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Aura from Duplication:
The Work of Art in the Age of Religious Reproduction

"The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity."
Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936)

Byzantine Icons, specifically the Image of Edessa (otherwise known as the Mandylion), complicate Walter Benjamin's seminal theory on art and image duplication: "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." An analysis of these icons exposes a counter-example to Benjamin's notion of reproduction as decreasing the 'aura' of a work, necessitating a re-evaluation of 'aura' and its connection to 'originality' and 'authenticity.'

In "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Walter Benjamin outlines a theory of art in relation to new methods of image reproduction, specifically engaging with the realities of photography and film. While speaking from a particular point in history and mechanical technique, Benjamin's essay has been widely applied by the humanities as a framework for understanding and unpacking artworks in relation to authenticity and 'aura.' Benjamin uses the term 'aura' to describe the aspects of a work of art which make it unique and individual; the soul or heart of a piece. Exploring the advent of image duplication techniques, Benjamin's argues that artworks lose this 'aura' through reproduction.

Conceiving the perfect reproduction of an artwork, Benjamin states how, even if visually identical, the mimic lacks "its presence in time and space, its unique

existence at the place where it happens to be.”¹ He goes on to describe how “the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence.”² Benjamin presents this theory of artistic reproduction with a negative tone, arguing that the artworks lose something—their ‘aura’—through the process of duplication. A negative substitution of quantity for quality.

This ‘aura,’ uniqueness and originality, has significance to Benjamin because of its relationship to authenticity. Benjamin claims, “the presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity”³. In other words, it is from knowledge of the originality and the presence of a unique ‘aura’ within a work that an individual piece gains its authenticity and authority. In other words: aura = power.

While Benjamin presents a convincing argument, analyzing Byzantine icons (specifically the Image of Edessa, also known as the Mandylion) complicates his theory. Icons are heavily reproduced images, and it is through this reproduction (especially in the case of the Mandylion) that ‘aura’ is created rather than removed. This creation of aura through duplication presents a different model for understanding artworks, one distinct from Benjamin’s theory, and prompts a re-evaluation of what constitutes ‘aura’ and authenticity.

According to the Christian tradition, the first icon in Eastern Orthodoxy was the Image of Edessa, also known as the Mandylion. The image consists of Christ’s

¹ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 220.

² Benjamin, 221.

³ Benjamin, 220.

head upon a piece of cloth. One version of its origin story speaks of Abgar, king of Edessa, who suffered from a malady of the skin. After hearing of Christ's miracles from a messenger, Abgar sent a messenger with a letter inviting Jesus to live in Edessa. The messenger was also reportedly told to sketch an image of Jesus' face, but Christ would not sit still long enough for a complete portrait. Without opening and looking at the message, Jesus read its contents back to Abgar's messenger. He then issued a response telling Abgar that he would not come to Edessa, but once he had returned to the kingdom of his father he would send a disciple to Abgar to cure him and aid him in seeking truth. Jesus then asked for a cloth and wiped his face. Upon the cloth was left an imprint; a perfect duplication of his features.⁴ This image upon the cloth, the Image of Edessa, was taken back to Abgar who pressed it to his body. Physical contact with the Mandylicon cured Abgar of his skin disease, save for a small area on his forehead. The relic was then placed in a niche within the city gate.⁵ After three generations, Abgar's grandson desired to remove the image and replace it with a pagan idol. Before he could do so, a bishop bricked the image into its niche along with a lit lamp, hiding it within the structure.^{6,7}

The image fell out of cultural memory and it was not until a Persian attack on Edessa in the sixth century, under King Khustro, that a miraculous vision led the city's bishop to rediscover the relic. Within the niche, the bishop found that the lamp

⁴ Mark Guscini, *The Image of Edessa*, (Leiden: Koninklijke, 2009).

⁵ The Mandylicon is both image and relic.

⁶ Guscini.

⁷ It is important to remember that this is only one specific mythology among many. The Image of Edessa has a long and complicated history.

was still burning and the image on the cloth had reproduced itself onto the brick that contained it.^{8,9} Another miracle.

Within the context of this story, the Mandylion can be seen not only as the first icon of the Eastern Orthodoxy tradition, but also as the first instance of image reproduction. The Mandylion therefore stands in contradiction to elements of Benjamin's theory because it is the actual process of reproduction, the miracle of it, that gives the Image of Edessa its 'aura.' The duplication from Christ's face to cloth to brick increases the 'aura' of the image with each successive reproduction, with each successive miracle.

The Mandylion is obviously a special case, one shaped by Christian tradition and legend. Regardless of the validity of its original story, the image of the Mandylion has spread as an icon-type throughout the Eastern Orthodox world. Christ's head upon a cloth can be seen in numerous Byzantine churches and religious sites.

The Mandylion has become one image among many classic archetypical icons of the Eastern Orthodox tradition. These icons usually depict Jesus, Mary, saints, and angels. As visual symbols, icons are signs to trigger meaning in those who view them. As such, icons are fascinatingly homogenous. Images of the disciples created across centuries have remarkably similar, oftentimes the same, features. Individuals are easily recognized. The abbreviated names of Saints next to their depictions are not read as words but as symbols, each associated with a specific figure and ideal. In such a way, these icons complicate Benjamin's conception of 'aura,' duplication,

⁸ The brick became an important image/relic within itself. It is known as the Keramidion.

⁹ Guscini

originality, and authenticity. Icons, duplicated across space both geographically and temporally, do not lose 'aura' in the process of reproduction. This reproduction does not lessen their authenticity and power. Conversely, it is through their distribution and proliferation that icons gain 'aura' and authenticity. Their similarities re-enforce each other. Through multiple reproductions, they no longer reference an original but rather come to symbolize an abstraction, an ideal.

Benjamin's theory begins to account for this phenomenon, but does not probe deep enough, falsely ascribing this lack of an original reference as a modern phenomenon.¹⁰ It is therefore productive to engage another source to supplement Benjamin's theory in order to more completely understand the workings of reproduction, 'aura,' and authenticity within Byzantine icons.

Jean Baudrillard, in his 1981 philosophical treatise *Simulations*, writes, "the very definition of the real has become: that of which it is possible to give an equivalent reproduction. The real is not only what can be reproduced, but that which is already reproduced. The hyperreal... which is entirely in simulation."¹¹ In his treatise Baudrillard creates a theory of "Simulacra and Simulations," arguing that issues of originality are not relevant to societies that replace all 'reality' with signs and symbols.

In terms of Byzantine icons, Baudrillard's discussions create a framework for understanding the creation of 'aura' through reproduction and proliferation, re-

¹⁰ Benjamin cites his contemporary time as the "first time in world history" where art is liberated from issues of authenticity and originality. Using the example of a photographic print, Benjamin illustrates how one cannot call a specific print the "authentic" print. While Benjamin makes a clear and valid point, he overlooks other similar phenomenon in art history such as Byzantine icons.

¹¹ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, (New York: Semiotext, 1983).

shaping Benjamin's conception of authenticity which is dependent on the "presence of the original." Baudrillard's logic categorizes icons as "Simulacra," duplications of images whose original is no longer relevant or never existed. It is therefore not from an 'original' image that the work's authority stems, but rather from the multitude of cloned images that work together to cross-validate each other in a coherentist web of signs and symbols. These multiple reproductions give each work an individual 'aura' that is tied to the abstract whole and every other specific representation; gaining authenticity through the presence of reproductions rather than a connection with a specific original.

This 'aura' through reproduction illustrated by Byzantine icons, the Image of Edessa specifically, complicates Benjamin's tight pairing of "the original" and "authenticity" and argues for a slightly modified version of Benjamin's theory. Baudrillard's logic of "Simulacra and Simulations" begins to bridge the gap in Benjamin's argument, creating a more holistic understanding of the workings of 'aura,' authenticity, and power as not solely dependent on a direct link with an original and individual source.

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