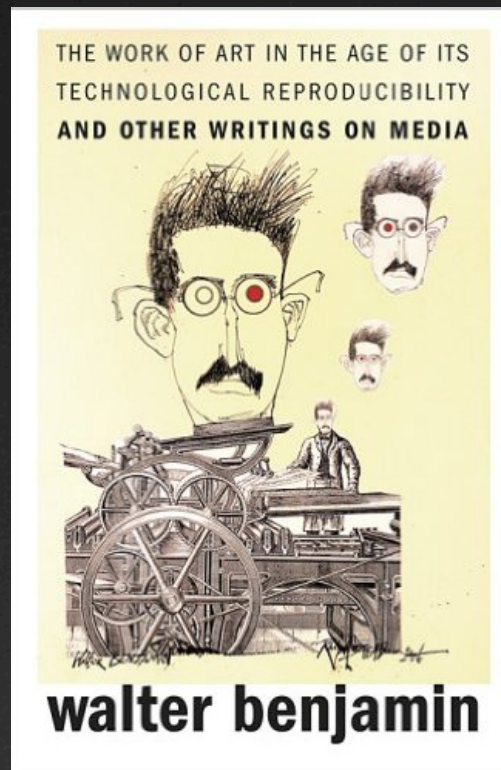
1892 - 1940



- Jewish philosopher, essayist, and cultural critic
- Member of the Frankfurt School which was critical of both capitalism and Soviet communism, and promoted an alternative path to social development
- Greatly inspired by Marxism
- Coined the term “aura in art” and pointed out its decay in the age of mechanical reproduction

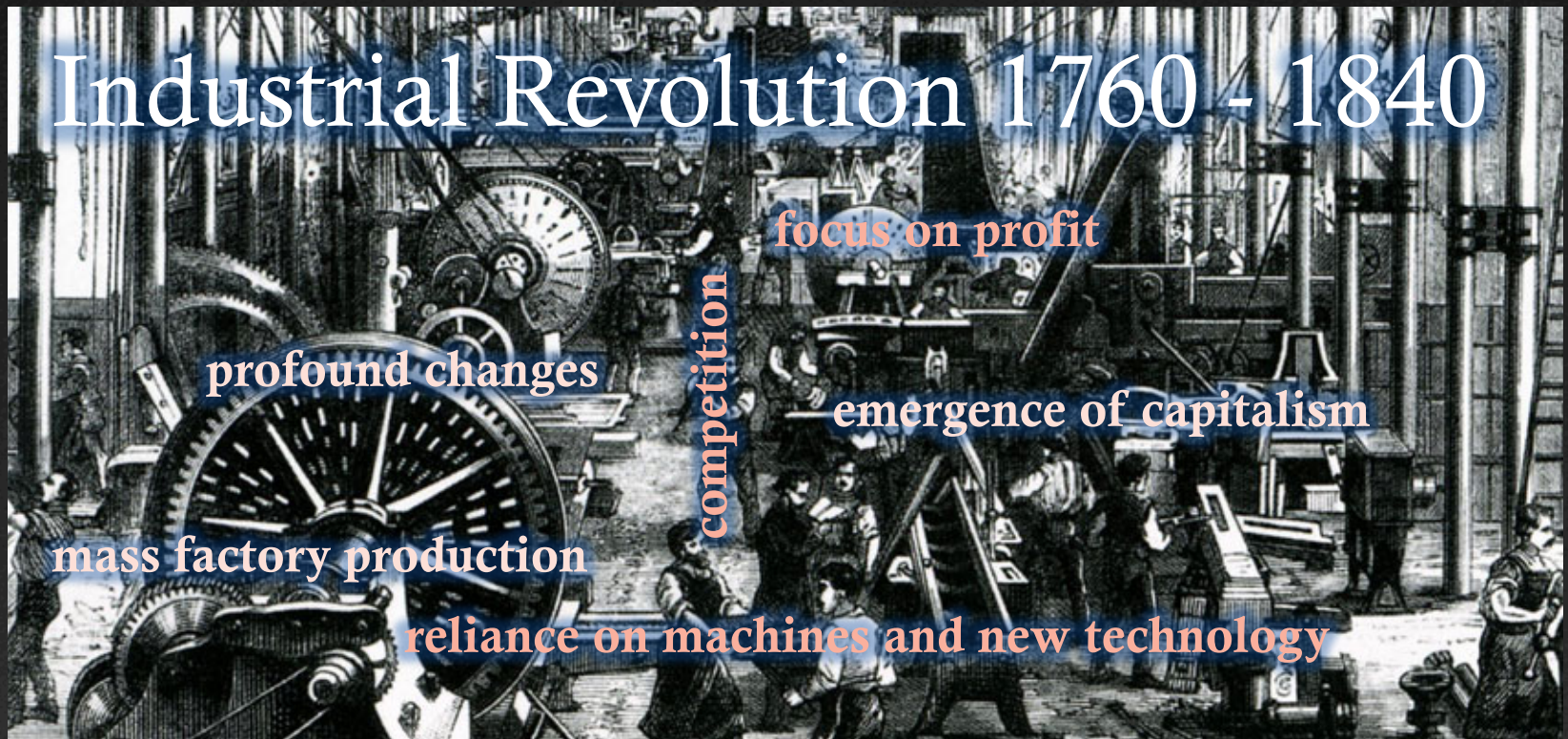
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1892 - 1940



- “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” continues to inspire significant attention as a major work in the history of modern art forms
- Credited with developing a timeless interpretation of the role technological reproduction plays in shaping aesthetic experience
- Points out significant effects of film and photography on the decline of authentic experience and decay of **aura**

How did it all start?



Transition to new manufacturing processes which included going from hand production methods to machines to increase efficiency in the newly emerged profit-driven capitalistic society.

Mechanical Reproduction of Traditional Art



- Started with lithography in the 19th century to provide images in the newspapers
- Announced the loss of creativity, genius, eternal value, and mystery
- Anyone equipped with the appropriate technology could reproduce art but it would never be as authentic (possess **aura**) as its original

Aura

- “that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the **aura** of the work of art”
- Even the greatest reproduction of a masterpiece lacks the **aura**; i.e. the authenticity of the time when it was created

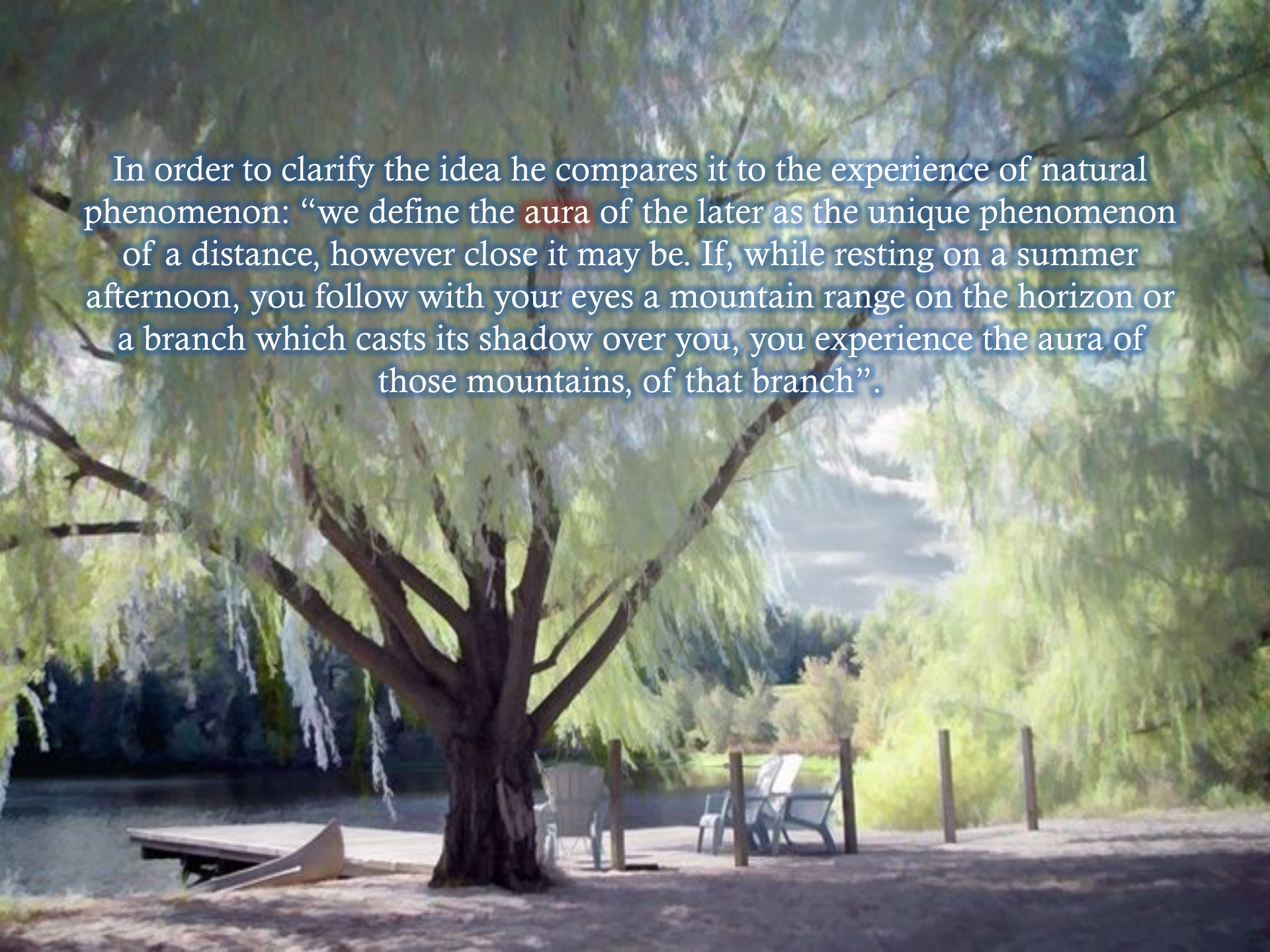


Aura = unique existence/essence

Aura

“the authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced”





In order to clarify the idea he compares it to the experience of natural phenomenon: “we define the **aura** of the later as the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be. If, while resting on a summer afternoon, you follow with your eyes a mountain range on the horizon or a branch which casts its shadow over you, you experience the aura of those mountains, of that branch”.

“With mechanical reproduction, which appears in its most radical forms in film and photography, millions of images of an original are circulated, all of which lack the “authentic” aura of their source. This process both affects and is the effect of changing social conditions in which all previously sacred rituals and unique traditions have become equal”.



Art and Tradition

- Authentic and original art is inseparable from tradition and rituals
 - Aura is always present during a ritual or tradition
 - Integration of art and tradition found expression in cult
 - Early photography have a cult/ritual value



Detail of Adam, Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel, 1498



Early Photography

Walters believed that “man is created in the image of God and God's image cannot be captured by any human machine”, yet he admitted that an early photography could be considered an art for its ritual value.



Cult/Ritual Value

Modern Photography

The mechanical reproduction separated art from the dependence on ritual. As such, photography became a tool for spreading a political propaganda. Its main purpose was to show subjective reality to the masses.



Exhibition value



Brought things closer but overcame the uniqueness.



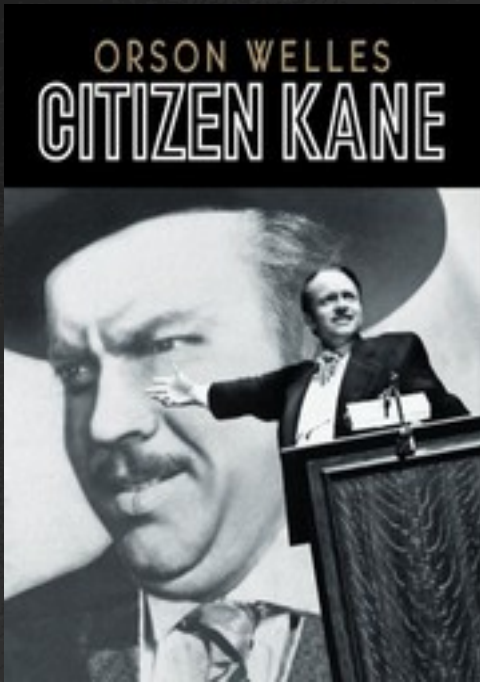
Film

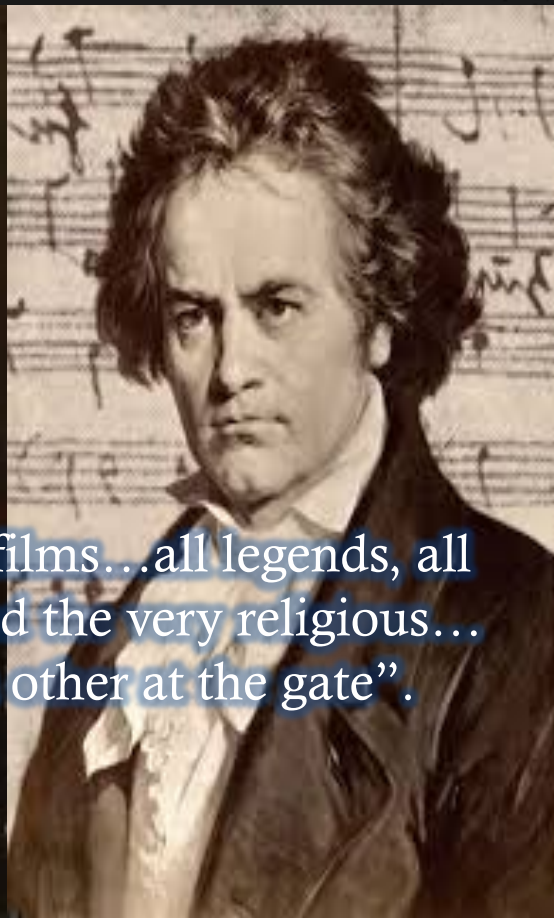
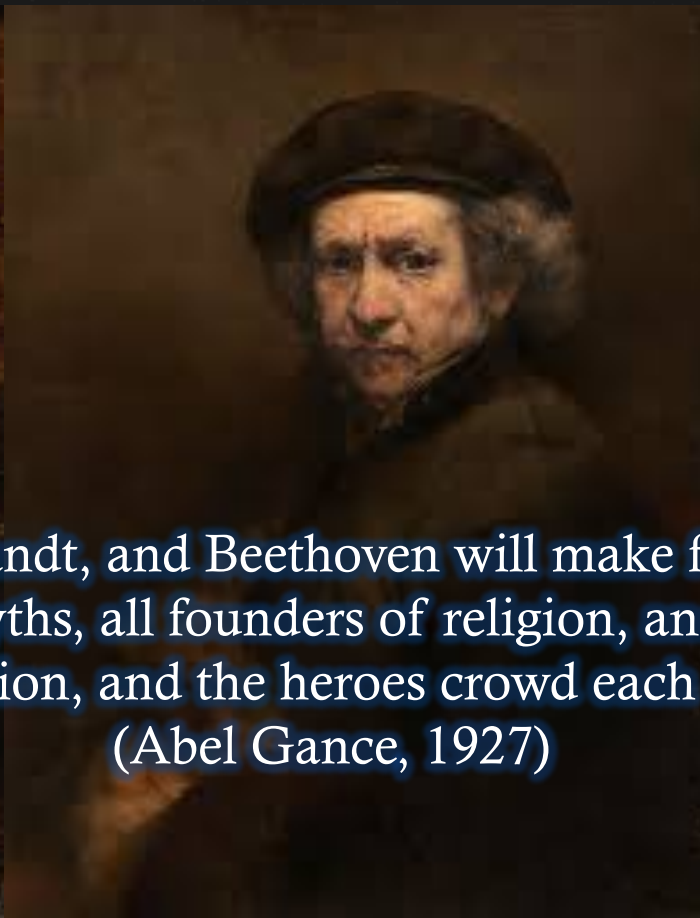
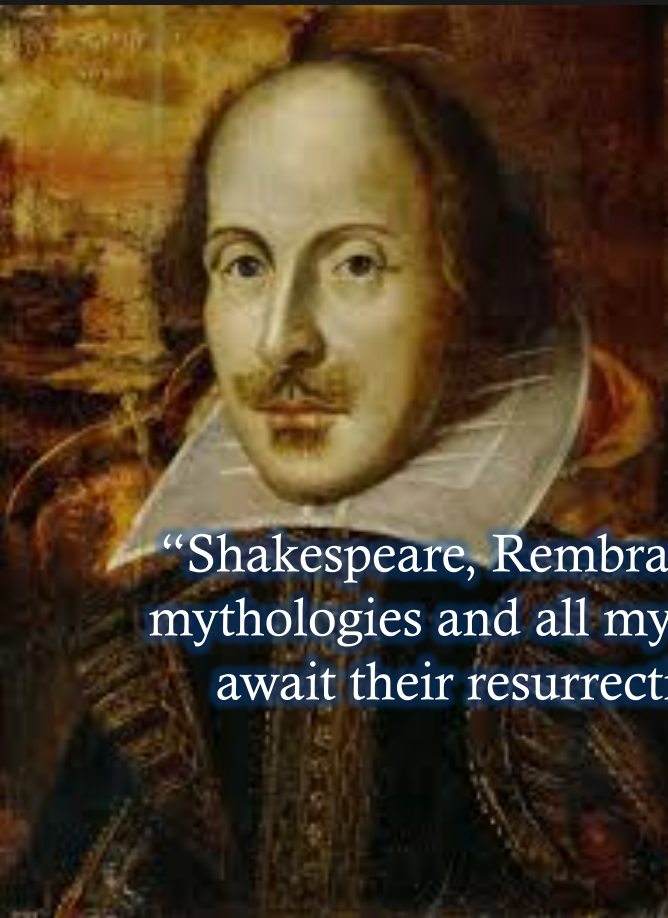


- **Film relies on a series of images that must be edited to form an aesthetic whole**
- **Film's swift juxtapositions and movements allow for an easy consumption of the image**
- **Film is carefully planned in advance by the director so it shows no signs of authenticity**

Film Actor

- The audience sees through the camera's vantage point and is told where to look.
 - There is no interaction between the audience and the actor.
- The film actor, unlike the theater actor, loses his aura, and the film becomes about the actor's persona, which is why famous actors attract audiences more than interesting plots.





“Shakespeare, Rembrandt, and Beethoven will make films...all legends, all mythologies and all myths, all founders of religion, and the very religious... await their resurrection, and the heroes crowd each other at the gate”.
(Abel Gance, 1927)

Are we going to learn about our society and culture only through movies?

Or perhaps there is much more to come in the world of mechanical reproduction...

